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To cite this article: Irene Gammel & Christiane Tarantino (2024) *Rouge: The Subway Poetics of Adrian De Leon's Sub/Urban Toronto*, *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 54:4, 374-387, DOI: [10.1080/02722011.2025.2462505](https://doi.org/10.1080/02722011.2025.2462505)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02722011.2025.2462505>



Published online: 23 Apr 2025.



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Rouge: The Subway Poetics of Adrian De Leon's Sub/Urban Toronto

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on theories of Canadian suburban literature (Cheryl Cowdy 2022) and suburban settlement (Zhixi Zhuang 2024), alongside experimental and subway poetics (Eric Schmalz 2022; Tim Conley 2014), to explore the Canadian suburban poetic imaginary. Focusing on Adrian De Leon's 2018 collection *Rouge: Poems*, which maps a subway journey from western Toronto to the eastern suburb of Scarborough, the article examines how poetry serves as both a lyrical and rhetorical narrative, interrogating the relationship between city and suburb, particularly the suburb's role as the city's shadowed double. Ultimately, the article argues that *Rouge: Poems* uses lyrical emotion, play, humor, and satire to depict the suburban and subway settings not just as thematic backdrops, but as active, generative forces that question and reshape urban–suburban relationships, expanding our knowledge of suburban and subway poetics.

KEYWORDS

Adrian De Leon; Canadian poetry; suburban literature; subway poetry; Toronto

East York
Old York
North York
Fort York
ROYAL YORK
New York
North York Centre
York Mills
Yorkville
Yorkdale
York University
York Region
Yorkshire Pudding
York Regional Police

–Adrian De Leon, "Islington" (De Leon 2018, 3)

In "Islington," the second poem in his 2018 collection *Rouge: Poems*, Scarborough poet Adrian De Leon invokes York, the historical name of Upper Canada's capital from 1796 to 1834, when it became Toronto. Although the city's name is derived from the Mohawk word *tkaronto*, meaning "where there are trees standing in the water," the poem conspicuously

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omits the name Toronto, instead repeating “York” 14 times, emphasizing the city’s colonial roots. This repetition, juxtaposed with blank spaces, underscores York’s enduring presence in Canada’s collective imagination and invites critical engagement with its legacy. De Leon uses anaphora, rhythm, and humor (“Yorkshire Pudding”) to further highlight and satirize the divide between old and new, city and suburb, a dis/connection visualized in the poem’s parallel columns. The final line, “York Regional Police,” evokes the institutional policing of borders and people, particularly in suburban areas.¹

De Leon’s repetition of “York” across “Islington” foregrounds the poetry’s use of language as a critical, rhetorical tool, emphasizing the interplay of place names and spatial identity. The collection includes 70 poems, each titled after one of 68 subway stations, with the final two named “Rouge” in reference to Rouge Park and the Rouge River in Scarborough, a suburb in Toronto’s eastern GTA.² These final titles lend their name to the entire collection. By treating subway stations as both poetic devices and spatial markers, De Leon’s subway poetry foregrounds movement and transition, reconfiguring the city–suburb relationship.

As we will demonstrate, *Rouge* provides a poetics of the subway and the suburb through the lens of a first-generation resident of Scarborough whose first-person speaker offers alternatives to suburban as white middle-class narratives, as seen in Phyllis Brett Young’s novel *The Torontonians* ([1960] 2007), where the affluent Rowanwood suburb is depicted as a site for exploring “the ennui of suburban housewives” (Cowdy 2022, 4), or Paul Quarrington’s dystopian novel *Whale Music* (Quarrington [1989] 2007), which focuses on the angst of a white, middle-aged former rockstar in Don Mills, another Toronto suburb. Instead, De Leon aligns his poetry with suburban Canadian literatures, challenging the systemic invisibility of Indigenous peoples and other underrepresented, racialized voices, as evidenced in twenty-first-century novels set in Scarborough, such as Catherine Hernandez’s *Scarborough* (2017) and David Chariandy’s *Brother* (2017).³ By similarly exploring Scarborough in the context of the 2010s, De Leon’s speaker’s commute between city and suburb becomes an underexplored poetic and rhetorical site, foregrounding marginalized stories and experiences whose scholarly context and contribution require a brief overview in the next section before we unpack the poetry. Ultimately, we argue that *Rouge* serves as an underexplored poetic crucible of cross-cultural convergence, urging readers to reconsider the boundaries and hierarchies that define the city-suburb dynamic—with subway poetry contributing to our understanding of the roles of both the suburb and the subway in Canadian poetics.

