

ENTRE VILLE: THIS CITY BETWEEN US

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My name is J. R. Carpenter. I'm a fiction writer, poet and web artist based in Montréal. I began using the Internet as a medium in 1993. All of my web art projects can be found online at: <http://Luckysoap.com>.

In 2006 I was commissioned by OBORO, a Gallery & New Media Lab in Montréal <http://oboro.net>, to create a new web art project on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Conseil des arts de Montréal <http://www.artsmontreal.org>. To mark this anniversary the Conseil solicited commissions of new works in each of the artistic disciplines that it funds. Tasked with selecting the New Media commission, Daniel Dion – Director and Co-Founder of OBORO – felt that a web-based work had the most potential to be accessible to a wide range of Montréalians for the duration of the anniversary year and beyond. The commission included a four-week residency at the OBORO New Media Lab.¹ The resulting work, *Entre Ville* <http://Luckysoap.com/entreville>, launched at the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal on April 27, 2006.²

Entre is the French word for “between,” as in: *entre nous*, “between us”. *Ville* is the French word for city. Montréal is an old city, founded in 1642; it was called Ville Marie until the 18th century. Driving into modern day Montréal, all signs point to *centre ville*, downtown. For the past fifteen years I've lived somewhat north of downtown in a neighbourhood called Mile End. I work at home. My office window opens onto a jumbled intimacy of back balconies, backyards and back alleys. Daily my dog and I walk through this interior city sniffing for stories.

¹After the residency, I was invited to join OBORO's Board of Directors, where I now serve as President.

² See: Un 50e anniversaire - En ville et sur l'île - Pierre Vallée - Le Devoir - Édition du samedi 29 et du dimanche 30 avril 2006 <http://www.ledevoir.com/2006/04/29/107759.html#>

Entre Ville is a text of walking, and a walk through texts. There are many authors of our neighbourhood. Some are famous, some less so. This paper gives fictional, poetic and philosophical voices equal credence. And the neighbours get a say. It's a shared city, after all, this city *entre nous*.

One neighbour, the poet and classicist Anne Carson, writes: "Towns are the illusion that things hang together somehow..." [93]. Montréal is both literally and figuratively a French-speaking island in North America. It's the second largest city in Canada, yet only 17% of its population claims English as a first language. It's a complicated place to live, especially if you're an immigrant. But things hang together somehow... Montréal's been very good to me.

I grew up in rural Nova Scotia. I decided to move to Montréal when I was twelve. I thumbtacked a map of the city to my wall and read all the English Montréal authors I could find, oblivious to Québécois culture or politics. In the literary Montréal of Irving Layton's autobiography there was only: "writing poetry and breathing poetry and talking poetry and nothing else had any reality" [249]. Throughout high school I pondered the nude girl in Leonard Cohen's 1958 poem *Snow Is Falling*:

She surveys the wine-coloured carpet.

She is eighteen.

She has straight hair.

She speaks no Montreal language [SP 201].

What was a Montréal language? I was dying to know.

I'd read in Mordecai Richler's *The Street* that: "On St. Urbain Street, a head start was all." He writes: "Our mothers read us stories from *Life* about pimply astigmatic fourteen-year olds who had already graduated from Harvard or who were confounding

the professors at MIT” [9]. It happens that I now live on Saint-Urbain Street, on the same block Mordecai Richler grew up on. It took me a while, but here I am at MIT.

Ideas of “place” have long figured prominently in my writing and web art projects, yet *Entre Ville* is my first major piece about Montréal. It was a long time in the making. I sketched the user interface in 1992, while apartment hunting in the Mile End. I spent the next fifteen years learning the vocabulary of the neighbourhood. I don’t mean French, English, Italian, Greek, Portuguese, Yiddish or any of the other languages spoken in the Mile End. I refer rather to the cumulative vocabulary of neighbourhood: the aural, audio, visual, spatial, tactile, aromatic and climatic vocabulary of community.

I have attempted to present *Entre Ville* in this vernacular. To tell it like it is. Ours is not the nicest alley in the neighbourhood, but it’s not the worst one either. Kitchen gardens and garbage heaps coexist with wildflowers, dog shit, graffiti and grape vines. Cooking smells and laundry lines crisscross the alleyway one sentence at a time.

How does one learn the language of all this? One studies, of course. Anne Carson writes: “I am a scholar of towns... To explain what I do is simple enough. A scholar is someone who takes a position. From which position, certain lines become visible. You will at first think I am painting the lines myself; it’s not so. I merely know where to stand to see the lines that are there” [93].

