

Popular Music and the Poetics of Self in Fiction

Edited by

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Montreal Bohemia and the Mile End Apartment Party Scene

Will Straw

Abstract

In the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century, Montreal's Mile End neighborhood was hailed, in media reports around the world, as a major centre of musical activity. Montreal was called 'the new Seattle' in press accounts, as performers like Godspeed! Ye Black Emperor, Grimes, and Arcade Fire attained international success. The neighbourhood's cultural vibrancy during this period was expressed, as well, in a number of literary works (novels and short stories) which focused to varying degrees on Mile End's music scenes and the populations of new-comers it had attracted. This article looks at literary representations of the Mile End neighbourhood, distinguishing between those works centred principally on its long-standing Jewish populations and those others in which its hipster cultural scenes are prominent. The literary sequence featuring parties transpiring in neighbourhood apartments is isolated as one key topos in the latter corpus of works.

Keywords

scene – music – gentrification – apartment

Late in the novel *Bone and Bread* (2013), by the Montreal-based author Saleema Nawaz, the book's narrator goes to the home of her estranged sister to attend a party. The sister has faced health challenges over many years, but seems, at this point in the narrative, to have gotten her life together. She has become part of Montreal's theatre scene, and moved to an apartment of her own in the city's Mile End neighborhood. The narrator enters the party:

I edged my way to the fridge through a pack of young men dressed in white shirts and black ties. One of them, taller than the others, had

long dreadlocks that fell below his waist. Elbowing one of his friends, he prodded him away from the swing of the fridge door and gave me a nod. I nodded back. A single magnet, for what looked like a video rental place, clung to the outside of the door. The inside was crammed with beer and other booze, a handful of lemons and limes, and an opened box of baking soda.

[...]

We leaned against the counter, and I kept my eyes on the men with the white shirts, who were still with us in the kitchen. I had come up with the idea that they were in a band together as the reason for their outfits. The blond man with the dreadlocks had rolled up his shirtsleeves, and I could see prominent veins in his forearms, longish fingernails on his right hand. A guitarist, maybe.¹

These two passages exemplify the literary topos which is the central focus of this article: the fictional Mile End party scene. By topos, I mean a literary device through which certain kinds of spaces come to be attached to particular themes, and by which relatively stable sorts of literary sequence are generated.² If the Mile End party scene is a literary topos, it is because the apartments in which these parties transpire – across several novels and short stories – become privileged spaces in which the effervescent sociability of the neighbourhood's cultural scenes is offered up to readers. At the same time, the lengthy description of these parties becomes a common means by which chapters are thickened, narrative time slowed, and an abundance of characters, actions, and things enumerated.

In the passages from *Bone & Bread* excerpted we find the typical constituent features of the Mile End party scene topos: the entry into an apartment and quick movement towards a kitchen, an inventory of material signifiers (of lifestyles marked less by luxury than by modest levels of bohemian comfort) and the observation of individuals who may or not turn out to be musicians. I will circle back to this topos after briefly situating the Mile End neighbourhood of Montreal within the city's history and geography. I will then trace the neighbourhood's emergence in the early 2000s as one of the Western world's most heralded places of musical activity.

1 Saleema Nawaz, *Bone & Bread* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2013), pp. 306–07, 308–09.

2 I borrow this sense of 'topos' loosely from Jane Suzanne Carroli, *Landscape in Children's Literature* (New York, London: Routledge, 2011), p. 13.

1 Montreal's Mile End

The Mile End neighbourhood of Montreal took shape in the late nineteenth century as a village named 'Saint-Louis-de-Mile-End', an area of transition between the developing city to the south and the farmland which still bordered the city's limits to the north.³ In Montreal's more recent cultural and administrative geographies, Mile End is understood as existing either within or adjacent to the larger district known as the Plateau Mont-Royal. By the end of the 1930s, Mile End had come to host a large population of Jews of Eastern European origin. The internationally successful novelist Mordecai Richler was raised within the neighbourhood's Jewish community, and several of his novels, such as *St. Urbain's Horsemen* (1971), chronicle that community's life. Key vestiges of this older Jewish culture remain in Mile End, most famously the two bagel outlets which continue to attract hundreds of tourists every day. In the 1960s and 1970s, with the significant migration of Mile End's older Jewish populations to suburbs or more prosperous neighbourhoods, Mile End became home to successive waves of immigrants from southern European countries like Italy, Portugal, and Greece.

