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"The wrong side of the desk": Material and Discursive Struggle in Bud Osborn's Downtown Eastside

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Abstract
Bud Osborn (1947-2014) was an American poet and activist who arrived in Vancouver, Canada in 1986. He landed in Vancouver's oldest neighbourhood, the Downtown Eastside (DTES), while struggling with heroin addiction. The DTES is a complex and politically active neighbourhood and site of intersecting social crises. Osborn would spend the remainder of his life capturing this community in his poetry, which is often understood solely through activism for harm reduction and against gentrification. In this article, I engage with his poetry to understand the politics which motivate his activism. This exploration will include a variety of textual mediums, voices, and analytic perspectives to capture the complex politics contained in his words. I believe that by reading his words we can examine his complicated self-positionality as a PWUD (people who use drugs) and a member of the *lumpenproletariat* who occupied sociocultural spaces that often excluded those from his social standing. This examination shows how he constitutes the DTES as a space of material and discursive struggle. What emerges from this examination is how his poetic resistance at the level of the signifier intertwines with his street-level resistance. That is, how the act of writing and reading poetry can be an act of defiance.

Keywords: Poetry, Activism, Vancouver, Canada, Harm Reduction, Overdose Crisis, HIV/AIDS

I. Osborn's Downtown Eastside

but here they don't even see you.
– Bud Osborn, "propaganda"

Bud Osborn (1947-2014) was a Michigan-born, Ohio-raised poet and activist who arrived in Vancouver, Canada, in 1986. He landed in Vancouver's oldest and arguably most complex neighbourhood, the Downtown Eastside (DTES). The DTES is the site of intersecting, overlapping, and competing social crises. It also faces stigmatization due to disproportionally high rates of substance use and trafficking, visibly unhoused people, mental health crises, crime, and residents who engage in sex work. Yet, the DTES is also represented by its large and politically active Indigenous population, its grassroots politics, harm reduction initiatives, and its dense concentration of artists. Osborn would spend the remainder of his life capturing this community in his poetry, which he frequently read at community events and political gatherings. His poetry became a way to amplify, archive, and advocate for the voices and histories in and about the DTES. His poetic fidelity to the lived experience of the DTES led him, in some ways, to become the unofficial ambassador for a community that refuses a stable definition.

In the 1995 documentary *Down Here*, Osborn recounts that for his first several years in the DTES, he was "one of the drug addicts on the 100 block of Hastings and on the corner in front of the Carnegie Centre." This autobiographic quip presents two types of positionality: social and spatial. Osborn identifying himself as "*one* of the drug addicts" situates him within a social classification that is often the source of condemnation and misunderstanding in the hegemonic discourse. He then spatially situates himself on the "100 block of Hastings on the corner in front of the Carnegie Centre" at the Main and Hastings intersection, the geographical and cultural epicentre of the DTES. It is important to consider that issues around drug use, and, by extension, people who use drugs (PWUD) are often treated as a crisis of criminality rather than a health crisis (Taylor 374). Legislation, such as drug prohibition, creates the conditions where PWUD are defined as criminals and justifies their regulation of liberties and movements through carceral forms of control. Osborn situates himself within this category of the criminal while occupying a space often defined

by the neighbourhood's higher-than-average crime rate (Vancouver Police Department). Osborn's resistance, however, intervenes at these boundaries that delimit hegemonic sociospatial exclusion to construct his DTES. His DTES becomes a space occupied and defined by those whose lived experiences include addiction, social dejection, and poverty. Osborn poetically reveals this thread and begins pulling on it to unravel this inextricable knotting of shared crises endemic to those in the DTES.

We can understand Osborn's DTES as a space of discursive and material conflict. Let us consider, again, Osborn describing standing on Hastings. Hastings Street is a notorious east-west traffic corridor that runs through the entirety of Vancouver's DTES.[1] Although Hastings is not the sole street contained in the DTES, these two terms are often used interchangeably. The "front of the corner in front of the Carnegie Centre" signifies the epicentre of the DTES where Hastings and Main St. intersect. It is also the heart of Vancouver's, and possibly North America's, largest open-air drug market. There is a constant refrain of "down, side?," signalling the trafficking of illicit opioids and amphetamines on the bustling black-market sidewalk.[2] Decades prior to Osborn's arrival, the Carnegie Centre held the central branch of the Vancouver Public Library and was thought to be in a state of disrepair. It was not until 1980 that a non-profit called the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA) successfully reopened it as a community centre and social services hub. It is important to note that DERA requires its members to be residents of the DTES. The Carnegie was an abject space until members of the DTES rejected its dereliction through community-based advocacy. DERA's reclamation of the once-abjected Carnegie Centre mirrors Osborn's poetic reclamation of his sociospatial positionality within the DTES. He initially defines his positionality from a category of sociospatial abjection only to resist these categories imposed on him.

