Introduction

Often overlooked in discussions about the nature of global cities is the proposition that the transformation from city to global city is not a totalizing event. In this essay, I read the novels of Canadian writer Russell Smith as a literature of a global city (namely, Toronto) in order to explore how the global (understood as a set of transnational, translocal processes) influences the physical, conceptual, social, economic, historical and cultural modalities of cities located in national space. My readings are guided by a cluster of questions, starting with the most fundamental: does globalization intensify or dilute particularized conceptions of culture? If it is not the subjectivity of literary modernism, then what informs subjective responses to the global city? Do we read of resistances to the global? Do we see more cultural distance between the city and the nation? Furthermore, if the space between the global and the national has always been marked by tension, then we must also consider how city-dwellers are national subjects too. City novels, similarly, are written within national traditions inasmuch as they constitute a supra-national subgenre. Does ‘global city fiction’ somehow update this tension, or dispense with it altogether? Certainly, the sense of the global city as a space that functions separately from the nation-state suggests liberation from the national. But without a sense of national belonging, does anything rush in to replace it?

I attempt to answer these questions by first discussing the idea of the global city as outlined by Saskia Sassen. My work draws on but also extends her important work in this field, as I focus on the Canadian city of Toronto rather than Sassen’s paradigmatic examples of New York, London, and Tokyo. Next, I connect notions of urban space (such as the “softening” of the city described by Jonathan Raban) with conceptualizations of national literary traditions by scholars such as Franco Moretti. Using this framework, in the final section of this essay I read the novels of Russell Smith, all of which are set in Toronto, as an embodiment of the dialectic tension between (on one hand) a Canadian national identity formed through notions of space
and literary traditions and (on the other hand) a transnational urban milieu marked by the economic, cultural, and political flows of globalization. My argument is that the ways Smith’s novels think through the newness produced by the globalized dimension of Toronto force us, as readers, to think through what is different about urban life in the age of global cities. This emphasis on the intellect supplants the affective modes of belonging associated with the nation, the land, and other modes of patrimony. Certainly, the novelists of the late nineteenth-century who confronted the bewildering newness of the modern city too had to deploy their intellectual resources; the novel of the city has always been a rhetorical performance. Smith’s novels suggest that what is different in the age of the global city is that the metropolis is no longer the novelist and/or his characters trying to make meaning from “the sheer extremeness of the events he [the novelist and/or his characters] is witnessing” (Alter 11). They are trying to make meaning in an age when structures of meaning have been exposed as structures, and have therefore been thrown open to reconsideration.

**Global Cities, National Subjects, and the “Softening” of Urban Space**

But what is ‘soft’ about the global city? First, let us be clear about what is meant by global city. Unlike world cities, global cities do not sit at the heads of empires and/or nation-states, rather they are sites in global networks that function in new ways:

- first, as highly concentrated command points in the organization of the world economy;
- second, as key locations for finance and for specialized service firms, which have replaced manufacturing as the leading economic sectors;
- third, as sites of production, including the production of innovations, in these leading industries;
- and fourth, as markets for the products and innovations produced. (Sassen 3 - 4)

Understanding both the historical newness of this set of functions, as well as the mechanics and processes of the functions themselves, is crucial to understanding why economic globalization has led cities as diverse as New York, London and Tokyo to undergo similar but “massive and parallel changes in their economic base, spatial organization, and social structure . . . in so brief a period of time” (Sassen 4, original emphasis). In contrast to the transnational positioning of the global city, the world city model is associated with the historical and spatial growth of the nation-state. Like global cities, their modalities of control are multi-dimensional, but unlike global cities their political function and symbolism at the national level is as important as their economic power.

For all of the structural profundity of the transformation of a city to a global city, Saskia
Sassen argues that conceptualizing global cities as totalizing transformations obscures an understanding of the distinction between the global city and the city. What she means is that the global city operates within a city, thus “one can study the global city function without having to study the whole city” because “[e]very city has its own larger materiality, politity, sociality, each often part of old lineages.” In Sassen’s view, an updated or revolutionary understanding of the global city must be ever mindful that “[t]he development of the global city functions, the endogenising of the dynamics and the conditionalities of economic globalization in the space of the city is a strategic but not all-encompassing event” (350–1). Sassen’s distinction thus leaves a space between the global city and the city within which it operates, and it reminds us that despite what many claim is a tide of globalized urban homogeneity, global cities are not all alike. Every global city grows from a different soil, and every global city retains something of its past.