When I moved to Montreal for graduate school, around 1980, we rarely used the term Mile End to describe the neighbourhood. We spoke, rather, of 'going to Parc Avenue', in reference to the main artery which runs through the Western edge of Mile End. We thought of this as an area of mostly Greek restaurants, and of dive or cocaine bars which, at the time, frequently hosted shows by punk bands. Since the 1970s, Mile End has also been the home of large numbers of Anglophone cultural workers: animators at the National Film Board of Canada, cultural journalists, writers, and university humanities teachers. In the last thirty years, a Hasidic Jewish population has continued to move into the neighbourhood, buying up houses, building places of worship, establishing businesses and interacting closely with other Hasidic populations on the continent, most prominently those in Brooklyn, New York.

Beginning around 2000, Mile End underwent an explosive process of cultural gentrification. Music was the most prominent cultural form in this gentrification, though, as my corpus of literary works will show, writers were a vital (if often unacknowledged) force within this transformation. By 2005, Mile End was considered the most dynamic area for rock-based music in Montreal and, for significant periods of time, in North America. Reports in media across

3 See, for an elaborate history of Mile End, *Mémoire du Mile-End/Mile-End Memories* <<http://memoire.mile-end.qc.ca/en/category/histoire-du-mile-end>> [accessed 15 March 2020].

Canada and the United States set Montreal within a sequence of urban musical capitals, calling the city the 'new Seattle' and ranking it alongside other capitals of musical hipsterdom, like Portland, Oregon, and Brooklyn.⁴ The Mile End neighbourhood is acknowledged as the area from which important, internationally successful performers like Godspeed! You Black Emperor, Arcade Fire, and Grimes all emerged, and it is the location of the Casa del Popolo, probably the most important venue for alternative rock-based forms of music in Canada.

In the new century, then, Mile End assumed autonomy within the broader area, known as the Plateau Mont-Royal, which had long been considered the sprawling centre of Montreal bohemia. Since 2010, Mile End's artistic character has been reconfigured around (and diluted within) more industrial ideas of creativity, as the gaming company Ubisoft has expanded its presence in the neighbourhood, and other firms, like the on-line clothing company Frank and Oak, have built their headquarters there. People now speak of hip, music-inflected cultural activity moving (and being pushed) north, into the newly branded Mile-Ex neighbourhood and the low-income area known as Parc Extension. The narratives which surround Mile End more recently, then, are the familiar ones of a gentrified bohemian district losing its soul, as rents go up and restaurants, bars, or cafés are opened to service the hundreds of tech sector workers who invade the neighbourhood each day.

During the period in which it reigned as Canada's most fertile musical district, Mile End posed, to outsiders, the problem of its legibility. An ongoing stream of camera crews and journalists visited the neighbourhood, seeking to track down and document the inner spaces of its cultural ferment. The problem, of course, was that the making and consumption of music, those activities most central to the neighbourhood's reputation for creativity, often took place in private, even secret spaces: in apartments, recording studios, loft parties, and only occasionally in the visible form of musical performances happening

4 See, among many others, David Carr, 'Cold Fusion: Montreal's Explosive Music Scene', *New York Times*, 6 February 2005 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/06/arts/music/cold-fusion-montreals-explosive-music-scene.html>> [accessed 15 March 2020]; Alyssa Noel, 'Burning Down the Loft: Inside Montreal's DIY Scene', *Spin*, 12 June 2012 <<https://www.spin.com/2012/06/burning-down-loft-inside-montreals-diy-scene>> [accessed 15 March 2020]; RowanC, 'The Arcade Fire: Montreal or Nothing?', BBC Radio One, 2006, archived on <<https://soundcloud.com/rowanc/bbc-radio-1-the-arcade-fire>> [accessed 15 March 2020]. For an overview of documentaries heralding Mile End's musical vibrancy since 2000, see Anne Le Gal, '5 Must-See Documentaries on Montreal's Music Scene', *Indie Guides* <<http://indie-guides.com/magazine/en/5-must-see-documentaries-on-montreals-music-scene>> [accessed 15 March 2020].

in accessible venues. As journalists moved between the quiet, often empty vintage clothing shops which lined Mile End's main arteries, or observed the restaurants which continued to open, the signs of musical effervescence were almost never to be seen. Indeed, as I have suggested elsewhere,⁵ it was easy to view both the neighbourhood's musical hipsters and its Hasidic populations as inscrutable – as parading the visible signs of their difference along the neighbourhood's streets, while hiding their core activities in private spaces to which the outsider had no access.

