A “MINOR LEAGUE EQUIVALENT TO THE EIFFEL TOWER AND THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING”: VANCOUVER’S PENTHOUSE NIGHTCLUB

by

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ABSTRACT

The Penthouse is rumoured to be the oldest continuously operating nightclub in the land we now know as Canada and is without a doubt the oldest exotic nightclub. Owned and operated by an Italian family who emigrated to Vancouver, British Columbia, The Penthouse has survived numerous waves of moral crackdown in the city as well as many offers to buy the prime location in the face of aggressive development. A staggering number of nightclubs in Vancouver, exotic or otherwise, have not shared the same fate.

Through conducting an institutional history of The Penthouse I locate it within changing local politics related to feminist activism, policing, and the sex industry as well as larger shifts in cultural attitudes towards sexual labour and sex workers’ bodies. Further I assemble a social history of the dancers, looking at their experiences in the club and their perception of the intersections between feminism, identity, performance, and sex.

Feminist theory, women’s and gender history, and performance studies inform this multi-method project, which includes results and analysis from archival research and oral history interviews conducted with dancers employed at the club from 1978-2012. Overwhelmingly, the narrators reflected on their time as dancers as valuable to their lives in a myriad of ways, including helping to foster healthy relationships with their bodies and sexualities. Nevertheless most felt that the stigma they faced as sexual labourers impacted their lives in a negative way and was in conflict with the way they experienced their work themselves. This ongoing stigma was often a driving force for abandoning striptease for more ‘square’ or respectable work. Others continue to work in the sex industry. Eleven dancers shared their stories for this project, as did one member of the serving staff at The Penthouse, booking agent Randy Knowlan, and current owner/operator Danny Filippone. These stories offer a history of the Penthouse which places it as a central part of Vancouver’s history. At a time when conventional striptease seems to be in decline and other facets of the sex industry seem to be under attack by new forms of criminal regulation, the interviews with dancers, staff, and the owner/operator suggest that future possibilities for Vancouver’s contemporary striptease communities might lie in the evolving local neo-burlesque scene.

Keywords: Burlesque; Nightlife; Sexual Labour; Sex Work; Striptease; Showgirls
DEDICATION

To hot bitches everywhere, especially Christy M. - miss you muffin
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INTRODUCTION

Overview

The Penthouse is rumoured to be the oldest continuously operating nightclub in the land we now know as Canada and is without a doubt the oldest exotic nightclub in Vancouver and in Canada. Owned and operated by an Italian family who immigrated to Canada in the early 1920s, The Penthouse has survived numerous waves of moral crackdown in the city as well as many offers to buy the prime location in the face of aggressive property development. A staggering number of nightclubs in Vancouver, exotic or otherwise, have not shared the same fate.

This dissertation is a history of The Penthouse and its relationship to the Philliponi/Filipone family, the City of Vancouver and the dancers who worked there. Based on interviews with the dancers this dissertation is also a social history which traces how the everyday working conditions in the erotic dancing industry shaped the labour experiences of the dancers who worked there. As an institution based on the performance of eroticism, the history of the Penthouse is told through its relationship to dancers, sex workers, policing, and city and community regulatory practices. Drawing on interviews with the Filiponne family, memoirs, media coverage, and records of community organizations, city council, and local politicians, this history of The Penthouse as an institution is located within changing local politics which included feminist activism pertaining
to sex work and the sex industry as well as larger shifts in cultural attitudes towards sexual labour and sex workers’ bodies. I argue that the owners and managers of the Penthouse have built a successful business based on the erotic labour of women by successfully negotiating complex regulatory regimes related to alcohol, sex work, and sexual performance. But I also argue that the labour of the performers who danced at the Penthouse are as central to the institution’s history as the story told by the owners, the media, and city and community regulators. Drawing on the ethics and practice of oral history, I assemble a social history of the dancers, looking at their experiences as performers in the club and their perception of the intersections between feminism, identity, performance, and sex. Overwhelmingly, the narrators reflected on their time as dancers as valuable to their lives in myriad ways, including helping to foster healthy relationships with their bodies and sexualities. Nevertheless, most of the narrators argued that the stigma they faced as sexual labourers impacted their lives in a negative way and conflicted with the more positive way they experienced their work. Dancers felt alienated from talking about their work experiences for fear of publicly being labelled a sex worker, which could result in judgements that would ripple through their lives and negatively impact their relationships. This thesis therefore continues the important work of highlighting the actual lived experience of sexual labours rather than the sexual performance of dancing itself.

