

# ‘My friends look just like you’:

Research encounters and imaginaries  
in Vancouver’s urban drug scene

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## Abstract

Drawing on eight years of research with young people who inhabit the margins of Vancouver, in this article I bring into view some of the ‘frictions’ that can arise when conducting anthropological research at home, across vast differences in power and privilege. I argue that our research subjects can also be deeply concerned with how to position themselves in relation to researchers and research studies, and with navigating the various forms of social and geographical distance and proximity that are embedded in anthropological encounters across time. Paying attention to how our research subjects position themselves in research encounters may force us to problematize tidy boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

## Keywords

Vancouver, youth, urban drug scene, marginalization, positionality

As an anthropologist, for the past eight years I have followed a group of approximately twenty-five young people who inhabit the social, spatial, and economic margins of Vancouver, Canada. My field site is simultaneously the city where I grew up, and have lived for the past nine years. In this essay, I bring into view some of the ‘frictions’ (Tsing 2005) that can arise when conducting anthropological research at home, across vast differences in

power and privilege. I argue that positionality is not solely the concern of the anthropologist, as our research subjects may be equally concerned with how to position themselves in relation to researchers and research studies. They, too, are engaged in navigating the forms of social, economic, and geographical distance and proximity that are embedded in anthropological encounters across time. This is perhaps particularly the case in settings like Vancouver's intensely studied inner-city drug scene, where much of my fieldwork has occurred.

## Navigating distance and proximity in Vancouver's fractured urban landscape

Several months ago, I had dinner at a restaurant two of my friends had recently opened in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, a neighborhood that has long been imagined as the 'proper' destination of the urban poor and visibly addicted<sup>1</sup> in Vancouver (Liu and Blomley 2013; Woolford 2001). On the corner of Main Street and Hastings Street, in the heart of the neighborhood, the open drug market operates 24/7. Veteran street-level dealers sell crack cocaine, heroin, and crystal methamphetamine, while others try to make a few bucks by selling their prescription methadone. Those who are buying dart furtively into nearby alleyways to use. Some smoke crack and inject drugs in full view of passing cars and pedestrians. This neighborhood is also inhabited by a large number of people who do not use drugs at all – many are simply poor. On Pender Street just one block south of Hastings, for example, elderly Asian men and women can be seen walking slowly along Chinatown's vibrant streets, socializing and shopping. Some occasionally dig through public garbage bins for discarded cans and bottles, which can be redeemed for a small cash refund.

While the Downtown Eastside has frequently been referred to in the media as Canada's 'poorest urban postal code', it is rapidly being transformed by processes of gentrification (Barnes and Hutton 2009; Blomley 2008; Ley 2012). The Downtown Eastside is now edged by two of the city's most desirable neighborhoods. To the east, Strathcona's charming heritage homes are increasingly inhabited by socially progressive, upwardly mobile young professionals. To the west, Gastown's historical buildings have been converted into exposed brick office spaces, restaurants, and high-end furniture shops. More and more, even in the heart of the Downtown Eastside, the aesthetic of new condo developments and expensive

<sup>1</sup> I use the phrase 'visibly addicted' to emphasize the highly public experience of drug addiction in the context of homelessness and severe material deprivation in downtown Vancouver.

eateries – like my friends’ new restaurant – intermingle with well-worn storefronts, single-room occupancy hotels (SROs)<sup>2</sup>, and various not-for-profit agencies (Burnett 2013).

During dinner, one of my friends wondered aloud at how long the neighborhood would remain run down, and offhandedly referred to the homeless drug users who inhabit the park directly across the street from his restaurant as ‘walkers’. His reference to the stunted movements of the zombies who populate the apocalyptic television show *The Walking Dead* made me cringe. I had cut through the park on my way to the restaurant, in order to greet a few young people I knew. One of them asked if I would bring him the leftovers from our meal, and declared that then *he* could be the judge of how the new restaurant’s food compared to other nearby spots, where he frequently received donated leftovers at the end of the night. Another voiced her displeasure at the fact that I was supporting the influx of yuppies who are ‘taking over the neighborhood’, and then asked me, somewhat provocatively, if I would take her to the restaurant the following week.

Vancouver’s fractured urban landscape means that there is often significant social and economic distance between the spaces inhabited by the young people I follow and the landscape of my personal life in the city, even when our physical geographies overlap significantly (albeit not completely – while young people have since been permitted to enter my friends’ restaurant with me during off hours, they continue to be prohibited from entering and staying as paying customers). But I am not the only one who navigates the distance between our social and economic positions, nor the social and geographical proximity embedded in our research encounters across time. The young people I follow also do this, as they attempt to determine where, if, and how they belong in the city of Vancouver.

