Geographic racializing and the (re)colonization of Vancouver during the sex work "crisis"

BY EVANIA PIETRANGELO-PORCO

Evania Pietrangelo-Porco is a PhD candidate in the Department of History, York University. Her research interests include 20th-century Canadian history, 19th- and 20th-century women's/gender/feminist history, and 19th- and 20th-century North American Indigenous history.

Vancouver's supposed sex work "crisis" began with the closure of the city's cabarets in the late 1970s. The closure of these cabarets meant that many sex workers (primarily women [biological and trans] of Indigenous descent) had to ply their trade on Vancouver's commercial and residential streets, making it appear during the 1980s that there had been an increase in outdoor sex workers. Ultimately, the sex work "crisis" was one of ideology, image, and identity. From 1980 to 2000, the city's white middle-class residents battled for control over Vancouver's geographic and ideological meanings. These residents not only lived in Vancouver but saw themselves *as* Vancouver itself. As such, these residents wanted Vancouver to embody the image of a white, hetero/homonormative, middle-class resident and, in doing so, adopted the persona of the (re) colonizer.

SEX WORK AS ANTI-COLONIALISM

The migration of Indigenous peoples to the city and the sex worker "invasion" of residential neighbourhoods constitute an act of anti-colonialism. Indigenous peoples and sex workers "invaded" previously and (then) currently colonized lands through their presence. During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Indigenous populations increased in western Canada, leading to a mass migration of Indigenous peoples to urban centres. While the increase of both migrants and sex workers in this period is not necessarily connected, the city's colonial past has otherized and sexualized Vancouver's sex workers and Indigenous peoples in a manner that has joined the two. This connectivity and the supposed increase in sex workers made the city, or rather the establishment of white middle-class hetero/homonormativity, appear under attack. The "panics" over the sex work "crisis," in many ways, resemble historical-colonial fears of Indigenous rebellion and the threat of Indigeneity to settler lands and colonizers themselves (Perry, 2001; Carter, 1993). Normative communities/residents, therefore, had to recolonize their areas through letters of complaint, municipal authorities, anti-sex-worker groups, and, most notably, the gentrification of Vancouver.

VANCOUVER AS A (RE)COLONIZER

The following passage from *A Newcomer's Guide to the City of Vancouver* (City of Vancouver, 2001, pp. 3, 7, 9) offers a pertinent example of the recolonization process:

> Though Vancouver is a relatively new city, aboriginal people have been living here for at least 8,000 years. The Coast Salish people, including the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh, who still live here today, dwelt in villages throughout the area and thrived on a land and sea rich with resources. … *Every City has its special areas and spots that give it a unique flavour.* … **Chinatown** … is one of North America's largest. Shops, restaurants, theatres, gardens, and cultural centres all contribute to this commercial and residential district. … **The West End** … is one of North America's most densely populated neighbourhoods. … The area retains a green and peaceful air while offering ample opportunity for shopping and entertainment.

In the *Newcomer's Guide*, Vancouver's Indigenous history is described through racial tropes that separate Indigenous peoples from the cityscape. The dichotomization between the "relatively new city" and its Indigenous peoples mythicizes Vancouver's Indigenous population. Their description as village-dwelling fixtures of the natural environment resembles the colonial romanticization of Indigeneity as ancient and fundamentally disconnected from modernity. The specification that these peoples still live in the city further projects Indigeneity and, by extension, the Indigenous women of Vancouver's on-street sex trade as relics of the past, thus making the land occupied by these peoples appear available, or rather available again, for settlement (Hunt, 2013).

The city's racialized identity is made more apparent through the gentrified descriptions of Vancouver's Chinatown and West End in the *Newcomer's Guide*. The late 1960s and early 1970s marked a burgeoning enthusiasm for Canada's diverse ethnic groups (Anderson, 1991). Chinatown was celebrated and protected as one of Vancouver's "ethnic neighbourhoods" (Anderson, 1991). The crude "Oriental" motif, associated with disease, crime, and prostitution, of the early 20th century transformed into a subtler sense of ethnic quaintness furnished with shops, restaurants, theatres, gardens, and cultural centres (Ross, 2012; City of Vancouver, 2001). During the same period,

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owing to a growing number of upwardly mobile middle-class gay men, the West End entered a period of intense gentrification involving the transformation of an established working area for sex workers into a "gaybourhood" (Ross, 2018). This "gaybourhood" became realized through the region's "green and peaceful" air and shopping and entertainment opportunities (Ross, 2018; City of Vancouver, 2001).

Chinatown and the West End are Vancouver's most successfully colonized areas. This colonization emerges through geographic size. Vancouver's Chinatown is one of North America's largest, and the West End is one of North America's most densely populated neighbourhoods. The sheer size and density of these regions and the commercial potential therein showcase the spatial success of Vancouver's gentrification/colonization efforts as these places, by all accounts, have been (re)colonized. Colonization is also made most evident through the whitewashing of Chinatown and the West End. Chinatown and the West End transform from their (albeit) white/colonial constructions as dirty, disreputable, illicit, and racialized into gentrified regions representing white, middle-class, hetero/homonormativity via the geographic and ideological colonization of the "other." The gentrification of Chinatown and the West End facilitated a reclaiming of these spaces as commercial and residential areas as well as criminal/racialized spaces within the cityscape. Additionally, as part of the City Publications Collection at the City of Vancouver Archives and as a city publication, the *Newcomer's Guide* represents Vancouver's ideal persona—that of the recolonizer gentrifying the city.

CONCLUSION

The movement and presence of individuals from various racialized and criminalized regions into the increasingly gentrifying Vancouver ultimately challenged the city's spatial delineations. Sex workers, as representatives and residents of the city's most loathsome districts, brought the police, drug dealers, pimps, and clients into "respectable" regions of the city. Instead of becoming the white city envisioned by 19th-century colonists and late 20th-century middle-class residents, Vancouver faced possible degentrification and decolonization from 1980 to 2000 and, therefore, had to adopt its recolonizer persona to regain normative control over the cityscape.

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