The Penthouse offers a unique opportunity to explore questions about the development of sexual labour in Vancouver and women’s experiences working in a club. The club has now built and nourished a reputation as a historical venue
that is an important part of Vancouver’s history. However, the women doing the majority of physical labour on which that reputation has been built are almost entirely absent from the few narratives about the club crafted by the media, the legal system, or the current owner/operator Danny Filippone. The stories and experiences of the sexual labourers at the heart of the club’s reputation seem to be under attack (again) along with other facets of the sex industry through the enactment of Bill C-36, *The Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons’ Act* that was put into effect on December 6, 2014.

In order to explore the development of sexual labour in The Penthouse it is important to situate the club in the local historical context. The Penthouse Nightclub opened officially as a supper club in 1947 and continues to operate to this day, licensed and sanctioned by the City of Vancouver as an exotic cabaret or show lounge.¹ The geographical land on which this heritage site sits has been the property of the same Italian family since they immigrated to Canada and later purchased the land in 1938. The venue has also been honoured by the BC Entertainment Hall of Fame (Figure 1). During its first ten years of existence, the nightclub was known for hosting wild parties that provoked conflict with law enforcement in Vancouver. These conflicts led the family to open a club where they could continue hosting parties with a similar theme but in harmony (for the most part) with the City’s rules and regulations.

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Nightclubs, particularly those featuring erotic entertainment, are spaces that illustrate the fluidity between supposedly distinct private and public spheres. Exhibitions and expressions of sexuality in nightclubs, like The Penthouse, straddle the public/private divide. These sorts of venues offer an illusion of privacy and anonymity and yet are often well-known and iconic spaces of eroticism and sexuality. The Penthouse in particular occupies a unique metaphysical location in the City’s local lore. It remains open six nights a week as a strip club, while occasionally offering tours to those interested in the club’s historical significance or hosting an event.

The lasting presence of The Penthouse is an important story given the general decline of exotic nightclubs in the Lower Mainland, the expense of running a nightclub in one of North America’s most expensive cities, and ongoing protest against venues of sexual labour from various local organizations.
This success is particularly interesting as the Lower Mainland, and Vancouver specifically, has not been an easy or friendly place to operate an exotic nightclub on a long-term basis. In the early 1990s, approximately 4000 striptease dancers worked in Vancouver, while currently that number is closer to 200.² Commercial properties in downtown Vancouver have become difficult to maintain in the face of aggressive housing development, which has in turn resulted in the closure of a slew of bars, exotic or otherwise. During The Penthouse’s ‘golden era’ of the mid-twentieth century, it was one of eight supper clubs in Vancouver proper, but now it is one of only six remaining exotic establishments in the entire Lower Mainland. Further, Vancouver has had a notable and influential pairing of radical feminist and religious organizations that continue to endorse a prohibitionist view of sexual labour and regularly protest at one of the three remaining clubs in Vancouver proper, The No. 5 Orange, which is located at the corner of Main and Powell.³ The Penthouse was most recently on the receiving end of a similar protest action during the 2010 Olympics.⁴ These sorts of protests significantly affect the revenue of the club because they reinforce the stigma attached to sex work.

The Penthouse, located at the intersection of Vancouver’s West End, Yaletown, and downtown core, is nevertheless regularly and openly celebrated by

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³ The other remaining club is Brandi’s, which is located downtown on the corner of Hornby and Dunsmuir. Groups who have picketed outside of strip clubs in Vancouver include (REED) Resist Exploitation Embrace Dignity who, according to their website, are guided by the radical teachings of Jesus Christ to end trafficking and sexual exploitation, and EVE (formerly Exploited now Educating), a group with an abolitionist perspective on sex work.
the wider community for its historical significance. Like former San Francisco dancer and scholar Siobhan Brooks, who has analyzed strip clubs in New York City and Oakland, California, I am interested in what an exploration of The Penthouse can show “about the history of people in a neighbourhood, about gender occupation, consumption, race and urban space.” Thus, this project explores the city of Vancouver’s approach to formally regulating sex work, using The Penthouse as microstudy of the complex relationship between politicians, police, local business owners, and sex workers. Furthermore, this dissertation provides a unique and original examination of the way in which this ongoing regulation created informal cultures rooted in the day-to-day lives of women working at the Penthouse as dancers.

The Penthouse’s more or less harmonious relationship with the larger Vancouver community is a relatively new initiative spearheaded by Danny Filippone, nephew to the original owner/operator Joe Philliponi. Philliponi navigated The Penthouse through its challenging early days as a very visible and outspoken manager at a time when anti-Italian sentiments were pervasive in

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6 The variation in their last names is because of a mistake made by an immigration officer upon Joe’s arrival in Canada.
Further, Philliponi was instrumental in seeing the club re-open after a three-year closure (1975-1978) during which he and some of his siblings faced criminal charges.