The social and geographical proximity that is embedded in anthropological research is not some sort of shared experience or understanding that anthropologists once imagined to be possible if only we could build enough rapport, develop enough empathy, or get ‘close enough’ to the margins and the marginalized through rigorous fieldwork (Pels 1999; Shuman 2006). Given the ways that power/knowledge mediate all aspects of research encounters

<sup>2</sup> SROs are multiple-tenant buildings that house one or two people in individual rooms. In Vancouver, they are typically three meters by three meters in size with shared bathrooms and kitchen facilities. SROs were originally built to meet the lodging and entertainment needs of Vancouver’s seasonal and almost exclusively male workers. More recently, they have been rented as permanent, low-income residences for around 375 CAD per month. Rent is commonly deducted directly from monthly social assistance (welfare) payments, leaving those who receive regular social assistance with around 235 CAD to live on per month.

(Foucault 1980), a proximity of understanding and experience between researcher and researched is an impossible, and at this point outdated, ideal. Rather, by social and geographical proximity I am referring to the ways that anthropological encounters bring the researcher and researched into what can become rather intimate social relationships – friendships, even, in the case of my own research – that unfold in particular places. These are messy, complicated relationships that develop across difference, which frequently involve misunderstandings, miscommunications, and other kinds of ‘frictions’ (see also Castañeda 2005; Elliott 2014; Elliott et al. 2015).

In this article, I want to bring into view some of the frictions that can arise as both researcher and researched grapple with how to position themselves in the context of a long-term anthropological study, in a city that all of those involved call home. In a very different setting, Anna Tsing (2005) uses the concept of frictions to make sense of the social drama of the Indonesian rainforest, where unpredictable, oftentimes fraught encounters across difference – between New Order army officers and nature lovers, university students and village elders, for example – nevertheless provided an opening for collective action. I argue that these insights can also be applied to the anthropological fieldwork process. In my own work, the frictions that have arisen from working closely with young people across difference have often resulted in illuminating points of departure rather than closure. They have powerfully illustrated what was at stake for young people in particular moments, and forced me to interrogate the politics and ethics of our work together. The notion that the frictions of anthropological fieldwork can result in these moments of departure – for the researcher and also, perhaps, for the researched – resonates with the argument that it is often the research process itself that is the primary locus of value in contemporary anthropology, rather than our specific research questions and outputs (see for example Castañeda 2006; Culhane 2011; Elliott 2014).

In the first part of this article, I describe some of the ways young people have positioned themselves in relation to my research across time. As we came to know each other in places like alleyways and car parkades, and underneath bridges and building overhangs – me, with my expensive digital camera, iPhone, and warm winter coat to protect myself from the elements, and them, oftentimes wearing only thin sweatshirts – youth were no doubt well aware of the social, economic, and geographical distances between us. They knew that I would go home to a safe, warm apartment once our time together was over, while many of them would face a decision between sleeping outside or in a noisy, infested, and oftentimes violent shelter or SRO. And yet, young people often used our research encounters not as opportunities to underscore our differences, but rather to align themselves with what they framed as ‘normal’ forms of belonging and becoming in the city of Vancouver. They insisted – sometimes quite angrily, and sometimes with great sadness – that we were much more

alike than I thought, and conversely, that they were ‘nothing like’ the other young people they imagined were also part of my research.

As Dara Culhane (2011) has observed in relation to her own long-term research in the Downtown Eastside, research participants are often astute analysts who have developed clear ideas about how ‘we’ – researchers, students, and other professionals – position ‘them’. The young people I follow are no exception. Indeed, youth spent much of our time together forcefully rejecting the claims made for and about ‘them’ by ‘us’, including claims about who they are (for example, members of a ‘street youth’ or ‘drug-user community’), who they are not (for example, ‘normal’ young people pursuing work, leisure, and homemaking in one of the world’s most livable cities), and where and how they belong in Vancouver (for example, as ‘street youth’, ‘drug users’, and social service ‘clients’ confined to the inner city, versus urban citizens whose geographies include ‘nicer’ urban neighborhoods). Their desires to redraw the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ shaped the boundaries they placed around their participation in my research – that is, the kinds of conversations they were willing to have, the kinds of places they were willing to take me to, and the kinds of photographs they were willing to take (or have me take). These boundaries were brought into sharp relief by an unexpected progression of events that occurred approximately five years into my research – namely, my own brother’s addiction to opiates in Vancouver’s inner city. In the second part of this article, I reflect on how, for me, this progression of events ruptured the already tenuous boundaries I had created between ‘the field’ and ‘home’, and my personal and professional life in the city. For many of the young people I follow, however, it seemed to have the opposite effect. It reified the boundaries they placed around their involvement in the research, and underscored how those boundaries articulate with desired senses of place and self in Vancouver.