Osborn's primary form to practice and disseminate his theory of resistance is poetry. His poetic struggle was against the material conditions afflicting his community and its members, in addition to discursive contexts that stigmatize and misrepresent. These stigmatizing representations of the DTES construct it as a tainted space "in an otherworld, helping [non-residents] to mitigate against . . . moral

responsibility" (Woolford 49). It is from within this otherworld that Osborn situates his poetry. Not only must his poetry challenge the conditions that create physical harm, but he must also demystify the discursive processes that both obscure and reproduce its conditions. Open-air drug use and drug trafficking, blocks of visibly unhoused population, frequent emergency vehicle sirens, decrepit building structures, and police over-surveillance were, and continue to be, common sights and sounds within the DTES. When experienced as a whole, these examples create a cacophonous environment, and sensory chaos exists in a seemingly never-ending feedback loop. Osborn wrote poetry that represented this chaos that defines the lived experience within the DTES while struggling against this same cacophony silencing the voices from within. His poetic resistance involves realizing his DTES as a space where both cacophony and community voices can be heard clearly.

My exploration will include a variety of textual mediums, voices, and analytic perspectives to capture the complex politics contained in his poetry and make clear what is at stake in his poetic project. That is, I engage with Osborn's politics by engaging with his words. To read his poetry and listen to his words, or the words from others contained in his poetics, allows me to examine his complicated self-positionality as a PWUD and a member of the *lumpenproletariat* who occupied sociocultural spaces that often excluded those from his social standing. These analyses aim to facilitate a deeper understanding for how he constitutes the DTES as a space of material and discursive struggle. What emerges from this examination is how his poetic resistance at the level of the signifier is intertwined with his physical resistance at the level of the street. That is, how the act of writing *and* reading poetry becomes an act of defiance.

II. Constructing the Downtown Eastside

Osborn's arrival in Vancouver's DTES coincided with the end of the 1986 World Exposition on Transportation and Communication, or Expo 86. Over 22 million people visited the False Creek fairgrounds, which neighbours the DTES. It also marked the beginning of Vancouver's rapid

economic growth which continues today. However, the DTES's existence and proximity to Expo 86 were seen as antithetical to the future Vancouver wanted to promote on the global stage. In order for the city to succeed with its plans for a utopic future founded on economic revitalization, it required DTES residents to be displaced and erased from this vision "to ensure that the . . . population does not threaten the exchange values concretized in the material landscape" (Blomley 576). Affordable housing options in the DTES rapidly vanished while surrounding neighbourhoods' wealthier tenants invested in the construction of new developments. In his poem "gentrification," Osborn quotes the professor and geographer Neil Smith in an epigraph: "gentrification . . . a revengeful and reactionary viciousness against various populations accused of stealing the city from white upper classes" (34). This definition of gentrification highlights this intersection between the material and the discursive. Gentrification and material displacement must be discursively justified as repatriating stolen territory from trespassers and squatters to those who rightfully utilize its land value. Smith's process allows us to clarify a hegemonic logic that catalyzed the mass evictions of DTES residents prior to Expo 86. British Columbia's provincial government notoriously ignored pleas to amend tenancy laws that left thousands of DTES residents living in single-room occupancy hotels (SROs) at risk of short-term evictions. These pleas were for "long-term SRO tenants [to] be covered under the rules governing landlords and tenants, rather than the Innkeeper's Act, which didn't require formal eviction notice" (Baker). The Innkeeper's Act allowed SRO landlords to post immediate evictions of their tenants without cause. By some estimates, over 1000 SRO tenants were given immediate evictions, sometimes only verbally, by their landlords in the weeks leading up to Expo 86 (Baker). Long-term tenants, many of whom were elderly pensioners, were forced to sleep on the sidewalks or in shelters while the province ignored calls to legislate their housing security.