This is where see the first hint of softness. Because global cities are cities, ways of experiencing the city will not be completely new; they will call upon subject positions fostered by the modern city, particularly the individualized meaning-making that the modern urban subject arrogates to himself (and in the history of modern urban experience, the gender has, alas, usually been male). Perhaps the clearest articulation of this subjectivity comes from Jonathan Raban. As he writes in Soft City, when a subject feels most alienated by a city,

the city goes soft; it awaits the imprint of an identity. For better or worse, it invites you to remake it, to consolidate it into a shape you can live in. You, too. Decide who you are, and the city will assume a fixed form around you. Decide what it is, and your own identity will be revealed, like a position on a map fixed by triangulation. Cities, unlike villages and small towns, are plastic by nature. We mould them to our images: they, in turn, shape us by the resistance they offer when we try to impose our own personal form on them. (1–2)

Raban’s soft city was the modern city of the individual strategizing his compartmentalized urban life; resisting its pressures where he or she could, and fabricating a self that could fabricate a city that to some extent fabricated the self. Raban’s urban individual seems a direct echo of the urban type Georg Simmel describes in his influential essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life.” Simmel claims that city life shapes not only the moral attitudes but also the mental processes of the urbanite. He maintains that because life in a modern, capitalist city overwhelms city-dwellers, they recoup something of their psychic well being by constructing rational, functional, non-emotional personas and relationships. Life is divided into separate compartments, with work, family, and friends kept apart lest the intrusion of one realm into
the other increase the complexity of life and destroy any hope of peace. Modern man, forced to endure the stresses of modern urban life, feared becoming anonymous and superfluous. Simmel was concerned with the social-psychological conditions of urban life, and how necessarily impersonal, functional and atomized relationships could actually lead to the creation of new intellectual and moral opportunities. This newly “specially urban, specially civilized kind of freedom” (Sennett 9) of the urban subject would gather its strength from a belief that the emotionless and functional contacts in the city would not circumscribe all human relations. Selfhood and humanity would be sought inside, and intellectual and emotional freedom would exist separately from the routine of daily life.

What is registered in the softness of the global city is not precisely that which is registered in the terms Simmel and Raban used for their historical moments. The global city is a different animal, requiring a different softness, different dynamics of adaptation, and a different conception of how and where the city exercises its control.

Reading and writing global cities will, like global cities themselves, traffic in the interpretive domain established by the historically influential city texts that arose from the transition from romanticism to modernism. What marked these texts — by such thinkers as Simmel, Benjamin, and Weber, along with such poets and novelists as Baudelaire, Balzac, Dickens, Zola, and Dreiser, to name but a few — was the newness of the modern city. “As the city becomes more complex as a physical structure,” writes Richard Lehan of the development of nineteenth-century city texts, “the ways of seeing it become more difficult and the individual more passive” (8). This shift in subjectivity marks the shift in literary style from romanticism to modernism. The first phases of this shift, what Lehan calls “the decadent/aesthetic,” creates “a reality so sour that it turned the aesthetic vision inward to escape reality.” The latter “symbolist” phase “moved to a private, autistic state of mind, shutting out the urban, commercial, and industrial world that had become hostile. Under such pressure the city as a physical space gave way to the city as a state of mind” (Lehan 76). Turning urban life into a subjective experience became the standard literary response, and despite the Parisian particularity of most of these writings, they formed a template for subsequent views of the city.

In this age of global cities, this Parisian template is of questionable relevance. The very term ‘global city’ suggests that the literature of the global city somehow connects with the specter of global cultural homogeneity, a homogeneity imposed by the dominant players in the globalized cultural realm, usually taken to be the developed countries of the West. If that is the case, then would not literary modernism’s subjective templates — also products of Western modernity — remain the global subjective norm? But if a global city retains something of the historical city, then surely global cultural homogeneity will be held at bay. Surely the varied forms of global
culture suggest that the global city may indeed be the site of more diversity and difference than the modern city itself. As sociologist Anthony D. King claims, global cities can be “real or potential site[s] for the construction of new cultural and political identities” (215). This potential requires us to engage in the difficult work of interrogating what relevance global cities might have for the “persistence or modification of existing local, regional, or national identities and cultures, or alternatively, for the construction of new transnational ones” (215).

