4
Vancouver Stories: Nancy Lee and Alice Munro

Ailsa Cox

Alice Munro: scenery, suburbs and basements

The British Columbian city of Vancouver, on Canada’s Pacific coast, is regarded by some as an archetypal postmodern metropolis. In his introduction to *Vancouver: Representing the Postmodern City* (1994), Paul Delany interrogates what is already a presumption of its place as a ‘vanguard city of postmodernism’ (23). *City of Glass* (2000), Douglas Coupland’s quixotic travel guide/memoir, characterizes his home town as a vibrant, idiosyncratic young city, where East and West meet: ‘in a poetic way, it feels as if human history, which began in Asia and moved ever westward across the centuries, is now making the final connection by hooking up western North America with Asia’ (26). Although the cyberpunk author William Gibson has situated very little of his fiction in an explicitly Vancouver setting, his hi-tech cityscapes, with their networks of disparate communities, may also be read in the context of fusion culture in the place where he has lived for 40 years. This chapter examines female encounters with postcolonial Vancouver which subvert or problematize that version of the ultra-modern global city, seen in Coupland, Gibson and other male writers such as Timothy L. Taylor.

Alice Munro needs no introduction as Canada’s most influential short story writer, and a figure whose worldwide canonical status has become incontestable. Her work is most frequently associated with her home territory, in small-town, semi-rural Ontario, but she has also set a number of her stories in Vancouver, where she lived...
at the start of her first marriage, later moving to the city of Victoria, on Vancouver Island, before returning to South West Ontario in 1973.

In the linked story sequence, The Beggar Maid (published in Canada as Who Do You Think You Are? (1978)), Munro’s protagonist Rose follows a similar trajectory, transplanted to this same alien territory when she marries Patrick. Her first adulterous kiss takes place at a West Vancouver party, her face wet from one of the city’s notorious rainstorms. In this story, ‘Mischief’, British Columbia is divided between the suburban conformity Rose encounters in Vancouver and the symbolic wilderness beyond the city. Rose flies to a secret assignation with her lover on Vancouver Island, a journey which is fraught with false assumptions, guilt and failed connections. The complications of the journey stand for the moral and emotional complexities that she must negotiate on unfamiliar ground. In ‘Material’ (1974), the narrator reads the biography of her ex-husband Hugo, a macho Vancouver-based writer:

He lives on the side of a mountain above Vancouver. It sounds as if he lives in a wilderness cabin, and all it means, I’m willing to bet, is that he lives in an ordinary comfortable house in North or West Vancouver, which now stretch far up the mountain. (Something 29)

In ‘Mischief’, Rose and Patrick’s house – a house in which he takes a special pride – is ‘a stone and cedar house in a suburb called Capilano Heights, on the side of Grouse Mountain’ (Beggar Maid 115). ‘Memorial’ matches the Native American and Inuit artefacts inside a house with its much-lauded view, suggesting that both are consumed as simulacra. Munro’s comments in a recent interview, ‘I love the landscape, not as “scenery” but as something intimately known’ (Munro ‘Conversation’), implies a distinction between ‘scenery’ which is devoid of memory and external to the subject and an experience of landscape which itself contributes to subjective identity.

Munro divides her fictional Vancouver according to a widely acknowledged demographic. North and West Vancouver linked to downtown Vancouver by the Lion’s Gate Bridge, which crosses Burrard Inlet, represents the smug and prosperous suburbs. Early in