## Researching addiction, crime, and homelessness in ‘The Best Place on Earth’

The city of Vancouver is celebrated as one of the world’s most beautiful, cosmopolitan, and livable cities. More than once, youth referred to Vancouver as ‘The Best Place on Earth’ – a slogan that appeared on license plates and other government advertising for the Province of British Columbia leading up to the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. Simultaneously, Vancouver is criticized as the site of a thriving inner-city drug scene, which is generally understood to include the Downtown Eastside neighborhood as well as an adjacent area I am calling the

Downtown South,<sup>3</sup> where the majority of 'street youth' drop-in services and shelters are located. Both of these neighborhoods have become zones of intense surveillance and monitoring, where people who use drugs 'on the streets' are subject to the gaze of researchers, public health experts, police, politicians, service providers, activists, artists, and the media (Culhane 2005).

In 2007, I was hired as an ethnographer by the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS to conduct qualitative interviews and exploratory fieldwork focused on understanding the 'risk trajectories' of adolescents<sup>4</sup> who were significantly entrenched in drug use, homelessness, and crime in the Downtown Eastside and Downtown South. By the time I had begun my PhD in 2009, my research had shifted to more immersed fieldwork focused on how these young people understood, experienced, and imagined their 'place' in the city of Vancouver more broadly. Youth who are homeless, destitute, and addicted to drugs in Vancouver are often defined through their relationships with the Downtown Eastside and Downtown South – including in my own earliest work (see for example Fast, Shoveller, et al. 2009; Fast, Small, et al. 2009; Fast et al. 2010). And yet, youth's physical and imaginative geographies in the city are far more expansive than these understandings allow. In terms of their physical geographies, all of the young people I follow have, at one time or another, resided in SROs and supportive housing located in Vancouver's inner city. However, they also all frequently move back and forth – sometimes several times a day – between the downtown core and other areas of the city. A significant amount of our time together has been spent on the move, travelling via public buses and the SkyTrain (a transportation system that was originally built for, and as an attraction of, Vancouver's Expo '86 World Fair) between various nodes of social and economic activity. These include the bustling transportation hub at Broadway and Commercial Street in East Vancouver (where

<sup>3</sup> While technically a part of the Downtown district, this area goes largely unnamed by young people. If it is called anything at all, it is usually lumped in with the adjacent West End neighborhood, which extends down to Vancouver's popular tourist beaches on the western edge of the downtown core, and across to the large forested area of Stanley Park in the northwest corner of the city center.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this paper, I use the terms 'adolescents', 'youth', and 'young people' to describe those who participated in this research. While recognizing that these are unstable categories that shift across time and place, this usage reflects how participants were regarded institutionally for much of the study period. Participants were originally recruited from the At-Risk Youth Study (ARYS), an ongoing prospective cohort of street-involved youth in Vancouver. ARYS cohort members are between the ages of fourteen and twenty-six and self-report use of illicit drugs (other than or in addition to marijuana) at the time of enrolment. During the eight-year fieldwork period, therefore, most participants moved, developmentally and otherwise, from adolescence into young adulthood. I retain the use of these terms in order to differentiate my participants from a largely distinct population of street-entrenched adults in Vancouver, and to avoid confusion (see also Meyers 2013).

youth congregate to meet up, 'hook up', drink coffee, and deal drugs); the crack shacks,<sup>5</sup> homeless camps, and informal recovery houses scattered throughout the suburbs of Surrey, Port Coquitlam, New Westminster, and Burnaby; and shoplifting hot spots like Metrotown Mall and Lougheed Town Centre. Youth's movements through the city are also shaped by elaborate geographies of Twelve Step meetings and endless appointments with social workers, housing workers, welfare workers, probation officers, methadone doctors, and officials from the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (where a small number of youth have been involved in legal proceedings related to determining custody of their child or children).

Throughout my fieldwork, I have lived outside of downtown Vancouver altogether, in an area of the city that long ago underwent gentrification and is now dominated by yoga studios, organic grocers, and boutique coffee shops. I grew up and attended school in Vancouver's West Point Grey neighborhood, which is edged by the University of British Columbia and the woods of Pacific Spirit Park. I had some exposure to the world of Vancouver's inner-city drug scene as a teenager. However, these privileged glimpses into this scene were markedly different from the kinds of trajectories that lead many adolescents to this place, where they are often 'thrown' into new forms of destitution, homelessness, addiction, and crime by recurring forms of personal and institutional experience (Garcia 2010; Fischer 2003).