The unique circumstances and experiences of this business family are interesting to interrogate closely in part because of the family’s Italian heritage. The family immigrated and opened a business in Vancouver during two periods of high migration from Italy, which generated anti-Italian sentiment in Canada. The nightclub was first opened in the midst of Italian immigration in the late 1930s and 1940s during and immediately following Benito Mussolini’s fascist reign, and later reopened during the 1970s when public paranoia surrounding organized criminal or ‘Mafia’ activity was high. Exacerbating these feelings and stereotypes is the fact that the family’s life revolved around a nightclub, thus making it seem as though they could be the model for HBO’s popular and problematic series *The Sopranos*. While some scholars have praised *The Sopranos* for being a ground-breaking show challenging complacent viewers with ethically complicated situations, others have more closely considered how the fictional family’s Italian ethnicity, heritage and culture are represented in racially

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problematic ways. The power of the stereotypes associated with Italian-ness and the mafia shaped how the media represented the family business, but also how the family characterizes its own history. For example, the unpublished memoir written by Danny Filippone’s mother Penny Crowe begins by comparing her experience with the Filippones with *The Sopranos*. She positions her former husband Ross Fillipone as similar to that of the protagonist Tony Soprano. Both patriarchs have very particular relations to and rituals surrounding money, food, and mannerisms. Crowe further identifies some of her own behaviour in her marriage as similar to Soprano’s wife Carmela. For example, Crowe states that:

> Carmela Soprano insisted on the family eating together around the dining table even though their children often slumped there are made sarcastic remarks. I too insisted we have dinner together and share our day’s activities but Ross would say little and concentrate on eating. Tony’s bodily gestures remind me of Ross, the money is a roll held by an elastic or money clip, sorted numerically and deftly counted out to whatever amount was required.

The current owner of the Penthouse, Danny Filippone, has inherited an established and successful business and an incredibly valuable piece of property. He probably experiences less stigma as an owner of an exotic nightclub than the last generation of owner/operators did. Conversely, the dancers who have been a part of the space almost as long as the Philliponi family continue to experience stigma because of the venue’s association with the sexual labour they perform. While documenting the history of this institution I explore and include

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narratives, largely from the dancers themselves, which diverge from the dominant patrilineal framing and official control of this space.

The history of the Penthouse as an institution and the experiences of the dancers who worked there must also be considered in relation to feminist theory and the history of sex work. How did groups and institutions in Vancouver (police, city officials, dancers, business owners) understand the kind of sex work performed at nightclubs like the Penthouse? How was dancing at the club understood on the spectrum of sexual labour both legal and illegal? When (and under what conditions) was dancing praised as art or marginalized? Most importantly, I wanted to know what individual dancers from various points in The Penthouse’s history felt about how their work and how perceptions about their work were shaped by the broader context of sex work in Vancouver. The experience of sex work is frequently reduced to the image of a silhouetted sexy woman lurking in the shadows. In reality, sex workers do an immense amount of physical and emotional labour while navigating a complex day-to-day life shaped in part by being sexual labourers. Placing their perspectives and narratives in conversation with the institutional history of the Penthouse creates a fuller story of sex work in Vancouver, one in which the main workers are considered as full participants.11

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11 For example, the recently released *Liquor, Lust, and The Law: The Story of Vancouver’s Legendary Penthouse Nightclub* features many photos of dancers from over the years, but not their stories. Most of the women in the photos are credited only in generic ways like “Exotic dancers on stage.” (69)
Theories and Literature Review

This dissertation contributes to the growing body of literature that focuses on the dynamics and history of striptease and its discursive conventions in exchanging sexual excitement and titillation using various styles of dance and athletic performance to showcase and display feminine sexuality. It draws on and is situated in research on the history of burlesque and erotic dance as labour practice and performance. It is also deeply grounded in feminist theories of sex work. Finally the dissertation draws on postfeminist theorizing on the body and theories of the body as performance.

The tradition of burlesque and striptease is conventionally traced through Victorian vaudeville and cabarets and includes elements of ballet, drag, opera, and satire that challenged “expectations for urban women in public space regarding appearance and behaviour.” The satirical element of burlesque that seeks to critique conventional conservative upper-class values, particularly focused on those related to sex and sexuality, continued to be a prominent part of the tradition long into the golden age of the mid-twentieth century. For example, famous burlesque performer Dixie Evans developed performances that built on the popularity of Marilyn Monroe’s film career and public personal life. Despite not having a reputation for being much of a singer, Evans sang songs made

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13 Brooks, Unequal Desires, 12.
popular by Monroe and sometimes playfully changed the lyrics to make a suggestive joke about Monroe's affairs. Joe DiMaggio was granted a private performance of Evans' popular song that satirized his relationship with Monroe shortly after his divorce with the real Monroe. Evans herself described burlesque as “mimicking the real and exaggerating something.”