The DTES also saw a significant rise in the unhoused population into the 1990s, many with complex mental health histories. This population jump was primarily the result of a decades-long provincial policy shift towards deinstitutionalizing its long-term psychiatric hospitals,

most notably Riverview Hospital in Coquitlam (Read 25). Many patients in these hospitals were forcefully subjected to carceral-like conditions and socially isolated, with some facilities reporting startling levels of physical and psychological abuse. The communicated objective behind this period of deinstitutionalization was to provide more humane treatments, increased community support options, and greater patient autonomy to those with chronic mental health conditions. Deinstitutionalization was also widely embraced by policymakers for its cost-cutting model that shifted labour and costs onto community-based support (Mechanic and Rochefort 305). In reality, deinstitutionalization occurred without this proposed support operating at the scale needed to transition the thousands involuntarily placed in inpatient wards to their new life in the community. Plenty of newly discharged patients ended up on the streets of the DTES. My work in and around the DTES has brought me in contact with several ex-Riverview patients who, to this day, have yet to be rehoused since they were discharged decades prior.

DTES residents also had to contend with an explosive HIV/AIDS outbreak during this era. The transmission rate of HIV/AIDS in the mid-90s was staggeringly high. Vancouver became infamous for having the "worst AIDS epidemics in any wealthy nation" (Associated Press). This health crisis has been largely attributed to the virus's transmission through the intravenous drug user population and street-based sex workers. Without access to sterile harm reduction equipment and sanctioned spaces for safe drug consumption, IV drug users were forced to inject in precarious ways. Examples include, but are not limited to, injecting with dulled needles, injecting with shared syringes, injecting with a makeshift syringe, cooking substances on unsterile surfaces, diluting substances with water from contaminated sources, and injecting in unsanitary environments, such as behind garbage bins in alleys. This culture of substance use and the conditions IVDUs [intravenous drug users] face are also frequently addressed in Osborn's poetry:

fixin in the alley
blood streamin
naked girl tweakin
hundred block reelin

vancouver's first
western world's worst
hiv
public health emergency. ("hundred block rock" 102)

The image of a "naked girl tweakin" in a bloodstained alley unveils the conditions that catalyze and sustain this public health emergency. To clarify, "tweakin" refers, often derogatorily, to episodes of erratic, unpredictable, and at times dyskinetic behaviour that are associated with prolonged stimulant use. This site-specific imagery of a DTES alley as a space for physical and mental crises disrupts the seemingly impartial use of "public health emergency." The population most at risk is the same population that has been often cast out from the public eye: those indefinitely committed to psychiatric asylums, those displaced by gentrification, and now those in the alleys of the DTES. As Philippe Bourgois notes, there is often an overlooked "logic for injecting in the midst of filth: the zero-tolerance War on Drugs has turned filthy nooks and crannies into the safest refuges for homeless injectors even if they are also incubators for propagating infectious diseases from the perspective of public health" (7). As Bourgois makes clear, those in the alleys of the DTES opt for increasing potential harm to their health in their attempt to avoid further criminalization. Even the most careful IVDUs could not negate every risk associated with illicit IV injection use, with HIV/AIDS transmission being only one of many. The rate of HIV/AIDS in Vancouver eventually began to drop in the late 90s, partly due to wider access to effective antiretroviral treatment (Sarti). It was still a number of years off, however, until publicly funded harm reduction incentives were widely accessible for those most at-risk.

III. Osborn's Poetry

a judge told me I was of no use.
– Bud Osborn, "amazingly alive"

Self-narration is key to Osborn's poetic project. He makes clear how his origins within the DTES, like many others, are preceded by a journey filled with trauma, poverty, and addiction. Osborn grew up in Toledo,

Ohio, before draft-dodging his way across the USA-Canada border to Toronto to avoid conscription in the Vietnam War. He details this journey westward to Vancouver's DTES in his poem "hounded to the coast." Osborn asks if his journey to the DTES is "to die like . . . many other Greyhound refugees burning a continent behind them" (110). In other words, how can his own experience speak to the experience of others in the DTES? And how does Osborn frame the DTES as a place of refuge for "other Greyhound refugees"? These questions highlight the utopian ideal contained in Osborn's poetry. He advocates for a unique community formed around those who are seen as "bad and not part of anybody's community" (*Down Here*).[3] The DTES becomes a space inclusive to those banished from other communities: a community for the urban refugee. In an ironic twist, banishment to the margins becomes a qualifier for gaining access to this community.