Canadian Suburbs and Subways: Theories and Contexts

While Toronto and other Canadian cities admittedly did not experience the same level of inner-city decline as did American cities such as Detroit and Buffalo, the scholarship on suburban literature in the U.S., such as Catherine Jurca’s *White Diaspora* (2001) and Robert Beuka’s *SuburbiaNation* (2004), offers relevant insights into broader suburban dynamics. Jurca critiques the “white smugness” of suburban attitudes, while Beuka examines the racial separatism of suburban expansion. Despite the rise of African American representation in suburban settings in the 1970s (Jones-Correa 2006), later amplified by *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990–1996), American literature largely continued to focus on urban rather than suburban depictions of immigrants and minorities. While this pattern finds

parallels in Canadian scholarship, which similarly addresses the evolving dynamics of suburban spaces, there are also differences.

In “Canadian Suburbia” (2018), Roger Keil argues that Canadian suburbs such as Fort McMurray, Alberta, have reshaped the social fabric, cultural meaning, and political landscape, creating globalized suburban communities in the twenty-first century. Similarly, Zhixi Zhuang, drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s spatial theory of placemaking (Lefebvre 1991), emphasizes the Canadian suburb as a space for lived hybridity, where immigrants reshape their environments through architecture and entrepreneurship (Zhuang 2017). Still, despite the growing importance of suburban spaces in Canada (66% of Canadians now live in suburbs), much of the suburban literature remains to be developed in scholarship.⁴ The literary suburb is sometimes depicted as a “haunted” twin to the city (Vogt-William 2018),⁵ but also as a space for transformation, as seen in Cheryl Cowdy’s *Canadian Suburban: Reimagining Space and Place in Postwar English Canadian Fiction* (2022), which shows how the fictional Scarborough of Chariandy’s and Hernandez’s novels challenges stereotypes of “Scarberia” and “Scarlem” (2022, 133–143), presenting Scarborough as a diverse, immigrant-rich suburb, while also calling for more scholarly engagement with suburban settings in Canadian literature, both past and present.

De Leon addresses these same suburban concerns through his unexplored subway poetry, building on Canadian literary experimentation of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the work of sound poet bpNichol and concrete poet bill bissett. As Stephen Voce documents in *Poetic Community: Avant-Garde Activism and Cold War Culture* (2013), these Canadian poets moved beyond traditional lyrical, interiorized self-expression to embrace visual, sound, and concrete poetry, mobilizing their work for community-building activism. Eric Schmaltz’s *Borderblur Poetics: Intermedia and Avant-Gardism in Canada, 1963–1988* (2023) further highlights how these avant-garde poets rejected institutional and mainstream norms, celebrating hybridity and radical experimentation to produce a poetics centered on embodied experiences and poetic play.⁶

In addition, Tim Conley argues that subway poetics across Canada, Europe, and the United States share an experimental focus, rejecting the view of a poem as a monument and instead emphasizing the communal experience of public transit, particularly the subway, tram, and bus (Conley 2014, 91). This focus is reflected in the overheard conversations of commuters, which become part of the collective urban experience (94). While subway poetry is often linked with metropolitan cities such as New York with a focus on a global context,⁷ De Leon reimagines the city-suburb relationship by drawing on the above Canadian tradition, yet also departs from it by blending lyrical, interiorized self-expression with community-building activism, transforming the journey home into an exploration and mobilization of the sometimes intense feelings of a first-generation resident toward the evolving city-suburb dynamic in the twenty-first century.

In *Rouge*, De Leon maps the city’s subway system across six rides (Figure 1), with each route helping to visualize the sequencing of the 70 poems. The first ride, from Kipling Terminal to Bathurst (Koreatown), explores themes of immigrant life along the Bloor-Danforth line. The second ride, from Downsview to Dupont, traverses North York, which is host to several immigrant communities. The third ride, from Don Mills to Rosedale, highlights the stark socioeconomic disparities between recent immigrants in Don Mills and the affluent residents of Rosedale. The fourth ride, from Spadina to Sherbourne, enters downtown Toronto—Old York and the epicenter of power in both Toronto and