From the position of my office window I can’t help but learn the lives of my most immediate neighbours. Their voices barge into whatever I’m writing. Sometimes they take over. *Entre Ville* is based on one such neighbour interrupted poem, *Saint-Urbain Street Heat*:

In an intimacy
born of proximity

the old Greek lady and I
go about our business.
Foul-mouthed for seventy,
her first-floor curses fill
my second-floor apartment;
her constant commentary
punctuates my day [Carpenter].

This is not quite a first person point of view. Our proximity disallows singularity.

We go about our business. *Nous autres*. We're poor. It's hot. No one has air conditioning. This is common, a shared experience.

All the kitchen
back doors stand open –
sticky arms flung open -
imploring, in a heat-rashed prayer:

Deliver us unto
the many gods
of Mile End [Carpenter].

Saint-Urbain Street Heat is a heat wave poem. Many people who have never been to Montréal in the summer refuse to believe how hot it gets. But we know. Our literature is drenched in the sweat of our summers. The Saint-Urbain Street heat of fifty years ago is palpable in Mordecai Richler's 1955 novel, *Son of a Smaller Hero*:

The sky was a fever and there was no saying how long a day would last or what shape the heat would assume by night. There were the usual heat rumours about old men going crazy and women swooning in the streets and babies being born prematurely. When the rains came the children danced in the streets clad only in their underwear and the old men sipped lemon tea on the balconies and told tales about the pogroms of the czar [12].

Most Montréal apartments have two balconies, one on the street front and one in the back alley rear. A common ground in our oft-divided city, an extra room, a slim slice of outdoors for inner city apartment dwellers, the balcony becomes a stage upon which

dramas unfold, from which orations issue. In David Fernario's *Balconville*, Canada's first bilingual play, three families sit on their balconies in the heat of a Montréal summer.

JOHNNY: "Whew, hot. You going anywhere this summer?"

PAQUETTE: "Moi? Balconville."

JOHNNY: "Yeah. Miami Beach." [28]

Balconville is a *Franglais* word, Montréal slang. In French, a "balcony" is a *galerie*. Like the visual art gallery, a site charged with potential. In this *entrespace* the private unfolds in public display. In Nicole Brossard's novel *French Kiss*, the balcony operates as a threshold of enunciation: "One struggles without voice to forge a voice the way a wrought-iron balcony suddenly gives access to the city's far-off sounds" [288]. Summer long conversations echo across the alleyway in call-and-answer *strophe* / *antistrophe*, clothesline curtains reeling in and out between the acts.

Don't be fooled. I have poetic ideas about neighbourhood, not romantic ones. *Entre Ville* is hot, loud, crowded and dirty; I am rural, solitary and misanthropic. Writing about my more trying neighbours has given me a soft spot for them though. Two months after the launch of *Entre Ville* the old Greek lady next door was evicted from her apartment of 23 years; we watched from our balcony as the discarded detritus of her life accumulated in the alleyway. *Entre Ville* has become a document of gentrification and its erasure. Mile End is changing. We could be next.

I write about my neighbours acutely aware that I write from amongst them. Gossip is rampant on our street. Stories pass from balcony to balcony. Voices carry. Word gets around, especially online. Occasionally the neighbourhood writes me an email. Like this one:

I was sitting at my mom's (no internet at home yet) eating millet pie with ketchup (a bit too dry). I clicked on Wannatakepicture. There was my mom's house. There

was the window i was staring out of (blankly) moments before. And there was the voice of Mr. G, the Portuguese landlord. Nice garden. Mom was chuffed. J. M.

How one reads or writes the texts and textures of neighbourhood depends entirely on one's point of view. Do you live here? Are you a parent or a child, a cat or a dog, a bicyclist or in a SUV? Word on the street is, novelist Heather O'Neill lives a few doors down the ally from me. Her 2006 novel, *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, offers a disconsolate twelve-year-old point of view:

The back alley behind Lauren's house looked the way the world would look if a child had built it. Some underwear and a couple T-shirts that had fallen from clotheslines lay on the pavement. A single sneaker was stuck up on a fence post. There was a toy bucket with rocks in it and a sled that had been left behind from a day when there had been snow on the ground. A wooden door leaned against a wall, leading nowhere. There was a lamp and a bathroom sink in the same garbage heap. You'd think that these houses were being blown apart by the wind, the way that pieces of them were lying about. Not one for them would be a match for the Big Bad Wolf [134].

