

The Great Mother of Prostitutes is Dying:
The City, Its Prostitute Body, and Queer Subjects Now

After saving young drag queen Felicia from what promised to be a particularly harsh gay-bashing, *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*'s mature transgendered Bernadette has caused to rethink her hasty exit from her urban home. "It's funny," she tells Felicia, "We all sit around mindlessly slagging off that vile stinkhole of a city. But in some strange way it takes care of us. I don't know if that ugly wall of suburbia's been put there to stop them getting in or us getting out." Though Bernadette, Felicia, and Mitsi belong to a very specific group of queer subjects in this film, Bernadette's thoughts on the city inspired the writing of this paper because they seem to me to be significant for other queer subjects as well. In this paper I discuss a particularly visible group of queer subjects in Canada: female sex workers who make their living on city streets here.

The pending trial of a British Columbia man for the murder of at least fifteen women, women who are routinely described in media reports as "prostitutes and drug addicts" from Vancouver's "gritty" Downtown East Side, is a cultural text which brings into high relief the recurrent conflation in Western culture of the "character" of city streets with the character of those who walk the streets. Significantly, however, this case also highlights ongoing reevaluations of modern images of the city and sex work. Sex workers, especially those who work on city streets, have routinely been figured in Western culture as synecdochic representations of the "degenerate" city itself. This paper not only examines the implications of this cultural synecdoche in the context of the B.C. case, it also briefly examines the ways in which urban activism centring on the missing women of Vancouver temporarily succeeded in foregrounding these women as Canadian

citizens whose disappearances warranted full investigation. I then discuss ways that this case highlights the modern (or postmodern) city as the site for the production and containment of radical activism. I also argue that queer politics' dependence on the city's "protection" must, with the advent of globalization and the resulting expansion or permeability of national and municipal borders, find new ways to protect and advance the concerns of queer subjects. In other words, I suggest that Bernadette's thoughts on the city may no longer apply; the city as global capitalism would have it will neither protect nor contain queer citizens and/or queer activism.

During the liberal leadership race last year Paul Martin asserted that "the strength of our municipalities is fundamental to our competitive position in the global economy... And they are where the face of Canada is changing most" (qtd in Miller). Toronto Mayor David Miller echoed this belief in his welcome speech at the Mayoral summit in Toronto in January. Miller then catalogued some of the "most important" initiatives that will be taken up by his administration so that Toronto can fulfill its "pivotal" role in the global economy. Increased police presence and regulation of city streets was one of the first key items on his list. Though studies routinely show that crime rates are steadily decreasing, apparently citizens "need" more policing and "protection." With the spotlight that global capitalism is shining on urban centres as the power of nation-states effectively dissolves, cities must be rejuvenated, become "more orderly," to become fit investment centres in an emerging global market.

Perhaps the outlawing of bawdy houses in cities across Canada in the 1970s anticipated this current revisioning of urban centres. These laws resulted, not surprisingly, in more sex workers working on city streets. A much larger group of sex

workers now faced public policies which sought to make them visible so that their newly public working lives could be increasingly restricted. This was perhaps the advent of the dissolution of traditional connotations of the prostitute body with the space of the city in Canada.

The image of the city as the Great Whore of Whores can be traced at least as far back as the Christian book of Revelation which figures humanity's most sinful vices as the image of Babylon, and then describes this city as "BABYLON THE GREAT. THE GREAT MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH" (Rev 17:5). The book goes on, of course, to describe the downfall of this "great whore" who embodies excesses of every kind and to celebrate her violent demise in gendered terms: "Come out of her," God tells his people, "so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues. . . . Give her as much torture and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself. . . . Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her: death, mourning and famine" (REV 18: 4b-6).

The ways in which sex workers have truly had such "plagues and tortures" visited upon them is a matter I will touch on shortly. For now, I concede that referencing the Christian Bible is a simplistic way of introducing what prostitute's rights activist Gail Pheterson calls "the whore stigma" in Western society. I recognize that this stigma has its roots in more than the religious facets of Western history. I quote Revelation, however, because it is a particularly vivid illustration of what *Whores in History* author Nickie Roberts calls patriarchy's initial push to control prostitutes by stamping out what remained of the "sacred prostitution" from pre-Christian, pre-historical goddess-based societies. Roberts writes, "[Whores'] rebellious sexuality and lack of dependence on one

master was an obvious threat to patriarchal authority – as it has been ever since. . . . If the male elites were decisively to overturn whores' power they had to invent a system of sex-repressive morality that would be sufficiently negative to make sacred women into social pariahs" (9). Since the advent of Christianity, Roberts explains, various patriarchal social and economic policies have effectively promoted just such a "whore stigma."

