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Jordan Stanger-Ross and Franca Iacovetta

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[See table of contents](#)

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

Jordan Stanger-Ross and Franca Iacovetta, co-editors

Shortly after his arrival as an immigrant to Toronto's Little Italy, Vincenzo Pietropaolo became a student of the city's group life and its urban form. A childhood propensity for wandering about the city blossomed into a career photographing it, and Pietropaolo came to see a close relation between people and place. In November 2007, after almost a half century of studying Little Italy, he discussed this relation at some length. Pietropaolo's reflections point to dynamics that have often eluded historians of Canadian cities and their inhabitants. "You can't plan it," he said of a neighbourhood like Little Italy. "It has to be organic, in a way." Pointing out of the window of the Café Diplomatico, an iconic neighbourhood greasy spoon since it opened on College Street in the late 1960s, Pietropaolo remarked on the "gentle curve" of the street and its "lumbering streetcars," which together slow traffic.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the winding street welcomed thousands of Italian immigrants with a tradition of meandering evening strolls: the *passeggiata*, which characterized sociability in the towns of Southern Italy, "is the . . . walk to nowhere, just a walk for walking." In the 1950s, this serendipitous encounter of urban form and urban dweller developed into street politics: "If you talk to immigrants you'll find out . . . everybody will tell you in the fifties there was some kind of a rule that the police enforced that said no loitering." For men and women out for a *passeggiata*, however, "the idea of loitering is a foreign concept . . . Mediterranean culture . . . is based on loitering or hanging out . . . you're there for no specific reason, just to be there." If hanging out for no reason at first appeared "threatening or conspiratorial," leisurely walks eventually metamorphosed the streets: "By the time the sixties moved along . . . this part of the city had been transformed to a place where people went for walks. So that's when the city gets transformed."¹ Urban social life was recast by members of ethnic groups in the midst of accommodating themselves to Toronto's built form. This two-part special issue, "Encounters, Contests, and Communities: New Histories of Race and Ethnicity in the Canadian City," is devoted to exploring the relation suggested in these remarks.

For at least a generation, historians of race and ethnicity have been well attuned to a key aspect of Pietropaolo's reflections; a series of studies have illustrated that group relations are best understood as highly situational rather than expressions of immutable or inherent attributes. Historians of race and ethnicity have adeptly linked group relations in Canada to a range of contingent historical dynamics, including the transformation of the state, structures of economic production, the operation of law, the performance and articulation of gender, and

contestation among political ideologies. The essays in this special issue owe significant debts to this broader scholarship and touch upon similar themes.

At the same time, however, this special issue reflects our view that Canadian historians have yet to fully appreciate the relations between group life and urban environments. Too often cities have been taken for granted as a background to the main action rather than treated as dynamic sites that deserve scrutiny. The articles in the pages that follow—as well as those in the next issue of this journal—seek to situate race and ethnicity more firmly in Canada's urban past. They explore a century and a half within which group relations have been constituted in cities and have constituted urban experience. Cities emerge here not as a mere backdrop for important events, but rather as consequential sites of historical development. Urban ideologies, patterns of city life, and the structures of urban economies are folded into the history of ethnicity and race in Canada. Just as the history of College Street can no longer be told without an understanding of the *passeggiata*, the history of evening strolls has become bound with that of rumbling streetcars and irascible policemen.

The articles to appear in part 2 of the special issue explore the interweaving of urban history with the story of Canadian diversity in the latter half of the twentieth century, when a majority of Canada's Indigenous people and the vast majority of its immigrants came to live in cities. But the six articles in this first instalment suggest more venerable, and less well-recognized, connections between urbanism and the encounters, conflicts, and communities that have characterized race and ethnicity in Canada. Part 1 begins with articles by Penelope Edmonds and Victoria Freeman that exemplify an emergent historiographical trend linking the history of Canadian cities with that of Indigenous people. Far from separate stories, the history of urbanization and colonization are intimately linked, not only, as both authors suggest, because of the ways in which urban settlers sought to displace Aboriginal people, but also because in sites as diverse as Victoria and Toronto, Indigenous people persisted.

