

BORDERLINES

BEST CULTURAL ISSUES MAGAZINE: UTNE READER ALTERNATIVE PRESS AWARDS

MULTIPLE CULTURAL BIRTHS

LAND OF THE FREE?

THE NBA

PUNKS

PORN NOIR

PURE
POP
FOR NOW
PEOPLE

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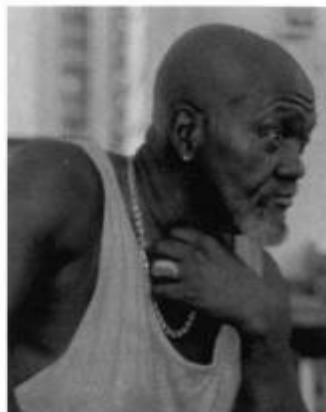
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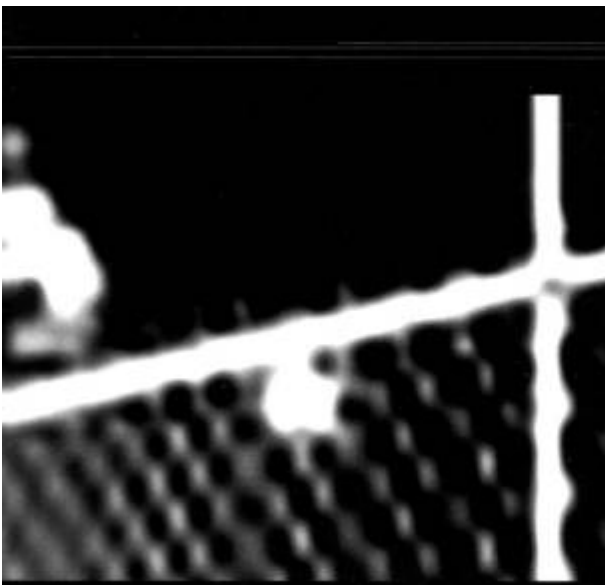
The Canada Council for the Arts
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SINCE 1937

Think of an entire city or a neighbourhood as just one piece of bad public art: part corporate promotion, part government subsidies, with people and ugly and not-so-ugly buildings, a few parks. What would the particular publicness of this "public" art tell us? What would be the narratives and the cumulative "statement"? The city as bad public art would tell us almost too much about the politics of race, gender and sex. Like various kinds of weak story lines in porn, there would be different venues of desire and satisfactions. There would be the narratives of the storytellers and the experiences of the "subjects." There would be a few well-anticipated cum shots and lots of tension beforehand.



Vancouver as
PORN NOIR

by Gordon Brent Ingram



More than any other city in Canada, Vancouver has generated imageries and mythologies of the evils of cultural hybridity. It was racially diverse far earlier than any other major city in Canada. Vancouver's dark Skid Row grittiness has been exported throughout Canada as the sign, the inevitable outcome, of the mixing of the races and the "downfall" of white domination, of the loss of, for lack of a better world, "anglocentricity." The shoved, squeezed and pinched centre of the city has been an arena for assertions of cultural autonomy, hybridity and multiculturalism, on one hand, and the futility of deploring public space in any other way than as established imperial proprieties on the other. The conflicts around social groups, resources and space always seemed to get examined and reiterated through sex and public narratives of the erotic: newspaper articles, court transcripts and urban planning and design.



British Columbia would soon manufacture its regional version of the spectre of the BLACK DICK.

Throughout the history of Vancouver, the most extreme zone of contention around culture, race, gender and sex has been the five blocks on either side of Main Street, once called Westminster, which today has some of the highest rates of street gang-related executions, prostitution, heroin addiction and new HIV infection in Canada. This "rotten" core has been referred, to at various times, as "Celestialland" for its night life and brothels, "Chinatown" and "Japantown" for its ghettoization of Asians and as Hogan's Alley for a small but highly diverse set of African Canadian and African American communities crammed in with some flop houses that were to become western Canada's first lesbian bars. It would be naïve to paint this area, today so painfully squalid, as a major centre of cultural and political resistance for the reconstructing of a Canada not so gruesomely gendered and racialized—especially since many of the battles were lost. But by living together, by being compressed while differences of experience were rarely collapsed, there was the basis for more than the simple and often hateful narratives, more than the reductions of the moral lessons of race and sex.

In 1886, when Vancouver was incorporated as a city, it was already highly multiracial, with Chinook and Chinese spoken along with English. "British Columbians," in contrast to "Canadians," were largely of mixed heritages. By 1887, there were race riots, impelled by whites, many of whom were United States citizens, pushing Chinese people east out of what is today Gastown into a filthy zone of tidal marsh and garbage. Chinatown, as the place of "the other," was born. But at its origins, Chinatown was never more than about half Chinese. The area also included Celestialland, the prime location for vice in Pacific Canada, from saloons to brothels to homosexual meeting places. Soon, the train station was located nearby and native Skid Row culture emerged from a port-side "Indian



Rancherie." Until well into the twentieth century, the majority of the women in British Columbia were of colour. The ruling circles perceived a "shortage" of white women leading to various programs to bring young women to British Columbia—notably the bride ships from London. But the male/female, white woman/non-white woman "imbalance" was to persist for decades, with subsequent pressures to make white women procreate with white men and to separate racial groups. In the nascent constructions of Skid Row, women of colour were targeted in a number of ways.