By the nineteenth century, the arguably figurative metaphorical relationship that Christianity established between the whore and the city firmed up significantly. No longer the morally degenerate reprobate of Christian apocalyptic myth, the prostitute body had gained a much more intimate, even literal relationship to the city in Western culture. Indeed, she had moved from mythic metaphor to direct social synecdochic substitution. In other words, her physical body had come to represent, or stand in for, the body and character of the city proper. Thus nineteenth-century moral reformers sought to "cleanse" city streets by "saving" the city's "worst sinners": street sex workers.

Throughout the nineteenth century, and especially in Victoria's London, sex workers on city streets provoked "anxiety" because they were seen to embody, among other things, disease, degeneracy *and* every woman's potential fate (Gilman 263). Women's supposedly innate desire to comply with men's needs for comfort were assumed to create an equally innate tendency toward prostitution should that comfort be proffered even once. With accompanying fears of disease and plague during this period and, as a matter of course, prostitution's particular association with sexually transmitted diseases, street sex workers in London were indeed uncomfortable figures for those who would "save" or "clean" the city. Both innocent victims in need of saving from the seductive sensual excesses of city life and the embodiment of sexual temptation, street

prostitutes were read as the diseased, the dissolute, the dangerous city itself. The image in Figure 1, entitled “L’Hcatombe, La Syphilis,” was produced in 1916 – an age, Sander Gilman reminds us, of “syphiliphobia” (266). Syphilis, embodied as a Medusa figure, stands in a full graveyard holding a skull that clearly represents her genitalia.

The focus during this period was on removing these “fallen” women from the streets and placing them in significantly less visible places: convents, hospitals, work houses, etc. In his 1974 book *Soft City*, Jonathan Raban notices,

some of the Manichean metaphors which writers in the nineteenth century tried to apply to the city—seeing it as a pustular disease, a giant dirt trap, an embodiment of original sin, or a reincarnation of primeval chaos. These are romantic images, and they stem from the passionate English discovery of an idea of Nature which led the most articulate and outspoken members of Victorian society to reject the city at the very time when cities were growing faster and bigger than ever before. (87)

This image of the city as Nature gone terribly wrong is exemplified in a haunting 1912 poem which describes the autopsy of a beautiful drowned girl. The autopsy reveals a nest of baby rats living “in a bower below the diaphragm,” “living off liver and kidneys,/ drinking the cold blood” (qtd in Gilman 266). The woman’s dead body perpetuates its own synecdochic relationship with capital “N” Nature’s nightmare: the disease-ridden city. Similarly, the rats living happily inside her corpse suggest Nature gone terribly “wrong.” For many nineteenth-century critics, only the eradication of this unnatural being – the prostitute and/or the city – could enable the re-establishment of Natural order.

In addition to the Medusa image, Sander Gilman examines the case of Jack the Ripper, the notorious serial killer whose numerous horrifically butchered victims were sex workers from nineteenth-century London’s streets. Until charges were laid against Robert Pickton, a British Columbia pig farmer, for the murder of at least fifteen

Vancouver women, various media reports across Canada and the United States compared the case of Vancouver's unknown serial killer to that of Jack the Ripper. The missing women's oft-discussed "prostitution and drug addiction" enabled such a comparison. Whether or not Pickton is convicted of these murders, to my mind the cross-century comparison is/was inherently flawed. The butchered bodies of Jack the Ripper's victims were found and photographed or sketched. Thus these images of death were carefully monitored by police because the blood and gore effectively demanded their attention. The story of their murders most assuredly became object lessons for other women about the dangers inherent to "illicit" sexual behaviour and the dangers of the illicitly sexual city.