Beginning as theatre for working-class audiences, the main objectives of this genre sought to “burlesque” upper-class art, conventions, culture, and politics. Famed performers Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes came to North America from England in 1868, touring to sold-out audiences who were shocked and intrigued by seeing women on-stage in men’s tights paired with corsets, and acting in a manner perceived as sexually aggressive, playful, and suggestive. Burlesque and vaudeville eventually split, with vaudeville considered family-oriented entertainment and burlesque becoming ‘adult’ because of the sexual themes that mocked bourgeois values of sexual propriety.

In the frontier towns of Western Canada, however, it is likely that this burlesque tradition merged with dances in saloons by the Hurdy Gurdy Girls, who charged a dollar a dance. Their dancing and their participation in other pastimes, largely in mining communities, flirted with the boundaries of socially acceptable decency and were often considered immoral or were conflated with

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15 *Anatomy of Burlesque*, produced by Peter Raymont and Lindalee Tracey (Toronto: White Pine Pictures/Canadian Television Fund, 2003), DVD.
prostitution. This conflation occurred in part because of the sexualized activities but also because a heavy male labouring population made up British Columbia mining towns. One such activity involved men holding plates of flour with women standing in rows across from them; the women would then kick the plate of flour towards the men’s faces while the men raced to see what was going on under the petticoats before their eyes were filled with flour. Though Lydia Thompson and her troop’s influence on the development of burlesque is undeniable, recent historical accounts perhaps give her too much credit and ignore other possible early influences such as those found in Western Canada, as well as the Can-Can and Middle Eastern Belly Dancing. According to Maruša Pušnik, striptease’s hegemonic conflation with promiscuity in North America has long cultural roots:

women’s powerful and enthusiastic movement of hips and buttocks is labelled as obscene, excessive and signifying vulgarity and

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20 VPL 2267; 1902; Ferguson, BC; Photographer: Mattie Gunterman; Ann and Rose Williams at the Nettie-L Mine in Ferguson playing "kick the plate" with Mattie Gunterman.

21 The documentary The Anatomy of Burlesque addresses how the Can-Can and Belly Dancing gained popularity and notoriety before becoming integrated into many burlesque shows. The Can-Can, created by the working class in France, was banned in 1830 when the nobility returned to power. ‘Can-Can’ was also listed as a forbidden word in the dictionary. Despite these attempts to aggressively eradicate the Can-Can it was practiced until 1845 and re-gained popularity in 1889 when it was performed at the famous Moulin Rouge in a show commemorating the French Revolution. France was now heading into ‘Le Belle Epoque’ of the 1890s, where bodies were liberated, morality was defied, and authority was again challenged. In North America, the 1893 Chicago world fair featured a belly dancer who performed under the name ‘Little Egypt’. Capitalizing on the Orientalist popularity of her performance, many burlesque shows following the fair included a belly dancer. This dancer would also use a stage name similar to Little Egypt’s such as ‘Little Cairo’ or ‘Little Alexandria.’
immorality, but this same movement in some other segments of the same society indicates female confidence and self-esteem...22

This dissertation makes an important contribution to the very limited literature on the history of sex work and burlesque in Western Canada. There is only one other scholar who has extensively examined this topic in the Western Canadian context. *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex and Sin in Postwar Vancouver* by Becki Ross creates the scaffolding of a comprehensive history of the burlesque tradition on the West Coast that I both draw and expand on through my own historical research and oral histories. Like Ross, my work approaches Western Canadian burlesque history in a way that attempts to disrupt the agent/victim dichotomy placed on dancers. Scholars and commentators have labelled erotic dancers and sex trade workers as either victims of patriarchy and male pleasure in “a universally harmful institution” or as agents empowered by choices they make regarding their bodies.23 These relatively simple binary frameworks limit alternative perspectives, negate or dishonour the complex realities of people who engage in sexual labour, and underscore the problematic


tendency of scholars of sex work not to consult with people they are studying. This dissertation adds to research that insists that people who work in the sex industry have the ability to participate in the construction of their own narratives. These narratives, including those in this project, problematize these victim/agent binaries and “resist stigmatization by speaking about what is deemed to be secret and shameful.” By refusing to adopt a dichotomous framework, this research highlights the stories dancers tell about themselves, stories which emphasize demonstrable abilities related to smart business decisions, theatrical and artistic skill, and athletic prowess.

