



Commentary – Canadian sexualities in context

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Introduction:

In developing together this special issue on Canadian geographies of sexuality, we hoped to bring together both established and new scholars to highlight the depth and breadth of scholarship undertaken in the Canadian context. We wish to illustrate the contradictory tensions and conflicts still experienced by LGBT and queer people within Canada's progressive social, legislative and public policy framework. To provide greater context for these articles and commentaries,



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we are including a discussion of contemporary Canadian scholarship beyond the geographical that positions these articles within the broader climate within which geographical work is undertaken. To this end, we engaged three scholars in conversation and analysis of following four prominent Canadian books that nicely illuminate the current Canadian political and social environment.

- Tom Warner (2010) *Losing Control: Canada's Social Conservatives in the Age of Rights*.
- Marci McDonald (2010) *The Armageddon Factor: The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Canada*
- Becki Ross (2009), *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex, and Sin in Postwar Vancouver*
- Gary Kinsman and Patricia Gentile (2009) *The Canadian War on Queers*.

We included these books for critical review in the context of the article in the special issue for three main reasons. First, these new texts engage important themes in the broad field of sexuality studies, including the sexual politics of conservatism and the historical governance of sexualities - themes that some contributors to this special issue also engage with. As well, the texts' recent publication provides an opportunity for assessment of their potential contributions to the study of sexualities in the Canadian context and beyond. While the books deal specifically with the Canadian context, the themes they analyze also animate recent scholarly analysis of the geographies of sexualities outside Canada (see, for example, Oswin, 2010; Brown and Knopp, 2010; Brickell, 2010).

Second, we wanted to highlight the nature and focus of broader scholarship on sexualities and spaces in Canada. These four books undertake an analysis of the politics of sexuality from a variety of perspectives, distinguishable from those in the geographical literature, providing an interesting foil to that research. Two of the texts, *The Canadian War on Queers* and *Burlesque West*, were published by scholarly presses and written by university-based academics. The other two (*Losing Control* and the *Armageddon Factor*) were written by a community scholar-activist and a journalist, respectively, and were published by commercial presses. Their audiences, arguably different, speak to the breadth not only of scholarly work on sexualities in Canada, but also of the very domains 'on the ground' where the sexuality remains very much a contested issue. Military, religious, government, civil society and urban planning forums are prominent locations for the debates around sexuality, joining other arguably more established spatialities of sexuality (such as Gay Villages). At least one of the books, *Burlesque West*, expands geographies of sexuality beyond the often-limited focus on sexual minorities and identities to consider the sexual as work (see also Coulmont and Hubbard 2008; Hubbard 2004, 2011). These contributions joins in the spirit of the special issue,

together with Cindy Holmes' commentary, in expanding the notions around what sites, what processes and ostensibly what 'sexualities' are 'at stake' in the politics of, and scholarship on, sexuality.

Finally, we wanted to highlight specifically Canadian perspectives in order to complicate popular discourses that paint Canada as an always already tolerant and inclusive nation-state and political and social community. As with the articles included in this special issue, the books selected for assessment highlight historical and contemporary forms of oppression, of and through 'sexuality', suggesting that historical victories in the realms of law and policy need to be assessed not only in terms of the good will of the state, but with due and careful attention to the hard-fought - and continuing - work by LGBT, queer and other activists. The books assessed here (particularly Kinsman and Gentile's *The Canadian War on Queers*) suggest that relative 'tolerance' in Canada was achieved, in so small part, because of the hard work of activists who struggle against and sometimes plead with the legal and policy institutions of the nation-state. The books also suggest much work is still necessary, especially as rights and victories in Canada are being targeted by a growing and networked, local, provincial and transnational network of social and religious conservatives opposed the gains achieved and working hard to prevent any further progress.

Our pairing of commentators with particular books was strategic, as we wanted to match commentators with books positioned with their area of expertise. Our first commentator is Dr. Miriam Smith, a political scientist from York University in Toronto. Smith's research has concerned, among other things, the ways that sexual rights movements have engaged with the state for recognition and protection (see, for example, Smith, 2005, 2010). In this book panel, she engages with *Losing Control: Canada's Social Conservatives in the Age of Rights* by Tom Warner (2010) and the *The Armageddon Factor: The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Canada* by Marci McDonald.

