

Montreal Confidential

NOTES ON AN IMAGINED CITY

by Will Straw

IMAGINING THE MEANWHILE...

The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history. An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd-fellow Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity.

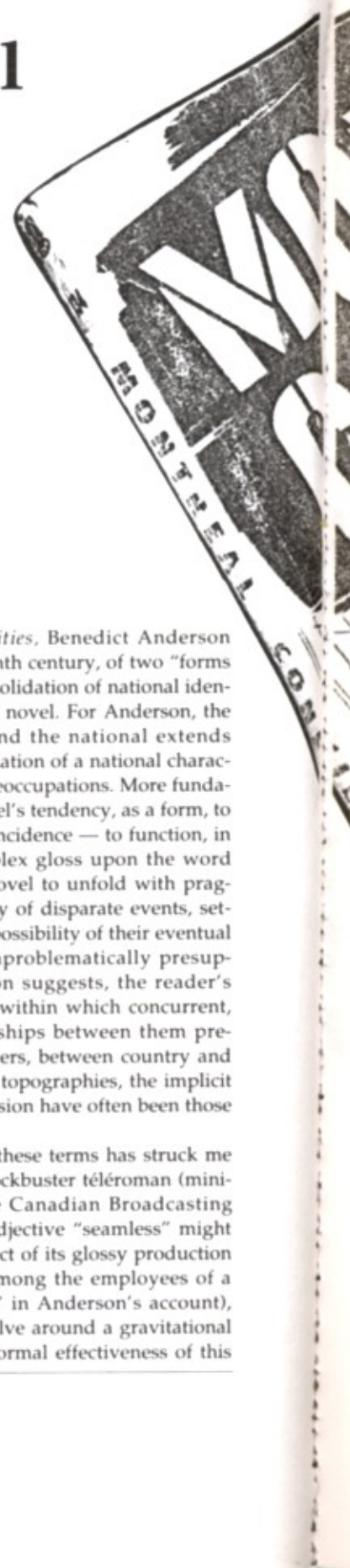
— Benedict Anderson¹

In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson describes the rise, in the eighteenth century, of two "forms of imagining" central to the consolidation of national identities (p. 30). One of these is the novel. For Anderson, the link between the novelistic and the national extends beyond any given novel's articulation of a national character or thematizing of national preoccupations. More fundamentally, it is evident in the novel's tendency, as a form, to produce a sense of temporal coincidence — to function, in Anderson's words, as a "complex gloss upon the word 'meanwhile'" (p. 30). For the novel to unfold with pragmatic efficiency, the simultaneity of disparate events, settings and characters — and the possibility of their eventual interconnection — must be unproblematically presupposed. This requires, Anderson suggests, the reader's sense of a shared, social space within which concurrent,

parallel actions are circumscribed and relationships between them presumed. As novels move up and down class ladders, between country and city and across their distinctive spatial and social topographies, the implicit boundaries which limit their dispersion into confusion have often been those of the nation.

The usefulness of conceiving the novelistic in these terms has struck me repeatedly while watching *Scoop*, this season's blockbuster téléroman (mini-series) on the French-language network of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. *Scoop* is a program for which the adjective "seamless" might have been invented, and this is not simply an effect of its glossy production values or taut, crisp editing. Set in Montreal, among the employees of a newspaper (the other great "form of imagining" in Anderson's account), *Scoop's* multiple narratives of newsgathering revolve around a gravitational centre which ensures their interconnection. The formal effectiveness of this

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso 1983, p. 31).



CONFIDENTIAL

by Al Palmer



The Low Down on

the Big Town!