More than most North American cities, certainly to an exceptional degree for any Canadian city, Vancouver's urban economy was based, in part, on prostitution. In Celestialland, there were several "restricted districts"; outside of some brothels were line-ups that went for half a block. There was an "anti-white slavery" movement to keep working class white women from taking up prostitution, but women of colour were a different matter—as long as they did not produce heirs to white men. In 1913, the backgrounds of the female prostitutes jailed in Vancouver were 26.9% white Canadians, 1.9% black Canadians, 29.5% white U.S. born, 21.6% black U.S. born, 19.7% northwestern Europe born and only .4% undetermined. The relatively high percentage of women arrested who were black may have been because they were targeted. The number of women arrested who were citizens of the United States is intriguing, since they were probably only in Vancouver for sex work. As for Asians, few Chinese women had been allowed entry into Canada by then and when they did it was usually as wives. Most Japanese women were also married.

In a city built so much on heterosexual prostitution, the urban "lessons" often had to be made via the punishment of homosexuality. Inter-racial heterosexual contact, though frowned upon, was virtually ignored in the public media. Punishing homosexuality became both the means to exalt heterosexuality and a conduit for the folly of intimate intercultural contact. Homosexuality,

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Rancherie.**

while illegal and often treated as a threat to the order of the militaristic colony in the nineteenth century, came to be increasingly targeted in the decade before World War I. It was also in this period of heavy immigration, that, for a few brief

waiting for sex, what today would be called cruising, at the southeast corner of West Pender Street and Columbia Street. The detectives had clearly been instructed to entrap.

"We had seen him there three or four nights previous to

that. That is what drew our attention to him this night in particular. I went over across the street to where he was...I asked him what he was doing and he told me to come along with him...

Q. COURT: Does he speak English?

A. Yes.

I hesitated for a little while. He says come on and caught me by the sleeve of the coat. I followed him. We waded cross a vacant lot, a building that has been torn down. He went behind the Chinese Hospital down a stairway and into a little alleyway between two

buildings. He took me over to the back of the hospital and across the alleyway between False Creek and Pender Street. The Chinese Hospital is back of the Mainland Transfer Company's Stables...He took me in the stoop of the stables where the Transfer Company keep their horses. He took me in behind a dray. Took off his coat and vest and put it on the back of the dray.

Q. Dray-wagon?

A. Yes. Then he started to open my clothes. I kind of stopped him a little from opening my clothes. He took down his braces and his pants and went down on his knees on the floor...

Q. MR KENNEDY:- That would be the top of the fly?

A. Yes in fact he had two buttons open. I put my hand on his and then he motioned to his mouth. Then I pushed him away and made him get up and put on his coat. He followed me out to this Chinese Hospital. He had a room there.

Q. COURT: You say he has a room there?

A. Yes five or six of them had a room together...

Q. Before going into where his room was you met Detective Scott?

A. Yes.

The subsequent defense questioning revolved around questions of intoxication and intent—especially as related to Singh's command of English.

Q... Did he say anything to lead you to think he wanted to commit an act of gross indecency?

A He said to me to come on with him and asked me what was the matter.

Q. Did he say anything?

A. He started to open my pants up.

Q. Did he say anything?-

A. No.

Q. So that what he did in your estimation was the object that this act be committed?

A. Well he got on his hands and knees and took off his coat."

Soon after, Singh was alleged to have taken the other detective to

Singh, who had come out of the Great Northern Hotel, was waiting for sex, what today would be called cruising, at the southeast corner of West Pender Street and Columbia Street. The detectives had clearly been instructed to entrap.

decades, the majority population of Vancouver was of British background. This majority was threatened when World War I broke out; many men enlisted, never to return. Vancouver's second boom cycle was coming to a close, threatening to cause many of the people who had recently amassed money to move on. In the same period, the first Nations intensified their reassertions of land ownership and sovereignty until such court actions were made illegal.

The (neo)colonial project on the Pacific coast of Canada was looking like it was going to unravel. Panic broke out in 1914; it was the Sikhs from northern India who had begun immigrating in 1905 who became the target, "the other"—even more of a threat to public "decency" than the black pimp supposedly "enslaving" white "girls" or the Chinese proprietors of the quarter's many opium dens. Like many of the incoming workers, the Sikhs who came were mostly well-built, young men. The Sikhs were politically organized and some were assertive of their homosexuality. British Columbia would soon manufacture its regional version of the spectre of the black dick.