Along with disrupting the agent/victim binary so often used to describe sex workers, oral histories have revealed that dancers struggle with the binary of ‘high and low art,’ a binary which is also related to the conflation of erotic dancing with prostitution. Erotic dancers have to negotiate mainstream perceptions that their performances are “sleazy” and hypersexual, as well as industry pressure that grants more opportunities to dancers who resemble most closely impossibly narrow and racialized beauty standards. The industry rewards extraordinary elements of any given performance including preparation, set, costumes, props, and athleticism. Making sets or developing performances that

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stand out in any of these ways increase the value of performers. But the time and money needed for this type of work investment does create an industry hierarchy that devalues the labour of dancers who work to make relatively quick cash, who dance in order to pay tuition, or who have to support dependents or pay for addictions. This industry hierarchy is reflected in the tension between dancers who say they ‘always wanted to dance/perform’ and those who say they “fell” into it. Sometimes this hierarchy is reflected in the fact that some had extensive dance and performance training in their youth while others did not have that opportunity.

Feminist theories of bodies influence the way I approach the history of burlesque and address the performance of sexuality and sexualization of women in relation to subjectivity. That is, women are often situated by scholars and activists as victims, subject to the dictates of a patriarchal culture that determines how female bodies are to be understood. As Ross and Greenwell argue, longstanding stereotypes assume that “ladies would never perform commercial striptease unless coerced and/or drugged by pimps or mobsters, as popular lore would have it.” Thus, engaging in sex/skin trade work is often argued to be a hyper-feminine gender performance that is coercive and an act of false

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26 See also Brooks, Unequal Desires; Ross, Burlesque West.


consciousness. From this perspective, women’s bodies are described as “bought and sold acts of rape.”29 This approach rejects the idea of any mutually beneficial exchange between dancers and customers and asserts that “sexual services and performances [are] inherently oppressive and exploitative.”30 Other scholars such as Debra Ferreday argue against this model and see the sexuality of burlesque dancing and its surrounding cultures as empowering, and as a “site of parody and resistance which ‘troubles’ critiques of femininity.”31 Burlesque, from this perspective, is a process of making spaces where performers explore their relationships to sexual and gender expression in creative ways.

An approach that carefully considers and examines many factors shaping a person’s reality draws on an intersectional framework which challenges the “prioritizing [of] one identity entry point (i.e. gender) or one relation of power (i.e. patriarchy) to the exclusion of others (i.e. race, class) misrepresent[ing] the


full diversity of ... lived realities.” Feminist scholars of sex work have drawn on this approach in a number of ways. Most usefully, Ron Weitzer has developed what he calls ‘the polymorphous paradigm’. In contrast to ‘the oppression paradigm’ touted by those who take a prohibitionist approach to sex work, ‘the polymorphous paradigm’ “holds that a constellation of occupational arrangements, power relations, and worker experiences exists within the arena of paid sexual services and performances.”

Following Ferreday’s more recent analysis of the controversy surrounding Belle De Jour, a British sex worker and academic who wrote about her experience in the sex industry in two popular books, this project continues the crucial task of destigmatizing sex work in order to make the industry socially safer for the people who take part in it. This happens primarily through listening to and respecting the knowledge of insiders rather than relying exclusively on the sensationalized accounts from outsiders. This includes being cautious of using terminology which positions dancers as victims of their circumstances and which does not adequately reflect their experiences. As one dancer told a reporter in Portland, “We’re the ones in our underwear, so we should be able to make the rules.”

The framework for this dissertation, which moves beyond the binary mode of victim/agency, is influenced by the rise of postmodern and poststructuralist theories and is shaped by Michel Foucault’s writing on power, knowledge,

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discourse, embodiment, discipline and genealogy. I am influenced by Michel Foucault’s work and the work of feminists who use Foucault, such as Judith Butler, who address gender as a social performance built on essential characteristics that are repeated over time and thus made meaningful. Butler argues that gender characteristics are unstable and highly contextual, for something that represents femininity in one cultural location could be interpreted differently in another time and place. I posit that the signs and symbols of erotic dancing are similarly unstable and that this instability can be demonstrated at various periods throughout the history of erotic dancing. For example, expectations of the degree of nudity, or the extent of individual audience/dancer interactions have changed significantly over time. The changing symbolic meaning of burlesque and erotic dance can be traced through the example of dancers at The Penthouse from the 1960s to the present day.