In keeping with the aims of this special issue, however, Edmonds and Freeman do more than tell the story of Aboriginal people and colonizers in cities. They demonstrate the centrality of colonialism to the material and discursive practices that produced urban Canada. Edmonds illustrates that political and legal constructions of Aboriginal people as "anomalous in urban settler space . . . take us to the heart of the operations of an urbanizing settler colonialism." Victoria was constituted

as a city through the efforts of municipal founders to define themselves against Aboriginal people. Freeman examines the public memory of a similar process, detailing the semi-centennial commemoration of the incorporation of the city of Toronto. As Freeman writes, "Cities, no less than nations, articulate founding moments in their efforts to define themselves." In the case of Toronto, she demonstrates, this process involved strategic readings and enactments of colonialism.

Like Freeman, Dan Horner and Robert Cupido draw upon the recent scholarly interest in public spectacle, but they do so to demonstrate that city streets could prove vital political tools for marginalized Canadians. Horner details the efforts of striking Irish labourers to improve the conditions and terms of their back-breaking labour in the construction of the Lachine Canal in 1843. Public parades, processions, and riots (all lavishly covered by the Montreal press) allowed labourers to express the violence of the transition to capitalism to a wide audience, bringing the labour politics of canal building to the "doorsteps of Montrealers." Montreal thus became a vital staging ground in the battle between capital and migrant labourers while, at the same time, confrontations over the Lachine Canal shaped subsequent responses to the famine-era flood of Irish immigrants into the city. Examining Winnipeg's celebration of Canada's Diamond Jubilee in 1927, Robert Cupido suggests somewhat similar dynamics at work in public space while also directing attention to the role played by organized ethnic groups in the ethnicization of Canadian politics both narrowly and broadly defined. Marginalized and segregated Winnipeggers, especially the Eastern and Central European residents of the North End, were able to use the civic celebrations for their own purposes, thereby subverting the organizers' goals even while participating in the national festivities. These civic celebrations were thus sites of contestation. In Winnipeg, the North End's ethnic leaders and organizers "negotiated the nature and meaning of the social and political order" and claimed their place in the emergent "liberal, pan-Canadian nationalism." The pluralism on display in Winnipeg's civic pageant was politically limited, failing to recognize "claims of ethnic minorities to full social and economic equality," but it represented a crucial step away from the violent ethnocentrism of an earlier era.

The final two essays demonstrate that an emphasis on race and ethnicity in its local environments requires a global sense of context. Examining Toronto in the second decade of the twentieth century, William Jenkins explores the transnational reverberations of the controversial Irish Home Rule Crisis of 1910–1914. Toronto was an important site of Irish settlement as well as for the production of newspapers that contributed to Canadian understandings and experiences of Irishness. In his article, Jenkins demonstrates that influential Orangemen in a city still known as the Belfast of Canada—particularly George S. Shields, editorial cartoonist for the staunchly Protestant *Toronto Telegram* newspaper—related the Irish home rule issue to Toronto audiences through the use of local figures and in the process re-appropriated symbolic practices (and offensive Paddy images) to undermine the respectable status of Toronto Irish Catholics. Also situating diasporic identities in local urban experience, Jared Toney argues that Afro-Caribbean immigrants in the second and third decades of the twentieth century responded to the particular circumstances of Toronto by participating in "the production and expression of a global community." Understanding the particular place of the black community of Canada within this global network requires, the article suggests, a firm grounding in the "lived experience and individual consciousness" of people situated in specific urban environments.

We believe that the essays in this issue represent an important step in interlacing urban history with the history of race and ethnicity in Canada. Taken together with the articles to appear in part 2 of the theme issue, they represent a varied and energetic response to the call for papers. Momentum appears to be building for a history that will detail and explain the dynamics that Vincenzo Pietropaolo noticed in his first neighbourhood in Canada. The result augurs well for both the history of Canadian cities and our understandings of their diverse inhabitants.

Note

1. Vincenzo Pietropaolo, interview by Jordan Stanger-Ross, 23 November 2007, Toronto, ON.