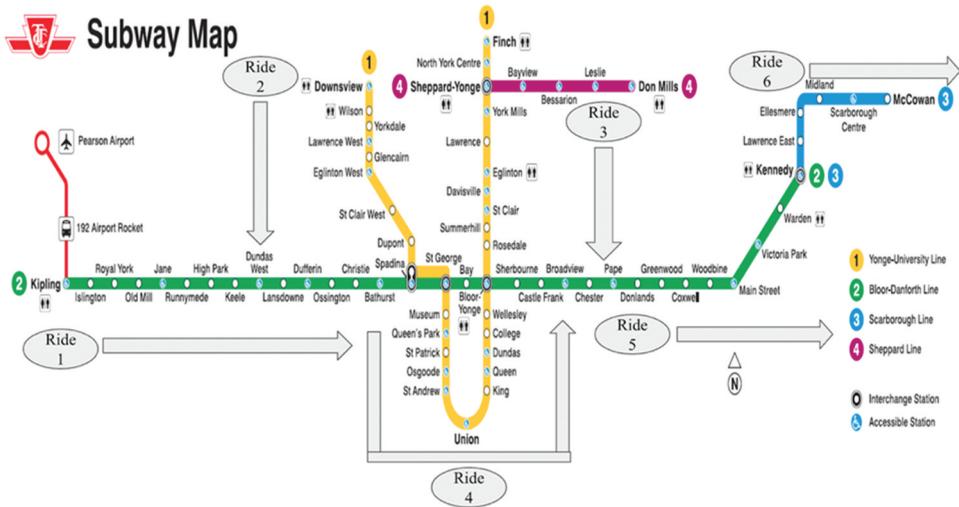


Figure 1. The Toronto Transit Commission Subway Map (2012) outlining the six subway rides represented in Adrian De Leon’s poetry. Marks added by the authors. Map reproduced with permission of the Toronto transit commission.

Canada. The fifth ride, from Castle Frank to Kennedy, moves through immigrant enclaves such as Greektown,⁸ with the sixth and final ride, from Kennedy to McCowan, culminating in suburban Scarborough, the poet’s place of residence and the speaker’s destination.

Because of space constraints, this essay focuses on rides one, four, and six, where De Leon reconfigures the city–suburb relationship through his journey from west to east into Scarborough. With De Leon’s poems inviting readers to see the city and suburb anew through the lens of the subway and the stories it carries, we argue that the speaker’s quest for social change is mirrored and amplified by the poem’s experimentation with poetic form, using elements of visual and concrete poetry, as well as radical poetic play, to unsettle reader expectations. By offering this contribution to the emerging field of suburban literary studies in Canada, ultimately we argue that by rejecting the hierarchical relationship that has long marked the suburb as inferior to the city, De Leon uses poetry as a rhetorical tool to reshape the reader’s perception of the city–suburb dynamic. As we shall see now by turning to the poetry, De Leon critically exposes—through lyrical interiority but also through play, visual/verbal experimentation, and excoriating satire—the ideological and discursive structures that underpin them.

From Kipling to Lansdowne (Ride 1)

The opening poem of De Leon’s *Rouge*, titled “Kipling,” references Toronto’s westernmost subway terminal, near Pearson International Airport and connected to it by an express bus. Located at the border of Mississauga, Canada’s seventh-largest municipality, and Etobicoke, a smaller suburb, the station serves as a point of arrival for many immigrants, with both areas hosting high percentages of visible minorities and foreign-born residents.⁹ This setting frames De Leon’s poetic parody of the subway journey home. The poem begins:

O, for a muse that grinds these gears—
 From arcane shafts, dispel my fears!
 This tunnel shaft, to be precise:
 The wellspring of our transit's might.
 (De Leon 2018, 1)

With a saucy, racy focus on “gears,” “wellspring,” “might,” and “shaft,” the ironic muse driving the poet is Toronto’s public transit system—“the wellspring of our transit’s might.” De Leon reinterprets traditional vertical imagery through irony, making shafts horizontal to symbolize movement and passage rather than static columns, thus setting in gear his subway poetry.

