Pigs, Cows, Boarders, and …: Brothels, Taverns, and the Household Economy in Nineteenth-Century Montreal

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Introduction

It is a privilege to honour Bettina Bradbury as she is about to retire from York University to pursue other interests and new projects. Bettina has had a significant impact on Québec and Canadian history, making connections between work, women, the household, and the economy where none at first glance had seemed apparent.[1] She is well known for her meticulous study of the household economy during industrialization, integrating the publications of international scholars from the United States, Europe, and Oceania, and arguing that the magnitude of economic change was writ large on women's work, family roles, and subsistence strategies. Consulting a wide range of historical sources such as parish records, census returns, notarial documents, Royal Commission reports, government records, institutional documents, and historical maps, Bettina treats the household and its members with compassion and details its inner workings to provide insights into and meanings of nineteenth-century working-class experiences. In her celebrated 1984 article, "Pigs, Cows, and Boarders: Non-Wage Forms of Survival among Montreal Families, 1861–91," Bettina explores how people lived partially by using diverse local resources to keep pigs and cows, take in boarders, grow gardens, and so much more.[2] By locating crucial links between the family, the household economy, workplace struggles, and industrialization, she demonstrates a range of strategies that the working class implemented in confronting and resisting capitalist society.

In her 1993 award-winning monograph, *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal*,[3] Bettina establishes that women's non-waged and informal work was vital to the household economy, turning wages into subsistence. Their revenue-generating and revenue-saving activities were crucial to the integrity, standard of living, and overall comfort of

1. In earlier studies, Bettina de-emphasizes family structure to argue that it is far more important to examine the processes and phenomena as well as the strategies that working-class families initiated to understand economic transformations and their impact on the family. Bettina builds on the work of leading scholars at the time such as Tamara Hareven who highlights the family and its life course in her book, *Family Time and Industrial Time: The Relationship between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

2. *Labour/Le Travail* 14 (1984): 9–48.

3. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993).

those who inhabited the household. In doing so, Bettina makes women's work visible, demonstrates its diversity and complexity, and reveals that the realities of daily life were at odds with prevailing discourses about what labouring women were suppose to be doing. Historians, she counsels, must expand their gaze beyond the workplace or factory floor to women's unpaid labour, workers' households, and their families.

Her second monograph, *Wife to Widow: Lives, Laws, and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Montreal*,[4] has all of the hallmarks of *Working Families* and so much more. It integrates many of the more recent developments in the concept of the household economy by historians such as Ellen Ross, Catherine Hall, and Leonore Davidoff interested in culture, identity, representation, and religion. Bettina depicts a more complete sense of widowhood in her employment of biography illustrating intricate details of women's lives and situating them transnationally.[5] Again, we see her extensive and effective use of sources as she traces the lives of wives in their journeys from marriage to widowhood. Bettina explores widowhood not only from discursive and legal frames, but also from the perspective of women's lived experiences. Thus the gap between rhetoric and reality becomes apparent.

Bettina's concept of the household economy has informed some of my own work on sex commerce in early nineteenth-century Montreal, specifically residential prostitution. I plan to apply this concept to a new project on women and taverns. Perhaps the article title so frequently associated with Bettina ought to be expanded to include "Pigs, Cows, Boarders, Sex, and Drink."

The "Home-Brothel"

Let me begin with sex. Historians have usually constructed prostitution within a context of women isolated from their families, friends, and communities. Consequently, histories of the family and of sex commerce have often given the impression that they are irreconcilable. Bettina brings the two literatures together in her monograph, *Working Families*; she argues that widows incorporated an array of remunerative activities into their households that for some included prostitution in order to carry out their family responsibilities while earning much needed cash.[6] In my forthcoming book, *Beyond Brutal Passions: Prostitution in Early Nineteenth-Century Montreal*,[7] I have applied

4. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012).

5. See for example, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and women of the English middle class, 1780–1850* (London: Hutchinson Education, 1987); Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Catherine Hall, *Civilizing Subjects. Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

6. Bradbury, *Working Families*.

7. Mary Anne Poutanen, *Beyond Brutal Passions: Prostitution in Early Nineteenth-Century*

Bettina's concept of the household economy to determine how and under what circumstances women integrated prostitution into their homes.