This banished group that Osborn centres on his advocacy is the *lumpenproletariat*, a class with which he self-identifies. This class, within the DTES, consists of "those radically excluded from traditional working-class citizenship: drug users, panhandlers, prostitutes, and petty drug dealers; in short . . . the 'undeserving poor'" (Proudfoot 99). To reference Marx and Engel's orthodox definition, the *lumpenproletariat* is a counterrevolutionary class existing in the absence of any class consciousness. Their goals and actions are antithetical to socialist movements since they supposedly leech off the *proletariat* – the so-called deserving working class. Osborn's poetic advocacy intervenes at this junction where class consciousness is seen as absent. His *lumpenproletariat* possesses a distinct consciousness constituted by "words and courage and love and hope and unity / only if we had / the means for self-determination" ("raise shit" 286). It is this very exclusion from working-class movements that the *lumpenproletariat* struggle to gain self-determination. Although working-class advocacy groups during the 70s and 80s, like DERA, were "not concerned that the *lumpenproletariat* of the [DTES] would sabotage their efforts . . . they were nevertheless portrayed as 'outsiders,' preying on the noble working class whose image [they] had worked to rehabilitate" (Proudfoot 100).

Let us return, again, and consider Osborn's description as "one of the drug addicts . . . in front of the Carnegie Centre" (*Down Here*). The Carnegie Centre is a space that DERA fought to reopen for the community, but Osborn positions himself outside of this space. This image provides a literal picture of the *lumpenproletariat*'s positionality in the DTES during the peak of working-class movements of the 70s and 80s. Osborn's *lumpenproletariat* physically existed in the DTES but outside of the social spaces that these working-class movements constituted as their community. One of DERA's failings was they did not foreground the possibility to house the *lumpenproletariat*. Instead, the *lumpenproletariat*'s absence from DERA's aims reinforced them as a fundamentally unhouseable class. For an organization in the DTES that touted the need to render citizenship through stable housing, this citizenship only extended to some, while the *lumpen* continued to live on the margins as urban refugees.

Throughout interviews and his poetry, Osborn does not shy away from his lived condition as part of the *lumpenproletariat* class and the desperation it entails. These poetic retellings attempt to fill in the gap in advocacy and representational exclusion of the *lumpenproletariat* from community-based movements during his early years in the DTES. In his recollections of how intense his drug addiction became during this period, he describes how he would carry a hammer around with him. This hammer could become a weapon to rob others as a more efficient means to get money to fuel his addiction:

> I was just gonna go out at night on the street with a hammer. I had the hammer! I was gonna whack people on the head! The more vulnerable looking person the better. I was gonna whack them and take their money. . . . If I kill somebody, if I maim somebody, that's too bad. I thought there's no other way, there's no other way. (*Down Here*)

Osborn did not go through with his intentions to commit armed robbery, but his phrase "I thought there's no other way" highlights how desperation can bring about violence for those struggling with drug addiction. Osborn does not try to justify this potentially heinous act, but he does not shy away from the violent reality that many of those who are entrenched in

addiction face. This violence is not exclusive to Osborn. Vancouver-based poet Mariner Janes notes how "the problems of poverty, drug addiction, and violence . . . have come to be considered as an intrinsic part of life in the community of the DTES" (16). This "intrinsic part of life of the DTES" are all subject matters Osborn's *lumpenproletariat* must contend with. To write about and represent the DTES from within is to bear witness to the ways an impoverished and maligned community operates under overdetermined forms of systemic oppression. Osborn reclaims these often-exploited narratives in his poetry by detailing the context, causes, and effects that the *lumpenproletariat* experiences in the DTES.

To read Osborn's poetry is to bear witness to these lived conditions. His poetic recuperation is to listen to "those whose everyday speech so often produces the living poetry of our time" (*East of Main* 157). This "everyday speech" is what Osborn brings into his poetry. What he defines as "everyday speech" expresses both solidarity and alienation. Janes argues that "Osborn's poetics attempt to write a sense of community where others only see separation . . . is heteroglossia translated into social terms" (22). Osborn's poetry as a heteroglossic text suggests that his work is polyphonic. He acknowledges how the DTES consists of a variety of voices describing "conflicting ambitions understandings and perspectives / still our words and presence create / a strange and profound unity" ("raise shit" 284). Competing voices within the DTES, Osborn suggests, allow for this distinct community to unify in its struggle for self-determination.