The changing symbolic meaning of erotic dancing is also demonstrated in the current trend of burlesque revival, also called neoburlesque. Debra Ferreday defines neoburlesque as “a subculture in which young women take part in striptease which invoke the iconic styles and routines associated with mid-20th century cabaret.” In the final chapter I explore the relationship between post-feminism and neoburlesque and suggest the role that neoburlesque might play in the future of the erotic dance industry in Vancouver. The growth and performance of neo-burlesque must be situated in the context of both third-wave feminism, which began in the early 1990s, and post-feminism. The major difference between third-wave and post-feminism, however, is that third-wave

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35 Ferreday, “Showing the girl,” 47.
feminism often sets up a polarity between the ‘matriarchs’ and the ‘younger’
generation of feminists, with this generational tension then used to either reflect
the on-going debates about the ‘correct’ way to be a feminist or to explain
ideological differences within feminism. While the idea of a specific or ‘correct’
form of feminism is rejected by third-wave feminism in theory, in practice
Willson argues that naming the faults of second-wave feminism has contributed
to the making of the ‘good’ third-wave feminist.36 Post-feminism offers a more
useful approach because it draws on postmodern considerations of multi-faceted
identities and multiple as opposed to singular narratives, claiming there are
many ways to look at the world and tell the ‘same story’ or truths. Neoburlesque
performances in Vancouver celebrate assertive feminine sexuality and challenges
narrow and normative beauty ideals. I am less concerned with where striptease
finds itself in the conventional genealogy of feminisms because sexual labourers
have often found themselves on the outside of those ‘mother-daughter’
conversations entirely, excluded from mainstream feminism because of the
perception that feminism and sex work is mutually exclusive or that all sexual
labour is exploitative.

My work on burlesque dancers in Western Canada is situated in feminist
and performance theories of bodies and sexualities. Interpretations of burlesque
performances hinge on issues of embodiment, gender, and subjectivity. Jane
Desmond contends that “to understand dance history and dance practices, we

36 Willson, The Happy Stripper, 9; Ann Braithwaite “The Personal, the Political, Third-Wave and
Post Feminisms,” Feminist Theory 3, no. 3 (2002): 335-44; Ann Braithwaite, “Politics of/and
Backlash,” Journal of International Women’s Studies 5, no. 5 (2004): 18-33; Rebecca Ellis,
“Second Thoughts About the Third Wave,” 20, no. 4 (2001) 24-6; Natasha Pinterics, “Riding
must analyze them in relation to histories of sexualities” particularly as theatrical dancing is frequently conflated with the feminine. Burlesque and striptease traditions are typically understood as explicitly feminine, whether they are being practiced or studied in a theatrical tradition or within the context of social dancing, which generally takes place at parties or in nightclubs. Striptease conventions in burlesque, whether social or theatrical, are infused with a certain amount of sexiness and spectacle invoked via a certain move, look, or aesthetic shared between the performers. These aesthetics and moves were then passed on through continued mentoring of newer dancers. The audience, venue, and intent of the performer, however, are what determine whether the performance of sexiness is operating within the heterosexual economy or whether it is a queer interpretation of this iconic spectacle. Katherine Liepe-Levinson, for example, considers how both choreography and costume have the potential to subvert and uphold conventional gender roles in erotic dance. Her analysis of sexuality tends to figure squarely on heterosexual desire, however, as her discussion relies on assuming a performer of the ‘opposite’ gender from the audience.

Jane Blocker criticizes scholars of performance art who do not locate the body at the centre of inquiry. This neglect is problematic because it disregards any emotional, psychic, or social affect for the artist. Blocker situates performance art as a postmodern practice that searches for ‘the body,’ unsure if it

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38 Desmond, “Introduction,” 5.
can actually be found, or experienced. Blocker’s criticism of existing scholarship on performance art notes that most scholars tend to follow a patriarchal, heteronormative, and modernist model that is counterintuitive to actual practice. I argue that some burlesque and striptease attempts to exist outside of this hetero and gender normative model, while ‘conventional’ strip performances in nightclubs where dancers are working exist squarely within it. However, as later chapters in this dissertation argue, the relationship between the conventional and more subversive performances is not always so clear, and remains, ultimately, incredibly complex.41

**Methodology**

To explore this project, I am using a multi-faceted methodological approach that is deeply rooted in the practice of oral history. In this section I discuss the benefits of using oral history methods and the ethics surrounding this practice and then discuss how the oral history component of this project was complemented with archival work.