2 Novels of Jewish Life

It is in this context that the category of Mile End literary fiction assumes interest. I have examined 15 works (novels and short story collections), published since 2007, which are set principally in the Mile End neighbourhood of Montreal (or along its boundaries). Roughly two-thirds of these are in English, and the rest in French. However, the language of authorship is no more significant in a differentiation of this corpus than another distinction – that between those novels principally concerned with the life of Jewish communities in Mile End and those recounting the bohemian life of young people moving through the neighbourhood's cultural scenes.

The novels set within Mile End's Jewish communities are, much of the time, concerned with family: with familial secrets, and with the tensions, in families, between different degrees of religious devotion and practice. In Magali Sauve's *160 Rue Saint Viateur Ouest*, for example, a gay Hasidic man has left his family to become a police officer; the novel is about the solution to a crime but also centers on the possibility of the main character's reconciliation with his family. This novel, like another, Nancy Richler's *The Imposter Bride*, circles back to the trauma of the Holocaust, and of the displacements which brought so many Jews to Montreal as refugees after 1945.⁶

Sigal Samuel's novel *The Mystics of Mile End*⁷ traces the lives of four characters, three of whom belong to the same family. It is organized in part around the forces (and desires) which pull characters away from their lives within

5 Will Straw, 'Visibility and Conviviality in Music Scenes', in *DIY Cultures and Underground Music Scenes*, ed. by Andy Bennett and Paula Guerra (London, New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 21–30.

6 Magali Sauves, *160 rue Saint-Viateur Ouest* (Montreal: Mémoire d'encrier, 2018); Nancy Richler, *The Imposter Bride* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2012).

7 Sigal Samuel, *The Mystics of Mile End* (Calgary: Freehand Books, 2015).

Mile End's Jewish communities or serve to bring them back. *Mystics of Mile End* is the only one of these three novels to acknowledge, to any significant degree, that the neighbourhood of Jewish communities is shared with a hipster musical culture.⁸ Secular musical culture mostly figures, in brief moments of recognition, at the novel's spatial and social edges. These moments include instances of cross-cultural judgement, as when passers-by identified as hipsters 'crinkle[d] up their noses' at the eccentric old Jewish man Mr. Katz, 'like they couldn't stand the smell of someone so uncool, even though they were the ones leaving trails of cigarette smoke and loud music leaking out of their big headphones.'⁹ In another sequence, music functions as a distant marker of alien cultural practice: reference is made to the Tams Tams, a regularly Sunday hippy-inspired drumming party which has been going on for at least 20 years, on the edge of Montreal's mountain and just a block south of Mile End.¹⁰ When Shamara, the key female character in the novel, begins going to dance clubs, as part of her flight from the confinements of Jewish neighbourhood life, it is to the more commercial clubs in downtown Montreal, rather than the hip venues of Mile End, that she travels. 'I rushed out', Shamara admits, in her description of one such moment of flight, 'into a tangled nightwood of rank bars and dirty dance clubs.'¹¹

3 Fictions of Mile End Bohemia

If the Mile End literature centred on Jewish Life constructs a neighbourhood of deeply rooted secrets and intimate family connections, this is not the case, unsurprisingly, for those works set within the area's bohemian worlds. The populations who fill this later corpus are almost all young, unattached, and possessed of a thin historical connection to the neighbourhood; they have been drawn there by the area's recent reputation for sociability and cultural effervescence.