Starting at Kipling, the poet’s subway ride becomes generative, resurfacing fragments of old, obscured meaning while creating new ones. The station’s name, “Kipling,” refers to Rudyard Kipling, British author of *The Jungle Book* (1894) and the poem “The White Man’s Burden” (1889), which speaks of the overlay of British colonialism, amplified by the following station names: “Islington,” named after the Northern District of Greater London, “Royal York,” referencing Canada’s monarchical system, and “Runnymede,”¹⁰ evoking Kipling’s eponymous poem on the Magna Carta, all of them tied to British history and locales. The ninth station, Dundas West,¹¹ recalls Henry Dundas (1742–1811), a Scottish politician who supported slavery and delayed the abolition of the slave trade in the British empire. De Leon does not make these colonial histories explicit. Instead, he constructs mock epitaphs through the sequence of titles, exposing the cultural meanings obscured by routine, as alluded to in the poem “Queen,” where he writes: “A poem about the fun-fun-fun of Queen Victoria/And how this street used to be named ‘Lot Street’/Before old Vicky usurped the park lots” (De Leon 2018, 48). By stripping away the layers of signification at each station, from signage to advertisement, each title becomes a poetic found object, or *objet trouvé*. These titles, repurposed and recontextualized, are curated for the reader to see anew.

Each title asks readers to examine the station name itself, revealing the poet’s self-awareness in performing the role of countercultural poetic rebel, creating a counternarrative from the speaker-commuter’s perspective. For example, “Runnymede,” subtitled “A Found Poem,” reads:

Oh what a nightmare. Jesus,
 she’s tiny. A little GOOD. a lot
 of ahhh. STAND BACK. Your
 Safety matters to us. Erin was
 thrilled her son had made an
 invisible friend at the day care.
 She just wished it wasn’t the
 flu. Security cameras. The next
 station is
 (De Leon 2018, 7)

Like an assemblage sculpture made of found objects in visual art, “Runnymede” combines banal fragments of conversation mixed with automated instructions. The line “STAND BACK. Your safety matters to us” transforms the subway station into a social site, capturing human intersections and interactions. This scene echoes Zhixi Zhuang’s idea of the suburb as a site of creative activity and hybridity (2017), and Tim Conley’s idea of the

communal mobilizing experience of the subway and subway poetics (2014). In this way, “Runnymede” becomes a point of convergence and divergence of commuters, blending stories of connection and disconnection. These verbal fragments challenge lyrical poetry by drawing attention to the materiality of everyday language. The abrupt ending, “The next station is,” without naming the following station, invites readers to fill in the blank and move to the next subway station-cum-poem, emphasizing participatory elements of community-building and movement. This reflects the Canadian avant-garde *borderblur* poetry of the 1960s–1980s, which similarly engaged readers as active participants, dissolving boundaries between poet and audience through concrete (or visual) poetry, as well as through sound and kinetic poetry—forms that address the audience’s embodied experience and mobilize the communal “we” of activism, particularly amplifying marginalized voices (Schmaltz 2023, 8–10).

This blurring of borders becomes explicit in the next poem, “Lansdowne,” which references a station at the boundary between city and suburb, marked by post-World War II single-family homes, small businesses, and cafés—almost suburban in its architecture and feel. Here, the first-person speaker positions himself as a poetic rule-breaker, even breaking his own rules by writing off the subway. He writes in italics:

*It's me again. I'm breaking the rules by writing
this in a coffee shop. Wide-open window
compared to the dreary subway grays of the past
six hours; [...]*
(De Leon 2018, 11)

Lyrical poetry emphasizes the speaker’s personal thoughts and emotions by staging the first-person “I,” often heightened through direct address and self-conscious interruptions such as “It’s me again—I’m breaking the rules.” Here, the poet-rebel challenges his own conventions by writing in a traditional café—ironically the mundane, traditional writer’s space. The rules he breaks pertain to his own unconventional method of composing poetry on the subway, his preferred mobile setting, producing his work literally in motion. By oscillating between traditional and non-traditional writing spaces, the poet-rebel proclaims the poem as a space of interiority and self-authorship.

Dufferin to Osgoode: Into the Mesh of Downtown (Ride 4)

Transferring from Line Two Bloor-Danforth to Line One Yonge-University, the speaker ventures into the downtown core, his verbal and visual rhetoric unraveling suburban stereotypes that have solidified the city–suburb relationship as a hierarchy, prioritizing city spaces. He does so through typographic experimentation and playful visual arrangement, aligning with the counter-tradition of concrete poetry in Canada, where “writing and art making occur through interactions between language, image, sound, gesture, space, and so on” (Schmaltz 2023, 8). Concrete poetry, in other words, speaks through non-linguistic elements that can shift the reader’s perspective, unraveling the dominance of verbal discourse and its long-engrained patterns of hierarchy.