Whereas Janes argues that Osborn defines the DTES's distinct community through this horizontal multivocality, I contend that Osborn's poetics also represent voices from what we might call vertical multivocality. He includes voices from those who may not occupy this social demographic, which includes the voices that struggle against the *lumpenproletariat.* These voices can include bureaucrats, policymakers, health care workers, journalists, academics, and radio callers sharing their disdain for the *lumpenproletariat*. One reoccurring example across Osborn's poetic self-narrative details his conversations with a judge who presided over multiple of his sentencing hearings. After being found guilty of drug possession and disorderly conduct, this judge "said 'you're

of no use to society'" ("guilty as charged" 32). The judge's comments offer a glimpse into how Osborn, both a member of the *lumpenproletariat* and DTES resident, is categorized within the juridico-political framework. He is rendered extraneous, sentenced to six months in prison, and separated from "society." This vertical multivocality in Osborn's poetry offers more than simply the perspective of those with more sociopolitical power. Osborn's DTES constructs and sustains itself discursively and spatially in opposition to these denigrating voices from above. To be a *lumpenproletariat* in the DTES is to struggle against the entire possible range of voices who seek to erase their existence.

Osborn's heteroglossic poetry does not, therefore, present the *lumpenproletariat* as an always harmonious group cooperating against the dominating voices, as Janes argues. His poetry reflects class struggle, and intra-class struggles, at the level of the signifier. Osborn is keenly aware of his liminal position as a member of the *lumpenproletariat* who also occupies a position alongside these hegemonic voices. He was a member of the Vancouver/Richmond Community Health Board (now Vancouver Coastal Health) in addition to being a founding member of the advocacy group Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU). Although much of the VANDU membership is made up of those from the *lumpenproletariat* class (former or current drug use is a prerequisite for voters), these two groups are important voices in the drug policy debate in Vancouver. Osborn's liminal position as a peer-worker has caused his defiant words to be turned against him. In his poem "one of them," Osborn recounts how he is perceived as a hegemonic figure during his role as a peer worker at an overnight shelter:

> I took this job
> and hear my own words:
> you don't know what it's like!
> used on me. (90)

To "hear my own words . . . used on me" suggests the fluidity of the *lumpenproletariat* identity. Osborn is no longer recognized as someone who understands the exhausting experience of accessing social services for basic needs. He is positioned as unable to understand the

lumpenproletariat experience because he is given the power to choose who can have a bed or food. His position as part of the *lumpenproletariat* becomes superseded by his position as the shelter worker. However, what Osborn emphasizes in "one of them" is the subjectivity of the *lumpenproletariat* or PWUD. There is no single form of *lumpenproletariat* or drug user. There are struggles between members of these identities. Osborn, in "switch[ing] sides of the social control" (*East of Main* 157), recognizes how the DTES is a site of physical struggle and struggle at the level of the signifier. This struggle occurs between all voices in this heteroglossia, not just between hegemonic voices and *lumpenproletariat* voices.

It is impossible to ignore how intertwined Osborn's poetry is with his activism. He makes clear how he sees his "political work [as] an extension of the vocation of being a poet" (*Down Here*). Poetry is the foundational medium for his activism. His poetic project is imbued with calls to resist the dominant sociopolitical forces that work to control, gentrify, and displace the subjugated bodies and their voices in the DTES. In the poem "raise shit," Osborn calls upon his peers to combat the City of Vancouver's inaction to tackle the concurrent crises afflicting the DTES:

> raise shit
> against the kind of "urban cleansing"
> it's a war
> against the poorest of the poor
> 1000 overdose deaths in the downtown eastside in 4 years
> highest rate and number of suicides in vancouver
> fatal epidemics of aids and hepatitis c
> and lack of humane housing. (287)

Osborn's repeated calls to "raise shit" present a dual intent within his poetic project. To "raise shit" can be understood as 'active resistance,' or being a so-called 'shit disturber.' His protests disrupt social complacency to the outrageous levels of poverty and violence towards the residents of the DTES. The absence of public outrage about this violence, Osborn argues, is specifically because this violence occurs in the DTES. One example of raising shit includes blocking off Main and Hastings, a major commuter intersection and the epicentre of the DTES, and then nailing

1000 crosses in Oppenheimer Park to mark "1000 overdose deaths in the downtown eastside in 4 years." Poetry becomes a way to document or commemorate these calls to action, as well as the action itself. Osborn frames this poetic document from his perspective as part of the *lumpenproletariat* class in contrast to the hegemonic discourse found in many journalistic and political accounts of the DTES.