The vast majority of works within this corpus, it should be noted, have been written by men, often within a generic tradition we might describe as the

8 One reviewer described its setting as a world of 'hipsters and Hasids'; Claire Schwartz, 'Sigal Samuel: The Mystics of Mile End', *Guernica*, 31 March 2016 <<https://www.guernicamag.com/sigal-samuel-the-mystics-of-mile-end>> [accessed 15 March 2020].

9 Samuel, *The Mystics of Mile End* (Kindle Edition; Calgary: Alberta: Freehand Books, 2015), loc. 63.

10 *Ibid.*, loc. 2225.

11 *Ibid.*, loc. 2488.

hipster coming-of-age narrative. The earliest literary work from this corpus to be examined here is Louis Rastelli's *A Fine Ending*, published in 2007, which reads as a lightly-fictionalized memoir of the author/narrator's life within Montreal's alternative music scenes in the late 1990s. While *A Fine Ending* is full of scenes of collective festivity, one party scene is particularly effective in condensing the book's themes:

Carole and I held a huge party just before she moved out. We invited everyone we knew, and I told Paula to invite whoever she wanted as well. We were amazed none of the neighbours ended up calling the cops, although some of them did attend the party. I felt proud when one of them remarked that it was the biggest party he'd seen in ten years of living on that block. There was a great mix of English and French people, all sorts of artists and musicians, and a lot of young punks, mainly friends of Paula's, which made me realize how little I'd hung out with punks since Peter, Kevin, and I used to trash apartments.¹²

A Fine Ending is partly, as its title suggests, a book about conclusions: as the narrative finishes, its narrator turns 30, and the twentieth century comes to an end. The book anticipates the imminent movement of people, places, and scenes northward in Montreal, out of the Plateau Mont-Royal (as strictly defined) and into Mile End. The punk culture which momentarily reassembles at the party described here will be displaced or diluted following the spectacular success of the post-rock and other musical formations which emerge in Mile End in the 2000s. (The magnitude of this new scene will trouble attempts to see it as simply building on the city's earlier punk culture.) In *A Fine Ending*, passages describing apartment parties alternate with other moments in which the narrator and his friends go to bars and clubs, most of them along Saint Laurent Boulevard below Avenue Mont-Royal (the commonly accepted southern boundary of Mile End.) By the mid-2000s, when scenic energies have moved almost entirely to Mile End, the apartment party – rather than get-togethers in bars or clubs – will have become the dominant spatio-temporal figure through which the sociability of the scene is offered for display in literary form.

The narrator of Pierre-Marc Drouin's *Mile End Stories* (published in 2011 and written, despite its title, in French) is an angry young Francophone from the suburbs. He has worked on the margins of the film industry but is failing at that, and had never been to Mile End until he stumbles upon it one night

12 Louis Rastelli, *A Fine Ending* (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2007), p. 250.

with a friend. Until that point, he had rejected the neighbourhood as a land of snobbish Anglophones whose cool postures he had found intimidating. The narrator and his friend move into Mile End and find a paradise of easy sex and drunken debauched nights, described in a language which remains that of the unhip outsider.

Mile End Stories allows us to outline some of the key ways by which Mile End bohemian narratives may be differentiated. One of the most important of these involves variation in the degrees of fit between the ethos and sensibilities of a work's central characters and those of the hipsters populating the neighbourhood's cultural scenes. We may distinguish between those works whose narrators arrive in Mile End untrained in the appropriate behaviors of cultural bohemianism and others who enter it effortlessly, often after an apprenticeship in the hip cultural scenes of other cities. The narrator of *Mile End Stories* exemplifies the first of these conditions, and the novel's many party scenes are occasions for dramatizing these clashes of sensibility. Across several parties, we grasp the narrator's status as outsider, as a brutish, macho Québécois intimidated (and disarmed) by the perceived sexual availability and sexual predation of Mile End women.