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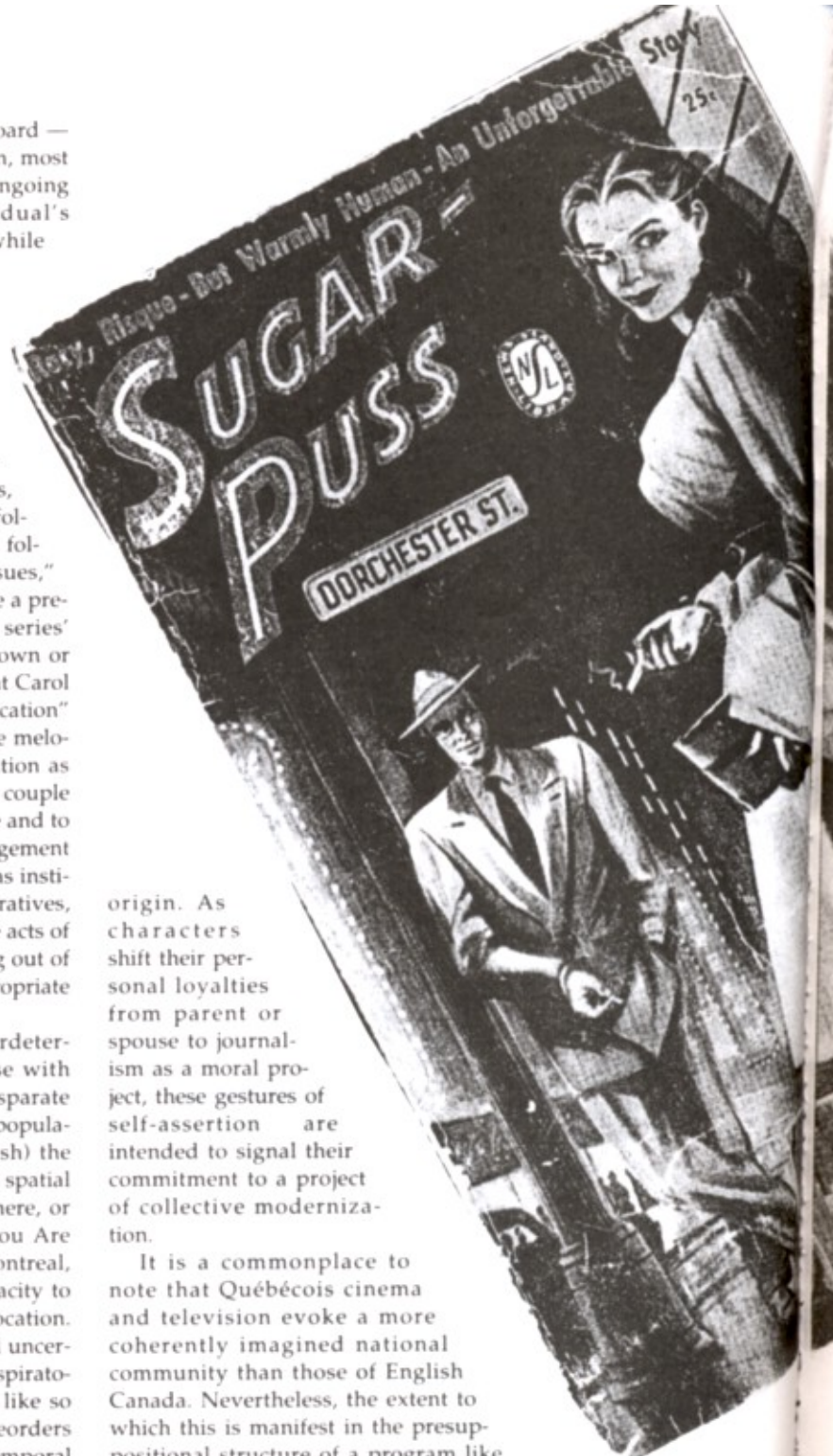
fictional device — the newsroom as narrative switchboard — has long been established by the cinema and television, most notably within the series format. It allows for the ongoing generation of plotlines which repeat the individual's encounter with social fragmentation and conflict, while holding out the promise that these will be rendered intelligible within the newspaper's collective, institutional reading of the social and its needs. At the same time, the newspaper genre is typically one in which the spatial mapping of urban life is articulated to the ongoing development of character over time.

It is here that the symptomatic usefulness of *Scoop* may be located. Like many urban newspaper narratives, *Scoop* sets up its many narrative threads (of reporters following stories) as dramas of moral awakening. *Scoop* follows a checklist of widely-acknowledged urban "issues," such as child abuse or poverty, making of each of these a pretext for the refinement and complexification of the series' principal characters. The uncovering of social breakdown or dysfunction initiates, for most of these characters, what Carol L. Bernstein has called the "enterprise of self-authentication" common within urban fictions.² Like many prime-time melodramas, *Scoop* implicitly defines this self-authentication as the capacity to withdraw from those bonds of family, couple or anachronistic prejudice which limit the ability to see and to judge. Across a variety of characters, these acts of judgement serve to elaborate the ethical stance of the newspaper as institution. In *Scoop*, as in any number of newspaper narratives, this stance is that of a benevolent reformism, but in the acts of disassociation which sustain it one can see the working out of a larger question: that of the moral vantage point appropriate to a modernized, national collectivity.