The youth I follow, for the most part, live separate lives from one another. However, they are also part of an urban population for whom everyday living has been rendered problematic in similar ways across time (Collier and Lakoff 2005). In the places of their childhoods and on the streets of Vancouver (in some cases these were one and the same), the overwhelming majority grew up in circumstances marked by severe poverty, violence, and routinized physical and psychological crises. Ongoing experiences of violence took the form of physical assaults, but also encompassed the everyday violence (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Scheper-Hughes 1992) of perpetual uncertainty and dislocation. Approximately half were taken from their birth families by the state, and subsequently grew up cycling between government foster care homes. Half have spent time in psychiatric facilities, juvenile detention centers, and prisons. Youth's experiences across time and place are also marred by the structural violence (Farmer 1997) of historical and institutional forces

<sup>5</sup> Crack shacks are houses in which drugs are sold and consumed. They are generally run-down, and vary significantly depending on how open or closed they are to newcomer customers. While some have the feel of an all-day house party where you can stay as long as you have the money to keep buying, others are only accessible to those with the right connections.

ranging from grossly inadequate monthly welfare payments and social housing in the province of British Columbia, to the ongoing effects of colonialism in Canada (over one-third of those I follow identify as being of Indigenous ancestry), to the global 'war on drugs'.

Shared experiences across time and place – but also, importantly, a shared desire for things to be otherwise (Biehl and Locke 2010) – have engendered shared value systems, moral logics, and subjectivities among youth on the streets of Vancouver. These include the 'responsible' drug user who uses the city's supervised injection site and distributes harm reduction supplies out of a backpack, the 'good worker' who sells drugs in order to 'get ahead' in life and mediate crushing experiences of boredom, and the practiced research subject who exchanges 'bare life narratives' for cash honoraria (Culhane 2011, 261; see also Tomaselli 2003). It was quickly made clear to me by young people themselves that they were not linked so much by membership in the same 'street youth' or 'drug user community', but by these sorts of shared regimes of living (Collier and Lakoff 2005).<sup>6</sup> Across time, young people enacted multiple regimes of living simultaneously, which were continually reworked, reshaped, and improvised in response to the shifting exigencies of particular situations. Their subjectivities were similarly shifting and multiple – in different moments, youth positioned themselves as 'street people', 'hustlers', 'drug dealers', 'gangsters', 'boyfriends', 'girlfriends', 'mothers', 'fathers', 'artists', 'employees', 'students', 'volunteers', and 'activists' (to list only some of the possibilities).

## 'My friends look just like you'

While youth's descriptions of how they 'ended up' in downtown Vancouver often reflected a sense of being thrown into new forms of life in the city (Fast, Small, et al. 2009), this is not the end of the story. Most of the young people I follow came or fled to downtown Vancouver from elsewhere – other cities, towns, and First Nations reserves.<sup>7</sup> In relation to these places, Vancouver was frequently imagined as the site of new and desirable

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Collier and Andrew Lakoff (2005) define 'regimes of living' as tentative and situated configurations of practices, practical knowledges, relationships, and habits of relating, as well as political elements (such as harm reduction, the war on drugs), and technologies of administration (such as meager monthly welfare payments, research studies), which are brought into alignment in situations where the question of how to live is at stake.

<sup>7</sup> In Canada, a reserve is a tract of land set aside under the Indian Act and treaty agreements for the use of a First Nations band. This land continues to be held in trust by the Crown and subject to various permissions and restrictions. Reserves therefore continue to function as colonial spaces, and powerfully shape the opportunities and movements of Indigenous people – including to places like downtown Vancouver.



opportunities for work, leisure, and home making (see also Robertson 2007). Lee<sup>8</sup> vividly described his first impressions of Vancouver to me during one of our earliest conversations in 2009, as we sat together on a bench in a public park in the Downtown South. ‘It was awesome’, he recalled enthusiastically. ‘Like, all the lights on Granville Street [in the Downtown South] – it felt like I was in Vegas. Well – I’ve never been to Vegas before, right? But, I don’t know – it’s how I imagine it – from TV and stuff. It’s just awesome out here’.

During that same conversation, I asked Lee if he ever considered returning to the reserve in Northern Alberta where he was born. ‘Back home, on the rez [First Nations reserve], it’s really poor’, he replied thoughtfully, as he repeatedly kicked the ground with his shoe. He continued, ‘People just sit around all day, cause there’re no stores – there’s no work there, really. I don’t see myself ever going back – backwards. In Vancouver, though, you have so many different kinds of people, going to work, going shopping, doing this and that – you know what I mean? There’s so much to do here, different ways to progress yourself’.