How does a new racialized (and racist), gendered and homophobic discourse begin to work its way into the city, making a new layer of suspect, "public" art? There has to be a bit of a spectacle, and in the absence of today's electronic media, the sites were the courts and the newspapers. For Sikh males, there was the construction of "the stranger" and later that of the conspiracy.

the stranger

In the decade before World War I there was the preoccupation with the "East Indian" male as aggressive homosexual; for example, the 1909 case of Rex vs. Nar Singh. In the months after the first large wave of Sikh immigration, Singh was accused of "in private unlawfully attempt[ing] to procure the commission of an act of gross indecency" involving a white male and later one of two undercover policemen, a Detective McDonald. At 2 o'clock on the morning of December 12, 1908, Singh, who had come out of the Great Northern Hotel, was

his crowded room, which he shared with at least five other Sikh men—one where “the window was very dirty” and there was “a dim electric light coming in.” In the trial, Singh had “nothing to say,” which was the typical sign of resistance to the whole entrapment and bribery system of the time. Singh’s sentence was unclear, as was his subsequent tenure in British Columbia. Chances are he was allowed to flee Canada and move on to another British colonial port city.

the conspiracy

One of the more bizarre attempts to trap around “attempt[sic] buggery” was made against two Sikh males. This episode occurred in the months after the May-July 1914 crisis surrounding the Japanese ship *Komagata Maru* and its thousands of Sikh passengers, who, because of racist hysteria, were not allowed to disembark in Vancouver. On February 2, 1915, one of the defendants, who still cannot be named under British Columbia law, tried to “pick up” a white (and most likely homosexual), chauffeur in the bar room of the Panama Hotel and to take him to a hotel room. The incident started out with conversation focused on the *Komagata Maru* incident and the defendant’s relationship to the activism surrounding that event. This was not exactly light cruising chitchat and may have explained the driver’s motivation in bringing in an undercover policeman—probably for some kind of payment.

The driver responded to the first defendant favourably: “he asked me if I would like to fuck. That is just what he said to me, and I said ‘sure any old thing.’” They made “an appoint” for later that afternoon. Because of potential police harassment at the Sunset, the appointment was changed to the Panama Hotel at 11 p.m. that evening and at one point the chauffeur informed on the defendant—thus becoming immune to any police prosecution stemming from the subsequent “fuck.” The police appear to have been attempting to target a broader network of male homosexual Sikhs—as a means of attacking activists. The first defendant brought a friend, a man identified as having a “blue turban,” while the driver brought a short undercover policeman with an Italian surname—this would be important later. After meeting at Cordova and Carroll in Gastown, the four proceeded along the Canadian Pacific Railway tracks a little on the other side of the Georgia-Harris Street viaduct. Other police officers were supposed to appear just before the men were to “fuck” but they got lost in the darkness. The detective and the driver pulled down their pants and were offered 75 cents by the first defendant, “that Hindoo with the white turban on,” which they gladly took, for sex with the two of them. After exposing themselves, the white men were supposedly offered “two dollars

every Sunday and pay car-fare both ways to Central Park.”

The detective claimed that the first defendant proposed a sort of regular “*menage-à-trois*” at Central Park with the detective and the second defendant.

“I got a shack...he [second defendant] sleep with me, if he don’t want to fuck, I will fuck you good.”

But the other police officers were late and the trap did not go into effect as planned. The detective described a large penis flapping half way up his back and then claimed that, soon after, he was nearly raped by the first defendant.

at one point the chauffeur informed on the defendant—thus becoming immune to any police prosecution stemming from the subsequent ‘fuck’

“He said ‘we will pay seventy-five cents for the two, but next Sunday we will give you two dollars each.’ He said ‘you had better take your pants down.’ So I unbuttoned my pants and removing my pants down my back, and [first defendant] came up with his penis stiff in my back and pushed. As soon as I saw that at my back I turned around and held the accused by the neck.”

But here the story gets fuzzy. While scuffling, the defendants were beaten and pistol-whipped; the first had his jaw broken. The details of this violence are oddly absent from the court proceedings. There were also claims that the undercover detective was well-known by the first defendant because the first defendant was active in defense of Sikhs being harassed by the police and had previously been threatened by the same detective.

The Sikh community has settled away from the older ethnic enclaves, moving out to the suburbs. So too have many of Vancouver’s Chinese-Canadians—often to relatively unilingual suburbs. Skid Row as Vancouver’s original zone of cultural hybridity, of intimate contact, is literally toxic. Just a coincidence? Is the multiracial city essentially a slum? Hardly. Rather the festering narratives encoded in this part of the city are difficult to ignore.

Will any of these competing narratives, these conflicts between a reductionist “white” porn and indefinite “noir” investigation have a physical impact on the city? Do narratives of sex as cultural contact and place in the legal system effectively erect barriers to cultural autonomy and self-definition? Most probably. Or were those racist and homophobic fantasies just “white” porn, just bad public art? The sleuthing continues; so does the circulation of drugs, the only partially successful gentrification and the new waves of historical obfuscation in Vancouver, newly identified as a “World Class City.” ■