In this respect, the seamlessness of *Scoop* is overdetermined by one of its most elusive qualities: the ease with which its novelistic "meanwhile" is able to order disparate political positions, geographical locations and urban populations. *Scoop* presumes (rather than having to establish) the shared possession by its viewers of social, political and spatial maps, upon which the distances between here and there, or the deviant and normal are clearly marked. The "You Are Here" of these maps is downtown, Francophone Montreal, but one of *Scoop's* most impressive features is its capacity to effortlessly align moral position with geographical location. Ottawa and Québec City are places of exile and moral uncertainty; Outremont, behind the mountain, is where conspiratorial efforts to acquire power are launched. As well, like so many Québécois films and television series, *Scoop* reorders geographical and moral difference in terms of their temporal relation to a punctual historical present. Ruthless, crude businessmen from the North Shore of the St. Lawrence River are residual reminders of an older collective moment, anachronistic in their attitudes towards the national question and issues of cultural diversity. Illegal immigrants constitute an emergent, modern challenge, the variety of responses to which organizes characters as more-or-less contemporary. The smooth readability of *Scoop* rests, it might be argued, in its consistent mapping of the stock types of miniseries melodrama onto recognizable geographical and historical points of

origin. As characters shift their personal loyalties from parent or spouse to journalism as a moral project, these gestures of self-assertion are intended to signal their commitment to a project of collective modernization.

It is a commonplace to note that Québécois cinema and television evoke a more coherently imagined national community than those of English Canada. Nevertheless, the extent to which this is manifest in the presuppositional structure of a program like *Scoop* — rather than simply thematically — has received less attention. While the plotlines of *Scoop* often replicate real-world news events which occurred elsewhere (such as the locker-room harassment of a female sports reporter) or which form part of a generalized urban condition (homelessness, for example), the lines of connection and association which lead from these phenomena to a nationally-specific power structure and political geography are effortlessly travelled and quickly conveyed. What initially circumscribes the reporter



and the homeless person within a coherent social space is the sense of ethical responsibility which the latter invokes within the former, but the typical trajectory of *Scoop's* plotlines is one which inevitably links such problems to a more longstanding and familiar set of political relations. Indeed, as *Scoop* unfolds, the cumulative evidence of social heterogeneity has accompanied the mapping of an increasingly complex conspiracy linking virtually all centres of political and economic power and threatening to divide families. In elaborating this web of interconnections, *Scoop* is clearly setting in place the precondition of its own narrative resolution, the unmasking of secret causalities. At the same time, it may be argued, it is enacting an operation of narrative containment, re-cohering disparate and contemporary urban "problems" within the familiar geometry of an (extended) family romance.

YOUNG MR. DRAPEAU

The largest city in Canada, and the second largest French-speaking city in the world, Montreal is the most two-faced community on the North American continent. During the day, it shows the tourist a facade of puritanical virtue. It is dotted with famous churches, parks and imposing buildings. At night, it becomes the happiest hunting ground in the hemisphere for prostitutes, gambling czars, racketeers, fixers and strong-arm men.

The estimated annual take from all forms of vice has reached the staggering figure of \$100,000,000.

— Martin Abramson, "Montreal Confidential," *Photo Magazine* (1953), p. 14.

Our television writers have carved up the 20th century lengthwise and sideways, giving us the Great Man approach one minute, the Little People's view of things the next. After *Les filles de Caleb*, *Desjardins*, *Cormoran*, *Le temps d'une paix*, *Duplessis*, *La petite patrie* and *Séraphin* — and others which I've no doubt forgotten — now there's *Montréal, ville ouverte* or Quebec's hesitant move into modernity.

— Hugo Léger, *Le Devoir*, February 15, 1992

The other major Québécois téléroman of the 1992 winter season is the TVA network's *Montréal, ville ouverte*, a 13-part series recounting the rise of a municipal reform movement in Montreal during the 1940s and early 1950s. Both *Scoop* and

Montréal, ville ouverte were launched with widespread press coverage and high-profile forms of corporate sponsorship, but the differences of scale and achievement between them are considerable. *Scoop* is shot on film, employs a good deal of location shooting, and is organized around the ascendant appeal of its principal co-stars, Roy Dupuis and Macha Grenon. *Montréal, ville ouverte* was shot on video, and its lazy attention to period detail and minimal, draped sets invite comparisons with a Monogram B-film of the 1940s. The series required, according to the press release which accompanied its debut, 771 distinct performer roles, and these are dispersed across a large number of parallel narratives whose equilibrium and interconnection are often clumsily managed. While the nominal heroes of *Montréal, ville ouverte* — municipal reformers Pacifique (Pax) Plante and Jean Drapeau — are uncharismatic and often peripheral to the events of any given episode, the series' secondary roles offer a succession of cameos by well-established Québécois actors (such as Dominique Michel or Jean Lapointe).

