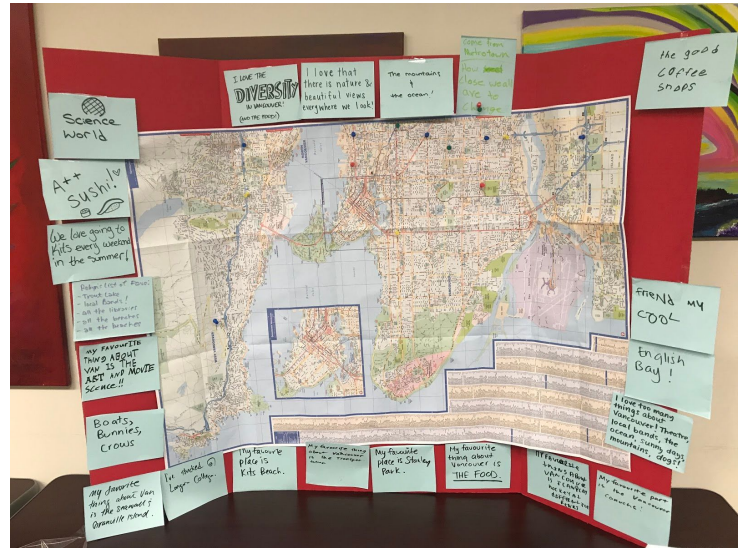


MAPPING VANCOUVER, OUR STORY

Author Douglas Coupland once wrote, “Vancouver is the square root of negative one. Technically it shouldn't exist, but it does. I can't imagine living anywhere else.” With the torrential rains and the greying skies of September, I've always felt there was a gloomy sadness only associated with Vancouver, yet unlike Coupland, I sometimes imagine living in other places. Maybe because I was raised in the city's suburbs, I admittedly miss the glittery chaos of New York City, where I lived as a graduate student.

I think a lot about the emotional geography of place when I'm writing, and cities are no longer flat backdrops, but become frenetic pulsing characters in my work.



A *location* becomes a placeholder for memory and powerful stories continue to form.

Locations often become defining characters themselves, marked by distinguished *characteristics*.

During our September workshop, participants and I worked together on creating a collective map of our everyday geographies. “Where did you come from today?” I asked, and each participant used a pushpin to anonymously mark their home location in relation to the CSO on Fraser Street.

By making a profound connection between each of our commutes to The CSO, I wanted to discover a commonality, a shared story.

I then posed the open-ended question: “What do you love about Vancouver?” The enthusiastic answers included Stanley Park, Kitsilano Beach, delicious sushi, Vancouver’s “Big City atmosphere”, the kindness of its residents, easy access to the skytrain, and of course, our famous cultural obsession with ice hockey. Some workshop participants even noted that The Nam was a particular Vancouver favourite: a restaurant of great historical and cultural significance, a vegetarian place originating from the 1960s. Others said that Sushi Moon on Fraser was



another culinary passion, and described the food as the “best thing about Vancouver.”



Yet when I posed the semi-playful, imaginative question about whether workshop participants and JHS staff would continue to live in Vancouver if they could live anywhere in the world, there was a compelling blend of answers. Nearly half of the staff and clients felt that Vancouver was their rightful home, yet others wanted to leave immediately if they could afford the move.

Karen, a staff member at JHS, admitted that “Vancouver is pretty alright,” while Caitlin said that she was ‘born in Vancouver’ and has “never left or travelled outside of it.” Both Karen and Caitlin could not imagine ever leaving permanently, while Rory explained that the “Lower Mainland has lots of fun stuff to do.”



Some of the workshop participants cited Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Kingston, Ontario as their primary go-to-places, especially because of the East Coast’s friendlier people who enjoy chatting with out-of-town guests. To which Robert declared that “Kingston is the Harlem of Canada!” and the workshop table erupted into loud, sustained laughter.

Having never been to Kingston, I was unable to give my opinion. I had a friend who once studied literature at Queen’s University; however, she often remarked that she found the isolation of Kingston to be disturbing.

