**’Urbs, ’urb girls and Martine Delvaux’s *Rose amer***

Novelist, essayist and public intellectual, Martine Delvaux is known for her literary and theoretical engagement with feminism. Not surprisingly, critics tend to focus on the identity politics within her work (Montpetit 2009, Tardif 2017). However, the author is an evocative place-writer. As Chantal Guy points out in a review of *Les Cascadeurs de l’amour n’ont pas droit au doublage* (Delvaux 2012a), “les lieux, dans les romans de Martine Delvaux […], sont importants” (Guy 2012). In this article, I shall examine how gender and literary geographies come together to particular effect in Delvaux’s *Rose amer* (Delvaux 2009a), translated into English by David Homel as *Bitter Rose* (2015a). The novel traces the social mores of white- and blue-collar Québec and franco-Ontario during the 1970s and 1980s. Its taking up of themes like single-motherhood, domestic labour and sexual violence is combined with a depiction of everyday middle- and lower-middle-class life in accommodation such as the bungalow and row house. *Rose amer* can be positioned in relation to broader trends in French-language fiction from Québec, in that, with the exception of the opening section, it is set outside Montréal. The city has tended to dominate Québec prose-writing in both of the province’s majority languages since the 1940s, especially since the nationalist assertion of the 1960s known as the Quiet Revolution. However, the last twenty years have seen a growing body of new regional writing in French. In what follows, I propose that the settings of significant parts of *Rose amer* can be read as inscriptions of what I term “’urb-anisation.” As outlined in the introduction to this dossier, ’urbanisation is fostered by global communications technologies and the expansion of housing forms in locations which are not quite rural and not quite urban, but various combinations of both. In claiming that Delvaux’s novel mediates this phenomenon, I demonstrate how places within *Rose amer* have their parallels in fictional characters. Drawing on Delvaux’s concept of “les filles en série” (Delvaux 2013), I argue that the girls in the novel function as individuals and a collective: given identities of their own, they can nevertheless seem to merge into one. Similarly, the village and suburb are distinctive and every-places, offering a model of ’urban life which carries an affective charge like those found in other examples of Québec culture of the period, such as Arcade Fire’s smash nostalgia-fest, *The Suburbs* (2010). There is a tension in *Rose amer*, however, between affection and an unease at the gendered violence tacitly underlying everyday routines, which ensures that girls are out of place within the domestic landscapes they inhabit. As a consequence, these landscapes become not only emblems of particular moments in North American housing developments, but also monuments to girls’ and women’s unseen pain.

***Rose amer* and literary geographies**

A kind of novel of development, *Rose amer* takes us through the narrator’s childhood and adolescence in Montréal, the imaginary franco-Ontarian village of Anjou, and Chichester, an Ottawa suburb, before ending with travels to international cities in adulthood. The various settings are put in parallel with the narrator’s life course, as suggested by the observation that “l’antichambre de la ville serait l’antichambre de la vie adulte” (110). The girl-then-woman’s individual story is tied to collective social issues, including gender relations, day-to-day language politics, increasing secularisation amongst francophone Catholics, consumerism and popular culture. The *récit* has four sections, with the first set in an unnamed Montréal. The second is entitled “Le village,” the third “La banlieue,” and the fourth “La ville,” which ends by being Montréal, but also takes in New York and Southampton in the UK. “Le village” and “La banlieue” make up the bulk of the text. *Rose amer*’s focus on place makes it apt for a literary geography analysis. As other scholars have pointed out, imaginary and material geographies inform each other, prompting emotional engagements or disengagements with places (e.g. Burgin 1996). Although there have been individual scholars from geography and literary studies who consider elements of both disciplines in their work, such as historical geographer Richard Dennis, literary geography as a recognised subdiscipline is only between ten and twenty years old. The founding of the journal of the same name (albeit in the plural) in 2015 by Neal Alexander, David Cooper, Sheila Hones, James Kneale and Juha Ridanpää marked an important moment of institutional recognition. Whilst many critics tend to identify more with one of the two disciplinary elements than the other, for me, literary geography considers how spatial theories illuminate our readings of imagined worlds as well as how texts inform our understanding of material places. It offers new approaches to carrying out both literary studies and geography. This is suggested by Hones in an article setting out the differences between literary geography and spatial literary studies: “the ‘literary’ of literary geography refers both to literary texts and to literary studies, while the ‘geography’ of literary geography refers not only to real and imagined geographies but also to human geography as an academic discipline” (Hones 2018, 146). Literary geography, then, can help us understand our places in, and relationships to, the world. A concrete example of this phenomenon is offered by Robert T. Tally, who recalls his disappointment when London failed to yield the smogscapes of Dickensian fiction the first time he visited the city: “I felt that it was somehow wrong that London wasn’t rainy and foggy” (Tally 2011, x).