Whatever I might say about multiplicity, *Entre Ville* privileges a pedestrian point of view. In *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, Rebecca Solnit likens walking to writing: "The walking body can be traced in the places it has made; paths, parks, and sidewalks are traces of the acting out of imagination and desire" [29]. In *The practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau suggests that the "ordinary practitioners of the city" cannot read this writing: "They are walkers... whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read... unrecognized poems..." [93]. Perhaps if de Certeau lived in the neighbourhood he wrote that about he'd have seen things differently. He claims that: "To walk is to lack a place" [103]. My dog and I humbly disagree. For eight-and-a-half years we've been walking up and down our back alleyway.

That's eight-and-a-half years of up and eight-and-a-half years of down.

Nine thousand three hundred laps of toenails clicking on cracked concrete.
Trail zigzagging, long tail wagging, long tongue lolling, dog tags clacking.
Ears open, eyes darting, nose to the ground.³

We walk like we own the place. We walk to write the place, to collect, collate and annotate the multitude of texts generated by the occupants of *Entre Ville*. We try to read between the alleyway's long lines of peeling-paint fences spray painted with bright abstractions and draped with trailing vines.

Nicole Brossard describes the meta-text of walking as:

Writing that feeds on zigs and zags and detours... Isn't on every streetcorner but roams the streets, traces its course through them... the narration of the inner odyssey in terms of Montréal's geography, its contours and harsh angles, sidestreets and lanes sharing the circulatory problems with the major arteries, from the heart of the city to the epicentre of oneself, the target and motive source [263].

Entre Ville is a poem. It has been published in print and online, with and without pictures, and it has been read aloud to audiences large and small in Montréal and places far away from Montréal's back alleyways. In the early days of the Internet, alarmists and advocates alike proclaimed that digital media heralded the end of the book. Yet, as Derrida had already noted: "The question of the book could only be opened if the book was closed... only in the book, coming back to it unceasingly, drawing all our resources from it, could we indefinitely designate the writing beyond the book" [294]. In its book iteration *Entre Ville* is very small. Photocopied and stapled, the *Entre Ville* mini-book recycles images cut from children's textbooks salvaged from the old Greek lady's moving day garbage. It's sold at neighbourhood readings and events and through

³ J. R. Carpenter, "Sniffing for Stories," in *In-sittu Cité*, an ensemble interdisciplinary audio tour of Mile End, Montréal, presented *Playwrights' Workshop Montréal* during *Les Journées de la Culture*, September 30 & October 1, 2006. [<http://luckysoap.com/statements/sniffingforstories.html>]

DISTROBORO, a network of cigarette machines re-purposed to sell cigarette-pack-sized art for two dollars.

In its web iteration, *Entre Ville*'s verses scroll the alleyway, popup in windows – altered – and then disappear. The user interface is an image of a blank book upon which a few lines of city have been hastily sketched. Roll the mouse over windows and doors as you might scan your eyes over a cityscape. Occasionally you will catch a glimpse of an interior. And, as in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, "It also happens that ... when you least expect it, you see a crack open and a different city appear. Then, an instant later, it has already vanished" [155].

I invite you to visit *Entre Ville* online: <http://Luckysoap.com/entreville>. If you're in the neighbourhood, drop me a line. Merci. J. R. Carpenter, 2007.

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ENTRE VILLE: ABSTRACT

Entre Ville: this city between us – J. R. Carpenter

In 2006 I was commissioned to create a web art project in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Conseil des Arts de Montreal. It was an honour and a challenge for me, as an English-speaking immigrant to Montreal, to collate the cacophony of voices and contradictory histories of my community. I live on the same block Mordecai Richler grew up on. The tour busses still come by looking for him, even as gentrification tosses out the old tenants. I wanted to represent my neighbours within a matrix of community, to explore the intimacies born of our proximity. The resulting work, *Entre Ville*, is an intimate view of my neighbourhood's jumbled intimacy of back balconies, yards and alleyways. *Entre* means between. *Entre Ville* is a walk through an interior city. Poetry is not hard to find between the long lines of peeling-paint fences plastered with notices, spray painted with bright abstractions and draped with trailing vines. Though Montreal is well known for its language issues, I tried to present *Entre Ville* in a neighbourhood vernacular, where cooking smells, noisy neighbours and laundry lines criss-cross the alleyway one sentence at a time. <http://Luckysoap.com/entreville>

J. R. CARPENTER: BIO

J. R. Carpenter is a poet, fiction writer and web artist based in Montreal. She is a two-time winner of the CBC Québec Short Story Competition and a Web Art Finalist in the Drunken Boat Panliterary Awards 2006. Her writing has been published internationally. Her web art has been exhibited in the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, the Rhizome ArtBase, the Electronic Literature Collection Volume One and the Web Biennial 2007. She serves as the President of the Board of Directors of the Oboro New Media Lab in Montreal.