Lee became increasingly animated as he imagined the details:

Here, eventually you’ll have a good job. You know, get up, take a shower. Go to work. Then take a lunch break – all those kinda things, right? You’ll come home from work every day and feel like you did a good job. And you’re happy because you’ve got that paycheck every two weeks in a bank account. You’re there for two and a half years, and then your salary goes up. I would love to just have my own house here, right? And have a dog, right? One or two kids – you know what I’m saying? And to be able to do things for your kids – just to be able to go camping on the weekend, or go skiing on the local mountains if you wanted – you know what I mean? Just the *normality* of life. I’m gonna have all that, eventually, when I get my own job and stuff – soon, right? I wanna have – I wanna have –

‘A white-picket-fence life?’ I interrupted, laughing. It was a phrase that I had been surprised to hear another young woman use the day before, in the context of a similar conversation. ‘You know that saying? Where you have the perfect family home and it has a white fence around it?’

‘Yes’, Lee answered matter-of-factly. ‘I want that. Here’. He stood up. We had yet to get to a number of the topics I wanted to cover – such as his current living situation, and how that was impacting his drug use – but it was clear that for him the conversation was over.

<sup>8</sup> All of the names appearing in this article are pseudonyms.

As has been argued for other urban settings around the globe (Sassen 2007; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000), many of the youth I follow embrace, and feel embraced by, the big-city dreams of capitalist consumption that Vancouver represents, in spite of growing up in circumstances marked by profound disadvantage. Once in Vancouver, youth found themselves inhabiting the margins of urban space, in ways that often mirrored the marginalization they had experienced in the places of their childhoods. However, the city of Vancouver itself was not understood as marginal. Even from their current location on the streets, many young people articulated a strong sense of belonging in what they believed really *was* one of the best places on earth (Fast 2013). They told the same stories – of belonging and of becoming – that are, to a certain extent, inhabited by us all in the city (see also Robertson 2006). Like Lee, the possibilities of place that they enjoyed imagining for themselves included nine-to-five jobs and engaging careers, participating in leisure activities in the evenings and on the weekends, and creating a family with a romantic soul mate. They spoke frequently about how wonderful it was to live near the ocean and the mountains (even though most had never had the opportunity to visit Vancouver's North Shore mountains until I took them there), and described with pride Vancouver's celebrated multiculturalism.

Unlike the individuals who populate Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg's (2009) ethnography of the Edgewater homeless, in most moments these youth could not be characterized as 'righteous dopefiends'. In fact, the mere suggestion by a researcher or other professional that the cultivation of 'street smarts' or a 'street youth community' in downtown Vancouver was something to celebrate could anger young people (Fast et al. 2013). 'I don't get this about people!' Aaron practically yelled at me in 2009, as we were sitting in my office. By 'people', he was referring to youth who had recently arrived downtown, but also to researchers like myself, who, in a misguided attempt to build rapport, frequently turned the conversation to overly romanticized notions of community and resilience on the streets. 'Like, oh, "*the street youth community*"', Aaron imitated sarcastically:

'Oh, it's so *cool* to sleep on the street', 'Oh, you've got to be *street smart* to live on the streets'. *Anyone* can easily drop a blanket on the ground and just lay down and throw another blanket on top of them, and there: they're on the street. This place is a gong show [crazy, out of control]. There is nothing good about it. It is *really, really, really, really, really, really* stupid how people talk about how you got to be like 'street smart' to be on the streets and stuff like that. And this is a '*community*'. Being street smart means not being on the streets. I don't know why but I *hate* that question!

In response to my clumsy questions about community and street smarts during the first years of my research, Tyson put it more subtly: 'Right now I have to be [street smart]. But like, I'm gonna get a hotel room, today. I'm gonna get a job in like, a week. Full-time job. Good pay. Get my own apartment in like a month or two. Or a house. I guess every

homeless person is part of “the community”, right? But I want to rejoin society again. Be a slave for the government, go to work. And contribute something, you know? Normal life kinda things’.

While it must be acknowledged that young people did sometimes describe themselves as shrewd ‘hustlers’ and fiercely loyal ‘gangsters’, the oppositional pride they attached to those regimes of living was usually short-lived. Instead, even as they actively used and sold drugs on the streets, youth also actively distanced themselves from what they framed as ‘junkie’ neighborhoods, spaces, and Others. They did this through their narratives, in which they frequently referred to other people who used and sold drugs in the third rather than first person (see also Robertson 2006), but also by physically avoiding inner-city services for ‘the homeless’, for example (Fast, Shoveller, et al. 2009). Especially initially, youth also made sure that they distanced themselves from long-term participation in my research – participation that, in a very real sense, locked them into categories like ‘street youth’, ‘drug user’, and ‘at risk’. As Lee and I were walking back to the research office in the Downtown South after that early conversation in 2009, I asked him if I could get in touch with him again. His response was immediate: ‘Actually, I was thinking about finishing my [high]school this year, right? Go to college or something. I wanna pursue certain dreams, right? So I probably won’t be around all these [drug user] services<sup>9</sup> that much’.