In contrast, the Vancouver women essentially no longer have bodies. And their disappearance went relatively unremarked until urban activists forced police to launch an investigation into their possible abduction and/or murder. Now, forensic investigators excavate the grounds around Picton's Port Coquitlam pig farm. They search for remnants of the missing women's clothing, their personal belongings, their DNA, for any trace at all that may remain of these unfortunate women. Somehow the lack of actual bodies makes this case both less and more visible to police and the Canadian public. Pickton's alleged victims have been disposed of in such a way as to promote forgetfulness, not sensationalism. Only when bodily remains and personal items were found, by accident on Pickton's farm as police investigated him for another crime, did the case gain any ground. With no mutilated bodies to discuss – and with an almost immediate publication ban on all of Pickton's trial proceedings, a nineteenth-century-style moral object lesson is harder to construct. Perhaps this is why CBC News reporter Philip Saunders chose to

post this Flash media picture on the CBC News website (See Figure 2: Vancouver's Missing Women).

This is presumably a “scarier” version of the poster the mayor’s office, in response to activists’ demands, produced. The poster featured pictures of all of the then 32 missing women and offered a \$100 000 reward for any information about their whereabouts. In Saunders’ version of this picture on the web, you can click on any of the four links above these ghostly, inhuman looking faces to see pictures from the excavation site, lists of the women’s names and the dates when they disappeared.

Saunders’ and other local, national, and international media reports both deny and adhere to the traditional synecdochic relationship between prostitutes and the city. I suggest two possible explanations for such tentative adherence to stereotyped associations: the recurrent focus on a particular city neighbourhood from which the women disappeared, and the disappearance of the women’s bodies from the streets of this neighbourhood.

Media reports since 2002 have routinely focussed on the women not as Vancouver residents per se, but as the “drug addicted and prostitutional” residents of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, a neighbourhood which reporters in a variety of media venues consistently describe as “seedy,” “drug-infested,” “seamy” etc. Significantly, even the reward poster produced by the Vancouver mayor and police “controversially identified the missing as Downtown Eastside, not Vancouver, women” (Pitman 176). This implies that it is not the city, or even the city neighbourhood that is “seedy” or “seamy”; it is rather the women themselves and their associates that “dirty” this

neighbourhood. Thus the responses of municipal authorities and the reports published in various media draw on traditional associations between prostitutes and degeneracy in the city, but ultimately deny any synecdochic connection between these women and their city.

The women's disappearance from the Downtown Eastside further complicates the traditional synecdochic relationship between the Whore of Whores (the city) and the women who supposedly embody her sinful, sensual excess. A prostitute's death, for numerous nineteenth-century cultural theorists, reinscribed this synecdochic relationship and suggested a need for a return to capital "N" Nature, from urban sickness and excess to rural health and simplicity. Toronto Mayor David Miller reminds us, "We are an urban nation today - a country where the bulk of the population lives in large urban centres. And we are continuously moving in that direction, not away from it." Recent global trends and demographic surveys suggest that this urbanization process will continue. Does the dissociation of the dead prostitute body from the image and/or fate of the city proper reflect this Naturalization of urban living? If urban living is inevitable, even necessary, in contemporary society, then clearly a reorganization of traditional urban imagery is in order. Thus the dead sex worker body becomes not a prophetic image of the macrocosmic urban fate, but rather microcosmic evidence suggesting the end of a particularly cumbersome social disorderliness.

In discussing the Downtown Eastside as an unofficial red-light district, Beverley A. Pitman suggests that "disposal" of these women and other poverty-stricken persons to specific neighbourhoods "is part of an increasingly widespread, even global, 'cleansing' of 'undesirables' from central redeveloping urban precincts that merely appears

especially pronounced in world cities” (182). That the Vancouver women have now been “disposed” of in an even more literal and gruesomely final way continues to be a focal point for radical activisms in and around Vancouver. Activists identify these women as queer persons who must be afforded the basic human rights that other citizens enjoy. They thus continue to fight in what the Sex Workers Alliance of Vancouver has termed “Whore Wars” (See Figure 3: Whore Wars).

Pitman notes that media interest in Vancouver’s radical social community’s concerns petered out after the airing of Fox TV’s *America’s Most Wanted’s* Jack the Ripper-esque portrayal of the missing women’s case in 1999. Since then, media coverage has centred again on “logical” police investigations and family reactions to Pickton’s court appearances. Remarkable alliances were forged and important actions taken when Vancouver residents came together to reposition the missing women from “disposable and generic” to “worth looking for.” However, this activism became less interesting and thus significantly less powerful to key media outlets after police received positive endorsement from *America’s Most Wanted*. The class, race, and sex workers’ rights issues that activists continue to attempt to foreground in Vancouver today are, for now, “contained” as political power has shifted to favour municipal government and police reports again.