The minor controversies which have turned around *Montréal, ville ouverte* since it began have further served to distinguish it from the more scrupulously credible *Scoop*. One of these centred on its version of the role played by the newspaper *Le Devoir* in the partisan politics of the period, setting the author of the series against surviving relatives and colleagues of Georges Pelletier, *Le Devoir's* editor in the early 1940s.³ Shortly thereafter, a columnist in the English-language daily *The Gazette* took both series to task for the regularity with which villains within them spoke English, noting that *Scoop* at least undertook to present members of minorities in "non-comic, non-stereotyped, sympathetic roles."⁴ The principle target in this case was the writer of *Montréal, ville ouverte*, Lise Payette, identified here (and invariably within the English-language press) as a "former Parti Québécois cabinet minister and narrator of the 1989 anti-immigration television documentary *Disparaître*."

In its treatment of ethnic and linguistic difference, *Montréal, ville ouverte* leaves little doubt as to where its lines of demarcation are drawn, and a reading which implicates it within contemporary polemics over cultural identity is hardly far-fetched. Nevertheless, a reconstruction of post-war Montreal which links political chaos to rampant criminality and both of these to ethnic diversity has been central to the cultural imaginaries of both Anglophone and Francophone communities within Quebec for several decades. For the first of these, it has served within the elaboration of a lost Montreal as Runyonesque carnival, whose big-city colour and street-corner eccentricity are seen to have faded by the 1960s, victims of the city's francisation and Quebec's ascendant nationalism. This vision of Montreal, which took shape within dozens of popular novels and photojournalistic features during the 1950s, has persisted in English-Canadian *mythemes* which cast Montreal as disco capital or gangster playground.

2. Carol L. Bernstein, *The Celebration of Scandal: Toward the Sublime in Victorian Urban Fiction* (Pennsylvania State University Press 1991), p. 47.

3. See, for example, Lise Payette's response to a series of letters to the editor of *Le Devoir*, "Lise Payette défend la véracité documentaire de 'Montréal, ville ouverte,'" *Le Devoir*, February 28, 1992, p. B8.

4. Don MacPherson, "Language of Vice: Why do the bad guys speak only English on Quebec TV?" *The Gazette*, March 28, 1992, p. B3.

An attachment to this prelapsarian Montreal undoubtedly masks, at one level, the nostalgia for Anglophone supremacy of which it is commonly accused. At the same time, it should be noted, the imagined city it has reconstituted is one whose values are defined in explicit opposition to those of a Scottish protestant elite or Torontonion puritanism. As the section to follow will suggest, the lost Montreal of Anglophone imagination is one in which the thematics of an ooh-la-la Frenchness are deployed within the generic forms of urban exposé, forms prominent within the U.S. popular culture of the 1950s.

If, as Hugo Léger has suggested, *Montréal, ville ouverte* traces the entry of Quebec into modernity, it does so principally by painting Montreal's "open-ness" during the 1940s as the sign of an underdeveloped collective purpose. It is essential to this reading that continuity be established between the anti-conscription campaigns of war-time and the post-war project of municipal reform. These themes converge in the images of Anglophone soldiers filling Montreal's brothels during the Second World War. *Montréal, ville ouverte* seems torn between a biologicistic reading of the city during this period, which would cast it — in the manner of contemporary accounts of U.S. cities — as a rotting social body, and an alternate, militaristic reading in which a people anxious to reclaim their city are set against invading and occupying forces (Italian gangsters and soldiers on furlough). In either case, the solutions proposed are likely to take the form of hygienic metaphors — most notably, that of "cleaning up" — common within the literature of urban exposé.