In fact, Lee became one the central participants of my study until his death in 2014. However, even as he and other young people participated in my research across several years – during which they all continued to cycle in and out of drug use, crime, and homelessness – they nevertheless remained deeply invested in imagining and aligning themselves with a ‘normal’ life in the city. They described again and again their plans for creating a ‘real’ home in one of Vancouver’s ‘nice’ neighborhoods – not just the Downtown Eastside; getting a university or college education – not just their General Education Diploma; and going shopping in ‘normal’ stores – not just standing in lines for free food and clothes. Young people’s drive to singularize out of categories like ‘street youth’, ‘drug user’, and ‘at risk’ was evident in the stories they told me, but also in the conversations they refused to have – particular kinds of conversations about ‘street smarts’ and the ‘street youth community’, for example, or those premised on their expertise as ‘addicts’. It was evident in the places they insisted we go to and photograph together, such as community gardens, public beaches, and Vancouver’s North Shore mountains, but also in the places they refused to spend time in and photograph together (for example, Lee was adamant that we never spend time together

<sup>9</sup> While our research office in the Downtown South is not technically a street youth drop-in service, youth rarely made this distinction.

in his dilapidated SRO in the Downtown South – even though I had been inside the building many times – and refused to photograph it as part of a photo essay he was creating about his sense of place in the city).

While youth were generally eager to distance themselves from long-term participation in my research, they did not feel the same need to distance themselves from me. Drawing on details I shared during our conversations together, as well as what they could glean from my Facebook page, youth would often steer the conversation towards a comparison of our lives in the city. Instead of emphasizing the social, economic, and geographical distance between us – which was almost always painfully obvious to me during these conversations – youth more often pointed out all of the ways in which our itineraries in the city overlapped (even if it was the case that they regularly took the bus up to the University of British Columbia to shoplift, while I was attending graduate school there). Over and over again, they each insisted to me that they weren't like 'the other people' they imagined were a part of my research, and asserted that we were much more alike than I – as a researcher who was trying to 'help' or 'save' at-risk youth – had considered. As Jordan was leaving my office after our first conversation together in 2008, he turned to me and said, 'You're gonna go home now, and I'm gonna stick in the back of your head. Because I'm mostly not a "drug person". I know normal people here in all different parts of the city. People with expensive houses, with cars and gold. Even in the Downtown Eastside now, there are people like that. My friends look just like you'.

Across time, some of the boundaries youth placed around their participation in my research shifted. Instead of distancing themselves from my study, some instead positioned themselves within it as co-researchers rather than participants, even though it was not technically a 'community-based participatory research study' in which young people were officially involved as 'peer researchers'. On more than one occasion, youth made a point of showing me books that they had checked out of the public library on the history of 'the drug problem' in Vancouver, and offered up insights gained from their research in this and other related areas, such as the global 2008 economic recession (see also Robertson 2006). They referred to the study as 'our university project', and, more than once, I overheard one of them explaining on the phone that they 'had to hang up now' because they 'had a job working on something for the university'.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> As is the common practice in our setting, young people were compensated for their time and participation in the research with cash honoraria.

## Ruptured boundaries, ruptured imaginaries

In the spring of 2013, I was dividing my time between finishing a first draft of my PhD thesis and fieldwork. As David Mosse (2006) has pointed out, there is something necessarily antisocial about ethnographic writing – it breaks fieldwork relations, cuts networks, and erects boundaries. I had told myself that when I reached the final push to pull a complete first draft together, I would remove myself from the field. But there was something about writing an ending of sorts to five years of anthropological research that compelled me to stay connected with as many youth as possible. I wanted to leave their stories unfinished and in-the-making (Biehl 2005) – and the only way to do that, it seemed, was to continue them into the present moment.

Exiting the field was also complicated by our social and geographical proximity. My research subjects and many of the places in which we spent our time together were only a short bus ride away. I frequently received calls and Facebook chat messages from young people in various states of crisis at all times of the day and night – like when Janet needed me to meet her so that we could figure out whether her boyfriend had been arrested, what the charges were, and how long the police were going to hold him for; or when Joe started hearing urgent messages from long-dead family members, and was threatened with eviction (and then hospitalization), for engaging in noisy conversations with them in the hallway of his social housing building. Other youth just wanted to get together to hang out and catch up.