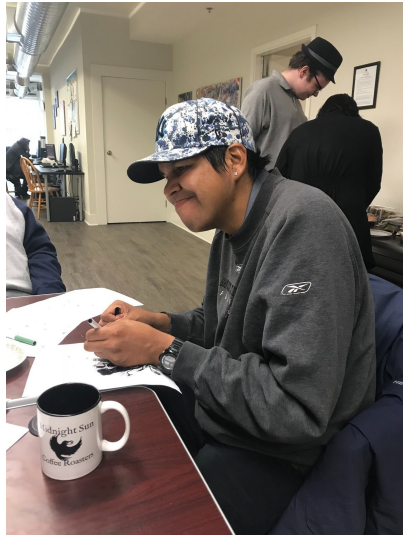
As a recent transplant to Vancouver, Dina misses the authentic, close-knit community of Calgary, where she said that people are less standoffish and more welcoming of strangers. If she could move anywhere in the world, she’d live in Damascus, the capital of the Syrian Arab Republic, explaining that it’s a beautiful city with a history of art and war, but it was modern before the year 300 BCE.

“We need to build more of a community in Vancouver,” Dina said. “We need a place for people to gather and just have potlucks.”



Wesley wanted to go up north to Powell River, where residents on disability are given a cheque for \$2000/month. 'Rent there is only \$300/month, so I could afford way more!' he said, looking excited at the prospect of relocating.

Daren mentioned Australia because his family lives there, and he misses them regularly. Sidney would move to Tofino because it offers her tranquility and peace. "It's like being on the edge of the world," she said, nodding.



But Sandra, a staff member at the CSO, says that she "just loves Vancouver." Her family would visit the city in the summer as a frequent holiday destination, and after relocating to the west coast for school, she doesn't ever think about returning to Calgary, despite her "struggle with weather and rain."

What is significant to note was that some outreach workers at JHS have found their passion and life purpose in Vancouver. The city's escalating homeless population, combined with clients with mental health needs and physical disabilities, require dedication from social service providers. Outreach workers at JHS agreed that social problems in the city are culminating, as is the divide between rich and poor, young and old, apathetic vs. compassionate.

As a location, as a literary character, Vancouver's defining features include a plethora of social issues and its edgy, often raw and gritty atmosphere. In my upcoming memoir and in a short story collection, I depict Vancouver as a place of diaspora, a tumultuous locale where family traumas haunt my characters, like vengeful ghosts.

"I am needed here," Jennifer, an outreach worker, explained to me seriously. She smiled contemplatively as she examined our extensive mapping project before placing her pushpin onto the board. "In Vancouver, I just need to be here, more like socially needed. It's as if I have a calling here. There are really dark things going on, like Riverview--how they put homeless people on a bus from Saskatchewan and send them here. I need to be in Vancouver because I can help people and make a huge difference in their lives."



Blog readers, what do you love about Vancouver? Would you leave if you could live anywhere in the world?

Drop-in Storytelling and Comics Workshops will be held on **Wednesdays Oct 3, 17, and 24** at the CSO on Fraser Street from **1-4 PM**. Come for snacks and community!

**Names of participants have been changed to protect their identities.*

RECOMMENDED READING (BOOKS THAT ARE SET IN VANCOUVER)

Stanley Park by Timothy Taylor

The Jade Peony by Wayson Choy

Hey Nostradamus by Douglas Coupland

The Conjoined by Jen Sookfong Lee

Invisible Dead by Sam Wiebe

Anatomy of a Girl Gang by Ashley Little

Dead Girls by Nancy Lee

The Plague by Kevin Chong

How Poetry Saved My Life by Amber Dawn

Blood Sports by Eden Robinson

Diary of A Street Kid by Evelyn Lau

Simple Recipes by Madeleine Thien

Fighting for Space: How a Group of Drug Users Transformed One City's Struggle with Addiction
by Travis Lupick

In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts by Gabor Mate

Missing Sarah by Maggie DeVries