

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Stuart Henderson, *Making the Scene: Yorkville and Hip Toronto in the 1960s*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011, 384pp. \$70.00 cloth (978-1-4426-4152-5)

Stuart Henderson's *Making the Scene* details the history of Toronto's Yorkville district and surrounds from the early 1960s to decade's close, presenting a rich variety of contemporary and retrospective depictions woven together with more general ruminations upon the nature of the place, performance, and projection onto the screen of wider popular culture that was, at the time, Canada's preeminent "hip" neighbourhood.

Henderson seeks to destabilize pat narratives of "the sixties" in general and the Yorkville scene in particular. The tight geographic focus furnishes a welcome opportunity. In questioning the set types according to which the cast of characters in the rehearsed version are identified, and in considering the range of social groups that cohabited (however fractionally) in the limited, albeit symbolically dynamic, space of a handful of square blocks near downtown Toronto, Henderson is able to present an unusually full illustration. The author's stated interest in displacing the presumptively white, male, heterosexual, middle-class "hippie" star of the pat narrative (and therefore to shake up a sort of synecdoche in interpretation), is manifest in the treatment of the various currents of identity simultaneously vying for a place in the Yorkville scene. In this, the book should be received as welcome addition in the same vein as recent works such as Sean Mills' 2010 *The Empire Within* (both, incidentally, are the published fruits of dissertation work undertaken in the Department of History at Queen's University).

Alongside analysis of the performances of hip identity associated with more familiar protagonists, both the "authentic" full-time hippie and the outer suburb or Rosedale weekender, particular attention is granted to the "greaser" subculture among working-class and immigrant youth — a group whose apparently ubiquitous presence is oddly paired with one-dimensional depictions and outright effacements which Henderson attempts to counteract with forays into the history of local churchmen's youth outreach efforts and other available sources. Although certainly not the first to do so, his efforts seek to address the often secondary nature of female perspectives, and to consider the failings of the "sexual revolution." He further traces the early significance of the scene with

reference to an emergent homosexual community, the “biker” identity, “hip” and not-so-hip political activists including such recognizable figures as June Callwood, David DePoe, and Clayton Ruby, and the proprietors and operators of the district’s various businesses and outreach services, from the owners of shops and galleries to Christian missionaries and health-services workers.

The subject matter offers significant grist for thinking on the nature of urban cultural scenes, and indeed the character of colourful or transgressive spaces as a pole of attraction for an increasing array of subjects in the latter half of the 20th century. Early on, Henderson traces how attempts at the fashioning of a Yorkville “brand” give way to struggles over the maintenance of a distinction between “sophistication” and “bohemia.” Assertions by erstwhile cultural entrepreneurs and chic merchants that “the goal of a visit to Yorkville is exploration and *discovery*,” (p. 58), the experience of a place suffused with sophistication and the possibilities of aesthetic pleasure and culturally astute acquisition, merge uncomfortably with its burgeoning status as a site for unorthodox cultural performances. While the first group seeks to avoid the taint of association with youthful disorders, some trace of affinity marks the apparent opposition of the *chic* and the countercultural — precedent, perhaps, for the valorization of places offering experiential variety and *edge* intrinsic to contemporary iterations of the “creative city” animated by hip consumerism. Subsequently, the emergence and permutations of public concern over impropriety and violence — effectively a moral panic which precedes more widespread justification for such social anxieties as the decade wanes and the scene integrates a significant population of destitute, mentally unstable, addicted, or otherwise troubled denizens — furnish a frame for many of the vignettes which lend life to Henderson’s historical account.

The themes of competing and variegated identity, moral panic and genuine social need, place-making and the attractions of the “imaginative marginality” of (neo-) bohemian performance are woven through the narrative. The relevance of *Making the Scene* to the sociologist is apparent, the descriptive and analytical conurbation presented by the text crisscrossed with familiar avenues. The book offers interest to scholars of the media and popular culture, social and cultural movements, even to those interested on the history of social work, a set of topics that bridges numerous disciplines. It also speaks to students of cities interested in changes wrought in the past half-century and which continue to weigh upon the present (urban reconcentration, neoboheimias, gentrification).