Of course, a literary geography analysis is not restricted to evaluating the “accuracy” of fictional representations of real-life places. Imaginary geographies found in literature and other cultural forms do not necessarily have to be rendered in realist mode. For its part, *Rose amer* combines a stylised realism with elements of the fairy-tale. On the one hand, it offers accounts of regular routines like hanging out with friends in lyrical prose:

On reste longtemps, pour retarder le plus possible le moment de rentrer à la maison […]. L’horizon est une chose qu’on devine derrière les maisons en rangées, la colline qui descend vers la banlieue cossue aux grandes maisons jaunes, blanches, bleues, on dirait du papier mâché. (Delvaux 2009a, 108)

On the other hand, the novel takes us out of this semi-real everyday and everyplace to a quasi-fantastical elsewhere. This is especially true of the opening and closing sections. Towards the start, the early years shared by mother and daughter are described as “comme dans les contes” (10). Near the end, the unreal quality the narrator attaches to post-911 Manhattan adds to the impression of dreaminess, of being transported out of the material world. This unreal quality is, in part, attributed to the highly mediatised nature of New York City: “j’étais partie quelques jours en me répétant qu’il n’y aurait pas de drames, rien de mauvais produit par le réseau Fox ou Universal Studios, pas de prémonitions, pas de complots” (132).

**Literary suburbs in Québec’s French-language fiction**

The first and final sections of *Rose amer* lack the rich detail of the embodied geographies of “Le village” and “La banlieue,” where we have, for example, evocative descriptions of eating Yum-Yum salt and vinegar chips (36) and getting sunburn at the campsite the villagers frequent during the summer (37). This lack of detail perhaps accounts for the *récit*’s identification as a piece of suburban fiction by some – Daniel Laforest includes it in a list of several published in a 12-year period around the beginning of the millennium (Laforest 2016, 108-9). In any case, *Rose amer* can be positioned in relation to wider trends in Québec’s French-language prose-writing characterised by a turn away from metropolitan spaces towards “heartlands” and “hinterlands” (Morgan and Laforest 2011, 115-117). “Heartlands” and “hinterlands” can broadly be defined as regions and suburbs, although the terms point more to cultural connotations than to precise spatial categories. For over 50 years, non-urban spaces were largely sidelined in French-language literature and literary studies in Québec. These chose instead to focus on the city (specifically Montréal), identified with modernity and self-assertion. After dominating French-language Québec fiction since the “urban turn” of the 1940s, Montréal has been displaced as a choice of setting in many twenty-first century works. Consequently, in a special edition of *Liberté* on Québec’s regions, Samuel Archibald refers to “une *démontréalisation* marquée de la littérature québécoise” (Archibald 2012, Archibald’s italics). Examples of this new regional writing include Archibald’s own short story collection, *Arvida* (2011) set in the Saguenay village of the same name, Mélanie Vincelette’s novel on the Great North, *Polynie* (2011), and Michèle Plomer’s *Dragonville* trilogy (2011-13), the Québec elements of which feature Magog and Lake Memphremagog.

The engagement with literary “hinterlands” is less sustained than the embracing of literary “heartlands”. Writing in 2013, Laforest argues that suburbs are rarely recognised in Québécois literature, representing a disconnect with most people’s dwelling patterns (Laforest 2013). For him, “les banlieues demeurent les espaces urbains les plus dépourvus d’un imaginaire propre au Québec” (Laforest 2013). However, as the critic acknowledges, several novels featuring suburbs have been published in the last twenty years. These include Michael Delisle’s *Dée* (2002), Pierre Yergeau’s *Banlieue* (2002) and Catherine Mavrikakis’s *Le ciel de Bay City* (2008). There are also some earlier French-language suburban prose-works, with key examples being Jacques Ferron’s *La Confiture des coings* (1972) and Pierre Vallières’s *Nègres blancs d’Amérique* (1968). If the suburb – specifically Ville Jacques-Cartier, on the south shore of the Saint-Lawrence – is a politicised space in Ferron’s novella and Vallières’s consciousness-raising essay-memoir, later French-language novels establish it as removed from nationalist endeavour. In this way, Louis Hamelin’s *La Rage* (1989), has its male protagonist bemoan the absence of culture in Laval, a suburb north of Montréal, situating political struggle instead in the former farmland expropriated for the construction of Mirabel airport.