Consider the poem “Dufferin” (Figure 2), which refers to Dufferin subway station, notable for its large-scale renovation from 2008 to 2014 with new signage, elevators, and art. Subtitled “*danger: construction in progress*” (De Leon 2018, 12), “Dufferin” uses the

DUFFERIN

danger: construction in progress

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Figure 2. Adrian De Leon's "Dufferin" from *Rouge* (Toronto: Mawenzi House, 2018) 12. Reproduced with permission of publisher.

typographic repetition of the name DUFFERIN in capital letters to construct a visual poem. The dramatic white space mirrors the construction holes, and the poem's layout reflects the physical square of the neighborhood, a well-known Toronto immigrant area with Little Italy and Little Portugal at its heart. The station, named after Dufferin Street—a major North–South artery connecting downtown Toronto to the suburb of King—serves as a focal point. With its 14 lines, the poem parodies the sonnet as a love poem to the early architectural esthetics of the suburb, which worked through replication of the same housing structures, just as his poem is built through repetition of the word Dufferin.¹² By integrating concrete poetry techniques, De Leon encourages readers to interpret the poem as a visual and verbal artifact, celebrating hybridity and inviting exploration of the poem's spatial architecture. The subway's rapid movement exposes both connectivity and disconnection of residence, commerce, and culture.

Like Dufferin, St Andrew (Figure 3) represents the city as a visual square but avoids describing the actual station. Instead, he focuses on artifacts from a Google search:

TheFinancialDistrictsToronto'sgroundzeroforlawfirmsinvestme
ntbanksandthemoversandshakersthanguivBayStreetitsreputatio
n.blogTO.

(De Leon 2018, 45)

ST ANDREW

An enmeshment of found artifacts on a Google Search

The Financial District is Toronto's ground zero for law firms, investment banks, and the movers and shakers that give Bay Street its reputation. *blogTO*. Much of Toronto's architectural heritage, especially of the modernist variety, is concentrated down here. *Toronto Star*. Most densely built-up area of Toronto, home to numerous banking companies, corporate headquarters, high-powered legal and accounting firms, insurance companies and stockbrokers. *Wikipedia*. is loosening up. A posh new coffee house opens in the Financial District. *Toronto Life*.

Figure 3. Adrian De Leon's "St. Andrew" from *Rouge* (Toronto: Mawenzi House, 2018) 45. Reproduced with permission of publisher.

Through dense verbal/visual enmeshment—transcribed as “The Financial Districts, Toronto’s ground zero for law firms [and] investment banks” drawn from *blogTO*, an online news source that focuses on Toronto—mimics the skyscrapers’ density of the area. This layout contrasts the spacious suburbs with the claustrophobic downtown core, highlighting the dense nature of urban living.

In contrast to the uniform squareness of “St. Andrew,” “Ossington” reflects the immigrant residents through graffiti: “Children in brown/Children of gods/Children in paint” (De Leon 2018, 13). With a final glance in the mirror, the speaker’s concluding line, “Who’s got the blackest eyes of all?” underscores the speaker’s racialized perspective, as mirrored in the subway artwork. *Ossington Particles* by Scott Eunson (Byford 2016; Eunson 2016) depicts pathways, branches of trees, and irregularly shaped stones adhering to the white subway tiles, and in the absence of “brown . . . children in paint,” one assumes De Leon was commenting on the earlier murals, likely graffiti, now covered by tiles and officially commissioned artwork. In “Christie,” the speaker engages “Koreatown,” an ethnic enclave known for its lively shopping and restaurant scene. The poem contrasts this enclave with “the glitter and/glamour of Yorkville,” a luxury shopping area, and embraces the “odyssey moving through east of the/Don” (De Leon 2018, 14). In “Bathurst,” the speaker reflects on “Markham”—a name associated with both urban and suburban contexts. “Markham Street” is a quiet residential street downtown; “Markham Road” is a major thoroughfare in Scarborough; and “Markham” is its own suburb. De Leon’s concern with these homonyms highlights the profound disconnection between these areas, represented as “the foreign lands beyond the trains/where tracks will never meet” (15). This wordplay underscores the irony of a shared name, a poignant metaphor for the geographical and cultural divide that separates such different locales, each with its own rhythm, character, and challenges. Through poetic experimentation, De Leon

recasts suburban life and challenges constraining social stereotypes, prompting readers to reconsider their perceptions of these spaces and the lives that unfold within them.