As he crosses a doorway into the first of the novel's parties, the narrator of *Mile End Stories* recognizes that he is on the verge of a life-changing event: "The loss of innocence and the frenzy of the adult world came together in a single instant. Here we had found it – the door to Mile End. Once we entered it, nothing would be the same, and we knew it."¹³ Most of the Mile End women at the party speak English, rather than French, and most of them are from elsewhere, like the two German women kissing each other and seeking a threesome. Drouin's narrator takes the playing of Daft Punk's *Make Love* as an incitement to a sexual come-in. He speaks to a young woman in English because, in his view, the hipsters around him speak in that language, and in fancy riddles, and so must he if he is to score:

A hazel-eyed blonde approached me and fixed her gaze on mine. Her sensual moves blended with the reddish lighting of the living room and, as if by magic, there was a very sensual song on the stereo to accompany it, I even think it was 'Make Love', by the group Daft Punk. Caviar on a silver platter. 'Am I pretty?' [in English] She asked me. She put her hands on my chest and came closer. 'You are the most beautiful creature I've

13 Pierre-Marc Drouin, *Mile End Stories* (Montreal: Québec-Amérique, 2011), pp. 86–87, trans. by Will Straw.

ever seen,' I replied. Good. You had to play the game. People have a sense of the theatrical in Mile End. With all these hipsters talking in riddles, hard not to use them yourself. But still, I must admit that she was pretty screwed up. It was well worth the hundred dollar words.¹⁴

In contrast, the narrator/hero of Guillaume Morissette's *New Tab*, though also a Francophone from elsewhere, has grown into adulthood amidst the neighbourhood's bohemian scenes. Unlike the central character in *Mile-End Stories*, who is ill at ease with the neighborhood's cosmopolitan and slightly libertine ethos, the central character in *New Tab* has assimilated this ethos. Working as a video game designer, he moves within social circles which include people engaged in running a clandestine backyard cinema. Nevertheless, his own relative stability (as a Francophone Québécois with a full-time job) is set against the ongoing arrival and turbulent career trajectories of Anglophone musicians who are constantly arriving from elsewhere. In one of *New Tab's* party sequences, we find many of the same elements found in the passage from *Bone and Bread*, with which this article opened: the entrance into an apartment, the noting of signifiers of cool (styles of dress and, in this case, a Betty Page poster), and the mingling of musicians and others:

I climbed the stairs to Shannon's apartment. [...] I sat in the living room and socialized with Shannon and some of her friends. Around us were leather couches facing one another, a chandelier, unlit candles, a glass table, a tall bookcase and a Bettie Page poster in which Bettie Page was wearing lingerie while on fire. I drank beers. One of the friends was named Paul and was a DJ and also played in a band called Burnaby Rebellion. I asked Paul why the band was called Burnaby Rebellion and he replied that two members of the band were from Burnaby in British Columbia and disliked the city.¹⁵

At another social gathering in *New Tab*, we are given an example of what I would call 'Mile End-splaining', the insider's account of how the neighbourhood works:

We drank beers and talked for a while, waiting for the rain to grow bored, fade itself out. Friends of Brent showed up despite the weather and then

14 Ibid., p. 229, trans. by Will Straw.

15 Guillaume Morissette, *New Tab* (Kindle Edition; Montreal: Esplanade Books, 2014), loc. 1802.

stayed because we offered them free alcohol. ‘Two months after I moved here, I saw Alex playing in someone’s kitchen,’ said Brent to everyone, ‘and now two years later, they’re playing Sala Rossa with four keyboards and this ridiculous fake jungle set behind them. When people talk about the music scene here, that’s always the first thing they miss. Musicians don’t come out of nowhere. People come here because education is cheap and then they stay because they can play.’¹⁶

In a social world populated to a significant extent by an ongoing stream of new arrivals to the neighbourhood, the recounting of origins and trajectories becomes important raw material for the description of this world. Parties combine people both familiar and unrecognized, and while such diversity within bohemian populations is hardly unique to Mile End or to its parties, its extended enumeration is a key element in the party scene topos. The early stories in Anna Leventhal’s book *Sweet Affliction* take place in cities which are often unnamed, but the book then jumps, in an early chapter called ‘Moving Day’, into an account of one of Montreal’s most famous rituals, the changing of apartments as leases expire on the first day of July. All but the final few paragraphs of a later story, ‘The Shirt’, take place at a social evening whose description abounds with the tropes of the Montreal apartment party: the line of winter boots at the top of a stairway, the run in the cold to the nearest ‘dep’ (*dépanneur*, or corner variety store) to replenish beer stocks, the outdoor staircases leading to balconies or to the streets, the quick references to music in the hipster canon (The Velvet Underground, Johnny Cash). The passage quoted here captures the fluidity of the Montreal apartment party and the preoccupation with the places from which people have come:

This party seemed to have not yet gotten its sea legs. Rafts of people drifted here and here, flotsam and jetsam, drifters holding bottles by the neck. I knew fewer people than I didn’t. That was becoming normal.