For Laforest, even when contemporary Québécois fiction takes up the suburb, it rarely invests the latter with sufficient meaning for it to enter the national imaginary. In *L’âge de plastique: Lire la ville contemporaine au Québec*, the critic goes so far as to suggest that “la littérature québécoise hait les banlieues” (Laforest 2016, 107). Laforest claims that most French-language Québec fiction featuring suburbs – here, he is referring to literary fiction – does so by mobilising stock images rather than the everyday realities of suburban living. A similar point is made by the editors of *Suburbia: l’Amérique des banlieues* (2015). Bertrand Gervais, Alice van der Klei and Marie Parent note that despite the variety of suburbs which exist in the material world, fiction tends only to offer up “la Banlieue qui renvoie à un mode de vie, une culture, orientés par des valeurs telles que la famille, la sécurité, la propreté, la vie privée, le conformisme, l’individualisme, le matérialisme, la mobilité sociale et physique” (Gervais, van der Klei et Parent 2015, 11). An initial reading of *Rose amer* seems to align the novel with the tendencies identified by Laforest, Gervais, van der Klei and Parent. The 32-page section entitled “La banlieue” offers recognisable shorthands for middle-class North American suburban life, such as standardised housing designed around the car (106). Suburbia is cast as a self-surveillancing community (106), with this surveillancing aided by the large windows and thin walls of the houses. Described at one point by the narrator as “l’absence de lieu, le bannissement’ (119), “la banlieue” seems to be a kind of ‘non-lie[u]’ (Augé 1992). Marc Augé defines “non-lieux” as highly regulated transitional spaces divorced from their local settings which exist to serve the circulation of goods and people within global capitalism (Augé 1992, 100-102). In *Rose amer*, the suburb services the nearby city or “centre d’achats” (119), as indicated by the commuters who park in identical home garages overnight and take care to observe the driving restrictions displayed on road-side signs (106). However, the novel does not mediate the concerns around falling prey to an increasingly global, English-language “Americanisation” identified by Laforest in other works of Québécois fiction (Laforest 2016). Indeed, Delvaux’s text mobilises a fondness for the suburban landscape and the lifestyle it fosters. This can be seen in descriptions of the community’s conviviality, built around post-work aperitifs and the collective marking of holidays and festivals (107). The novel also celebrates popular culture and other aspects of everyday life, such as child and teen stars Nathalie Simard and Céline Dion, swimming lessons and adolescent make-up.

Although she does not describe her work as such (Morgan 2015), Delvaux can be seen as practicing a form of life-writing or *autofiction* – a literary practice which, according to Michel Biron et al, has become common in Québec fiction in French since the 1990s (Biron, Dumont and Nardout-Lafarge 2007, 624). Like her protagonist, the author grew up in a franco-Ontarian village followed by a suburb outside Ottawa. She recalls the geographies of her childhood in “Histoires vraies 3: Boundary Road”: “mon enfance tient entre les murs d’un bungalow en briques jaunes, bardeaux d’asphalte et planches à clin planté sur Boundary Road à Limoges Ontario” (Delvaux 2012b). The brief description refers us to a model of the post-war North American suburb which has come to be associated with housing forms like the bungalow, even if these forms were originally designed for non-Western contexts (King 2004, qtd in Ekers, Hamel and Keil 2015). In contrast to some of her literary peers, Delvaux finds something positive in the shared experiences and mind-sets shaped by standardisation:

I don’t look down on or reject the suburbs […]. I think my generation in particular is made of suburban life, manufactured homes and objects, the repetition of things. We all seem to share memories, a similar experience of time and space, as if all these families living in twin-homes were the same. I am fascinated by that, and endeared by it. I like these similarities. I am not disappointed by them. (Delvaux, qtd in Morgan 2015)

The narrator’s neighbourhood is described as a childhood world resembling the miniaturised landscapes found in theme parks (105), Lego and Playmobil playsets (112) and *Alice in Wonderland*: “c’était un monde où on avait l’impression d’être protégé” (105). Such descriptions add to *Rose amer*’s fairy-tale qualities.

