Urban History Review
Revue d'histoire urbaine

Strange, Carolyn, *Toronto's Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880–1930*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, pp. Xi, 299. Illustrations, $22.95 paper
Sangster, Joan, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920–1960*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, pp. X, 333, Illustrations
Dubinsky, Karen, *Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880–1929*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. Pp. IX, 228, $14.95 (U.S.) paper

Caroline Andrew

Volume 25, Number 2, March 1997

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016073ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1016073ar

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 review

Andrew, C. (1997). Review of [Strange, Carolyn, *Toronto's Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880–1930*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, pp. Xi, 299. Illustrations, $22.95 paper / Sangster, Joan, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920–1960*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, pp. X, 333, Illustrations / Dubinsky, Karen, *Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880–1929*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. Pp. IX, 228, $14.95 (U.S.) paper]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, *25*(2), 64–65. https://doi.org/10.7202/1016073ar

Strange, Carolyn, *Toronto's Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880–1930.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, pp. Xi, 299. Illustrations, $22.95 paper.

Sangster, Joan, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920–1960.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, pp. X, 333, Illustrations.

Dubinsky, Karen, *Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880–1929.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. Pp. IX, 228, $14.95 (U.S.) paper.

These three books all relate to the intersections of women's history and urban history and, as such, have important things to say about how women's lives are influenced, shaped and constrained by the particular built environment and social relations embodied in that spatial arrangement in which they live and, in turn, how their lives influence, shape and constrain those built environments and social relations. This is not to say that all three authors would situate themselves in this way; Strange clearly does but Sangster is first of all the combination of women's history and the history of work and Dubinsky, women's history and the history of sexuality. But both Sangster and Dubinsky are interested in space and the ways in which space plays itself out with gender, class and race.

The idea of intersecting factors is central to all three books; but it is very much the variety of groups of women — most often by employment status and family position but also by class, by race, by age, by sexual orientation, and by language — that preoccupies the authors. How to understand these differences, and the multiplicity of patterns of women's lives that results, represents a major challenge. Doing justice to the multiplicity while trying to tell a clear story is not easy: what is the main argument? How do class and race affect gender in specific circumstances? What is the relative weight of material conditions and the construction of discourses in fashioning these influences? And, in terms of my preoccupation for the city or the built environment, how do the interrelated influences of gender, class and race write themselves onto space?

Carolyn Strange's *Toronto's Girl Problem* looks at why Toronto, during the late 19th century, thought it had a girl problem. Her argument is that the idea of the wage-earning single woman crystallized Toronto's fears about urbanization and industrialization and that these fears were projected onto these women. It was particularly the idea of their sexual autonomy that fuelled the construction of their lives as a "problem".

The city therefore influenced the lives of these women. Not so much the city as a physical form but the social organization of the city, particularly the professional reformers and the club women who saw the single working women as central to the problem, and therefore the solution, of urban vice. Strange brings together wonderful material on the ways in which the Local Council of Women, journalists, police officers and working women themselves constructed versions of their lives. More concern was placed on what "the girls" did after work than during work. These people, who paid them poor wages and offered them insecure employment, were less interested in knowing about this influence than in fantasizing about the promiscuity of the working woman. As Strange says, this is an area where gender, class and race intersect particularly clearly, and, with the rise of non-British immigration from the 1880s on, the image of foreign men and the "working girls" fuelled the articulation of the "girl problem".

The city did impact on the lives of these wome. Strange discusses the creation of organizations for healthful leisure, the medicalization of the question (the "psychiatric discourse to debates about working girls and their inappropriate pleasures", p. 128) and the invention of delinquency. This is not to suggest that these measures of social control were uniformly successful; the working women of Carolyn Strange are also agents of and actors in history.

Indeed, the women in this way also influenced the city, most clearly in their contribution to Toronto's development as an industrial metropolis, but also in opening up the city to a greater inclusion of diversity. By the 1920s, Strange argues, the city had come to terms with working women. The interrelations of changing material conditions and the changing expressions of these conditions contributed to the disappearance of the "girl problem".

Joan Sangster is also interested in the impact of the community on the lives of the working women within that community. Her book interviews women who worked in four places in Peterborough, both white collar and blue. As Sangster says, "while my research began with a central focus on the workplace, it grew beyond this emphasis on productive relations, paying more attention to the interconnections between women's familial, community and workplace lives" (p. 4). Peterborough was known as the "working man's city" and this image transmitted the ideas of interconnectedness, hierarchy, patriarchy and neighbourliness. As well, the small town environment was seen by Sangster as one of the forces that facilitated the accommodation of women to the work world. There were also forces supporting resistance, and Sangster analyzes in detail union organization and union activity. It was not only Peterborough, but also social constructions at even broader levels — including the place of women in society, and the family wage — that fashioned women's employment in the workplaces studied by Sangster. Both operated to reinforce the primary identification of women with the family and only secondarily with the work world and, therefore, the dichotomous view that underlays these very notions of primary and secondary identifications.