‘Andrew’, Marty said, appearing next to me with a girl in tow, ‘this is Selena. She just moved here from Beijing. Selena, Andrew used to live in China.’

‘Taiwan’, I said.

‘Exactly’, Marty said.

‘Where in Taiwan?’ Selena asked. ‘Taipei.’

‘For how long?’

¹⁶ Ibid., loc. 1900.

‘Two years’, I said. ‘I was an English teacher.’

‘I spent some time there too, as a student’, Selena said.

‘Perfect!’ Marty said. He scuttled off, and Selena and I got to talking about Taipei. I told her about how I taught the kids in my class to sing Johnny Cash’s ‘Ring of Fire’ more or less phonetically, and how I expected to feel awkward being over six feet tall, and never did, and how there were certain foods I still missed and couldn’t find anywhere here.¹⁷

Two of the short stories collected in Jay Winston Ritchie’s *Something You Were, Might Have Been, or Have Come to Represent* capture the Mile End hipster scene in distinct but vibrant ways. The opening of *Mermaids* quickly interweaves the magical and the coldly satirical in its account of the creation of a song:

Mermaids lounged on side-street dumpsters, sighing forlorn sighs as they combed their seaweed hair with seashell combs. A dragon strapped to the flatbed of a semi truck blew an umbrella of fire into the night sky as it zoomed down St. Urbain. Julian felt inspired by these things. He returned to his Mile End apartment and wrote a song. He called the song ‘Mermaids.’ It went like this:

*I’ve known some friends, but never would I have guessed
That these mermaids would be my BFFs*

‘Mermaids’ appeared on his debut eponymous EP, *Triangel*. *Triangel* got 9.0 from Pitchfork. The writer for Pitchfork called *Triangel* ‘a post-modern Bob Dylan with a psychedelic set of pipes’. Julian’s Facebook notification, message, and friend request icons were superscripted with little round-edged orange rectangles for a week straight.¹⁸

In another story ‘Ogopolo’, two characters return to a party from a beer run, and the narrator describes the scene in a manner sumptuous in its detailed inventory of the architectural features and material culture characteristic of a time and place:

More people had arrived while they were gone. Justin searched for Ahlam. He walked through the living room and kitchen, then went outside on the balcony and heard music coming from the storage shed on

17 Anna Leventhal, *Sweet Affliction* (Kindle Edition; Halifax, Toronto: Invisible Publishing, 2014), loc. 1515–17.

18 Jay Winston Ritchie, *Something You Were, Might Have Been, or Have Come to Represent* (London, Ontario: Insomniac Press, 2014), p. 85.

his left. The plywood door had a unicorn drawn in Sharpie on it. Inside, Ahlam and five other people in coats and toques and fingerless gloves were huddled close together on a carpet on the floor. Tea lights and votive candles from Dollarama flickered on the shelves. Two guitars, a banjo, a mandolin, and a harmonica were going. Pot and cigarette smoke hung above everyone's heads. Sharpie dragons, Pegasuses, more unicorns – a veritable mythological zoo – decorated the walls. 'Back Nest' was inscribed above the door.¹⁹

Only two recent Mile End novels, I would suggest, come close to mobilizing the 'apartment plot', which Pamela Robertson Wodcik has theorized as 'any narrative in which the apartment figures as a central device'. Vic Verdier's 2010 novel, *L'Appartement du clown* is focussed, as its title suggests, on one of the characteristic dwellings of Mile End. However, while musical performance (the playing of classical piano by a key character) is one of the key activities within the novel's titular apartment, a broader Mile End music scene is seen in only partial fashion – dispersed, when it is acknowledged at all, across a wide variety of other spaces and intermittent moments. In Elizabeth Benoit's novel *Suzanne Travolta* (2019), the Mile End apartment of the eponymous central character hosts most of the encounters, intrigues, and dramatic moments which run through the novel, but none of these involve music to any significant degree. The characters of *Suzanne Travolta* converge upon the residual spaces of the neighbourhood's music scenes only through their shared fidelity to the Italian café, Olympico – a node at which several networks and circles overlap, and one of those micro-spaces which, in Ceri Morgan's astute analysis, assume symbolic importance in Montreal fictions.²⁰