If, in some respects, the times and spaces of Delvaux’s novel lie in an other-world linked to childhood, in others, they remain located. Andrée Fortin and Carole Després highlight the necessity of taking account of spatial specificities when thinking about “périurbain” (exurban in English) spaces forming around cities: “tout comme c’est le cas des quartiers centraux ou des banlieues, il faut parler des territoires périurbains et non *du* périurbain” (Fortin and Després 2011, 18). *Rose amer* presents its suburb as a place where “jamais rien ne se passait, un endroit idéal où habiter, sans souci, *no worry*” (106). The inclusion of English words and phrases is, of course, common in Québec French, as is the inclusion of French words and phrases in Québec English. However, what Catherine Leclerc describes as “la cohabitation du français et de l’anglais” (Leclerc 2010) is particularly significant in Delvaux’s text. This is because it is language which primarily marks the distinctiveness of its suburban setting. The suburb in *Rose amer* may have a “nom british” (104), yet the language of communication is French and the characters are francophone, even if one set of parents is known by “Mom” and “Daddy”. In a review of *L’Âge de plastique* and *Suburbia*, Fortin ponders whether the apparent difficulties in representing suburbs in Québec’s literary fiction identified by Laforest, Gervais, van der Klei and Parent are partly due to the untranslated and untranslatable terms used to refer to particular dwelling-patterns, such as “*split-levels*” and “*driveways*” (Fortin 2017, 682).[[1]](#footnote-1) Fortin’s reflection suggests that English pulls on the imagined 1960s suburb in Québec, threatening a linguistic uniformity which echoes the reproducibility of the housing stock. Whilst *Rose amer* flags that the French spoken in the settings it depicts does not always conform to received grammatical norms (22), it does not mobilise an anxiety around language loss. Indeed, the novel offers an interesting combination of the standardised or “universal,” and the “particular” described by Pierre Hamel and Roger Keil (Hamel and Keil 2015, 5). Hamel and Keil suggest that due to the ubiquity of suburbanisation across the globe, it is possible to think of “*suburbanism(s)*” – ways of living in suburbs (Hamel and Keil 2015, 5). Whilst these ways share elements in common, they will also have local variations (Hamel and Keil 2015, 5). In *Rose amer*, we find descriptions of routines associated with post-war U.S. suburban life such as commuting to work or school by car or public transport, car-washing on weekends (106) and home-baking (118). That these routines all take place in French in proximity to “la capitale fédérale” (104) ensures the text’s setting retains a certain specificity and resists being a cypher for an all-American ’burb.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**From suburb to ’urb**

As noted earlier, Delvaux’s novel mobilises many positive sentiments towards the suburb, even if it also represents it as boring (119). However, all is not as it seems. For whilst *Rose amer* offers a description of the comfortable lives of its reasonably affluent children, there is a real undercurrent of unease. This is rendered in the description of a séance in which one of the girls had participated. During this, she encountered the spirit of another young girl – perhaps the baby her mother had miscarried before having her (120-1). Discomfort is also foreshadowed in the flash-forward to the disappearance of one of the narrator’s childhood friends as an adult:

[M]a mère m’a appris que les affaires de Christine avaient été retrouvées éparpillées à l’intersection tout près de la maison […]. Christine avait disparu. Ça ne s’était pas passé à New York, ça avait eu lieu ici, dans ce quartier où rien ne se passait jamais, où il fallait tout inventer pour ne pas mourir d’ennui en oubliant de respirer. (114)