De Leon's brief detour downtown defies the downtown's traditional hierarchical dominance of the city, including what Christine Vogt-William describes as the traditional literary representation of the suburb as the shadowed other (2018, 65). Midway through the collection, he guides readers into the downtown core, illustrated in the yellow loop on the map (see Figure 1), a journey that surfaces the speaker's personal history and anger. This anger is vividly expressed at Osgoode Subway station, named after William Osgoode, the first Chief Justice of Upper Canada. The poem "Osgoode," subtitled "A Free-Write," includes this personal reflection:

*Really sorry for all these personal
interjections. Whenever I hear
"Osgoode" I'm pulled into the hall
of the Mountain King. The Legal
King, actually. My dad used to
work here. We rose to power, to
middle-class, to the Canadian
dream, . . . and I grew up hearing the word
"Osgoode" like it was a Greek god
(De Leon 2018, 44)*

With such interiorized outpourings of emotion, De Leon's poetry offers autobiographical, confessional insights into the motivations behind his outbursts. His anti-institutional stance counters Osgoode Hall's high status by juxtaposing the venerable institution of Canadian justice with the dream of upward mobility associated with it—a dream that parallels the American Ivy League ideal and reflects his own family's newcomer narrative in the city.¹³ His reference to the Hall of the Mountain King suggests that this institution held an almost mythical significance, not only for the city of Toronto and its residents but for his immigrant father.¹⁴ This personal backstory imbues these spaces with the affect of his lyrical "I." Through this approach, De Leon transforms these *spaces* into *places*, transcending the official map through embodied, dynamic place-making practices, such as subway rides, poetry writing, and self-authorship. In doing so, his work exemplifies place-making as a tactic, where personal narratives infuse and reshape the concept of space.

Homecoming (Ride 6) and Conclusion

The final ride in the collection, from Kennedy to McCowan, centers on homecoming, transitioning from Line Two Bloor-Danforth—still operating with the old tracks and cars—to Line Three Scarborough, now decommissioned. Line Two serves as a connective space between the collection's first and final journeys; "Broadview" includes a line on the "don valley [that] divides real toronto from that other shit to the/east" (De Leon 2018, 57), with the deliberate lower-case "toronto" functioning as a humorous, ironic counter-gesture or comical dethroning, a reverse discourse that brings down to earth the metropolis upheld by grand narratives. Upon reaching Scarborough—a suburb on Toronto's east end, historically derided as "Scarberia" or "Scarlem," as depicted by fellow Scarborough writers

Chariandy and Hernandez in their respective Scarborough novels—De Leon, like them, reclaims the setting, not as a fictional, but as a uniquely poetic destination, with each station becoming an opportunity for contemplating its cultural structures through poetry.¹⁵

The collection culminates with the speaker's homecoming in Scarborough, dramatized in the penultimate and final poems, both titled "Rouge." These poems stand out by not deriving their names from subway stations but from the Rouge River running through the eastern edge of Scarborough. This final ride, from Kennedy to McCowan, reflects a line decommissioned in 2023 after a train derailment and accident caused by outdated operating equipment. Rouge, the most northeastern part of Toronto, is a district where, in 2018, 57% of the population was made up of first-generation immigrants, including East Indians, Sri Lankans, Filipinos, and Jamaicans.¹⁶ In De Leon's hands, Rouge becomes a fluid space where cultures merge to create a new hybrid place that allows him to confront difficult topics and feelings in poetry.

The first "Rouge" poem captures the raw, visceral experience of life in Scarborough, with its final words, "red/red," leaving the impression of violence (77). The poem is prompted by the 2012 Danzig Avenue gang shooting, which claimed the lives of two Scarborough residents and wounded 24 others. Refusing to sweep issues of gun violence under the rug, De Leon writes about his community with a graphic, visceral directness—rhetorically dramatizing an environment shaped by both gun violence and media spectacle.