Nevertheless, the two key bodies of fiction discussed in this article – those dealing with Jewish life and those focused on Mile End's cultural scenes – give thematic power to Montreal's most distinctive residential building form. The city's attached triplexes, with their long apartments and separate outdoor staircases, have few if any equivalents in North America. In the Hasidic or Jewish novels, families live claustrophobically on single floors of these buildings, their secrets and tensions magnified as a result. In the bohemian novel, the triplex apartment came to exemplify Montreal's reputation, in the 1990s and early 2000s, as a city of abundant, inexpensive space. With their long corridors and

19 Ibid., p. 59.

20 Ceri Morgan, *Mindscapes of Montreal: Quebec's Urban Novel, 1960–2005* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p. 121.

numerous bedrooms, these apartments served easily as spatial frames for literary sequences organized as series of encounters between the music scene's diverse populations.

4 Literary Gentrification

If the recent gentrification of Montreal's Mile End neighbourhood is the result of real estate speculation more than of any other factor, we may nevertheless explore some of the ways in which that gentrification has been literary and musical as well. Notions of 'literary gentrification' and 'musical gentrification' weave their way through a variety of treatments of the place of culture in contemporary cities. The literary variant of these is used to designate two very different kinds of phenomena: on the one hand, the 'gentrification' of popular fictional genres (like the detective story) through their infusion with literary devices and ambitions;²¹ on the other hand, an increase in the property values of certain urban neighbourhoods which bears some relation (of coincidence if not causality) to the increased use of such neighbourhoods as the backdrops for literary fiction.

If the first of these definitions need not concern us, the place of literary fiction in configuring neighbourhoods as places of attractive cultural effervescence is central to this article. This sense of literary gentrification is usually traced to urban sociologist Sharon Zukin's discussion, in her 1991 book *Landscapes of Power*, of the ways in which key New York City novels of the 1980s, like Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* and Bret Easton Ellis's *Less than Zero*, offered an image of that city as a playground for excessive consumption.²² Recent versions of literary gentrification, as Sarah Brouillette has shown, are marked less by the spectacle of luxury than by the representation of places (neighbourhoods and entire cities) in which twenty-first century notions of creativity, diversity and cultural effervescence are prominent. Brouillette suggests that Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane*, for example, was part of a broader set of discourses contributing to the cultural authentication of the eponymous London neighbourhood:

21 Maurizio Ascari, 'Counterhistories and Prehistories', in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 22–30.

22 Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 35.

[I]t was one of several literary works whose appearance contributed to the continuous and rapid circulation of reference to the area and its betterment – circulation that focused potential consumers' and residents' attention on the place's availability for authentically edgy lifestyle experiences, and thereby contributed to its gentrification.²³

If the notion of 'literary gentrification' has gained traction in the last three decades of scholarship on cities, that of 'musical gentrification' has not. When the term is invoked, it has little to do with the role of music in endowing place with economic and cultural value. Rather – in a manner analogous to the first definition of 'literary gentrification', summarized above – it usually refers to the cultural 'upgrading' of popular musical genres (typically those rooted in racial or ethnic minorities) through their absorption into the repertoires and educational infrastructures of elite institutions like the symphony orchestra or the musical conservatory.²⁴ Rarely does one speak of musical works as participating in processes of urban gentrification of the sort that Brouillette attributes to the novel *Brick Lane*.

There are obvious reasons for this – musical works are only very occasionally 'about' the neighbourhoods or other territories in which they are made. Their expressive relationship to space and place is complex and mediated (and, indeed, the focus of endless ongoing elaboration and debate within the disciplines which study music). If music sometimes serves an implicit promotional function in relation to the places in which it is made, this is usually through its indexical status, in which the very fact of musical activity transpiring in a given locale contributes to a perception of that place as culturally fertile in a general fashion. Widespread contemporary acceptance of the concept of 'musical tourism' usually involves the recognition that music is one possible feature within a range of amenities (like bars, restaurants, historic sites, and museums) likely to attract visitors, rather than a cultural form through which the social ethos of a place is expressed and offered up for display.

