

Encounters, Contests, and Communities: New Histories of Race and Ethnicity in the Canadian City, Part 2

Franca Iacovetta and Jordan Stanger-Ross

Encounters, Contests, and Communities: New Histories of Race and Ethnicity in the Canadian City, Part 2

Volume 39, Number 1, Fall 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/045103ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/045103ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Iacovetta, F. & Stanger-Ross, J. (2010). Encounters, Contests, and Communities: New Histories of Race and Ethnicity in the Canadian City, Part 2. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 39 (1), 3–4. <https://doi.org/10.7202/045103ar>

Encounters, Contests, and Communities: New Histories of Race and Ethnicity in the Canadian City, Part 2

Franca Iacovetta and Jordan Stanger-Ross

The history of Canadian ethnic and racial diversity, we asserted in the introduction to part 1 of this Special Theme Issue, has been deeply and increasingly interwoven with the history of cities. As the articles in part 1 illustrated, attention to questions of race and ethnicity in urban contexts can illuminate the history of urban Aboriginality as well as enhance our understanding of how and at which key transitional moments urban social life was significantly recast by diverse groups of men and women, even as they adapted to the city's built form. Such historical enquiry involves careful attention to the particular ways in which the dynamics produced by white settler colonialism, capitalist hegemony, homeland politics, gendered hierarchies, ethnic group cultural assertion, and the competing political agendas of ethnic and ruling elites played themselves out in a given time and place. We were particularly pleased that collectively the contributions also illustrated the value of viewing Aboriginal and immigrant history as intertwined facets of race relations in urban Canada.

After the Second World War, urban history is ever more interwoven with the story of Canadian diversity. As Canadian immigration gravitated to cities and Aboriginal people became an increasingly visible urban presence, encounters, contests, and community life shaped cities large and small. The contributions in part 2 demonstrate that the history of urban life in Canada can benefit tremendously from a deeper consideration of the relations between urbanism and race and ethnicity. Together, the authors range across the country, examining new arrivals in major cities that, like Toronto, came to define much of what is now meant by Canadian "multiculturalism"; medium-sized but historically "immigrant" cities like Winnipeg, where class conflict and workers' militancy and radicalism was strongly overlaid with ethnicity and, in relation to Aboriginals, race too; and smaller and under-studied towns, like Trail, BC, that attracted earlier waves of immigrants but were affected hardly at all by the renewed large-scale immigration after the Second World War. These authors demonstrate the value of intersectional approaches that pay close attention to class, gender, and other social categories of analysis. While some essays contribute to newer histories, such as the rapidly proliferating work on public spectacles and on anti-Vietnam War Americans in Canada, others contribute new insights into more established literatures, such as women's labour history, or challenge traditional stereotypes of apathetic working-class immigrants forged by earlier social science models. The articles are organized largely chronologically and partly by theme.

We begin with Jodi Giesbrecht's piece on Jewish women workers in the Winnipeg garment industry during the Depression and the Second

World War. Women who take to the streets in combative ways attract plenty of public attention, and moments of heightened class conflict, such as strikes, are especially revealing of both specific and broader social, economic, political, and gender dynamics. Giesbrecht provides innovative treatment of unions as sites of Canadianization from "the bottom up" and assesses the relation between union strategies and women's activism. In one of the few Canadian efforts to apply the insights of U.S. labour historian James Barrett, who years ago argued that unions and left parties (as opposed to middle-class gatekeepers) offered an alternative path towards integration, Giesbrecht shows how Jewish women's participation in radical and conservation unions enabled simultaneous resistance and accommodation to the urban mainstream. Such negotiations could facilitate immigrant women's integration into their new society while also encouraging retention of cultural distinctiveness.

A critical tool for writing the histories of marginal groups, oral interviews are an important source of information for many of the contributors. In their analysis of the life stories of child survivors of the Holocaust who settled in Montreal, Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki illustrate the value of sharing authority with the living historical subject. Working together with survivors who became involved in educational and commemorative projects, the authors focus is on how they rebuilt their social worlds in early post-1945 Montreal, with its particular mix of franco-phone, anglophone, and Jewish and gentile residents. As their stories illustrate, child survivors experienced considerable ostracism, and the process of rebuilding meaningful lives after so much loss and suffering, while deeply personal, often took place within specific social spaces, or worlds, inhabited by other child survivors like themselves. Whether created by sympathetic gatekeepers or reshaped by the child survivors themselves, these spaces, as the narratives show, subsequently helped give shape to and organize memories of rebuilding meaningful lives that defied Hitler's final solution.