Such events give the lie to the narrator’s impression that “[la banlieue] était un monde où on avait l’impression d’être protégé” (105). *Rose amer* makes a link between the suburb and the village (22), with the latter characterised by a generalised uncanny. Described by Freud as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 1955, 220), the uncanny is linked with the primal scene – the (potentially traumatising) witnessing of a sex act by a child. In Delvaux’s novel, the uncanniness of the village is encapsulated in the moment when the narrator, here a little girl, goes to feed the family rabbits as usual one morning to find all the cages empty with the exception of one. This contains a mass of flesh of semi-developed babies: “un tas de chair rouge, informe, sanguinolante, une sorte de pâte à modeler gluante où se détaillaient les fentes délicates de petits visages fermés et d’oreilles avortées” (39). Unbeknown to her, the narrator’s parents had had some of the rabbits harvested, and one must have given birth prematurely out of fear (40). For its part, the suburb contains the threat of sexual abuse. This is implied when Manon-juste-Manon returns from a visit to her uncle, a dairy and pig farmer: “quand sa mère mettait la pinte sur la table devant elle, Manon-juste-Manon ne disait rien mais son visage devenait plus blanc que le lait” (50).

Further connections between the suburb and village are suggested by the description of the latter as “un village nouveau” (22) – the result of planning and design rather than organic human settlement next to a water source or other strategic geographical feature – , architectural forms such as the ‘bungalow’ (24) and 1970s housing and home décor materials like “*plywood*” (22), “polyester” (22) and “[le] tapis *shaggy*” (22). At a formal level, the village bleeds into the opening pages of “La banlieue” in the lists of activities and objects associated with the former home recalled by the narrator in her new setting (100-103). Similar sensory geographies are found in both sections, particularly in relation to taste. *Rose amer* remembers and celebrates many vernacular food items, including “la Hubba Bubba” (36), “du macaroni Kraft” (46) and “[des] hot-dogs *steamés all-dressed*” (71). A key point about Delvaux’s novel, then, is that although the middle sections differentiate between the village and the suburb, the narrative suggests that such distinctions are not clear-cut:

Anjou, Ontario. C’était le nom du village, un petit village perdu entre le maïs et la forêt, où on baragouinait des restes de français dans un décor de banlieue. Quelque chose comme une banlieue trop éloignée de la grande ville pour être une vraie banlieue, et trop laide pour être considérée comme un vrai village. (22)

The erosion of distinct spatial categories can be inserted into a theoretical and critical-creative trajectory which includes research on rural geographies by Michael Woods (2004) and Paul Cloke, Terry Marsden and Patrick Mooney (2006), and Paul Farley’s and Michael Symmons Roberts’s work on “edgelands” (2011). In “Do the suburbs exist? Discovering complexity and specificity in suburban built form,” Laura Vaughan, Sam Griffiths, Mordechai (Muki) Haklay and Catherine (Kate) Emma Jones claim that whilst there is a general consensus as to the existence of the suburb, precise definitions are lacking (Vaughan et al. 2009, 475). They go on to propose, “the key significance of a theoretical discussion of suburban space lies in its potential to undermine dominant historical-geographical narratives of city and periphery” (476). A similar point is made by Pierre Lefebvre et Marie Parent in their introduction to a special issue of *Liberté* devoted to the suburbs (Lefebvre and Parent 2013, 11).

As cities expand to become city-regions or “megalopolis spaces” (Ekers, Hamel and Keil 2015, 25), suburbs seem increasingly to be replaced by ’urbs. Evading definitive categorisation, ’urbs might lie on edges of cities or in rural or semi-rural spaces. They may have to rely on nearby urban conglomerations for services or have their own. Writing in 1994, Nigel Thrift claims that globalised technological networks complicate spatial distinctions (Thrift 1994). However, as Doreen Massey highlights, even in a globalised world, people live out their daily lives in the local (Massey 1994). *Rose amer* mediates the coming together of the global and local, urban and ’urban, (post-)modern and longstanding. The narrator enjoys national and international French-language popular culture and international English-language popular culture – there are no indications in the text as to whether or not the latter is in translation. There are references to Diane Dufresne (9), *Allô Police* (24) and Joe Dassin (77) as well as Elvis Presley (28), Charlie’s Angels (55) and *Stairway to Heaven* (73, Delvaux’s italics). The enjoyment of popular culture is a part of the narrator’s everyday life which also includes small-scale animal husbandry (38), community fundraisers by religious or agricultural organisations (33) and attending (Catholic) church (30) and school (110).