King’s idea of the global city’s potential puts Raban’s idea of softening the city into sociological terms, while also registering the transnational dimension of the global city. The combination of Raban’s affective articulation of the urban experience and King’s sociological dimension provides a strong and pliable analytical tool for reading contemporary literature within a national or transnational framework. King’s ideas also point to the fact that global cities are part of a circulation of large-scale urbanism into geographies that literary studies have not customarily associated with the modern capitalist city. Ashley Dawson and Brent Hayes Edwards, the editors of a special issue of Social Text entitled “Global Cities of the South,” attempt to correct the impression that global cities are a Western phenomenon by arguing that the size and concentration of the global cities of the south “suggest the inadequacy of recent attempts to theorize globalization by focusing on cities in the developed world” (2). They also note the explosion in scholarship on global cities, how it has expanded beyond Sassen’s original examples (New York, London, and Tokyo) and a focus on the economics of global cities, to question the legitimacy of economic explanations. Thus, the field has started living up to its global dimensions. Following Dawson’s and Edwards’s lead that the importance of global cities exceeds economic measure, I argue that the global city and its representation in literature calls attention to the different roles that literature plays in local imaginaries and in conjoining these imaginaries in a tense but productive symbolic and cultural relationship with global forces. The novel in particular, though a product of European nationalism and dependent on colonial expansion for its development, has been appropriated in ways that challenge European aesthetic and cultural norms. Moreover, if the novel is, as Franco Moretti claims, “the only symbolic form that could represent it [the nation-state]” (17), then how does it adapt to the global city’s challenges to the sovereignty of the nation-state? There is much to be gained from reading how novelistic representations of global cities concentrate issues of transnational identity and representation. Apart from analyses of how globalization alters consumption regimes and the symbolic nature of cultural commodities, literature produced in this age of globalization has been under-analyzed. As Michael Peter Smith remarks, we must be wary of how the globalists’ gaze “focuses our consciousness disproportionately upon the global economy, reified as a pre-given thing — whose developmental logic not only fully explains the
development of cities but even determines the subjectivity of their inhabitants, without ever interrogating them about what they are up to” (6). In a review of Sassen’s *The Global City*, Nigel Thrift criticizes accounts of global cities that restrict their analyses to the economic effects of the world economy on cities. While Thrift agrees that there is utility and insight to be gained from the latter, the uni-dimensionality of this kind of account “neglects the social and cultural importance of these cities as sites of social contact and narrative innovation, as places where this new world presents and represents itself, as places for story-telling rather than strategy” (233).

**Russell Smith’s Toronto: A Motley Collection of Softenings**

Russell Smith’s Toronto novels do precisely that — they transform the developmental logic of the global city into a space for storytelling. To tell their stories, however, they have to soften global city Toronto by imprinting on it several competing identities, identities drawn from a transnational circulation of metropolitan influences and pressures. Smith uses these to shape the city within the often satirical spaces of his narrative, exposing the plasticity of the city as both generic and Canadian, and finally, exposing how Toronto’s resistance to this softening emerges from a national cultural history that has traditionally been ambivalent, if not hostile to the city. Smith’s first challenge to this history is to — unlike many Canadian writers — set all of his novels in Toronto. Outside of his fiction, Smith has written in despair of Canadian literature’s view of the city “as a place of corruption and toxic science, a place hostile to nature and community.” Rather, for his generation, “the city [is] a place of freedom and sophistication, where we could indulge our tastes in philosophy and fashion without accusations of ‘elitism’ (second only to homosexuality as this country’s worst insult)” (“CanLit” 12). Within his fiction, it is clear that Smith wants his Toronto to soften the city so that it contains whatever it is that a great metropolitan city contains. Within this authorial ambition is the global dimension; it is not registered thematically or diegetically (he never mentions the term global city) but as a place that must be thought through in light of particular historical and cultural change. Smith’s literary Toronto presents a problem and an opportunity for understanding both the place of the global city in contemporary fiction, and the place of contemporary fiction in the global city.