The historical figure in whom continuity between different political struggles is embodied, in *Montréal, ville ouverte*, is Jean Drapeau. Drapeau began his political career as a candidate for the anti-conscription forces and served, with Pax Plante, to bring about a judicial inquiry into municipal corruption (the Caron Commission, whose report was published in 1954). One of the idiosyncratic features of *Montréal, ville ouverte* is its tracing of Drapeau's early life within the generic conventions of the Hollywood biography, from youthful musings on life's purpose through to early political acts offering glimpses of embryonic greatness and resolve. Indeed — and to invoke an analogy which is little more than frivolous — *Montréal, ville ouverte* follows the contours of *Young Mr. Lincoln* (John Ford, 1939) in offering a hero whose tentative initiation into politics is followed by a period in which these ambitions are suppressed, and whose judicial battles for a common good are preparatory for a later political triumph which is now deserved. *Montréal, ville ouverte* has installed Drapeau's election to the mayoralty in 1954 as the anticipated moment of its narrative culmination, but its inability to invest this moment with the force of historical necessity lingers over it as a failing which invites diagnosis.

Montréal, ville ouverte is striking for its lack of narrative drive. At one level this simply evidences the temptation to linger on an eroticized image of post-war Montreal rather than moving on to the courtroom sequences which will dominate its latter episodes. More importantly, it might be argued, this quality is rooted in a contemporary ambivalence surrounding Drapeau's ascendancy and the subsequent reform of municipal politics. The familiar narrative of Montreal's

modernization — which leads from the 1954 election through Expo 67, the building of the métro and the 1976 Olympics — has clearly withered over the past two decades as an object of collective commitment whose beginnings might be cast in heroic terms. At the same time, the city's economic decline has led it to be valorized in terms which emphasize its continuities with the "open city" of the immediate post-war period, rather than suppressing these. Amidst this decline, the city has been newly recarnivalized within a range of Francophone works — from the novels of Michel Tremblay to the films of André Forcier — which relocate Runyonesque social chaos from an ethnically diverse downtown to an impoverished, Francophone east end. From the vantage point of 1992, the puritanical figure of Drapeau and sanitizing quality of the push for municipal reform seem insufficiently compelling to sustain *Montréal, ville ouverte's* narrative project.

LOW DOWNS ON BIG TOWNS

"You can't mean Montreal — not the Paris of North America?" she grinned.

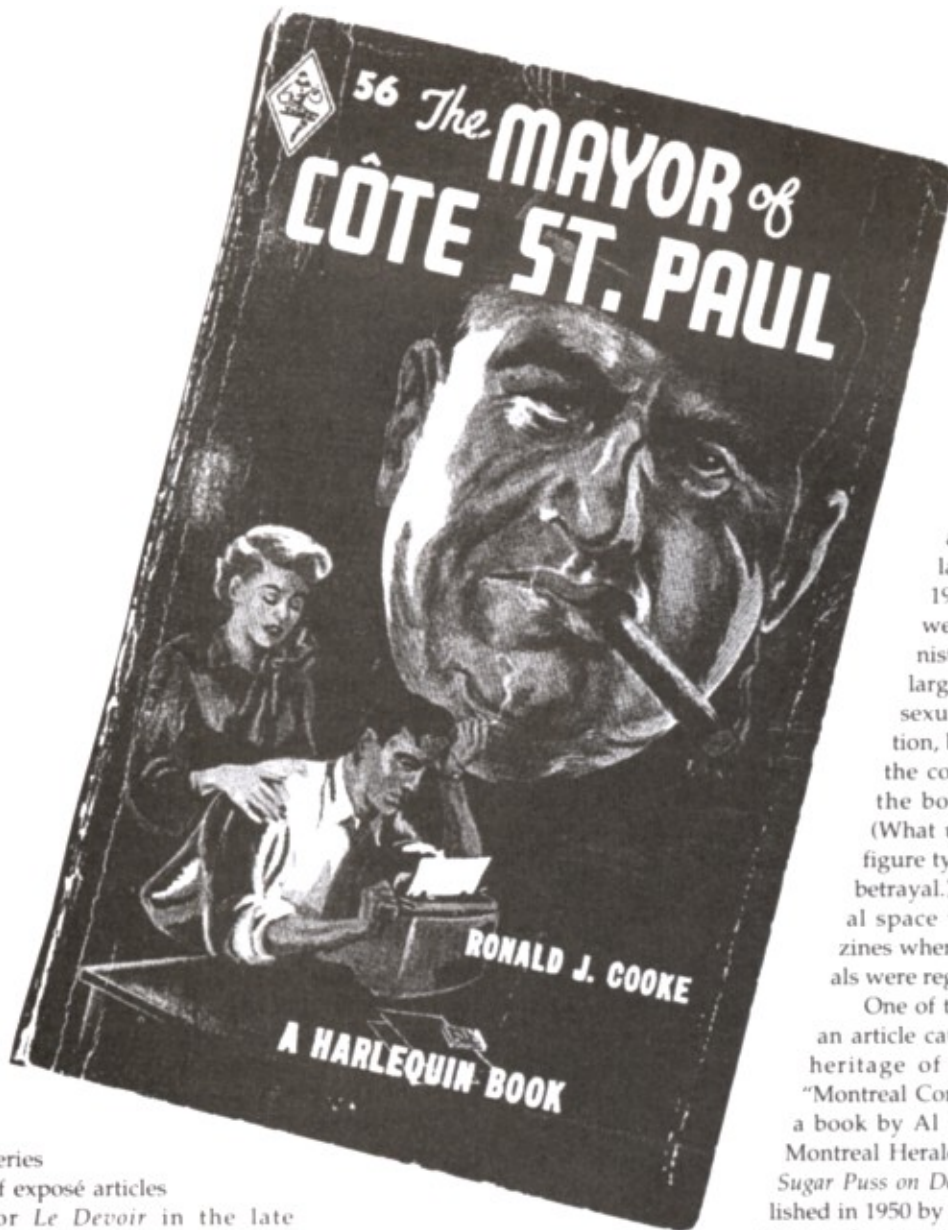
"It makes me puke," I said savagely. "Look at it. An illuminated cross stuck up on the mountain, street after street full of the reverend clergy, a self-congratulatory city council, pious editorials in all the newspapers, and as much vice and aberration and corruption as any city this side of Port Said. One level stinking and the other level smirking, and in between a layer of supposed public servants trying to stuff their greasy pockets with graft. Oh, sure, we have a vice probe every decade or so. It goes on and on, year after year, and then finally it peters out under the sheer dead weight of its own evasive evidence. A few honest officials are disgraced, a few more get eased gently out of their jobs, a couple of writs for slander are issued and settled out of court, and everyone sighs with relief and goes right back to smirking abnormal. Gah! It makes my gorge jump. And to think that not so long ago this used to be a country of clear eyed pioneers."