Smith details the arguments made in these books on the rise of the conservative and religious right in Canada and the challenge their political and social agendas pose to LGBT and queer people's hard won protections. Smith's exploration of Warner (2010) and McDonald (2010) is particularly trenchant in making sense of religious conservative arguments and highlights the necessity for Canadian LGBT and queer political actors to engage not just with the vagaries of the state and its instruments of power (e.g., law), but also with the rising political presence and clout of highly organized and often well funded religious and conservative civil society organizations. This political context is organized transnationally through various conservative networks, as exemplified by the tight links between the American and Canadian iterations of Focus on the Family and the media conglomerations Fox News in the USA and Sun News in Canada (see also Rayside and Wilcox, 2011).

The second contributor is Eric Olund from the University of Sheffield, UK. Olund's work has concerned the historical governance of intimacy in the US Progressive Era, examining among other things, how prostitution, marriage and the cinema were regulated (see, for example, Olund, 2010, 2011). In his section, Olund considers the contributions made in Becki Ross' (2009) book, *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex, and Sin in Postwar Vancouver*. This book contributes to a broader understanding of the history of sexual practices in Canada. As historical analysis of Vancouver, *Burlesque West* makes clear how particular sexual practices are rendered literally out of place in the name of normalcy, morality and quality of life – powerful discourses that continue to be mobilized by the social and religious conservatives. *Burlesque West* provides important genealogical linkages between the 'cleaning up' of particular neighbourhoods post-World War II (and the moral economies these shored up) and much more recent attempts by revanchist city governments to produce respectable and consumable sexual spaces (e.g., Gay Villages) in the name of the competitive city (see Nash, this volume; Bell and Binnie, 2004). It further highlights the necessity for scholars of sexuality to engage not only in narrowly defined battles for human rights (e.g., same-sex marriage), but also, using a queer methodological approach (c.f., Oswin, 2008; Browne and Nash, 2010) the governance and displacement of sexual bodies and conducts legally deemed unnatural, like sex work.

The final contributor is Deborah Cowen of the Department of Geography, University of Toronto. Principally, Cowen's research has been on questions of citizenship and belonging, military geographies and security (see Cowen, 2004, 2008). Cowen considers the major themes highlighted by Gary Kinsman and Patricia Gentile (2009) in *The Canadian War on Queers*, an examination of state security campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s against LGBT and queer people in the federal civil service and Canada's military. She illustrates how early state oppression and stigmatization of LGBT and queer people shaped the formation and agendas of the gay and lesbian movement from the 1970s onward and its' particular focus on human rights protections and social equity legislation. This necessitates an unpacking the specificities of the socio-spatial organization of sexualities and the related institutions, discourses and investments into 'normalcy' and 'citizenship' that this entailed. Taken together, the discussions of Smith, Olund and Cowen bring into sharp focus the broader political and social influences contributing to the shape of current Canadian geographical scholarship on sexualities.

Tom Warner (2010) *Losing Control: Canada's Social Conservatives in the Age of Rights* and Marci McDonald (2010) *The Armageddon Factor: The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Canada*

Miriam Smith

Canada is often considered a bastion of tolerant liberalism while the U.S. is depicted as the home of evangelical conservatism. Yet, over the last ten years, conservative forces in Canada have gained strength and, since 2006, the Conservative Party of Canada has formed the government. These two books, one by leading journalist Marci McDonald and the other by longstanding queer activist Tom Warner seek to shed light on the organization of Christian nationalists (McDonald) and social conservatives (Warner) in Canada and their impact on the political process. Both books focus on Protestant evangelicals and Roman Catholic conservatives with some attention to social conservatives in other religious communities.

Warner views social conservatism as a counter-movement to the women's movement and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) movements and as a reaction to the rise of secularism in Canadian society. He also reads the movement as a reaction to the rise of rights-based society, exemplified by the establishment of human rights legislation and the constitutional entrenchment of a bill of rights (the Charter) that protects against discrimination. Warner provides a solid account of social conservative mobilization on a range of political issues, including the pro-life movement's campaign to (re)criminalize abortion. He also discusses pornography, prostitution, age of consent and other criminal law issues, which he presents in the context of social conservatives' preference for state regulation of morality and social order. Warner's perspective as a gay activist allows him to present a rich picture of how social conservatives' stance on the criminal regulation of sexuality is related to their anti-gay agenda through, for example, their depiction of LGBT communities as sexual predators and deviants. Warner presents a detailed history of LGBT struggles in Canada in areas including hate crimes, same-sex relationship recognition and (anti-)discrimination laws. Perhaps most interestingly, Warner discusses the current controversies in education such as the debate over gay-straight alliances and the role of public funding of Catholic schools in Ontario as well as social conservative debates over political strategy for the Harper Conservative government.