The need for this kind of interrogation rests on the assumption that the relationship between the novel form and the nation-state needs updating. When Franco Moretti claims that the novel is only symbolic form that could represent the nation-state, he draws attention to how the latter escapes our immediate grasp — “ ‘Where’ is it? What does it look like? How can one see it?’ — while the “village, court, city, valley, universe can all be visually represented — in paintings, for instance . . .” (17). The novel is able to take in the complexity of the nation by, in the
words of Timothy Brennan, “objectifying the ‘one yet many’ of national life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles” (49). This objectification makes sense when and where the sense of nation coincides with the national project, when there is a sense of what Herder believed were “primordial and ineluctable roots of nationhood as a distinguishing feature from other communities” (Brennan 53). But when an element within the nation fissures that sense of nationhood, a reexamination of the national project seems inevitable. The latter half of the twentieth century featured many rents in the national fabric of many nations. The emergence of the global city is one such fissure, and counts among the most compelling sites for examining the relationship between nation-state and city because of the extent to which global cities have become what Sassen calls “nodal points for the coordination of processes” (5). But to repeat what Michael Peter Smith and Nigel Thrift argue, we must include among these processes the dialogic of cultural identity formation and narrative choice; examining these processes in tension with the economic processes of globalization adds a qualitative, experiential dimension to the global city.

Shifting the coordinates to Canada adds another layer of complexity because of Canadian literary nationalism’s contested relationship to a landscape that has been ‘nationalized’ despite its intrinsically alienating properties. Northrop Frye once summarized the Canadian dialogic of national space and national identity in these bleak terms: “to feel ‘Canadian’ was to feel part of a no-man’s-land with huge rivers, lakes, and islands that very few Canadians had ever seen” (222). This Canadian alienation was the product of the misfit between European aesthetics and the Canadian landscape, between language and forms that constrained the European imagination. Margaret Atwood intensified this misfit into her influential (though subsequently largely discredited) survival thesis, in which Canadian literature’s encounters with an overwhelmingly hostile natural environment can be thematized in terms of ‘survival.’ While the survival thematic has not, well, survived, Atwood’s novel Surfacing still enjoys canonical status as the representation of the Canadian subject’s encounter with the wilderness. In the novel a group of young city dwellers journeys into the wilds of northern Quebec, where they search for the missing father of the protagonist. The group fragments, leaving the female protagonist to delve deeper into the forest to the point where she identifies more strongly with the land than anything human: “I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning. . . . I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place” (Surfacing 187). The influence of figures like Frye and Atwood worked to sustain and inspires other Canadian writers, ensuring that the northern wilderness heritage would endure “as ‘an amorphous, obscure, yet recurrent theme in Canadian nationalism’ ” (Hulan 3).

Despite the prevalence of the wilderness mythos, there have in fact been many novels written
in, about, and of all Canadian cities, Toronto included. What has been lacking is a cultural, and therefore literary-critical accounting for what the city might mean in terms of a Canadian cultural space. This lack of literary-critical attention is ironic, given the attention to Toronto as a social space in other disciplines, not to mention in popular media. The social sciences in general have demonstrated a consistent interest in Toronto, an interest not unrelated to the flowering of Canadian cultural nationalism: the development of Toronto’s “comforting inner-city sense of community” (Davies 31) was linked to the notion that Canada was a relatively successful liberal democracy with enlightened urban social policies. This attitude towards cities captured something of that very identity that literary scholars had paradoxically derived from representations of the bush. To put it in somewhat simplified form, a de-romanticized sensibility of place, one that sought ordered community as the best response to spaces that threatened to overwhelm and alienate, found its social expression in urban environments. In their landmark study, *The Myth of the North American City*, economist Michael Goldberg and geographer John Mercer (neither of whom, it should be pointed out, are Canadian) argue that the development of Canadian cities reflects the “notion that the state has as its mandate the maintenance of the well-being of the civil society rather than the furtherance of individual liberty, happiness and economic gain” (29). The latter are attributes of the American polity, they argue, that find partial expression in the enshrinement of property rights in the Constitution. No such protection exists in Canada, where all land rights remain vested in the Crown. This difference has had important implications for the shaping of urban land use policies and in cultural representations of the land.

In Toronto, this attitude contributed, in the mid-1970s, to a period of activist politics led by Jane Jacobs (who had moved there with her family in 1968) and undertaken by a mayor and city government that had read and digested her *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. They rejected the tenets of modernist planning theories and formulated an urban policy committed to the idea, propounded by Jacob’s book, that the well-being of the inner-city depends on “a most intricate and close-grained diversity of uses that give each other constant mutual support, both economically and socially” (Jacobs 19). Toronto worked to create economically, culturally and socially diverse neighborhoods with relatively high population densities through tax and zoning regulations that encouraged developers to build residential units in the inner-city that appealed to low and middle-income earners, as well as the increased office space that this new urban population would work in. Business was therefore more comfortable about remaining and moving into the city core, creating the need for peripheral services. Entertainment and ‘culture’ also benefitted from the upsurge in population and capital.

