

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Becki L. Ross, *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex, and Sin in Postwar Vancouver*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009, 368 pp. \$29.95 paper (978-0-80209646-3), \$65.00 hardcover (978-0-8020-9698-2)

Becki L. Ross's *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex, and Sin in Postwar Vancouver* documents the growth and role of the burlesque industry, contextualizing Vancouver burlesque into the social, cultural and economic environment that the city benefitted from, even if it pushed it away (or even attempted to destroy it) publicly. Through the lens of performance and gender theory, her sociological study argues that Vancouver burlesque generated economic stability for a variety of urban interests even in the worst of times and, consequently, offers a glimpse into the racial tensions, gender norms and sexual values of the time. Through years of archival research, dancer scrapbooks, and copious interviews from around the circuit of Vancouver burlesque, Ross excavates a full, detailed, compelling vision of what burlesque contributed to Vancouver's history, economy and culture.

Despite increased media and academic interest in strip clubs, Ross faced a severe public backlash in applying for (and receiving) taxpayer funds to research and complete this project. Overcoming this opposition, her determination to reconstruct a history to which Vancouver owes so much of the city's growth and culture, publicizes what Brian McNair, in *Striptease Culture* (p. 98) calls "that which has been not just private, but suppressed, repressed or oppressed into invisibility." For Ross, dancers are whole, complex, real people. On the growing bookshelf of work on strippers and strip clubs, their histories, economy, politics and cultural roles, *Burlesque West* stands out as a work that humanizes all its players by completing the historical picture.

As Ross traces the story of burlesque in Vancouver through well-known show clubs such as Isy's Supper Club, Harlem Nocturne, and the Penthouse Cabaret, she connects burlesque to the myriad movements, political struggles, and parallel histories it touched. Burlesque in Vancouver survived among the tensions between prohibition and the demand for alcohol, between union and antiunion movements, between the balance of running a lucrative business and remaining under the legal radar enough to stay open. Dancers along the route from Los Angeles to Van-

couver found bountiful economic opportunity, personal freedom, and creative expression through their work, alongside risks of harassment, assault, social stigma, and the fickle tides of a business that overwhelmingly values youth and novelty over seniority and experience. While dancers executed highly stylized, edgy, fire and pole routines to push their performances to the limits, the industry overall found itself needing to navigate the grey area among political and social extremes in order to stay afloat.

Notably, Ross expands the story of erotic entertainment histories in Vancouver beyond females as providers and males as consumers by devoting her second chapter to the jobs burlesque created for *men* (a consistently understudied dimension of the sex industry). While male club ownership certainly exerted a level of control over the dancers' choices in spaces to work, the club owners depended heavily on the dancers for their livelihoods. Burlesque also meant money in the pockets of satellite industries such as club owners, musicians, costume suppliers, and nearby distractions, as well as other performance-based economies (such as carnivals). Resisting the tendency to paint burlesque and stripping with the broad brush of "low-brow" entertainment, her attention to class-based boundaries among burlesque clubs and audiences reveals the degree of surveillance, the range of legal threats, and their strategies to avoid harassment — all of which are deeply rooted in location, reputation, and the real or perceived class status of the venue and its inhabitants. Ross's inclusion of queer bodies in the story of the Vancouver strip trade — as industry allies, performers and audience members — reflects an increasing attention to an area that is often overlooked in research on strippers (particularly research on heteronormative strip spaces) or acknowledged but often left undeveloped. Having said that, one area left underanalyzed here is how (or whether) the story of burlesque in Vancouver may have had an impact on (or been impacted by) the high-profile and politically volatile antipornography movement in Canada.

Overall, Ross offers a thoroughly researched and compelling work that not only reveals the tremendous cultural debt owed to burlesque but begins to capture this important piece of our collective urban histories.

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Michelle M. Carnes earned a Ph.D. in Public Anthropology from American University in Washington DC in 2009. Her dissertation, "Do It For Your Sistas," explores the history of Black, working class women's lesbian/bisexual strip performance events in Washington D.C., where Black women find acceptance, affirmation, encouragement to be positively sexual and to receive culturally competent health information in a nurturing, judgment-free environment. Following her passion for public health as an essential human right, she now works

as a Public Health Analyst and Project Officer for the federal government. She works closely with community grantees, developing culturally competent prevention programming, core competencies and trainings to reduce health disparities among women, racial/ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ communities.

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