The qualitative oral history component of this project draws together two important themes in the history of The Penthouse. First, interviews with

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Penthouse staff, management, and the owner of the club help explain the business practices of The Penthouse and the conditions under which the dancers were expected to work. In particular, the interview with current owner Danny Filippone demonstrates his desire to situate The Penthouse as an 'iconic' club that is an important part of Vancouver's history. Second, interviews with dancers who have worked at The Penthouse demonstrate their resistance to their stigmatization as sexual labourers. By interviewing dancers about their experiences as sexual labourers, I draw on the work of Elizabeth Anne Wood who argues it is important "To depict the stripper as subject, rather than as object." 42 Taking seriously the experiences of dancers at The Penthouse reveals the importance of oral history methodology. Oral historians actively listen to and prioritize the stories and experiences of people who are often ignored by official narratives. While the interviews with Danny Filippone and former staff tell us important stories about the history of the club, interviews with the dancers put their sexual labour at the centre of The Penthouse’s success. Further, oral history “provides access to huge populations of women from whom we would otherwise not hear.” 43

Oral historians argue that “sharing” authority is a central part of the process of oral history. What is meant by sharing authority? Written sources framed by an institutional or patriarchal lens are more prevalent in history

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because they reflect the ideological values of those with control and access to power and resources. This makes written documentation and documentation formally preserved in archives easier for historians to study. Historian Joan Sangster notes that while written documents can be interpreted in a way that highlights the “crucial elements” of class and gender, deciphering a first person perspective from a marginalized position remains difficult. Oral history can offer alternative views on dominant stories from a particular time or place by deliberately seeking out the experiences of those who are marginalized or ignored. Oral history is particularly appealing to me as a scholar interested in the stories of sex workers because, as Sangster notes, traditional sources have often neglected or erased those who are marginalized. Similarly, Michael Riordan in his book *An Unauthorized Biography of the World* (2006) uses oral histories to recover alternate versions of official histories, including the debates and confrontations over First Nations’ land, environmentalism in Chicago, genocide in Peru, and homelessness in Cleveland. The ultimate aim of historians using oral history methodology is not simply to ‘add’ alternative or ‘extra’ voices to a dominant narrative but to challenge the validity of the dominant narratives themselves. In this dissertation, I argue that privileging and seeking out the

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perspectives of dancers helps us understand erotic dancing and sex work in more complex ways.

Historians who use oral sources also have to address the concept and the meaning of memory:

as soon as we recognize the value of the subjective in individual testimonies, we challenge the accepted categories of history. We reintroduce the emotionality, the fears and the fantasies carried by the metaphors of memory, which historians have been so anxious to write out of the formal accounts.47

Elizabeth Tonkin initiates a discussion of memory and reliability in her book *Narrating Our Pasts* (1992), where she describes issues raised by the conflicting memories of the narrators in an oral history project that she conducted in Liberia. Tonkin motions to the relationship between the past and the present, noting that memories of the past shape conceptions in the present.48 A narrator in an oral history speaks with intention, and it is important for the historian to try to discern or be aware of this intention as it can influence the delivery and construction of the historical narrative.49 For example, because I spoke to dancers who were largely interested in sharing their positive experiences of dancing, it seems the narrators by and large did not want to engage in discussions that contributed to or reified the stigma they experienced as part of a dangerous industry allegedly closely associated with violence, drugs and alcohol, or organized crime. The dancers did not share any memories of sexual harassment

they experienced or any substance use they could have been a part of or been witness to.

A history of the Penthouse would look very different without seriously considering the stories of the dancers who performed and worked there. Similarly, the oral history undertaken with Danny Filippone adds a dimension to the institutional history of the club that would otherwise rely on media accounts or city documents which focus on the club’s relationship to regulatory agencies such as the police. Danny Fillippone’s interview should be understood as a particular kind of narrative performance that is shaped by his desire to frame the history of The Penthouse as a story of business success, “class,” and respectability.50

This project draws on the methodological contributions of collaborative oral history, which argues that such projects can be linked to broader ethical social goals of disrupting patriarchal power relationships inherent in the dynamics of the researcher and the narrator.51 Furthermore, many scholars argue that one of the strengths of oral history is that it allows for projects that bring together community collaboration with social justice activism and scholarly endeavour. According to Armitage and Gluck, oral history projects are “both a scholarly and an activist enterprise.”52 Oral history principles which emphasize collaboration and sensitivity to the risks at stake for both the researcher and the narrator, are also ethical principles that should provide the underlying principles.

51 Shopes, “Commentary”, 107.
52 Armitage and Gluck, “Reflections on Women’s Oral History”, 3.
for any academic research involving sex work because of the stigma attached to working in the industry and the ramifications of this stigma in each narrator’s circumstances.