Another key factor in the ‘renaissance’ of Toronto was the repealing of patently racist
immigration laws, the effects of which were, by the late 1960s, beginning to be seen and felt on the streets of Toronto. Toronto attracted enormous numbers of Asians, West Indians, and South Americans, adding to an already rich mixture of Chinese, Western European (particularly Italian), Jewish, and Ukrainian communities — later complemented with waves of young Americans dodging the Vietnam War. As geographer James Lemon writes of how immigration had changed the social landscape in the 1970s, “Toronto was about as diverse and tolerant place as one could find in the world; it could hardly be otherwise as two in five people in the metropolitan area were foreign born and, of those, less than one in ten were British or American in origin” (290). These immigration trends have continued, and Toronto has come to see itself as Canada’s — and perhaps the world’s — pre-eminent multicultural city, the one global city that within its geographical boundaries is truly socially and culturally globalized.

Toronto’s transformation to global city status can be assessed in various ways. Space precludes a detailed analysis of how and when this transformation occurred, but it essentially rests on the “shift to a post-Fordist economy and the strategic creation of a globally oriented urban space for financial services” (Todd 197). Geographer John Friedmann ranks Toronto (along with Miami, Houston and San Francisco) as a secondary ‘world city’ in a “core country” (320). Friedmann’s secondary core-country cities share many of the functions and characteristics of New York, London and Tokyo, but lack the history and political power of these main global cities. One could also argue that a sense of the global has long been part of Toronto’s intellectual and artistic fabric: Toronto’s Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism was one of the first and most comprehensive attempts to treat literature as a transnational, even universal — and pointedly non-national — mode of expression. Before Frye came his colleague at the University of Toronto, Marshall McLuhan, who gave us the expression ‘global village’.

But it is not Toronto’s presence on league tables of global cities that animates Smith’s fiction — to repeat, he never uses the word global city — rather, it is the sense that Toronto is, but also wants to be a “world class city” that underpins his work. Margaret Atwood, in her 1987 novel Cat’s Eye, takes aim at this provincial ambition to be worldly. When her protagonist Elaine returns to Toronto in the 1980s, she finds herself comparing it to the Toronto of her childhood in the 1940s: “Now you’re supposed to say how much it’s changed. World-class city is a phrase they use in magazines these days, a great deal too much. All those ethnic restaurants, and the theatre and the boutiques. New York without the garbage and muggings it’s supposed to be” (Cat’s Eye 14). Atwood’s phrasing pinpoints how this ‘civic ambition’ is countered by a confusion of cultural ambitions; in particular the deterritorialized nature of globalized urban culture, which dominates the world-views and habitus of her characters, and the provincialism of the cultural establishment, which strives to ‘Canadianize’ local cultural production. Smith’s
work picks up where Atwood leaves off, and in his novels both sides come in for criticism (as we shall see in detail later). But what is important for this analysis is that the sharpness, the intensity of Smith’s satire can be seen as a product of tensions themselves made sharper and more intense by globalization’s effects on Toronto.

Central to this tension is the idea that, because of the persistence of the wilderness myth, Canadian urban culture has always seemed foreign, and that Canada’s urban centers have always been located abroad, with London being the first, and now New York, Los Angeles, Paris, and perhaps even Mumbai and Hong Kong providing contemporary templates. With the centers of Canadian urban culture being deterritorialized, there is for Torontonians a sense that Toronto, for all of its global city-ness, never quite measures up: “Toronto is a city, like many more, to which people come because it encapsulates a version of a world beyond their own but which, for most, cannot deliver everything it seems to promise” (Davies 31). The failed promise of global city Toronto has emerged from the already transnational cultural history of Toronto: we see the gap between the city and the global city, how the development of the latter does not supersede the history of the former.