— Martin Brett, *Hot Freeze* (A New Red Badge Mystery), 1954, p. 108.

Leaving her bitter-sweet memories she travels west, past Guy Street and slowly wends her way past Victorian mansions now reeking of shabby gentility until she reaches Atwater. Once west of the city limits she loses herself in middle-class squalor. This is Dorchester. For this Gisele Lepine traded the cool cleanliness of a Laurentian village.

— Al Palmer, *Sugar Puss on Dorchester Street*, 1950, p. 8.

In its title and iconography, *Montréal, ville ouverte* self-consciously evokes the literature and cinema of urban exposé which flourished during the late 1940s and 1950s within North America. Pax Plante, a lawyer whose experience of municipal corruption as a city employee led him to write a



series of exposé articles for *Le Devoir* in the late 1940s,⁵ fills the role of crusading reformer which is almost a generic requirement of this form. (Following the hearings of the Caron Commission's hearings, in which he was central, Plante moved to self-exile in Mexico, apparently fearing retaliation). What distinguishes the discourse of 1950s municipal exposé from earlier traditions of reformist muckraking is the former's casting of urban crime and corruption in terms which set the backward city against an enlightened national state and judicial system. In the United States, the Kefauver hearings into organized crime (1950-51) served to initiate a series of low-budget films which, throughout the 1950s, succeeded in the redefinition of municipal illegality as a challenge to national integrity and security. These films — *The Enforcer* (1950), *Chicago Confidential* (1957), *The Captive City* (1952), *The Phoenix City Story* (1955), *Kansas City Confidential* (1952), and several others — invited a national, judgemental gaze onto a diseased municipal body.

Films such as these were marked by a predictable dupliciousness whose traces persist in *Montréal, ville ouverte*. In their cataloguing of urban vice and criminality, they made these the basis of their own lurid stylization. The beginnings of