**’Urb girls**

In a way which echoes the spatial representations of the novel, *Rose amer* offers a play between the individual and the collective when it comes to characters’ identities. The novelcontains traces of the author’s reading and writing history. The period in which Delvaux was working on *Rose amer* also saw her research the counter-cultural writer, Josée Yvon, whose prose-poetry is structured around vignettes of female characters. Employing an aesthetic which might be described as spectacular everyday underground, Yvon’s novels *Danseuses-mamelouk* (1982), *Maîtresses-Cherokees* (1986) and *Les laides otages* (1990) feature larger-than-life socially marginalised female characters, including strippers, sex-workers and drug addicts. These frequently carry out challenges through crime and guerrilla action to what is represented as the drudging and invisibilised violence of capitalist heterosexist daily life (Morgan 2012, 68-9). Notwithstanding their refusal to lead mainstream lives, Yvon’s exaggerated characters are representative of a broader female collective than the underground. Yvon could be scathing in her depictions of a suburban lifestyle which she associated with mainstream consumer society (e.g. Yvon 1986, 50). *Rose amer* offers a kinder perspective on the ‘urb and its characters, giving us mini-portraits of village girls like Manon-juste-Manon, who “ne ressemblait à personne” (Delvaux 2009a, 47). The suburb features Christine Blondin, whose brother goes on to become a successful actor (116), and Nathalie, “une vraie rockeuse” (117). As with Yvon’s women, these children and adolescents can seem to blur into one.

This blurring echoes the phenomenon about which Delvaux writes in an article on dolls and femininity published the same year as her novel. “Poupées” offers “[un] voyage au pays de Barbie” (Delvaux 2009b, 96) to highlight how the apparently all-American doll represents the sexualisation of girls’ bodies in patriarchal society, offering a mass dream of a silent, slim yet buxom beauty whose compliance is echoed in the passive plastic of sex dolls proper (Delvaux 2009b, 100). In her critical monograph, *Les Filles en série*, Delvaux explores further how the voiceless collective, “serial girls,” is the projection of “un désir fascisant, pervers et jouissif, du même” (Delvaux 2013, 11). Indeed, Delvaux argues, in our society, the very conceptualisation of the girl is indissociable from the multiple: “*les filles sont des filles parce qu’elles sont en série*” (Delvaux 2013, 17). As Wallis Seaton points out, “girls” is used in English to refer to children and young adult women in complex and contradictory ways (Seaton 2018, 1). Delvaux is more precise when it comes to charting the life course of the “fille,” claiming “*fille* est ce qui se passe entre *petite fille* et *femme*” (Delvaux 2013, 18). Both Seaton and Delvaux argue that the terms “girl” and “fille” can work to infantilise and sexualise young and/or young adult female bodies (Seaton 2018, 10, Delvaux 2013, 18). For Seaton, “girls” can also suggest a postfeminist – and potentially depoliticised and individualised – “power” (Seaton 2018, 10). For Delvaux, it is possible for “filles” to represent a feminist challenge when reappropriated positively by those to whom it is applied (Delvaux 2013, 18). This challenge can be shared by a valorisation of the non-patriarchal “fille”: “il s’agit […] de redonner les filles aux filles pour penser le *nous* des filles, un nous-les-filles qui s’énonce contre le vous-les-filles des *filles en série*” (Delvaux 2013, 28).