Thus when the global city goes soft in Russell Smith’s novels, the softenings work within and against transnational flows that call attention to what happens when diverse and competing political and aesthetic interests are roped together in a city that exerts little cultural pressure to organize them. Take, for instance, Smith’s 2004 novel *Muriella Pent* when the eponymous protagonist, recently widowed, comes to share her comfortable uptown Toronto mansion with Marcus Royston, a writer from the Caribbean. Royston overturns the expectations of the city’s arts-activism coterie by being thoroughly British in his education and literary sensibilities, and thoroughly metropolitan in his interest in Toronto’s history. When a Toronto journalist, interested in the political side of Royston the poet, asks him if he feels exiled from his native country (the fictitious island-nation St. Andrews), Royston has a hard time convincing her that he does not feel at home anywhere. As he explains, “‘My education makes it difficult for me, in St. Andrews, to . . . ’” But then he pauses, changes tack, and reflects that “‘I have met people here, here in this country, who make me feel at home’” (175). Those people are other West Indian migrants, who, as he explains, are like him at home with their homelessness. As a child of colonial slavery, and as a one-time revolutionary writer, Royston has felt and experienced exile all his life. Toronto’s willed lack of history and geography is the very thing that allows him to feel at home there.

The local, in other words, has been evacuated by a motley collection of softenings, drawn from experiences and notions from elsewhere, tending towards imposing some sort of meaning on a city that Royston reflects “was not a place, not a real place” (326). Evacuations of the local
are a hallmark of the claims made about the deterritorialized nature of the global city. Among the most notable is Doreen Massey's idea that "the social relations that constitute a locality increasingly stretch beyond its borders." While Smith's fiction endorses this view to an extent, we see from Royston's normalizing of feelings of homelessness that Massey's belief that "you can sense the simultaneous presence of everywhere in the place where you are standing" (162), can perhaps be taken too far. Smith's novels interpose a willed structure of belonging, a narrative consciousness that stands back and ponders the city, then softens it with the rhetorical devices that illuminate the detachment of the subject. Smith's subjective distance, however, does register the possibility that localities are not bounded physically or by identity — that they can be thought of as — again in Massey's words — “open and porous,” with identities that are defined not by what the space contains but by “the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections to that 'beyond’ ” (5).

In Smith's case, what is beyond is Canadian literary history's elision of the city from the national cultural imaginary. With the city being an absent cultural space, what flows in and out of Smith's literary Toronto — what softens it, makes it pliable and shapeable, but only to a point — are anti-urban prejudices counter-acted by derivative cosmopolitan poses, transnational pop-culture fashions, and waves of satire piggy-backed on postmodern irony. At the end of _Muriella Pent_, we are introduced to a young literature professor from the prairie city of Regina who is writing a book on Canadian literature “ ‘When it was at its peak,’ ” by which he means nineteenth-century settler novels all the way to writers who represent the first flowering of Canadian literary nationalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. His book will stage, in his words, “ ‘a reaction to this new kind of urban crap that’s so dominant now, you know, the Torontocentrism that’s just so commercial and so dominates the publishing world.’ ” Because the English-Canadian publishing industry is based in Toronto, “ ‘the regional voices that so really define this literature have been silenced, or are being silenced, you could say, and this represents a real . . . a real loss, I think’ ” (*MP* 341). The satirical target here is the datedness of this young professor's romantic view of Canadian literature as being related to rural place and shaped by experiences in nature (Muriella Pent keeps asking him if he's interested in “ ‘Anything contemporary’ ” or “ ‘anyone younger’ ” [341]). This young academic's dusty, provincial literary nationalism is meant to represent the hinterland's hostility to Toronto; at the same time, however, the novel's sarcastic portrait of this provincialism reveals the smug provincialism of the urban elite. Smith thus softens Toronto by writing outside the global city of the global city: he satirizes the generic-global imaginations of his hip Toronto characters from the dualistic vantage point both of a hip Toronto writer and of a critic of Toronto's place in Canadian cultural history. This satire can be seen in the way Smith’s young professor puts canonical Canadian
writers Atwood and Alice Munro on his list of young, contemporary authors. The significance here is that both Atwood and Munro are aligned with the anti-urban bias that marked Canadian literature when they came of age as published authors in the late 1960s.