Although Americans have long been migrating north of the forty-ninth parallel into Canada, they remain a largely understudied immigrant group. A partial exception, however, is the increasing attention paid in recent years to U.S. expatriate resisters, draft dodgers, and deserters of the Vietnam War. David Churchill's consideration of American expatriates in Toronto highlights the disproportionate influence that these well-educated, white, and middle-class migrants had on the city's progressive urban culture and social movements. Here, too, the spatial dynamics of the city are taken seriously and the newcomers' social

Encounters, Contests, and Communities

worlds—or intentional, affective communities—are considered through the dual lens of politics and social space. According to Churchill, these expats never formed a dedicated social and political community but rather integrated and bolstered existing communities populated by students, artists, activists, and bohemians who became associated with iconic spaces and institutions of the late 1960s and 1970s counterculture, including Yorkville and Rochdale College but also Theatre Pass Muraille. His discussion of African Americans (who felt like they had jumped into a “pitcher of buttermilk”) and women draws attention to how gender, race, and class inequities limited the “condition of possibility” for them.

Shifting our focus from central Canada to British Columbia and from major cities to small ones, Stephen Fielding explores the gendered and contested character of Italian ethnic belonging in Trail, BC, through a case study of the Colombo Lodge queen pageant in the 1970s, thereby contributing to the still tiny literature on the making of ethnicity in small Canadian cities. According to Fielding, the anxieties accompanying the otherwise “positive” changes Italians had undergone by the post-1945 era, such as upward mobility, improved relations with non-Italians, and suburbanization, coupled with the lack of further immigration from Italy, reflected a shared concern about a declining sense of an “Italianness” rooted within a social space with clearly marked boundaries. Such anxieties, he shows, were not only voiced primarily by men but also played out on the bodies of young women, in many cases the second- and third-generation daughters they placed and/or judged in a queen pageant meant to represent the best of Italian womanhood and community. A cultural institution in which women participated as contestants or chaperones, and remembered their experiences in positive ways, the Miss Colombo pageant, like other pageants, was ultimately a patriarchal institution that unfairly expected women to be exemplary ethnic symbols—and yet, paradoxically, it was men who felt the most at stake in these performances of ethnic femininity.

Taking up another understudied dimension of immigrant experience in postwar Canada, Gilberto Fernandes’s article on Toronto Portuguese offers an important challenge to social scientific portraits of Portuguese immigrants as a pathologically apolitical labouring group, unable to think beyond a “politics of toil.” Fernandes recovers Portuguese political agency by highlighting key moments of mobilization. While incorporating insights from two dominant paradigms in immigrant studies—the socio-economic status model and socialization model—the article demonstrates the value of a historical perspective that is sensitive both to the impact of transformative events, such as the Salazar dictatorship and the Carnation Revolution that brought it to an end, and the role of individuals, such as elites of both the left and right, in the political participation and politicization of an immigrant community. As he shows, politically speaking, Toronto’s Portuguese community of 1990s and 2000s differs enormously from that of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when it first attracted scholarly attention.

Our two-part theme issue ends with a piece by John Zucchi, who participated in the flowering of Canadian urban and ethnic history that occurred under the leadership of the late Robert Harney. Zucchi offers a mix of personal reflection, historiographical inquiry, and proposals for further research, paying appropriate homage to Harney’s charismatic and seminal role in facilitating and inspiring a generation of scholarship. As Zucchi writes, Harney’s enthusiasm for ethnic urban neighbourhoods, his understanding of ethnicity as a living, breathing process, and his ability to make the Multicultural History Society of Ontario an exciting intellectual gathering place encouraged graduate students, fieldworkers, and volunteers alike to use Canadian cities as laboratories and to embrace the foreign-language sources so necessary to writing a “bottom up” history of immigrants. Zucchi identifies a recent resurgence in the study of urban ethnicity that is charting new paths and points to important directions that this research might yet take.