Much of the time, then, music's power to endow neighbourhoods or other places with gentrifying value is almost always displaced onto other cultural forms, routed through literary or audiovisual works which solidify music's relationship to place. The place-based character of historically important music

23 Sarah Brouillette, 'Literature and Gentrification on Brick Lane', *Criticism*, 51 (2009), 425–49 (p. 445).

24 See, for example, Petter Dyndahl, Sidsel Karlsen, Siw Graabræk Nielsen, and Odd Skårberg, 'The academisation of popular music in higher music education: the case of Norway', *Music Education Research*, 19 (2017), 438–54.

scenes, like Manchester post-punk/rave in the 1980s, or Memphis soul in the 1960s-1970s²⁵ is best captured in films (whether fictional or documentary) in which the relationship of music to space and geography may be more fully grasped. The effervescent cosmopolitanism of Mile End's music scenes of the mid-2000s was usually better captured in literary works about the neighbourhood and its music scenes than in the music itself, which rarely 'spoke' of the neighbourhood's ethos in any decipherable way.

5 Musical Scenes and the Literary Tableau

A cultural 'scene', it may be argued, emerges when cultural practices of various kinds participate in the broader sociability and effervescence of city life. A scene is that form of collective life in which cultural practice generates a fluid sociability, and in which that sociability is put on display, in contexts which range in scale from the dance club to the apartment party. A scene, in the words of the sociologist Alan Blum, is that unit in a social morphology through which multiple acts of intimate interaction join each other in public or semi-public places to produce the social spectacle of urban life.²⁶

In an article on visuality in the novels of Balzac, Renée de Smirnoff notes how, in many of Balzac's works, narrative and sequential logic are interrupted to provide us with the extended description of a social tableau.²⁷ Typically, these are scenes of banquets or other soirées; in them a certain set of social relations are organized and elaborately described for the reader. Description glides across the surface of a social event, and the details of individuality are less important than the feeling of variety and abundance which is produced. In literature (as in cinema), we can say that a scene emerges when textuality works upon the spectacle of sociability to prolong it in time and extend it or flatten it out in space.

In the literary works centred on bohemian life in Mile end, it is this triple levelled idea of scene that interests me. These novels themselves are the product of a particular cultural scene – one in which, in a historical moment, high

25 See, respectively, the fictionalized biographical film *24 Hour Party People* (dir. Michael Winterbottom, 2002) or the documentary on Memphis soul, *Take Me to the River* (dir. Martin Shore, 2017).

26 Alan Blum, *The Imaginative Structure of the City* (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 2003), p. 179.

27 Renée de Smirnoff, 'Jeux de regards dans la scène balzacienne', in *La Scène: Littérature et Arts visuels*, ed. by Marie-Thérèse Mathet (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001), pp. 109–22.

levels of literary and musical production took place in the neighbourhood. At intermittent moments, these novels come to focus on a more restricted scene: the effervescence of the Mile End apartment party, which functions as what we might call an ‘event-structure’, an occasion through which a social world reveals itself most fully. The parties in these literary works, then, become the pretext for the elaboration of descriptive tableaux which are ‘scenes’ in a more formal sense. They are tableaux which offer up, for observation, the heterogeneity and festive interaction which are taken to be hallmarks of Mile End life. At all these levels of scene, music is present, as one of the *points de capiton* which ground a loose and meandering sociability in the key cultural phenomenon, the music, for which the neighbourhood is most famous.

There is a quite remarkable consistency to these party scenes in Mile End novels. The climbing of the stairs, the entrance into a large but crowded apartment, the spectacle of eccentricity and heterogeneity, the clash and difference of languages, the fall into drunkenness or debauchery, and the weaving of music and musicians in and out of the picture – together, these constitute the units of a narrative grammar through which the character of Mile End’s music scene has been made intelligible.

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