Another way we can understand Osborn's calls to "raise shit" are his efforts to elevate the "poorest of the poor" within his poetry by giving a "voice to the voiceless" (O'Brien 17). That is, give a population who are cast out like excrement by the rest of the city a place in his poetry to *speak* and be *heard*. There is obvious self-effacement in Osborn's reappropriation of the term "shit." Yet, this self-effacement is an effort to dignify the *lumpen* population in contrast with the hegemonic discourse surrounding this class. Often voices from within the DTES are placed alongside authoritative voices that seek to displace and commit violence towards the former. In turn, his poetic resistance functions by foregrounding "assumptions of the dominant discourse and then engag[ing] in a series of oppositional and recuperative readings . . . that aim to highlight both the antagonistic relationship his world experiences with the dominant order and strategies of survival and resistance" (Campbell 270). This foregrounding-then-subverting of the dominant discourse can allow us to understand Osborn's dialectical method. He challenges the hegemonic discourse on drug use and poverty by preserving the often-excluded perspectives of those most affected by these topics.

We can consider how Osborn uses his poetry to engage with the hegemonic discourse regarding the *lumpenproletariat* in an excerpt from "insite vigil poem." Osborn was a central figure in the fight to open North America's first legally sanctioned and supervised injection site, Insite.[4] Opening in 2003, Insite is still in operation serving hundreds of visitors a day, with many participants making multiple daily visits. Even if Insite is a success for those who access its services, Osborn makes clear that some who opposed supervised injection sites would call into the radio to state their disdain towards PWUD and the *lumpenproletariat* population in the DTES: "'why don't they just string barbed-wire / around the downtown eastside / and let them infect each other to death?'" (189). The unnamed

caller perceives "them," the *lumpenproletariat*, as filth, as excrement, as shit. This vitriolic quote against the *lumpenproletariat* exemplifies an overtness to this hegemonic discourse, a politics of exclusion. Osborn presents these calls for violence against his community as an example of how the exclusionary discourse is one attempt to control the *lumpenproletariat* population in how they live *and* die. The justification for segregating the *lumpenproletariat* from a supposedly productive society is, as Julia Kristeva succinctly argues, founded on "the simple logic of *excluding filth*" (65; my emphasis). Kristeva proposes that societal divisions form between groups to prohibit "a filthy, defiling element" (65). The *lumpenproletariat* is the "defiling element" to the caller. Thus, those who occupy this class must be cast out. They must be contained. They must be voiceless. They must be *excluded*. Otherwise, these two groups may both become infected. Osborn's inclusion of the caller's request for the *lumpenproletariat* "to infect each other to death" ("insite vigil poem") also highlights how biomedical processes can obscure fears of "social infections." Of course, "infect" initially refers to the myriad of diseases which stem from or are exacerbated because of drug use (more specifically, the drug prohibition laws that inhibit PWUD from safer substance use options). HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C are two prevalent biological diseases discussed in the DTES and substance use in the *lumpenproletariat* population. But this spread of disease that physically threatens the *lumpenproletariat* and PWUD in the DTES quickly transitions into the middle-class fear of *lumpenization*.