Like Bettina, I have consulted a broad range of historical sources, such as criminal court records, parish records, census returns, newspapers, and government and institutional documents to explore the reasons why married, widowed, and single women with some capital established brothels to meet their personal or their families' subsistence needs. I demonstrate that the home and the brothel were not distinct or separate operations. Married couples as well as men who fashioned partnerships with women not their wives, with family members, or with future spouses also operated brothels. Parents and children worked together in "family" ventures. Although the majority of unmarried women laboured as prostitutes for widowed and married brothel keepers, they also operated "home-brothels" together. A revitalized interest in the history of single or independent women has resulted in a rich literature, which I have incorporated into the history of sex commerce in Montreal to show that single women created household economies to meet their subsistence needs. Scholars such as Bridget Hill, Judith Bennett, and Amy Froide suggest that single women pooled resources, achieved their own subsistence, and shared the costs associated with rent and heat as well as divided household tasks, chief among them, going to market, preparing food, and conveying wood and water.[8] Keepers of brothels, then, had to ensure that the necessary duties related to running a household were carried out in addition to managing complicated human relations while overseeing the business of residential prostitution.

As Bettina makes clear in her own research, the interaction between the local economy and the household must be taken into consideration when examining the subsistence tactics that women initiated in their homes. She explains why changing economic forces and circumstances required family members to reformulate their survival strategies.[9] Household economies were more precarious if primary wage earners were underemployed, laboured in low-paid jobs, were unable to work owing to illness or unemployment, or were no longer present because of death or desertion. In early nineteenth-century Montreal, diverse economic, social, and personal situations drew women to sex commerce. The decision to work as a brothel-keeper was based upon a complex range of options, which differed according to each woman's individual character and circumstances, her social class, ethnicity, and marital

Montreal (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, forthcoming).

8. Bridget Hill, *Women Alone: Spinsters in England 1660–1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide, eds., *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250–1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999): 10; and Maura Palazzi, "Female Solitude and Patrilineage: Unmarried Women and Widows during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of Family History* 15:4 (1990): 443–459.

9. Bradbury, *Working Families*: 47, 153.

status. Notwithstanding a few women who established houses of prostitution in abandoned buildings, single rooms, and cellars, abject poverty narrowed their choices. For those with household capital, keeping brothels provided the means for ready cash. Wives with ill or unemployed husbands, deserted women, those fleeing abusive or alcoholic spouses, single women, and widows chose residential prostitution, participating in economies of expediency where moral imperatives were less important.[10] Women also elected to incorporate prostitution into their households to achieve economic, social, and sexual independence. Studies elsewhere have shown that residential prostitution provided an income that was either above that typically associated with female wage earning in pre-industrial societies or that supplemented otherwise meagre incomes from wage work, charity, and/or public relief.[11]

Montreal brothels accommodated people involved in convoluted and ambiguous relationships where respective inmates wielded varying degrees of power rooted in gender relations. Although difficult to detect explicitly, given the limitations of the historical sources I examined, the brothel was also characterized by tender ties between husbands and wives, lovers, parents and their children in addition to friendships amongst brothel prostitutes. Some couples who lived together in brothels without the benefit of a marriage certificate eventually wed. Others instituted self-divorce and entered into clandestine marriages. Nevertheless, these households could be dangerous places where women had to carefully negotiate the brutality of conjugal violence as well as clients' threats and assaults. That said, brothel-keepers promoted or resisted coercion of their daughters to market sex and intimidated the prostitutes they employed. Thus, women's work in the "home-brothel" also included, as Bettina argues, tension management associated with difficult life situations.[12] The brothel was no different and men were more likely to initiate acts of aggression not only as clients but also as husbands and lovers.

Neighbours intervened in cases of spousal abuse involving brothel-keepers, disciplined those who did not respect community norms, and interacted with them as neighbours. While the boundaries between the respectable and non-respectable could be blurred, popular-class women were ambivalent about female neighbours who marketed sex. On the one hand, women shouldered

10. Olwen Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750–1789* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974). See also, Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986); Ruth L. Smith and Deborah M. Valenze, "Mutuality and Marginality: Liberal Moral Theory and Working-Class Women in Nineteenth-Century England" *Signs,* 13, 2 (1988): 277–298; Ross, *Love and Toil*; Bradbury, *Working Families*; and Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

11. Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*; Tony Henderson, *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London: Prostitution and Control in the Metropolis, 1730–1830* (New York: Longman 1999), 16.