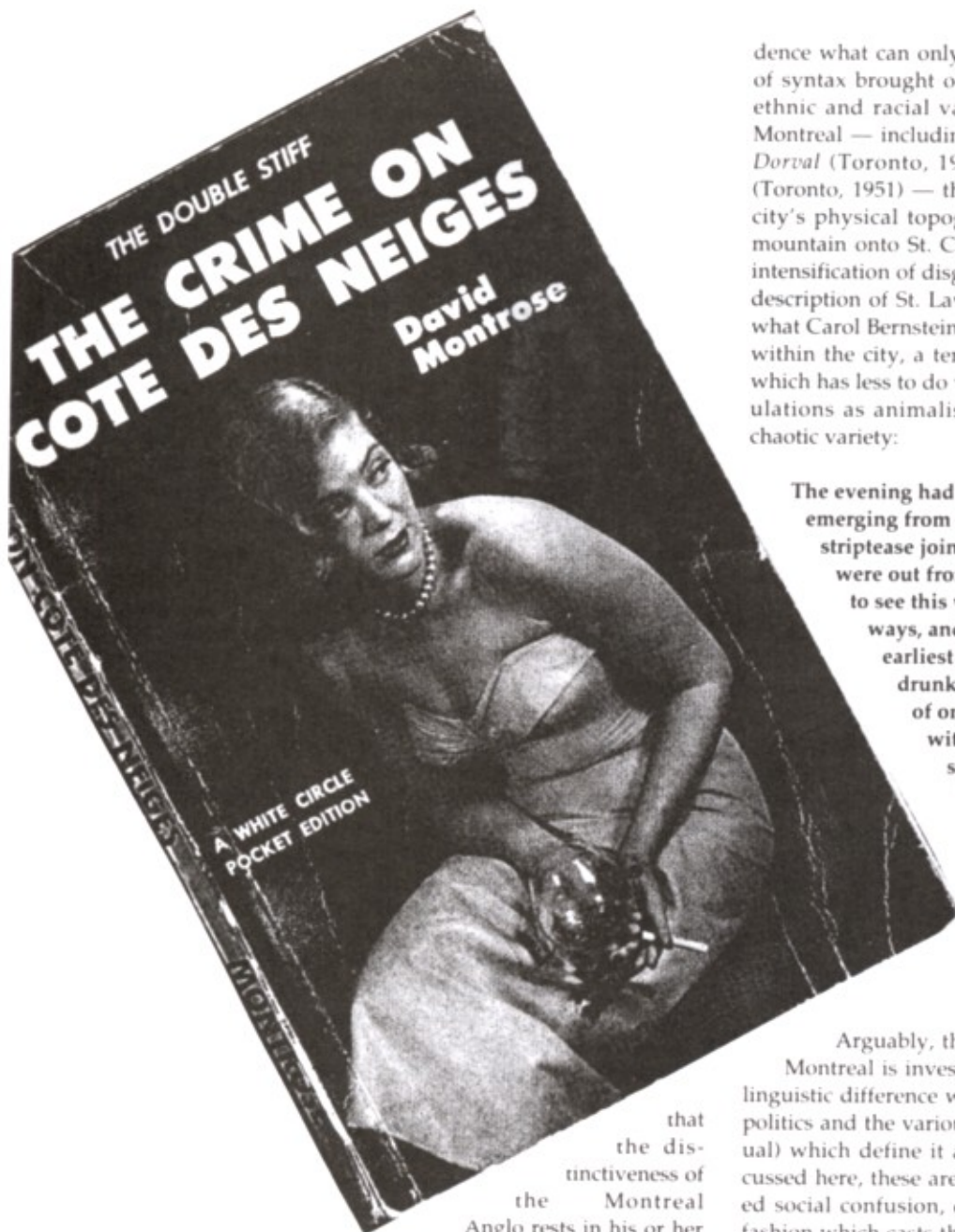
these films are invariably marked by the punctual transition from a documentary framing sequence into an interior set, such as a bar, in which baroque images of chaotic promiscuity (frequently involving interracial mixing) were prominent. The significant influence here is no longer a reformist journalism or judicial investigation, but the city "Confidential" books of Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, which sold in large numbers throughout the late 1940s and 1950s.⁶ Lait and Mortimer were conservative, syndicated columnists for whom the topography of the large U.S. city was one of uncontrolled sexual deviance and racial miscegenation, both of which were seen to nourish the communistic sympathies which are the books' underlying preoccupation. (What united all three, in a condensatory figure typical of the period, is the notion of betrayal.) These books shared an intertextual space with male-oriented photo magazines wherein city exposé articles and pictorials were regularly featured.