In contrast, Marci McDonald presents a detailed account of specific evangelical groups based on first-person reportage. She presents a rich picture of evangelical groups, the Conservative Party (and its predecessor parties), the Christian press and the role of newly established think tanks from the U.S., such as Focus on the Family. Like Warner, McDonald touches on conservative approaches to a broad range of moral issues that are of importance to the evangelical constituency and its allies. However, her analysis differs from Warner's in her emphasis on the ways in which the growing network of evangelical political and media allies are seeking to shift Canadian values through deliberate and incremental agenda-setting. In particular, she argues that the Harper government has undertaken an incremental approach: "[w]ithout putting forth a single piece of provocative legislation, he has used the enormous patronage powers of his office to shift the ideological leanings of key institutions from the federal courts to federal

regulatory agencies, toward a more socially conservative worldview” (McDonald, 2010: 353). She also argues that some of the funding and expertise for the growth in the evangelical political and media network comes from the U.S.

As both authors are non-academics, neither explicitly engages with scholarly literature on the topic. Nonetheless, they both offer much fodder for further analysis. In particular, they both suggest that social conservatives are worthy political opponents, who are well resourced and well organized, despite their seeming marginalization during the rights era. We might ask whether resources and organisations are sufficient for political success. McDonald’s analysis in particular calls attention to the role of the media in transforming political beliefs and to the possibility that long-term media dominance can shift Canada’s self-image from one of tolerance to one of conservatism through the governing party’s repeated mantra “Canada is a conservative nation”. Neither volume considers social conservatives in relation to Canadian multinationalism (the role of Quebec and First Nations) or multiculturalism. Are there contradictions in the white social conservatives’ pursuit of political allies in minority communities? Are the roots of conservatism in Quebec ripe for a political re-awakening or will English-speaking Canada’s shift to the political right accentuate the rift between Quebec and the rest of Canada? How are First Nations implicated or (re)victimized by the criminalization of sexuality and by the attempted re-traditionalization of church, school and family, according to the social conservative lexicon?

Altogether, Warner and McDonald have made an important contribution to the understanding of contemporary Canadian social movement dynamics and these books should be required reading for anyone seeking to understand Canada’s conservative revolution.

Becki Ross (2009), *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex, and Sin in Postwar Vancouver*

Eric Olund

Becki L. Ross’s *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex, and in in Postwar Vancouver* is a timely intervention within a rapidly re-energising debate over the live commercial display of women’s bodies. Ross’s rich and lively social and cultural history of Vancouver strip clubs explicitly aims to dispel condescending and stigmatising myths of the downtrodden and dysfunctional exotic dancer, and her argument is premised upon one central claim: in a capitalist economy, stripping is labour like any other. Therefore, strippers should be accorded the same rights and dignity as any other workers, and their individuality and agency should not be obscured by blanket assumptions of victimisation.

Valuing these women’s work entails valuing their history, and Ross wears her politics on her sleeve as she documents their labours. In this sense *Burlesque West* is a classic effort to recover and record marginalised voices before they are lost, an especially urgent task given that her history begins in the immediate post-war decades. The study is primarily based on interviews with women who

participated in the industry, as well as with a handful of male club managers, musicians and others who employed or worked with them. The interviews are wide ranging and focus on childhood and home life as well as the workplace. But Ross makes no claims to representativeness here, and this is a fundamental if readily acknowledged limitation of the study. Her interviewees were necessarily self-selecting and tended to be those women who felt the most empowered in their participation in the industry. This is not to say that they or Ross romanticise their time “in the life,” for the women she interviews are very clear on the limits to their agency as well as to their solidarity.

They are explicit about the hazards of the job, as well as the industry’s stratification by race, class, ability, age and size. It is here that the geography of Vancouver’s erotic entertainment industry emerges most clearly. In the post-war years, the city was a particularly important stop on a transnational West Coast circuit of high-profile entertainers. But within the city itself, white, ‘high-class’ venues were located in the West End, while racially mixed, lower-class establishments were clustered in the economically and socially marginalised East End. Ross offers a finely wrought inductive account of this labour geography, one that was inflected by discriminatory licensing and policing along with the differential consumption habits of locals and visitors.