12. Bradbury, *Working Families*, 178–180.

domestic responsibilities including efforts to stretch inadequate wages no matter their reputations; and, on the other hand, money paid to prostitutes diminished household revenues, associations with prostitutes could tarnish reputations, and men who visited prostitutes risked infecting wives with venereal disease given that all had unprotected sex. Moreover, Anna Clark has argued "when "respectable" women snubbed their fallen sisters, they were expressing their solidarity with injured wives rather than with "unfortunate" women."[13]

Taverns and Inns

Let me turn now to drink and a new study, which focuses on women who held tavern licences or who were married to tavern or innkeepers in Montreal in the years 1840 to 1880. I propose to write a monograph on the history of women's diverse roles in the city's public houses as patrons, keepers, spouses, daughters, and servants. In doing so, I seek to explore the drinking habits of women and to make women's work in taverns and inns more visible demonstrating their key contribution to these establishments and to the local economy. Family businesses of this nature depended upon women's work to succeed, Jane Errington reminds us, which gave them some degree of power.[14] It is Bettina's astute employment of the household economy in Montreal that allows me to shift the lens from men to women, consider what effect the local economy had on the strategies they implemented, and identify the particular choices women who were married to keepers made when they became widows. The model of the household economy will also enable me to determine the following: how did the intersections of class, gender, ethnicity/race, and religion play out in taverns, inns, and grocery stores; what identity did female keepers promote in the face of temperance advocates' mounting discourse about the evils of alcohol; and, how did they ensure respectability under these circumstances. I am especially interested in exploring how the women reconciled expectations from elites to act as the moral compasses of the family and, as Philippa Levine has argued, from British colonial authorities seeking to contain women's sexuality to marriage, motherhood, and domesticity.[15]

While the tavern has been the subject of growing scholarship in Québec and in Canada,[16] and notwithstanding Julia Robert's exceptional study of taverns

13. Anna Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, 50–53.

14. Elizabeth Jane Errington, *Wives and Mothers, School Mistresses and Scullery Maids: Working Women in Upper Canada 1790–1840* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 192–193.

15. Philippa Levine, "Sexuality, Gender, and Empire" in her edited collection, *Gender and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 133–137.

16. See for example, Sherry Olson, "Silver and Hotcakes and Beer: Irish Montreal in the 1840s," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 45:1–2 (2013): 179–201; Anouk Bélanger and Lisa Sumner, "De la

in Upper Canada in which women figure largely, few studies here or elsewhere explore fully the complex role of women in the operation of public houses.[17] Some studies have overlooked their contributions completely. For example, in Peter de Lottinville's seminal study of Joe Beef's canteen in Montreal, the wives of its proprietor Charles McKiernan – Margaret McRae and Mary McRae – whom he married in 1865 and 1872 respectively, along with their eight children are absent from the discussion even though they would have participated in the operation of the tavern.[18]

In a preliminary examination of the years 1840 to 1860, using applications for tavern licences, census returns, municipal tax rolls, city directories, newspaper accounts, and criminal court documents, I identified at least 90 single, married, and widowed women who held tavern licenses whilst operating taverns, inns, and grocery stores.[19] As keepers of small, medium, and large public houses, such business activities afforded these women opportunities to contribute to the household economy often to ensure their own economic independence. Nonetheless, to maintain these licences, the evidence suggests that they had to carefully negotiate the boundaries of respectability by following the rules associated with licensing, submitting to an annual inspection of their establishments, regulating the culture and the clientele who patronized their businesses, and displaying reputable behaviour. Even though class, ethnicity, and race played a critical role in determining a woman's social status, in the case of public houses, it was the work that women did, the type of businesses they operated, and outward appearances, which at first glance determined respectability. The narrative is likely more complicated. Borrowing from historian Julia Roberts, respectability was a code of behaviour female keepers performed with clothing, manners, and comportment.[20]