Paying close attention to the various girls/*filles* in *Rose amer* enables us to construct a collective. In “Poupées,” Delvaux lists all the names and nicknames of the characters in Yvon’s work who represent the nameless and overlooked women in society, describing these characters as “une communauté de filles, des filles-missiles” (Delvaux 2009b, 104). Where Yvon has Bobby-She-Millet, la chienne de l'hôtel Tropicana, Ginette de la rue Frontenac and others, Delvaux has Manon-juste-Manon, BB, Valence Berri, Chantal Brunet and Nathalie. Crucially, *Rose amer* recalls Doris and Christine, who disappear from the village and suburb respectively. Doris vanishes with no explanation and is soon forgotten (86) and Christine is never found, her belongings scattered “à l’intersection tout près de la maison” (114). The girls’ disappearances serve to cement the connection between village and suburb. They also highlight the unhomeliness of both places – and, by implication, all domestic spaces – for girls and women. The violence perpetrated against Doris and Christine is represented as both banal in terms of the regularity with which it occurs and as deeply shocking. The characters’ (untold, yet imagined) treatment is implicitly linked with other instances of patriarchal aggression, such as the behaviour of Manon’s alcoholic great-grandfather, who accidentally killed his youngest child after immersing her in a bath of scalding water (91-3). There is a sense, too, of the emotional violence of the narrator’s biological father’s self-removal from her life before she was born (11-12). It would be too easy to read this self-removal only as an inscription of the absent father – subject (in some respects) of Delvaux’s *Blanc dehors* (2015), which was shortlisted for the Governor General’s Award for French-language fiction in 2016. Whilst absence frames *Rose amer* from the outset, where we are informed that “la vie se passait entre filles” (9), it is the particularly gendered nature of the various losses or lacks which is the text’s focus. Although the novel’s opening casts itself as a sort of tale of mother-daughter fusion in which men are but distant or imagined figures (13, 10), the absenteeism of the masculine is itself a marker of women’s unequal position in patriarchal society as primary care-givers. As such, it comprises an example of the suppressed or unnoticed violence against girls and women which informs daily life.

**Emotional ruins**

Highlighting the extent to which girls and women are out of place in the domestic landscapes it portrays, *Rose amer* has its ‘urbs open up gendered wounds. In her work on “wounded cities” (Till 2012, 3), Karen E. Till describes these as “densely settled locales that have been harmed and structured by particular histories of physical destruction, displacement, and individual and social trauma resulting from state-perpetrated violence” (Till 2012, 6). The trauma within these settings is not the result of an extraordinary act or event. Indeed, Tell explains that she “understand[s] the moment of the wound as unfolding, as neither singular nor inevitable, nor coming from an outside source” (Till 2012, 7). Whilst the ’urbs in Delvaux’s novel do not physically correspond to Till’s description, we can nevertheless understand them as “wounded,” in that they contain multi-generational violence against girls and women which is endemic and therefore normalised. Indeed, this violence is even served up as entertainment, as can be seen in the gratuitous photographs and accounts of attacks, murders and kidnappings featured in *Allô Police* (24). The tabloid is read with enthusiasm by neighbours in the village, prompting the narrator to imagine the sudden return of one of the disappeared girls featured within it (25). This figure becomes the narrator’s ghostly other, as the young girl dreams of offering her temporary shelter: “on serait des jumelles dans des pyjamas pareils” (25). The exchangeability of the girls points to the possibility of violence befalling either – or both – , whereas the novel’s occasional allusions to mother-daughter fusion (26) underlines the reproducibility of brutality across generations.

*Rose amer* plays around doubling, mirroring and multiplicity in relation to character and setting, so that the “superbe *split-level*” (31) in the village is echoed by the “*split level* luxueux” (111) inhabited by the Blondins in the suburb. The narrator’s family move from a bungalow in Anjou (24) to “le quartier des maisons en rangées” (104) in Chichester. The novel’s ’urbs are unremarkable containers of, and testaments to, the physical and affective wounds of many of their inhabitants: staples of North American and British vernacular domestic landscapes, the bungalow (38) and row house (104) go unremarked due to their reproducibility and familiarity. Delvaux’s ’urbs can be paralleled with the urban and suburban or exurban (or ’urban) ruins described by Tim Edensor (Edensor 2008) in a piece on the geographer’s regular commute to work. For Edensor, buildings and transport infrastructure fallen into disrepair or repurposed represent the “failed plans, visionary projects, and sites of collective endeavour and pleasure” (Edensor 2008, 313) deemed out of place in the sleek, modern city. In focusing on these decomposing or recomposed phenomena, he highlights both the temporal dynamism of cities (and, by extension, other spatial configurations) and the mundanity of haunting (Edensor 2008, 314). Retaining Edensor’s insistence on the ordinary and unspectacular, the ’urbs in *Rose amer* can be seen as emotional ruins; mundane monuments to the everyday gendered aggression which shapes girls’ lives. This aggression informs the generalised anxiety about girls’ fates shared by mothers and daughters, which is sharpened by media coverage of enforced prostitution and sex tourism (109-10).