However, more deductive claims are less convincing. Ross notes that in the immediate post-war era, top hotels in the West End refused service to non-whites, including famous African American singers booked by venues in what was emerging as one of the hottest nightclub scenes in North America. As she explains, without any support, this practice of segregation was ‘borrowed’ from the Jim Crow South (34). Resonating with the Canadian discourse of negative nationalism and the more broadly shared discourse of Southern distinctiveness, this claim not only argues racial segregation originates south of the 49th parallel, but that it comes from south of the Mason-Dixon line. Ross does briefly mention other shameful aspects of Canadian racial history without blaming the United States, but taken together, these offer little explanatory content regarding the cultural construction race and sexuality in Vancouver that helped constitute the concrete labour process under examination. They effectively leave the larger context of Vancouver’s erotic entertainment industry very much over-determined by its proximity to the US to the south and its isolation from the rest of Canada to the east. While the peculiarities of Vancouver’s municipal and provincial regulation of pleasure are crystal clear, the distinctiveness of its West Coast-but-not-quite-American cultural milieu and its effect on the production of pleasure begs for more elaboration.

This lack of conceptual and theoretical development is characteristic of the book as a whole. To be fair, the primary purpose of the work is to offer an empirical, documentary intervention, but the style of theorising these findings detracts from this central contribution. Nicely integrated insights, as when Ross characterises white dancers’ racialised ‘exotic’ routines as ‘a uniquely situated

form of “passing” intended to deceive no one’ (93), are outnumbered by name-dropping passages that appear out of the blue to cap off extended empirical narratives by declaring them to be examples of a certain theorist’s sociological or cultural concept. No explanation of how this translation from labour practice to social structure or cultural meaning is offered, and no exploration of how the theory might be thought differently in light of Vancouver’s example is given.

To be clear, these add-ons are so distracting precisely because this submerged Vancouver labour history Ross tells is so rich and compelling on its own terms. Situated at the intersection of political economy with anti-racist, queer and feminist studies, this project raises fascinating questions about the historical and geographical embodiments of labour-power. Whose labour is worth more than others’? How might body size be conceived as a social determinant akin to race and sexuality? What was distinctively ‘Canadian’ about discourses or social formations of race and sexuality in Vancouver? Or is the national scale simply inappropriate for explaining these relations in Vancouver, and perhaps elsewhere? Perhaps the question most germane to Ross’s own purposes is, what is it about sexual labour that makes it seem so different in essence from any other concrete labour process? This book is a richly suggestive starting point for debating these questions.

Gary Kinsman and Patricia Gentile (2009) *The Canadian War on Queers*.
Deborah Cowen

The *Canadian War on Queers* is a hefty 550-page contribution that matches its size with profound significance. A social history of incredible scope and depth, it refuses the ‘social forgetting’ its authors’ diagnose in relations of rule. It is an archive of decades of LGBTQ struggles against the security state, and a powerful weapon in the fight against present and future social wars.

Drawing on a rich collection of interviews, personal memoirs, and community and government archives, *The Canadian War on Queers* recounts five decades of state violence, and the rise of organized LGBTQ movements in response. The book focuses on the purging of queers from the federal civil service and armed forces in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet, while the text is concerned with campaigns of the state security apparatus, the broader social context of laws, norms, and social relations are centrally in the spotlight.

Kinsman and Gentile trace the state’s classification of homosexuals as a ‘security risk’ in the 1950s on the grounds that their sexuality made them susceptible to Soviet blackmail. They recast this vulnerability to blackmail – a ‘character weakness’ according to the state – as a socially constituted precarity produced directly by the criminalization of homosexuality. The authors reconstruct how ‘character weakness’ came to underpin an arsenal of practices and campaigns to rid the civil service and armed forces of ‘confirmed homosexual’ personnel. This included infiltration of queer networks, blackmail and threats of exposure, job loss, incarceration, and aggressive surveillance of queer places of gathering, comport,

conduct, and sexual lives. If the criminalization of homosexuality and persecution of suspected homosexuals concretized the insecurity that was then used to justify (further) state violence, there is another irony to this story. While there are no reported instances of KGB blackmail in all the decades of these campaigns, there were countless stories of ‘suspected homosexuals’ blackmailed by Canada’s military and police forces.

Over the course of the 1960s, as gays and lesbians began to develop more active networks and collective solidarities, state intimidation and blackmail became less effective. The *Canadian War on Queers* documents the ways that civil servants, military personnel and the communities that were brought under surveillance subverted security forces. The ‘fruit machine’ marks this shifting terrain of power. Designed to ‘detect homosexuals’ by monitoring biochemical responses to visual stimulation, the fruit machine was not a marker of the technoscientific prowess of the security state, but rather a sign of its deepening desperation. Not only was the tool a failure at detecting homosexuals; its invention was prompted by the security forces’ search for a technological fix to their own growing impotence in the face of the building LGBTQ visibility and social power. The invention of the fruit machine is evidence that queers were increasingly reshaping the practice of the security forces.