taverne Joe Beef à l'hypertaverne Edgar. La Taverne comme expression populaire du Montréal industriel en transformation," *GLOBE: Revue international d'études québécoises,* 9:2 (2006): 27–48; Julia Roberts, *In Mixed Company: Taverns and Public Life in Upper Canada* (Toronto: UBC Press, 2009); Craig Heron, *Booze: A Distilled History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003); Kevin B. Wamsley and Robert S. Kossuth, "Fighting It Out in Nineteenth-Century Upper Canada/Canada West: Masculinities and Physical Challenges in the Tavern," *Journal of Sports History,* 27,3 (2000): 405–430; Cheryl Krasnick Warsh, ed., *Drink in Canada: Historical Essays* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); and, Margaret McBurney and Mary Byers, *Tavern in the Town: Early Inns and Taverns of Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

17. Roberts, *In Mixed Company.*

18. Peter De Lottinville, "Joe Beef of Montreal: Working Class Culture and the Tavern," *Labour/Le Travailleur,* 8–9 (1981–82): 9–40.

19. Mary Anne Poutanen, "Due Attention Has Been Paid to all Rules": Regulating Tavern Licences and Bodies in Montreal, 1840–1860," paper given at the 2013 Social Science History Association Conference, Chicago, Illinois.

20. Roberts, In *Mixed Company,* 138.

Tavern licences permitted women to retail alcoholic beverages such as spirits, wine, and beer in small measure and to furnish lodging and meals for a fee. While the sale of such beverages was profitable and allowed women keepers to juggle their household responsibilities while serving customers, operating public houses meant that they worked long hours every day. They had to welcome travellers at all hours of the day and night, stable horses, prepare meals, serve drinks, launder linens, and deal with inebriated customers who may or may not have been able to pay their tab. Female tavern and innkeepers, like their male counterparts, required access to capital and credit to supply the business with everything from furnishings, linens, and cooking gear to food and alcohol in bulk. They purchased goods and supplies locally and usually on credit. As keepers of public houses, women needed a good head for business because they had to also extend credit to customers.[21]

Julia Roberts makes evident that keeping taverns was a female trade at least in small establishments.[22] In Montreal, women who were married to keepers also provided the main source of labour in public houses; such places were also domestic spaces, that is to say, homes to the keepers' families. Married women managed these businesses [while husbands pursued other types of work], provided the domestic labour, watched over their children, supervised servants, and dealt directly with the clientele. Children grew up and worked in taverns and inns – contributing to the household economy – where they learned skills useful in later life.

Bettina's studies demonstrate the importance of consulting a wide range of sources in order to tease out the intricacies of the household and its members. Therefore, by following Bettina's rigorous methodology, I will once again consult notarial documents, after decades of absence, not only to examine inheritance practices but also to determine the business customs of as many of the women I can identify who sold alcohol in taverns, inns, and grocery stores across the urban landscape. Her comprehensive application of biography to explore women's lives in *Wife to Widow* resonates with my study. Such a model will allow me to link the business practices current in Montreal at mid-century to the women who laboured in public houses as widows, wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, and servants.

Conclusion

Bettina's application of the concept of the household economy to industrializing Montreal is the starting point for anyone who intends to study women, work, family, and the economy. It can take you to unexpected places as it did for me with respect to residential prostitution. Certainly, it provides

21. Dorothy A. Mays, *Women in Early America: Struggle, Survival, and Freedom in a New World* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio Inc., 2004), 390.

22. Roberts, In *Mixed Company*, 141.

a much better grasp of women's complex and diverse roles in the household economy especially in families of tradesmen including keepers of taverns, inns, and grocery stores. Both of her books, *Working Families* and *Wife to Widow* are original and influential; their narratives have had great appeal to both students and scholars alike. These monographs represent not only thoroughly researched studies – surely great models for all of us – but also demonstrate Bettina's intellectual prowess and skills to communicate history to a large audience. She has undoubtedly raised the bar for social, economic, cultural, and political history in Québec and in Canada. Bettina paints the realities of nineteenth-century women's lives – across class, religion, ethnicity, and race – with compassionate and meticulous brush strokes, fleshed out in vivid detail, situated transnationally, and rooted in the scholarship of multiple continents.