On the one hand, then, ’urbs in *Rose amer* function as what Guy Beiner describes as “sites of oblivion” (Beiner 2018, 1), fostering a “social forgetting” (vii). On the other hand, however, they potentially challenge banal and invisibilised violence by offering what Jo Frances Maddern and Peter Adey term “spectro-geographies” (Maddern and Adey 2008, 291). In using this term, Maddern and Adey draw on Derrida’s work on spectres, whereby repressed pasts and futures haunt the present with the potential to effect social change (Derrida 1993). *Rose amer* seeks to bring certain hauntings to light, in a similar way to the Internet site consulted by the narrator which “refuse de laisser les Jane Doe tomber dans le trou noir de l’oubli” (116). Delvaux’s novel draws our attention to what is there in plain sight but goes unnoticed, like the phantomly girl the childhood narrator imagines turning up some time after her disappearance: “elle serait debout derrière la porte de notre bungalow en briques rouges et stucco” (25). This girl connects not only with Doris and Christine but with all the disappeared – and undisappeared – girls/*filles* whose lives are impacted by everyday patriarchal violence. Ultimately, *Rose Amer* suggests that its ’urbs become what Pierre Nora describes as “*lieu[x] de mémoire*” (Nora 1996). Nora defines “le lieu de mémoire” as “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (Nora 1996, xvii). *Le lieu de mémoire* par excellence in francophone Québécois culture is Québec City, represented as the repository for a national memory in novels such as Andrée Maillet’s *Les Remparts de Québec* (1964), Anne Hébert’s *Le premier jardin* (1988) and Nicole Brossard’s *Hier* (2001). In contrast to the monumentality of the provincial capital and world heritage site, Delvaux’s novel offers us everyday ’urb-ruins which are closer to the dwelling patterns of most Québécois/Quebecers and Canadians. These ’urb-ruins are non-places, everyplaces and specific places at one and the same time.

**Conclusion**

Part of a broader trend in French-language fiction in Québec which looks beyond Montréal, *Rose amer* is prescient in its representation of a particular set of domestic landscapes. Highlighting the similarities between its two main settings, Delvaux’s novel traces the late-twentieth and twenty-first century phenomenon of ’urbanisation–a proliferation of human settlement outside urban centres. It succeeds in giving a sense of the interplay between the local and global in underlining the specificities of French-language North American ’urban quotidianity whilst mobilising familiar – because highly-mediatised – , models of everyday life associated with certain forms of standardised housing. As observed earlier, doubling and multiplying occurs in relation to place and character, with disappearing girls/*filles* a motif throughout. Revealing the unhomeliness of the ’urban, *Rose amer* implies that all domestic spaces are unsafe for girls and women. This is due to these spaces being situated within a (local, yet global, or quasi-universal) patriarchal culture and society in which gendered violence is pervasive and thereby invisible. The fairy tale often serves as a caution, policing gender roles in ways which have been uncovered and challenged by feminist writers like Angela Carter. Delvaux’s version may seem especially sober in its suggestion that there is nowhere for girls and women to go. However, in drawing out, and paying attention to, its disappeared, *Rose amer* offers an activist politics of memorialisation, with implications for gender relations and social belonging within and beyond Québec and Ontario. Reminding readers of Michel de Certeau’s celebration of remembering as having the potential to challenge power structures, Edensor claims, “dominant strategies of remembering tend to exorcise haunted places” (Edensor 2005, 829). Delvaux’s novel returns its ghosts to their stucco and plywood surroundings, reminding readers of their constant presence. There is gravity as well as affection in descriptions of the vernacular topographies *Rose amer* describes and the emotional resonances these can generate: “on restait hanté par le stand à hot-dogs de la rue principale” (35). These descriptions suggest a turn away from the grandeur or official recognition associated with, or accorded to, dominant “lieux de mémoire” (Nora 1996) towards embracing the banal micro-ruins which are a feature of many people’s regular lives. Locating these micro-ruins in ’urbs stresses their mundane reproducibility. Their ubiquity is the point, serving to warn readers of the gendered violence all around us.

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1. In the same review, Fortin makes the important point that popular fiction often features suburbs (Fortin 2017, 685). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Michael Ekers, Pierre Hamel and Roger Keil give a list of terms used by critics to refer to what they term “suburban forms of urban decentralization” (Ekers, Hamel and Keil 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)