Lumpenization as contagion calls for a biomedical intervention that quarantines and isolates. To be exposed to poverty, Osborn's radio caller suggests, is to be threatened by its supposed transmissibility. One's spatial proximity to the DTES, or those who are signified as *lumpenproletariat*, is a potential factor in what leads many to end up "down there." Whereas the DTES becomes a metaphoric boogeyman for the caller to inscribe their societal grievances onto, Osborn makes clear that the sociopolitical conditions imposed on the DTES are material. David Sibley's comments on the moral panic surrounding the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 90s illustrate a similar trajectory for how a discursive contagion originates from an epidemiological process. Sibley notes that HIV/AIDS became a

sociocultural contagion, or a contagious metaphor, that threatened the material conditions benefitting those within the sociocultural hegemony:

> One panic response in western societies was to advocate quarantine, the physical isolation of homosexuals with AIDS, a response which betrays ignorance of the epidemiology of the syndrome but is consistent with the idea of the threat of contagion, a metaphoric threat to the health of the family. (42)

Quarantine is no longer to prevent just a biological contagion. Whereas Sibley argues that HIV/AIDS is seen as threatening the heteronormative "health of the family," Osborn quotes Smith to show how the *lumpenproletariat* is seen as "stealing the city / from the white upper classes" ("raise shit" 280). *Lumpenization* is not solely the passive transmission of poverty and abjection from one body to another, from one urban space to the next. *Lumpenization*, to many, is the active taking of profit and securities from the non-*lumpenproletariat*. One example includes former Mayor of Vancouver Sam Sullivan's comments regarding the opening of the Thomus Donaghy Overdose Prevention Site in the upscale Yaletown neighbourhood. He argues that safe injection sites are not part of the harm reduction model, but "really about 'harm production . . . the drug-addicted person has to find money, often from illegal means'" (qtd. in Griffin). Sullivan's comments follow a similar logic as the dejected caller: exclude the *lumpenproletariat* from this space to avoid producing a social infection. When the *lumpenproletariat* (the euphemistic DTES resident) ruptures the geographical boundaries of the DTES, the fear of *lumpenization* displaces the well-being of the individual. The dejected caller treats the symptom as the root cause of the disease.

We can see a similar dynamic towards the *lumpenproletariat* as in the attitudes towards those most affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s. What Leo Bersani calls a "frenzied epic of displacements" (220) frames what these similar attitudes are, and what Osborn advocates against. Like Sibley, Bersani describes how those who were disproportionally at risk from HIV/AIDS during this period in North America – gay men and PWUDs – were often displaced by the possibility of harm, predominately discursive harm, to the so-called general public (white, middle-class, able-bodied). If we translate this "frenzied epic of

displacements" into the context of the *lumpenproletariat*, we can quickly see how the fear of *lumpenization* at the level of signifier displaces the real harm being done to the *lumpenproletariat* at the level of the street. Osborn positions the province's medical inaction to the HIV/AIDS epidemic ravaging the *lumpenproletariat* in the DTES as a symptom of this displacement. He centers on this inaction in the fight to open Insite, which "began in a political/rhetorical atmosphere / of depraved indifference / regarding overdose deaths and pandemic emergency" ("insite vigil poem"). The province's inaction, or their "depraved indifference," is a topic Osborn addresses with frequent exacerbation. This inaction is not an overstatement either. Osborn was still a member of the Vancouver/Richmond Community Health Board in 1997 when Vancouver (more precisely, the DTES) had some of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS among injection drug users in the world. During one of the board meetings, another member looked at a chart with the skyrocketing rates of infections and proposed that "if we don't do anything, they are going to come down, because we'll hit a saturation point" (Lupick 117).[5] The unnamed member's proposal implies letting PWUD infect each other until there are no more bodies to infect, effectively reducing the number of new infections. This proposal mirrors the radio caller's suggestion for the *lumpenproletariat* to "infect each other to death" such that inaction becomes a solution to reducing statistical trends. These statistical trends present the *lumpenproletariat* only as a group defined by their inevitable death. And, in this proposal, epidemiological statistics displace the real harm being done to the *lumpenproletariat*.

Osborn's poetic response to these hegemonic voices can be understood as a poetic *détournement*. He situates those who propose passivity to or abjection upon these dual medical crises as the defiling element, rather than the *lumpenproletariat* themselves. It is this inaction or exclusion concerning the *lumpenproletariat* which further exacerbates these real and metaphorical infections. Osborn equates this lack of compassion with a lack of humanity when he introduces those who treat the *lumpenproletariat* with "depraved indifference" as "horrifying ghosts of human beings" ("insight vigil poem"). Notice how Osborn frames this caller as a "horrifying ghost" right after discussing the political

atmosphere regarding the *lumpenproletariat*. We might immediately assume that "horrifying ghosts" refer to the *lumpenproletariat*. But Osborn redirects this description back toward the caller. The labels used against the *lumpenproletariat* and PWUD can be flipped onto the so-called productive citizen. The suggestion to dehumanize others based on class or substance use makes the caller a "horrifying ghost." The radio caller, thus, becomes *more dead* than PWUD, the *lumpenproletariat* and the actual dead.