It was in the midst of all-nighters spent at my computer and days spent hanging out in SROs, hospital rooms, and McDonald's restaurants that I found out about the severity of my own brother's addiction to Oxycontin. Today, whenever my brother's addiction comes up in conversation with people who know about my research, they inevitably ask if it is the reason I ended up doing this kind of work. The truth is I had no idea that these two worlds were going to collide – and to what extent – until they did. I remember my brother's friend, Brandon, calling me late one night from Australia, where he was away at school getting a law degree. 'I'm not sure how much you know', he began. For the next several minutes, I sat at my kitchen table and listened while Brandon explained that, in addition to his addiction to opiates, my brother had been arrested for dealing drugs. Early the next day, I went down to the police station to post my brother's bail. I had been to this station countless times, including with Janet that night when we were trying to figure out the details of her boyfriend's arrest. Unlike Janet, I was able to get my brother out, and into a private, residential drug treatment program in place of serving jail time.

That year, my brother went to treatment, got clean, threw himself into working the Twelve Steps, and then relapsed. It was a pattern that would repeat itself numerous times in the

years to come, with the exception that a yearly stay in a private, residential drug treatment facility was far too expensive to be sustainable. Instead, eventually my brother had to detox off of opiates in a publicly funded facility, where the worst-case scenario was going through the physical horrors of withdrawal while lying on a cot in a room with a handful of other people going through the same process, a thin curtain of plastic your only separation from the person in agony next to you. Detox was then followed by a stay in a halfway house for 'recovering addicts' – many of whom resume using and dealing drugs while in residence. Of course, detox in a publicly funded facility and halfway houses were often the only addiction treatment options available to the young people I follow.

When my brother was in residential treatment, I went to visitor's days, and stayed in touch with him via Facebook chat. When he wasn't in treatment (and later, detox), I spent time with him at his halfway houses, and accompanied him to a weekly Twelve Step meeting (which ran a parallel meeting for family members). I participated in consultations with social workers, addiction doctors, and drug and alcohol counselors. It was impossible not to bring these experiences into the field with me – into the places and encounters that were increasingly the very same ones I was navigating in my personal life. As my brother became increasingly entrenched in cycles of addiction, crime, and mental and physical health crises, the already ambiguous boundaries I had created between 'the field' and 'home', and my personal and professional life in the city, were ruptured. Today, just as I see young people through overdoses, mental breakdowns, and periods of hospitalization and institutionalization, I also see my brother through these kinds of experiences. Just as I visit youth in detox facilities, hospital wards, halfway houses, and social housing buildings, I now visit my brother in these kinds of places.

In certain ways, these events brought me into even greater social and geographical proximity with the young people I follow. Not infrequently, I ran into them when I was trying to track my brother down in Vancouver's inner city, or when we all found ourselves in the same office waiting rooms or Twelve Step meetings (attendance at which is oftentimes mandatory for young people enrolled in particular kinds of recovery programs, or for those attempting to get their child or children back from the Ministry of Children and Family Development). And yet, the boundaries that youth placed around their participation in my research meant that they did not embrace this greater proximity in the ways I might have expected. I thought, for example, that like our other conversations in which we compared aspects of our lives, our conversations about my brother would provide youth with an opportunity to point to areas of overlap and weigh in as experts – even if they did use the third rather than first person to talk about experiences of cycling through detox facilities, psychiatric holds, and recovery programs, and being put on methadone and various psychopharmaceuticals. But whenever my brother came up in conversation, youth would generally offer me their sympathy and emotional support before rather abruptly changing the subject. And when I

actually ran into young people while I was with my brother, these encounters tended to end just as quickly.

These frictions led me to consider whether, for some young people, the ongoing situation with my brother threatened to rupture their imaginaries of what constitutes a ‘normal’ or ‘white picket fence life’ in Vancouver – imaginaries that many young people believed I inhabited fully, no matter how much I might try and complicate their renderings of my life during our conversations together. It also led me to consider whether our close relationship was one of the ways in which they aligned themselves with these imaginaries, and, to however small an extent, inhabited the ‘normal’ forms of belonging and becoming they so deeply desired in Vancouver (regardless of the fact that our relationship was developed via a research study focused on urban poverty, addiction, and crime). In addition to allowing youth to develop a friendship across large differences in socioeconomic position (see also Culhane 2011), our research encounters brought them into a number of urban spaces that it would have been difficult for them to access under other circumstances. Youth and I have frequently shared meals and cups of coffee at what they refer to as ‘nice’ and ‘normal’ coffee shops and restaurants (including, eventually, my friends’ new upscale restaurant in the Downtown Eastside). Regardless of how ‘nice’ the place is, these opportunities to sit indoors as regular, paying customers are a stark contrast to the humiliation of attempting to sneak into McDonald’s restaurants and Starbucks coffee shops several times a day to use the bathroom or seek refuge from the rain, only to be kicked out a short time later. Youth and I have also often gone on trips, traveling together in my car to photograph the suburbs of their childhoods, popular tourist attractions like Vancouver’s North Shore Mountains, and the neighborhoods where they imagined living in the future. During these outings, even the toughest ‘gangsters’ gleefully played around with my iPhone, checking Facebook and carefully crafting playlists for our car ride.