What is 'global' about this dualistic dynamic in Smith’s work is that larger historical forces have timed his literary project so that it has to make sense of a kind of city that no longer functions as a control point in a national economic or social structure. Smith’s novels about Toronto register the global city in the way they create a tension between taking the city qua city for granted and a desire to thrust the city of Toronto into a globalized Canadian historical consciousness — as if he’s trying to put Canadian noses to the global window and have them see that their very own Toronto is out there on the other side. Smith softens Toronto, imprinting on it the transnational signs and attitudes of the urban hipster (his characters listen to European industrial music, eat at ethnic-fusion restaurants, are conversant in contemporary literary and cultural theory) and the narrative strategies and themes of the modernist and/or realist city novel (particularly the theme of the young man trying to make the grade in the city). But, in a twist on Raban, global city Toronto limits what he can do by undercutting whatever may be distinctive about the Toronto urban consciousness — *pace* Anthony D. King, it does not create the potential for new identities, national or transnational. More specifically, the global city limits Smith’s characters by marginalizing their artistic ambitions, or by trivializing their culture work; the global city’s transnational obscuring of place and identity short-circuits the attempts to write a distinctly Torontonian urban consciousness. Thus it is that the editors of a recent book on Canadian urban fiction say about Smith’s novel *Noise*, while it is set in Toronto “it could just as easily be set in, say, Philadelphia or Vancouver” (Edwards and Ivison 204).

Therein lies the tension in Smith’s Toronto. This tension is exemplified by James Willing, the main character of Smith’s 1998 novel *Noise*. Willing finds his literary ambitions sidelined by a globalized publishing industry that demands generic, simplistic and sensational content that can be consumed by the broadest possible audience. In *Noise*, James Willing finds that his article on a canonical Canadian poet has been stripped of any mention of Canada by the editors of the New York-based magazine that commissioned the article. As the magazine editor explains to James, “‘if the guy’s born in Pittsburgh or Canada or, I don’t know, it’s not that exciting, right. . . .’” (N 226). The irony is that the Canadian poet’s canonical status comes from his evocations of the northern wilderness, in echo of Canadian literature’s great thematic preoccupation. The double irony is that James finds that the poet is a washed-up drunk living in a suburb of Toronto, prompting James to write the article as a pastiche of platitudes that winks to those in the know about the artificiality of Canadian literary nationalism. Readers are treated to one of James’s in jokes about the tiresomeness of the Canadian myth of the northern
wilderness, in this glimpse of a draft of the article: “As if the injunction, ‘A story Canadians should never tire of telling,’ were directed, mantra-like, at the story-teller himself” (N 147). But with the strokes of a New York editor’s red pen, globalism limits even his chance to take a dig at nationalistic puffery.

A similar example comes from Smith’s first novel, How Insensitive (1995), when protagonist Ted Owen journeys from Montreal to Toronto because “‘Well, . . . for what I want to do, I guess you, I think you really have to be there.’ ” Toronto’s value is functional, and therefore suited to vague ambitions. Accordingly, Ted Owen wants to “‘try to get into film’ ” or into “‘some kind of writing’ ” because he has “‘a couple of degrees that are not really useful’ ” (HI 9). His useless degrees in cultural studies mean that the only work available to him is writing about lampshades for a design magazine, and trying to sell an article (mostly unwritten) about social spaces. This intermittent work reflects a homogeneous urban culture controlled by a mass media. Toronto is so devoid of hope, spirit, personality and mythology that, by the end of the novel when Owen eventually decides to mine the city for a novel, all he can come up with are ethnic stereotypes and adolescent sarcasm:

His head was filling with details. He could see Janet’s volunteer boss — not Janet, though, he would have to name her something similar, something plain, Karen, Jennifer maybe — he could see the head of the volunteers at the Community Outreach Office, New Day Community Outreach, fat Ilsa — no, Ilsa was too obvious, something Scandinavian, Baltic: Alfreda, Jasminka, fat Jasminka with her hysterical letters to Next magazine. She would have a bit of body odour, poor old Jasminka. (HI 249–50)

Thus in their critiques of how Toronto neuters attempts to distinguish it through narrative, Smith’s novels are very specifically targeted at Toronto. He is putting the anti-urban anti-Toronto bias of Canadian literary culture against the self-absorbed cosmopolitan yearnings of the global city. Because it is in thrall to transnational pop culture trendiness, Toronto’s vanities are exposed, its built environment described as dirty, makeshift, dingy, polluted, drab, pretentious, old, dilapidated, and derivative. Rarely does it capture the hearts of his characters. The youth culture he depicts is a direct outgrowth, and cultivator, of this dowdy exterior. The inner life of Toronto is also depicted not much negatively but as lacking; the global Toronto is soulless, the city is essentially without character. This is, ironically, why the city of his novels is not interchangeable with other cities.