Free for all no fights
 happy g-way
 family
 we're good
 pop pop pop
 BABY
 leave bodies
 eyes ain't stopping
 garbage bags
 bullets do not choose a victim
 (De Leon 2018, 76)

De Leon evokes trauma through fragmented syntax and the jarring "pop pop pop" of gunshots, emphasizing the violence and absence that permeate the community. The blank spaces in the poem visually highlight these absences and losses, paying tribute to the dead and marking the piece as a commemoration where grief blends with anger. This moment also challenges the vilification of suburban spaces by reframing the issue as one of citywide gang violence. By explicitly naming "Jane Creba" (77),¹⁷ the 15-year-old victim of a 2005 shooting at the downtown Toronto Eaton Centre, De Leon counters stereotypes about faceless victims and faceless gang members, suggesting that violence is not confined to the suburbs, as negative stereotypes of the suburbs often suggest, but affects the downtown as well.

The final poem, also titled "Rouge," critically tackles media rhetoric about the suburb, opening with sardonic lines:

reporter's arsenal

rhetorical scandal

gory details
(De Leon 2018, 78).

Here, the headline becomes the “noose tight,” a provocative and incendiary image recalling Reconstruction-era lynchings. Meanwhile “cracked/white minds/etobicoked” (78–79) offer a sharp, racialized critique of social dynamics. “Cracked” evokes brokenness or fragility, reflecting mental and social fragmentation, alluding to the concept of white fragility—an anxiety and backlash among white residents in response to racialized minorities gaining power. The phrase gains further resonance in the context of the 2018 election of Conservative Party leader Doug Ford as Premier of Ontario, and whose home riding is Etobicoke. “Cracked” suggests ideological divisions, offering commentary on the political landscape of suburban Ontario, where Ford’s populist appeal resonated strongly. The lines “blairing on tv/fording/every stream/of/unconscious/get jobs” feature the deliberate misspelling of blaring as “blairing” (79), likely alluding to Bill Blair, Chief of Toronto Police Services (2005–2015) and Scarborough resident. As “Rouge” becomes a poetic space to reconsider Scarborough from the perspective of a racialized insider-speaker, the poem mobilizes anger as a tool of social critique.

In these final “Rouge” poems, De Leon returns readers to the poetic explorations of Toronto suburbs, using *Rouge* as both a symbol of bloodshed and a voice for the suburb. With its dramatic, disjointed form and vast gaps on the page, the poem does not resolve social issues but draws attention to them, leaving spaces to be filled. These poetic interventions ultimately present the suburb not as a site of unity or hybridity, but as an expression of fragmentation and unease. Interestingly, this pairing of the two *Rouge* poems is preceded by a heart-shaped poem titled “Scarborough__Centre,” with the heart’s center empty, and the first line reading: “The hub of life is dead today” (73). These penultimate poems undercut any idealizing focus on the communal experience of the subway, articulating divisions through sardonic irony that can be held together only through poetry.

In the end, this article carries broader implications for the Canadian suburb and the poetry exploring it. While immigrant spaces have long been a topic of canonical Canadian literature, De Leon’s highly emotional, personal interjections project his interiorized self as a racialized, suburban speaker-cum-subway-traveler. As he aligns this suburban self with the broader community and spatial reality, he takes readers inside Scarborough, his method blending the interiorized, lyrical self with spatial metaphors—including the commutes and the commuters that are constitutive of the suburb. As his collection aligns with the poetry of the 1960s and 1970s, a tradition of poetry that seeks social transformation, his poetry reveals that the separation between lyrical outpouring and concrete poetry, personal and communal, is not as divided as it was for the poets discussed by Stephen Voyle, but for De Leon it works hand in hand. But mostly, in connecting the city and the suburb, De Leon contributes to developing Canadian subway poetry to mobilize social transformation for the twenty-first century. His work engages with Lefebvrian concepts of the production of space (Lefebvre 1991), transforming spatial narratives through poetic experimentation querying established names, identities, and hierarchies. Through the mobility of the subway, De Leon defies city-suburb divides, using the

communal transit system as a tool to expose the marginalization of suburban spaces and their residents. In this, he uses humor, subversion, and dethroning techniques to dismantle elevations of all kinds, as well as unearthing obscured and forgotten cultural stories and meanings. Ultimately, De Leon's poetry offers humor as a leveling device, framing social discourses—colonial, economic, political, and social—as persiflage and inviting readers to explore “the foreign lands beyond the trains” (De Leon 2018, 15).