One of these magazines, in 1953, published an article cataloguing Montreal's "400-year-old heritage of sin."⁷ The title of this article, "Montreal Confidential," had earlier been that of a book by Al Palmer, a former reporter for the *Montreal Herald* and author, as well, of the novel *Sugar Puss on Dorchester Street*. In both books, published in 1950 by the News Stand Library of Toronto, Montreal is imagined in a manner which evokes both the New York of Damon Runyon and a fin-de-siècle Paris. *Montreal Confidential* was obviously inspired by the Lait and Mortimer books, and its subtitle, "The Low Down on the Big Town!" had appeared earlier on the cover of *Chicago Confidential*. What distinguishes *Montreal Confidential* from its U.S. models is its transformation of deviance into eccentricity, and its subsumption of political problems specific to Montreal and Quebec within a series of local particularisms. The dominant authorial attitude in *Montreal Confidential* is one which has persisted within the discourse of Anglophone Montrealers:

5. These articles were eventually collected in the volume *Montréal sous le régime de la pègre* (Editions de l'action nationale, 1950). In 1992, to coincide with the broadcasting of *Montréal, ville ouverte*, *Le Devoir* reprinted a number of these articles. See, for example, "Le roi, la reine et la barbote," [1949] *Le Devoir*, February 6, 1992, p. B1, and "Ne touchez pas au gentleman!" [1949], *Le Devoir*, February 20, 1992, p. B8.

6. Among these are *New York Confidential* (Dell, 1949) *Chicago Confidential* (Dell, 1950) and *Washington Confidential* (Dell, 1951). Jack Lait died in 1954; Mortimer continued the series, which concluded with *Women Confidential* in 1960.

7. Martin Abramson, "Montreal Confidential," *Photo*, Vol. 2, No. 7, July 1953, pp. 12-19.



dence what can only be termed a male hysteria: the collapse of syntax brought on by the encounter with infinite sexual, ethnic and racial variety. In a number of novels based in Montreal — including two by David Montrose, *Murder Over Dorval* (Toronto, 1952) and *The Crime on Cote Des Neiges* (Toronto, 1951) — this sense of collapse is mapped onto the city's physical topography, such that the descent from the mountain onto St. Catherine St. and lower is marked by the intensification of disgust. In his novel *Hot Stuff*, Martin Brett's description of St. Lawrence Boulevard after dark exemplifies what Carol Bernstein has described as the finding of "nature" within the city, a tendency towards zoological enumeration which has less to do with the naturalistic vision of urban populations as animalistic than with the recognition of their chaotic variety:

The evening had begun to crawl. The night birds were emerging from their little nests. The movie-cum-striptease joints had their lights on, and the barkers were out front hollering that we were all just in time to see this week's extrah-speshul show. In the doorways, and peering from the pinball saloons, the earliest birds were gathered: the straight drunks; the alcoholics trying to bum the price of one, the fags hoping for something quick with the guys coming home from work; the super-annuated whores hoping for something at any speed with anyone who had fifty cents; the pencil-mustached pimps in fedoras, casting the crowd for guys who looked like they had five dollars, because flashy head-gear costs money and a feller never knows when he might need another hat. (*Hot Freeze*, p. 102)

Arguably, the textual labour of many fictions set in Montreal is invested in fixing a relationship between the linguistic difference which is a principal subtext of that city's politics and the various diversities (linguistic, ethnic and sexual) which define it as urban. In the popular literature discussed here, these are either collapsed into an undifferentiated social confusion, or ordered (as in Palmer's books) in a fashion which casts the Anglophone as intermediary between a Francophone province and ethnically varied inner city. In *Scoop*, the managing of this relationship is accomplished, in part, through a consistent separation of distinct narrative levels — between the glossy melodramas of power which unfold within a unilingual elite and those encounters with a metropolitan *real* which sustain the moral fortitude of its central characters. The difficulty confronting *Montréal, ville ouverte* is that of evoking the historical necessity of municipal reform for an audience which is unlikely to react with moralistic horror to images of prostitution and gambling. The implicit displacement of targets within the series, from vice itself to the political disenfranchisement of the Francophone population, has come at the price of its narrative coherence, but it has made *Montréal, ville ouverte* a revealing and symptomatic object for analysis.

that the distinctiveness of the Montreal Anglo rests in his or her ability to negotiate the linguistic and political complexities of the city and province with a subtlety beyond the grasp of those from elsewhere (and, in particular, Toronto). This particular form of self-valorization — casting the Anglophone Montrealer as proprietary insider and intermediary — recurs in Palmer's novel, *Sugar Puss on Dorchester Street*, wherein a naïve young Francophone woman from the Laurentians enters into sexual maturity and night-club society as a result of her contact with an Anglophone criminal underworld.

Palmer's books are relatively free of the delirious passages with which those of Lait and Mortimer are saturated, and which are prominent in a number of crime thrillers set in Montreal during the 1950s. These passages, whose purest examples may be found in the novels of Mickey Spillane, evi-