The active role of the governed in shaping strategies of rule is a key thread of *The Canadian War on Queers*, though this is not presented as a romantic tale. In the face of building resistance to their tactics during the 1960s, the RCMP deepened their ties to local police forces. Police ‘morality squads’ worked to elicit information about queer social networks through local violence; raids on bathhouses and other systematic social and bodily violence including the gang rape of butch lesbians.

The Canadian War Against Queers provides a rich social history, yet also offers insights into pressing questions about the political that make it vital fuel for a diverse contemporary readership. This book highlights the central role of sexuality in governing social order and the work of ‘security’ in rendering that social governable. While these themes are largely implicit in the text, there is nevertheless a wealth of insight on offer for those willing to work through its pages. In addition to discussions about the collaboration between national security and local police forces – a theme of interest in critical security studies and activist worlds today, the authors also track the internationalization of security practice decades ago, particularly in relation to surveillance and information sharing. Other threads in the text would be of interest to contemporary scholars of security including the extent of undercover operations and methods of police infiltration into LGBTQ networks – an issue that has garnered significant attention in the wake of the major protests in the 21st century.

More broadly, the whole framing of the book in terms of ‘war’ is provocative and connects to active debates about citizenship and violence. The book’s title is

powerful precisely because it works to describe the targeted attack on a group by its own state, and at the same time to problematize it. ‘War’ works because the organized violence inflicted on queers was sustained, deliberate and multi-faceted, but also because states are ostensibly not supposed to fight wars in this way. The modern state is premised on a distinction between domestic and foreign authority and violence. Yet nation states have always fought domestic wars, and a settler colonial state like Canada was established through ‘domestic’ wars on indigenous peoples. This book helps trace the ways in which internal enemies have been continually created and managed in Canada, and helpfully demonstrates that the very legality of domestic war relied on a prior dehumanization of the group in question.

But this book is not simply about violence and oppression; Kinsman and Gentile also tell a powerful story of the emergence of collective claims for the right to have rights, and thus it is also a book about the agonistic life of the political. Geography also infuses the engagement with organized violence and resistance, though often only implicitly. On the one hand the authors demonstrate the violent constitution and reproduction of national space, while at the same time challenging simple assumptions about the geographies of warfare. The historical urban geographies at work in *The Canadian War on Queers* are enlightening; the reader is exposed to first hand accounts of urban social spaces and sites of surveillance, and queer urban emigrations in response to security sweeps.

The connection between theory, archive and method is a powerful element of this work, but also at times a limitation. The authors make a strong case for the value of social history from below and the role that ‘experience’ plays within such a framework. Indeed, the book’s strength draws from the stories it tells. In mobilizing the perspectives and experiences of the people who survived security campaigns the reader is privy to the complex analyses they offer of their own conditions and the elaborate social and activist worlds they construct. One of the authors’ central aims is to “give the insights of queer theory a more social, historical and materialist grounding, to make its insights relevant to critical historical investigations and activism” (30). Their approach is refreshing. Yet, there are other threads of the story – discursive ones - that deserve attention. Struggles over naming are also material social histories and the time period in question is one of enormous mobility in the politics of naming and being named. If we take the social lives of concepts seriously, we would see the various identity categories that emerge over the course of these decades as not merely descriptive but part of the constitution of new social groups and political worlds.

This kind of analysis would strengthen the important work in the final chapter on the contemporary global politics of sexuality, security and race. The authors make a valuable move to connect the ‘war on queers’ to the ‘war on terror’ describing the common security tactics deployed in each. But for all the value in describing parallels in the forms of state violence, the more constitutive relationships between the shifting politics of sexuality and imperial racism are left

largely unscrutinized. Kinsman and Gentile locate the connections between these two social wars almost entirely in state security practice, downplaying some of the very analyses of class and sexual politics to which they are explicitly and admirably committed.

It is precisely because this text gives so much that it may leave the reader asking for more. *The Canadian War on Queers* is a tremendous achievement and a gift for critical scholars and activists.

Conclusion

The Canadian geographical scholarship contained in this issue is better understood within this wider political and social context. Since the Second World War, state intervention and regulation into LGBT and queer life has influenced the form and substance of the LGBT and queer movements' activism and the nature of their political successes (and failures). This goes a long way to understanding the rise of the conservative and religious right and the form their opposition to LGBT and queer gains is taking. The geographical articles included here further illuminate these historical contexts (Lewis) while breaking new ground in terms of understanding how current circumstances give rise to awkward state interventions into LGBT and queer lives (Catungal, this issue), changing urban spatial organization (Nash and Podmore, this issue) and unanticipated tensions and alliances in regional locations such as Lethbridge, Alberta (Muller Myrdahl, this issue).

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