Of course, it must be recognized that in these very same moments – driving somewhere in my car, or sitting in my friends’ restaurant in the Downtown Eastside – I could become a mirror of the worst kind for youth, perhaps particularly because we are so close (in some cases identical) in age. Youth at times became painfully aware of all of the ways in which our circumstances differed – differences that, as Culhane notes (2005, 97) ‘stretch[ed] back into historical time, permeat[ed] the present moment, and shape[d] the future’. I own an apartment in a nice Vancouver neighborhood, an iPhone, an expensive camera, and a car. I have a university education and a ‘real’ job doing research. These were things that young people deeply desired, and wanted to believe that they would one day attain once they had ‘pulled their lives together’ – that is, gotten off drugs, gotten ‘real’ (in other words non-SRO) housing, and gotten a job in Vancouver. The fact that I had them and they did not could generate anger, sadness, and resentment for youth (and privileged guilt for me). Ultimately, I

was 'accessing the lines of social mobility from which they are largely removed' (Culhane 2011, 260).

## Conclusion: Fleeting moments of reprieve

The young people I follow must continually attempt to shake loose from determinants and definitions like 'crackhead' and 'junkie', but also 'street youth', 'IDU' (injection drug user), 'NFA' (no fixed address), and 'homeless'. Unlike my brother, who has rapidly embraced the 'addict' label as one of the Twelve Steps, many youth have been trying to distance themselves from these kinds of labels and 'policy-relevant codes' for their entire lives (Robertson 2006, 302). In Vancouver's intensely researched urban drug scene, youth must also push against well-worn social science scripts – about 'community' and 'resilience' in the margins, for example – in order to assert desired senses of place and self in the city. The young people I follow are deeply engaged in trying to find ways to inhabit 'normal' horizons of possibility in one of the world's most beautiful, cosmopolitan, and livable cities, even as they become embroiled in addiction, crime, and forms of physical, psychological, emotional, and economic injury over time (Ralph 2014). This is what is at stake for them as they enroll in yet another research study about 'at-risk youth' in downtown Vancouver in order to make ends meet, and also, perhaps, in an effort to position themselves in the city in particular ways.

Even as our research encounters always underscore the vast social, economic, and geographical distances that exist between myself and the young people I follow, in certain moments they also seem to create desired forms of social and geographical proximity for youth – proximity to 'normal' or 'nice' places, for example, or to the imaginaries of a 'normal' life in the city that I sometimes reflect back at them. Whether our friendship, and the places in which we all find ourselves, constitute desired forms of proximity is highly situational. Youth were decidedly less interested in emphasizing our commonality when what we had in common was a family member experiencing addiction or when we were sitting anxiously in the same Emergency Room waiting area.

I do not want to overstate the impacts of involvement in research on young people's material lives. If our research encounters create desired forms of social and geographical proximity, and allow youth to position themselves in the city in desired ways, these are fleeting moments of reprieve from the everyday emergencies of life in the margins. And, none of this changes the fact that my study and numerous others like it are a part of an infrastructure and institutional gaze that positions youth as members of various 'risk groups'. Moreover, it is not lost on me that, while the frictions of working with young people across difference have pushed my research into new directions by forcing me to recognize their



deep desires for things to be otherwise in the city, in many ways my inclusion in the formal economy depends on their continued exclusion from the same (Culhane 2011). At the time of writing, with one exception all of the young people I follow continue to inhabit the social, spatial, and economic margins of Vancouver. But, they also continue to understand the future as yet-to-be-determined. They continue to explicitly challenge my assumptions about the limitations of life in the city for ‘people like them’, forcing me to constantly interrogate the politics, ethics, and practices of my research. This process of interrogation does not result in resolution; there are no quick fixes to the political and ethical dilemmas raised by my research, including the textual solution of reflexivity as a practice of ‘redemption’ (Stewart 1996; Weems 2006). Looking beyond reflexivity and the researcher’s positionality, we see how the researched may, in certain moments, use research encounters to position themselves in the world in particular ways – as employees working on a study for a university, for example, or as ‘normal’ urban citizens enjoying a car ride and some leisure time at a popular tourist site. Paying attention to how our research subjects position themselves in research encounters may force us to problematize tidy boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

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