

From transgression to normalcy? The evolving figure of the ‘working girl’ making her own home in Canadian cities in the 1920s

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This paper uses the concept of transgression to interpret the linkages between forces promoting the individualization of the lives of non-married women in Canadian cities of the early twentieth century and the choices they were able to make about their housing and living arrangements. We develop a hierarchical model of ‘residential autonomy’ to examine linkages between different kinds of living arrangements open to single people and their personal autonomy vis-à-vis parental and other authority figures, although some situations, such as live-in domestics, occupy an ambiguous position in this hierarchy. We focus here on the time between the end of World War 1 and the onset of the Great Depression. Multidisciplinary and cross-national scholarship in gender studies broadly concurs that this period, roughly corresponding to the decade of the 1920s, was a critical and turbulent moment of gendered economic, sociocultural and technological change. We focus mainly on single women in white-collar (clerical) work, a sector that experienced massive growth in major cities and was relatively well-paid.

Our paper draws on a larger mixed-methods study. The research project revolves around quantitative analyses of the living arrangements and residential autonomy of single people, using (confidential) microdata samples from the Canadian censuses of 1921 through 1951. The census analysis is challenging, not least because census categories of housing and household composition evolve over this period due to changing living arrangements, changing social norms about living arrangements, and changing domestic technologies. At the same time, qualitative sources that open windows into the everyday contexts in which urban single people were embedded are indispensable for interpretation of the census-based findings. We thus draw on contemporary published materials, primarily the ‘middlebrow’ mainstream media, using sampling and (where possible) keyword search techniques to examine representations of housing, employment, family and lifestyle issues pertaining to single women and men in cities. Although news stories and feature articles provide some insights, it is the readers’ letters published on the advice columns of the women’s pages, and the editorial responses—which can be seen as constructing an ‘expert systems’ guiding readers to make and negotiate socially-acceptable lifestyle choices—that turn out to be the most illuminating.

Taking forward some arguments touched on in feminist urban studies (e.g. Boyer 1998), our work addresses a gap in the literature on the gendered modernities of the 1920s (Sjøland 2000; *The Modern Girl Around the World* Collective, 2008). We explore to what extent this decade saw an undermining of predominant frames of reference that characterized as transgressive the figure of the unmarried woman who moved away from the parental home and opted for a more autonomous living arrangement in a large urban setting. Through the combined effects of the spread of consumerism, construction of modern apartment buildings catering to small households, more stable and better remunerated employment, and the agency of women who chose to postpone marriage or not marry, the moral panics about ‘women adrift’ in the early twentieth century metropolis dissipated somewhat over the course of the decade. In English-speaking Canada, the ascendant notion of ‘youth culture’ embraced the figure of the 20-

something female office worker for whom 'home' was a boarding or lodging arrangement, or even a self-contained apartment shared with peers, albeit as a transitional stage that would help prepare them for their ultimate full-time role in marriage. In French Canada, however—dominated by a very conservative wing of the Catholic Church—what prevails is an older vision that it is only legitimate for young single women to live in the city away from the parental home when their earnings are needed as part of an economic survival strategy for rural and small-town families. Nevertheless, one should not exaggerate these ethnocultural differences. If, in English Canada, the self-determination involved in young women living independently was no longer a transgressive act by the late 1920s, the same cannot be said for the repudiation of intergenerational solidarities, especially with the onset of the Great Depression. Pressure to perform the role of breadwinning daughter in working-class and struggling middle-class families continued regardless of cultural/religious context. Letters to the women's pages of both anglophone and francophone media reveal angst as to how much of the daughter's salary should be turned over to parents, although only in the case of the English Canadian letter-writers was this linked to decisions about living with parents or in a boarding establishment.

Census data reveal that overall change in the share of single women office workers living away from their parents remained slight until after World War 2. When we examine those living in Canada's two metropolises, Montréal and Toronto, controlling for age and other factors, French Catholic versus Anglo Protestant differences disappear. Other things being equal, French Catholic women office workers had *greater* odds of living away from their parents, no doubt because so many were rural-urban migrants. It is those women born in another region of Canada, or abroad, who are most likely to be living away from the parental home, no doubt in many cases because they migrated alone. While institutional boarding residences were promoted by social welfare organizations, much reported on in the contemporary media, and much studied by feminist historical urbanists, as a way of morally and materially safeguarding women newcomers to the city, these played only a very small overall role in housing single women, immigrants or not. Both for French-Canadian migrants and immigrants, the meagre record of their voices suggests that, while their migratory strategy and independent explorations of the city were indeed acts of individualization (Fahrni and Frenette 2008), they would opt if possible for the safety and respectability of boarding arrangements with 'familiar strangers'. Inasmuch as this meant greater surveillance of their comings and goings, the navigation course that these single women charted in the 1920s city between transgression and normalcy was doubtless more complex than that of the 'boarding house business girls' or those whose 'innovative' lifestyles of apartment sharing caught the media spotlight.