This rhetoric of "depraved indifference," of course, did not disappear after the opening of Insite. It continues to rage on. Osborn's startlingly accurate comment about the "depraved indifference / regarding overdose deaths and pandemic emergency" can be applied to the current health crisis in British Columbia: the continued toxic drug crisis which has grown even more deadly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. British Columbia recorded "2,511 suspected unregulated drug deaths [in 2023,] the highest number of suspected deaths ever recorded in a year, 5% higher than the number of deaths in 2022 (2,383)" (BC Coroners Service). Several factors are listed as contributing to this statistic, such as where someone is using, if fentanyl is detected, the route of administration, or even when the day welfare supplement cheques are released. These factors can help us understand how to reduce the risks involved in contemporary substance use. However, they fail to capture the question of *why* deaths tend to increase after welfare day, or *why* so many PWUDs use alone. Osborn's words suggest that any effective intervention must challenge this "depraved indifference" materially *and* discursively.

Libby Davies, a founder of DERA and retired Canadian federal politician, argues in the introduction to Osborn's *Keys to Kingdoms* that his poems "propel us to act" (5). Davies's argument, however, fails to capture the nuance of his poetic project. Poetry as a force which propels resistance at the level of the street is only one aspect of Osborn's *poeisis*. For many readers, Osborn must contend against hegemonic discourse that defines and subjugates the DTES. His demystification of the lived condition of the *lumpenproletariat* in the DTES becomes a way for others, specifically those occupying classes above the *lumpenproletariat* or non-drug users, to bear witness to the "wrong side of the desk" ("one of them"

90). That is, we challenge the harmful assumptions regarding the *lumpenproletariat* by reading his poetry and paying attention to his words. In bearing witness, Osborn brings into emergence the unique community within the DTES. Osborn's project redefines what it means to be on the "wrong side of the desk." Those who lack humanity towards the *lumpenproletariat* or PWUD are who Osborn frames as being on the "wrong side." The indifferent policymaker, the dejected caller, and even Osborn himself as the exhausted shelter worker are examples of this. Osborn frames these examples as unempathetic not solely because they "don't understand" ("one of us" 92). They occupy the "wrong side of the desk" because they "don't give a shit" (92). But how can this reader "give a shit"? They can listen to the voices that Osborn includes in his poetry. They can think about how his DTES is a space constituted by physical and discursive struggle. Osborn's poetry may even provoke them to raise shit!

Notes:

[1] Hastings Street's notoriety has been the inspiration for diverse media works. For example, Montreal-based post-rock band Godspeed You! Black Emperor named their song "East Hastings" after the Hastings strip in the DTES. This song later appeared in the Danny Boyle zombie film *28 Days Later*. Exploitative and dehumanizing comparisons between the impoverished conditions many DTES residents face and the undead are not only common but continue to proliferate. The UK tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mirror* published an article on February 22, 2023, entitled: "'Ground Zero of drugs' where zombie addicts lie in street as heroin and crack made legal." I am unsure if this connection between the inspiration of the song and how PWUDs are reduced to zombies was evident when the politically anarchist band signed over rights for the song to appear in the film.

[2] Today, fentanyl has nearly entirely replaced heroin in the DTES (Nolen).

[3] Veronica Alice Mannix's documentary also takes its name from a similarly titled Osborn poem, "down here." Down is a word that takes on multiple meanings in the DTES. It is a locational signifier: the Downtown Eastside rather than East Vancouver or Downtown Vancouver. It can take on the vernacular for street-level heroin and now fentanyl. To end up "down here" also refers to this process of social banishment from other spaces through drug use, struggles with

mental health, and so on. This banishment allows the DTES to become a space of refuge.

[4] Other common names for safe injection sites include safe consumption sites, overdose prevention sites, OPSs, and supervised consumption rooms.

[5] Lupick quotes Dr. John Blatherwick, the head of the health board, during this meeting, twenty years later. Blackerwick, Lupick writes, "acknowledges that the deaths hitting a saturation point is very likely what occurred" (117).

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