“Our greatest urban thinkers. . . have taught us that city-building is also about neighbourhood-building,” David Miller tells Canada’s mayors. This interest in neighbourhood-building appears as both the force driving urban renewal projects and as radical activism. After all, if we take Pitman’s analysis at face value, a less geographically restricted neighbourhood existed at least for a few months when activists

rallied in Vancouver. However, more conservative “activism” against sex workers’ rights as citizens in Canadian neighbourhoods remains common. Neighbourhood organizations in areas such as Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside continue to push for the physical removal of prostitutes from their neighbourhoods using posters like this one (See Figure 4: Zero Tolerance). Note that the focus on the “visibility” of sex workers to non-sex worker residents is figured as an evil in and of itself here.

Public and conservative “activisms” like these remain especially powerful in a society focused on “neighbourhood building” as they cater to dominant hegemonic agendas regarding the regulation and “renewal” of urban space. However, the Vancouver case indicates that queer politics and radical urban activism, though contained or limited via modern discourses of clean, orderly urban spaces, can get loud and disorderly in ways that are influential with contemporary media and municipal authorities. This same activism is also effectively quashed by what Pitman describes as the white suburban viewer’s desire for status quo reports. The modern trend toward the creation of Edenic cities free of any traces of “degeneracy” (and especially prostitution) suggests the old Mother of Prostitutes is dying – or at least changing her image. The case of Vancouver’s missing women, and the almost absolute eradication of these women’s bodies indicates that while the Old Whore gets treated to an extreme makeover, her former synecdochic relations are being swept away for good. Are websites, posters, and awareness campaigns that get little to no media coverage going to constitute enough resistance to the orderly urban blueprints favoured by global capitalism? Are they who hold the media not the ones who control the cities now? If this is the case, is radical activism anticipating and working to combat this reality too?

Works Cited/Consulted

- Brock, Deborah. *Making Work, Making Trouble: Prostitution as a Social Problem*. Toronto: University of Toronto P, 1998.
- Davis, S. and M. Shaffer. "Prostitution in Canada: The Invisible Menace of Invisibility?" Online. 10 Jan 2003. www.walnet.org/csis/papers/.
- Hubbard, Phil and Teela Sanders. "Making Space for Sex Work: Female Street Prostitution and the Production of Urban Space." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27.1 (2003): 75-89.
- Maggie's, & the Prostitutes' Safe Sex Project*. 10 Jan 2004. www.walnet.org/csis/groups/maggies/
- Miller, David. "New Deal Speech." Mayors' Summit. 22 Jan 2004. www.city.toronto.on.ca/mayor/speech/newdeal_speech_012204.htm
- Pitman, Beverley A. "Re-mediating the Spaces of Reality Television: America's Most Wanted and the Case of Vancouver's Missing Women." *Environment and Planning A* 34 (2002): 167-87.
- Priscilla Queen of the Desert*. Dir. Stephen Elliott. Perf. Terence Stamp, Hugo Weaving, Guy Pearce, and Bill Hunter. Polygram, 1994.
- Raban, Jonathan. *Soft City*. London: The Harvill Press, 1974.
- Saunders, Philip. "The Missing Women of Vancouver." *CBC News Online*. 7 Feb. 2002. 10 Jan 2004. www.cbc.ca/printablestory.jsp
- Seager, Joni. "The Short Curious Half-life of 'Official Concern' About Women's Rights." *Environment and Planning A* 35 (2003): 1-4.
- Sorfleet, Andrew and Raigen D'Angelo. "'Pimps' and 'Predators': A letter to Janet Steffenhagen, City Editor, *Vancouver Sun*, February 19, 1996." *SWAV: Sex Workers Alliance of Vancouver*. 10 Jan 2004. [//walnet.org/csis/groups/swav/index.html](http://walnet.org/csis/groups/swav/index.html)
- SWAV: Sex Workers Alliance of Vancouver*. 10 Jan 2004. [//walnet.org/csis/groups/swav/index.html](http://walnet.org/csis/groups/swav/index.html)