Seen this way, it is perhaps no surprise that Smith’s most sympathetic and rigorously drawn character is the non-Torontonian Royston. He is the only Smith character who embodies a
history, and is thus the perfect foil for all of the Torontonians (even those of color) who disdain Toronto history. Even this most integral of characters, however, cannot make sense of the globalized distortions of history, ending up in Toronto due to the machinations of transnational capital and cultural politics. The new government of St. Andrews, in light of impending trade deals with the U.S. and Canada, needs to sideline the melancholic Royston (serving as an education bureaucrat) lest his anti-colonial past overshadow negotiations. Canada’s External Affairs ministry needs a St. Andrean symbol for the pro-forma cultural exchange that would accompany the trade deals. Meanwhile, to sustain its annual grant, the city of Toronto’s Arts Action Council (literature committee) badly needs a writer from a developing country to fulfill its residency program. External Affairs proposes Royston as the solution to everyone’s problem, and he finds himself on a plane to Toronto.

If we accept Fredric Jameson’s synoptic characterization of globalization as “an untotalizable totality which intensifies binary relationships between its parts — mostly nations, but also regions and groups” (xii), then Royston’s exile to Toronto intensifies the relationship between a developed and developing nation, but also reverses the usual flow of influence. Royston’s liminality intensifies Toronto’s liminality, troubling its relationship to Canada, to any sense of cultural continuity, and to itself. The city is softened almost out of existence, only to remain as a site to be thought through rather than loved. What emerges is the sense that understanding the experience of the global city requires more than simply replicating older structural or thematic models. Therefore, we need a theoretical framework that begins with the idea that the city is a unique but transformative space, functioning and bestowing meaning beyond — or despite — the influence of the nation state; and accounting for the fact that not all global cities are global in the same way.

Notes

1) It should be noted that ‘world city’ is often used to mean what Sassen calls the global city. Sassen develops the distinction between the two in *The Global City*: world city, she writes, “referred to a type of city which we have seen over the centuries. . . . it could be said that most of today’s major global cities are also world cities, but that there may well be some global cities today that are not world cities in the full, rich sense of that term. . . . Thus the fact that Miami has developed global city functions beginning in the late 1980s does not make it a world city in that older sense of the term” (xix). The latter point also applies, it seems to me, to Toronto.

2) On the various forms of global culture, Ulf Hannerz writes “[t]here is now a world culture. . . . marked by an organization of diversity rather than by a replication of uniformity. No total homogenization of systems of meaning and expression has occurred, nor does it appear likely that there will be one any time soon. But the world has become one network of social relationships,
and between its different regions there is a flow of meanings as well of people and goods” (237).

3) Notable examples: *Cabbagetown* (1950) by Hugh Garner; *The Meeting Point* (1967), *Storm of Fortune* (1971), and *The Bigger Light* (1975) form Austin Clarke’s Toronto trilogy. Robertson Davies was two thirds of the way through a Toronto trilogy at the time of his death, having completed *Murder and Walking Spirits* (1991) and *The Cunning Man* (1994). Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) and Michael Redhill’s *Consolation* (2006) are both, though in different ways, historical novels of Toronto. Many of Atwood’s novels make use of Toronto, while *The Robber Bride* (1993) and *Cat’s Eye* (1987), with their very consciously constructed social and cultural histories, could both be called novels of Toronto.

4) As an editorial in the September, 2001, issue of the journal *Canadian Literature* argues, a recent surge in city fiction means that “Canadian literature . . . requires re-mapping,” because there is currently a “more than usually wide gap between literary production and the reference works describing it” (Kröller 6).

5) A 1996 *National Geographic* article on Toronto gushes that “[w]ith its sizzling cultural mix and a stylish new personality, this once bland metropolis breaks into the urban major leagues” (121).


7) In his *History of Canada*, McNaught writes that in scholarly histories of Canada in the 1940s and 50s “a virtually unanswerable case was made that the principal political ideas and forces in Canada, both of the right and of the left, originated across the Atlantic and were organized in Canada by urban-rather than rural-frontier groups” (386-87). More specifically, in books and articles, leading Canadian historian of that period J. M. S. Careless “propounded the idea that Canada has always been organized by metropolitan centres in reciprocal relationship with their own hinterlands and with larger external metropolitan centres such as London and New York” (McNaught 387). Canadian historians, claims McNaught, have generally maintained this line of interpretation.

Works Cited