Henderson is largely successful in capturing texture, nuance, and indeed ambiguity by the variety and arrangement of his sources, heavy on

contemporary media accounts but also drawing on a range of contemporary and subsequent studies and reports, on “underground,” popular and autobiographical writing, and on well-selected retrospective interviews. The breadth and depth of empirical material alone reward attention — yet, neither dry nor parochial, the work is remarkably lively, at times evoking a historically and theoretically informed literary journalism. Clearly, the specific themes treated in *Making the Scene* range across a variety of disciplines and subject areas — and no doubt offer up appeal also to a general audience.

Stepping back from the specifics, ambiguity is perhaps a decisive theme. The back-and-forth exposition of the numerous vignettes that elucidate the account at times leads the reader to believe that Henderson has put his lot in with one of two or more competing versions of an event — only to retrench to a point of indecision illustrative of the persistent uncertainty and incompleteness which plague historical (or sociological) reconstruction. Evaluative ambiguities, as well as contention, are central to the exposition of the inchoate nature of the scene and the variety of public and private responses elicited *in situ*. As Yorkville gained prominence in the public imagination, Henderson notes, a panoply of media attempts to grapple with its meaning put to audiences a contradictory, prismatic vision of its cultural significance:

[T]he Village is powerful, beautiful, ideologically sound, and necessary; the Village is disastrous, violent, unsafe, and wretched; the Village is illusory, *passé*, a home for poseurs and wannabes; the Village is vibrant, exciting, sexy, fun, and cool. Such a complex brew of contradictory value assessments were part of the allure of the scene; very often, the nexus of bohemianism develops at the site of ambiguity. (p. 236)

The tacit and explicit theorization of the political significance of the “counterculture” and the Yorkville scene in Henderson’s book at times invites contention. The coverage of several specific protest events, and indeed of questions of much broader significance vis-à-vis social/cultural movements (e.g. “hip separatism” vs. “engagement”), is frequently astute. When Henderson writes, though, that any countercultural refusal of the dominant culture finds its practitioners, “however accidentally,” “serving a necessary and by no means aberrant purpose” as “part of the constant call-and-response between dominant powers and ideologies and subaltern powers and ideologies” (p. 5), one might furrow a brow at the apparent functionalism of a notion supposedly girded by reference to Gramsci. While locating an enduring and relevant legacy in the “making and remaking” of analogous *scenes* which offer the chance of “performing emergent identity in new, exciting, and fundamentally *other*

ways,” Henderson’s conclusion appears to both to limit the potential political significance of Yorkville in the 1960s (and the so-called counter-culture generally) to just such exercises in performative self-experience and “escape” (p. 274) and to find something to valorize therein.

When Henderson rails against the “assumption” that “there was something to win, something that could be gauged” (p. 274) in the immediate struggles surrounding Yorkville, an over-infatuation with the theme of ambiguity could be diagnosed. However inchoate, the counter-culture contained a significant kernel of repugnance for the vicissitudes of quotidian exploitation and inequity under late capitalism. Its local performance may well have been more spectacle than effective counter-hegemonic struggle, and the symbolic status of the neighbourhood, for many, “a means to approach social rebellion merely by *being* someplace” (p. 271). Yet the very failure of political activists to articulate broader disaffection with effective political projects is seemingly a reckonable “loss” from the perspective of those dissatisfied with the dissemination of modified lifestyles and a vague (and all too easily commodified) ethos of rebellion as a legacy.

More concretely, Henderson writes that the specific struggles for *space* in the moment, decidedly lost (albeit “merely superficially”) to the developers in Yorkville, are ultimately insignificant (pp. 273–4). Yet the instant gentrification of the quarter post-1970 marks one instance in a process that spilled out onto Toronto’s Queen Street West and beyond, along with many of Yorkville’s remnants. As critical geographer David Ley suggested, the diffusion of the tendency by which places infused with (neo-)bohemian spirit come to be ushered into gentrified futures is an enduring legacy of the 1960s and 1970s in Canadian cities, one associated with class-based displacements and other harms. What happened to Yorkville’s “greasers” or those broke youth from across the country who flocked there in the later 1960s? And what of the ways in which property markets continue to force mobility (and potentially class-based exclusivity) on institutions and activities in the ferment of contemporary urban cultural scenes? Urban space itself is perhaps one of the most manifest objects of struggle in the city, finite and reckonable.

Yet such points of contention arise inevitably with work of the scope and ambition of *Making the Scene*; along its topical breadth, it is not surprising to trip over such points. Ultimately, such questions of interpretation supply further grist for a productive debate to which this capably documented and artfully told account of hip Yorkville in the 1960s makes an indispensable contribution.

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