But Sangster also sees these women as actors and their persistence in the work world will, over time, lead from the period of the "working daughter" to the "working mother". It also leads to an influence on the city although this was slow to occur. The first day-care centre was not set up until 1967, and was dependent both on "different economic and social conditions" and on "altered consciousness on the part of working women" (p. 256). Once again, material conditions and the construction of dis course are both essential to our understanding the ways in

which gender, class and race intersect and translate themselves in space.

Dubinsky's central theme is neither work nor leisure, it is sexual violence. *Improper Advances* studies the 400 stories of Ontario women who brought complaints of physically-coerced sex to the police, between the years 1880 and 1929. It is, as with the two other books, about the social construction of gender. Her concern is in fact more with rural Ontario than with cities) but Dubinsky is interested in both the social and spatial settings for sexual violence. And, despite the cultural stereotypes about the "stranger" and the danger of sexual assault, the reality, not surprisingly, is completely different. The number of cases of sexual violence is highest for household members (66), followed by strangers (51), neighbours (46), dates (40), against children (39), gangs (30), and friend of family (23). In broader categories, women were assaulted, in 175 cases, by people they knew as compared to 95 cases where they did not know their aggressor. In other words, the "private" world is more dangerous than the "public". It is the confining of women to the private sector that increases the danger in their lives. This reality underlines the fact that sexual violence is about power and unequal power relations.

Dubinsky goes on to explore the impact of these constructed gender relations on the construction of space, more particulady, on the development of Northern and rural Ontario. She makes an intriguing argument about moral boosterism, about the "convergence of discourses — of national economic and social development, gender relations, sexual morality, and crime. ... The perceived need for economic growth and the desire to cleanse one's community of vice thus arose from the same impulse and often from the same people (p. 161).

What comes across most strikingly from these books is the difficulty women have had, in a variety of different spaces and times, to affirm their autonomy and, conversely, the difficulty society has had in dealing with women's autonomy. In fact, as the books indicate in wonderful detail, society has "dealt" with women's autonomy by medicalizing it, criminalizing it, channelling it into healthful recreation, marginalizing it and by creating a variety of discourses that legitimated lower wages, insecure employment, sexual violence, sexual stereotyping, etc, etc, etc. Sexual autonomy is perhaps the form of autonomy that most frightened society for both Strange and Dubinsky, but economic autonomy is also important in Strange and central in Sangster. The city was often the focus for these struggles around autonomy, both because the material conditions underpinning autonomy (particularly women's paid employment) were established first in the citie, but also because the social actors "articulating" the discourses were often urban.

The books all attempt to deal with women as both actors and acted upon, as creating their own lives and having their lives fashioned, constrained and constructed by forces beyond their control. The authors all deal with race, class and gender and also, and perhaps more directly in these studies, with family and employment status. The struggle for autonomy is not a struggle for isolation, since women's autonomy is also embedded in community, family and work. But what these studies make clear is that the question of women's autonomy raised, and continues to raise, fears, resistance, justifications and a whole variety of terrains of struggle. The telling of these stories, as Strange, Sangster and Dubinsky have demonstrated, is both wonderful and depressing.

Caroline Andrew
Political Science
University of Ottawa

Evenden, Leonard J., ed. *'The Suburb of Happy Homes:' Burnaby Centennial Themes.* Burnaby, British Columbia: Community and Economic Development Centre and Centre for Canadian Studies, Simon Fraser University, 1995. Pp. xviii, 192. Illustrations. Maps. $??.?? paper.

Readers might welcome the appearance of this book since the study of suburbs has been a relatively neglected aspect of the Canadian city, especially those, like Burnaby, that began as working class suburbs. They will be disappointed however, if they think the title reflects the contents. There is little sense of Burnaby as a suburb since none of the articles study the relationship between the municipality and other parts of the greater Vancouver area. The word suburb also implies commuting, but virtually no attention is paid to this theme even though several articles include material on the electric railway system and one focuses entirely on a major roadway. Several articles offer fleeting references to automobiles, but none study them explicitly. And belying the title entirely, the collection contains not a single article on housing. The title, we soon learn, has nothing to do with this collection of articles, but was resurrected from a 1942 publication.

If the book does not treat the sort of themes one might expect from a study of a suburb, then what does it provide? Published to commemorate Burnaby's one-hundred-year existence as an incorporated municipality, it offers a wildly eclectic mixture that includes articles on the introduction of computer mapping in the municipality, the relationship between street widening and land values, the building of a town centre in the 1980s, how contemporary retired men spend their time, the natural environment of the mountain that houses Simon Fraser University, and five articles relating to particular aspects of the history of civic politics and government. This mix reflects a variety of disciplines and contributions from the university, civil service, and private business. Most of the articles are unimaginative, many are unanalytical, and some are oblivious to the important literature on their topics. Many employ an administrative and technical approach that ignores broader economic and social forces. Some are so incredibly short that they can barely introduce their topics, much less explore them. One is so uncritical of its subject that it