Notes

1. The Regional Municipality of York includes Aurora, East Gwillimbury, Georgina, King, Markham, Newmarket, Richmond Hill, Vaughan, and Whitchurch-Stouffville.
2. The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) includes the City of Toronto, and the regional municipalities of Durham, Halton, Peel, and York. In total, the region contains 25 urban, suburban, and rural municipalities.
3. See also Michael Ondaatje's *In The Skin of a Lion* ([1987] 1996), which rewrites the immigrant experience of building the Bloor Street viaduct; and Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For* (2005), which moves between downtown Toronto and Richmond Hill, north of Toronto, focusing on Vietnamese newcomers during the late 1970s.
4. In the introduction to *Downtown Canada: Writing Canadian Cities* (2005), Justin D. Edwards and Douglas Ivison argue that many scholars cling to the idea of Canada as a land of small towns and wilderness, despite its essentially urban character. See also Artibise (1988, 237–264).
5. Vogt-William's (2018) study notes that Canadian literary scholarship often supports idealized views of Canadian rural spaces (69). This is exemplified in L. M. Montgomery's novel, *Anne of Green Gables* (Montgomery [1908] 2014).
6. Schmaltz critiques Canadian cultural nationalism, which media theorist Marshall McLuhan argued often reduced Canadian culture to symbols like the Beaver. Instead, Schmaltz advocates for global and multimodal perspectives (Schmaltz 2023, 51–52).
7. See Bentien (2021, 345–367); Lapprand (2001, 17–26); Gui (2021, 227–245). The tradition of “transit” or “subway poetry” (Collins 2017) aims to bring poetry to commuters via public transportation systems, particularly subways; Toronto's version is *Poems in Passage*.
8. The revision to Canada's Immigration Act in 1971 opened the country's doors to non-European immigrants, changing the demographic makeup of newcomers settling in affordable locations such as the Jane and Finch corridor and Scarborough (Tasan-Kok and Ozogul 2017, 23).
9. Etobicoke is a border “town” connecting Toronto, Brampton, Mississauga, and Vaughan, with a small portion of Toronto Pearson International Airport extending into Etobicoke.
10. The poem's title recalls Kipling's popular 1911 poem “The Reeds at Runnymede,” focusing on the signing of the Magna Carter in the thirteenth century: “At Runnymede, at Runnymede, your rights were made at Runnymede. . . . Forget not after all these years, the charter was signed at Runnymede” (Kipling 1911).
11. Due to the colonial underpinnings of subway names, Toronto City Council and the Recognition Review Community Advisory Committee (CAC) agreed on 14 December 2023 to rename Yonge-Dundas Square “Sankofa Square,” drawing from the Guianese concept of “reflecting on and reclaiming teachings from the past to move forward together” (City of Toronto 2023). They also agreed to rename Dundas and Dundas West subway stations, along with the Jane/Dundas library. As of November 2024, the new names for the subway stations and library were still under negotiation.
12. Dufferin Street itself honors the Earl of Dufferin, the British-born Governor General of Canada who served in that office from 1872 to 1878. See “Lord Dufferin” *Canadian Encyclopedia*.

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/frederick-temple-blackwood-1st-marquess-of-dufferin-and-ava>. Accessed 4 January 2025.

13. Located at Queen Street and University Avenue, Osgoode Hall was named after William Osgoode, the first Chief Justice of Upper Canada; it is Canada's leading law school with an admissions acceptance rate of about 8% each year.
14. The Osgoode name, like the Osgoode subway station, is not explored separately—a strategy repeated at several other stations on the Yonge-University line, including King, where the poet briefly launches an angry attack, and St. Andrew, where the poet stops but consults Google.
15. This parallels the reclamation of the suburb in David Chariandy's *Brother* (2017), where derogatory names for the suburb are explained (13); see also Cowdy's chapter, "Scarborough, Scarberia, Scarlem, Scarbistan, Scar-bro" (2022, 129).
16. Data sourced from the City of Toronto's City Planning Strategic Initiatives, Policy & Analysis. Toronto, Ontario (City of Toronto 2019, 2021).
17. Jane Creba was shopping with family when she was caught in the crossfire of a gunfight and killed by Jorrell Simpson-Rowe. See Loriggio (2020).

Acknowledgments

At the MLC Research Centre, we thank Dr. Jason Wang for his invaluable feedback throughout the development of this article. We are also grateful to the two peer reviewers for their deeply informed insights, which greatly enhanced this article, and to the editors of *American Review of Canadian Studies* for their helpful guidance.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The authors report no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

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