The ethics of oral history are complicated, but the emphasis of oral history methodology on ethical care, respect, and collaboration are principles well-suited to academic research on sex work. This project brings together the emphasis on collaboration and reflexivity within the practice of oral history, and the ethical values underpinning my approach to studying sex work, in order “to redefine the very conditions in which knowledge is produced and legitimated, situating ethical relationships as central.” 53 I approached the interviews collaboratively, which Bowen and O’Doherty argue is “the least ethically harmful and most beneficial form of research related to the sex industry.” 54 Before the actual interview, each narrator was given the opportunity to look at the questions I had prepared to ensure the questions reflected the ideas and themes they wished to contribute to the project, and that the interview would not violate their comfort in participating. I also gave the narrators the opportunity to modify, elaborate, or suggest alternative questions. As Armitage et al. argue, “The best interview allows for the flow of material in a natural manner, within the interviewee’s own framework.” 55 Ultimately, it is the dancers themselves who are the most familiar with their experiences at The Penthouse. As I have never danced at The Penthouse despite my extensive knowledge of the sex industry, I wanted to make

54 Raven Bowen and Tamara O’Doherty, “Collaborative Research with Sex Workers in Vancouver, B.C.” Critical Perspectives on the Politics of Sex Work. Forthcoming: 6
sure I asked questions that honoured the narrators’ time dancing and time spent talking to me about it.\textsuperscript{56} Talking about one’s experience in the sex industry to someone relatively unknown can be difficult because of the ongoing stigma against sexual labourers. Further, this collaborative approach allowed the narrators to influence the themes and theories that I explore in this dissertation, giving them and opportunity to challenge any presumptions I may have unwittingly written into the draft questions.\textsuperscript{57} By seeking input on direction and approach from narrators before the taped interview and by being aware of the exchange of power between narrator and researcher,\textsuperscript{58} I agree with Bowen and O’Doherty that this approach “can build social and cultural capital among sex workers; support their goals towards civil rights, social justice and social change; and also challenge existing policies that serve to marginalize, criminalize and exterminate.”\textsuperscript{59} As a researcher who has also worked closely with sex workers as a front-line support worker, I made it clear to narrators that I respected their craft as dancers and that I shared their desire to destigmatize sexual labour.

I came into contact with many of the dancers who offered their time to participate in this project through my involvement with sex worker advocacy,

\textsuperscript{56} In 2007, I started volunteering for WISH Drop-In Centre Society, a non-profit in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside that seeks to improve the health and safety of Vancouver’s street-based sex workers. In 2010, I was hired on as relief a relief driver and peer support worker for their Mobile Access Project (MAP) Van. In 2012, I took on the co-ordinator role for that project which I still hold. My dissertation is informally influenced by the values and expertise I have gained there.

\textsuperscript{57} Jade Boyd, “Producing Vancouver’s (Hetero) Normative Nightscape,” Gender, Place, and Culture 17, no. 2 (2010): 172.

\textsuperscript{58} “There is an increasing recognition that an understanding of the relationship between interviewer and narrator is important in any analysis of the oral history interview and of the stories that are told or not told” (Sitzia 87).

\textsuperscript{59} Bowen and O’Doherty, “Collaborative Research with Sex Workers in Vancouver, B.C.”, 6-7.
activism, and outreach in Vancouver.\textsuperscript{60} Interviews began in the months following Justice Himmel’s September 28, 2010 decision in Ontario that provisions in the \textit{Criminal Code} violated sex workers’ rights to safety and security, as guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.\textsuperscript{61} This decision resulted in de facto decriminalization in the province of Ontario that could have spread across the country as the case moved through the court system. The unfortunate outcome, however, was restrictive legislation passed by the Conservative federal government and put into law on December 4, 2014. Bill C-36 criminalises purchasing sex for money and some surrounding activities, including advertising sexual services, communication for the purposes of buying sex, and receiving material benefit from someone else’s sexual services. The new legislation tries to end the supply and cut off demand similar to the Swedish model of criminalization. The Global Alliance Against Traffic In Women (GAATW), consisting of more than 120 non-governmental organisations from Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean, argues that “the criminalization of clients fosters a climate that tacitly supports the use of force or coercion by social service providers. The choice to exit sex work should not be

\textsuperscript{60} In 2009, I joined the planning committee for FIRST, a feminist group which advocated for the decriminalization of the exchange of sex for money. Simultaneously, I began volunteering at a drop-in centre for sex workers. Later in 2010, I started a paid position with an outreach van for sex workers affiliated with the drop-in centre. In 2012, I took over coordinating that outreach project.

\textsuperscript{61} There are essentially 3 approaches to regulating sex work: criminalization, decriminalization, and legalization. Criminalization can encompass both the buying and selling of sexual services. Under the current Bill C-36, the purchase of sexual services is illegal, which much like legislation in Sweden. Advocates of this kind of regulation argue that controlling and condemning the clients will eradicate sex work. Decriminalization models like the one currently employed in New Zealand endeavor to reduce stigma against sex workers by treating the sex industry like any other profession and does not necessarily place sex workers in an antagonistic relationship with the law. Legalization frameworks, like those currently employed in Amsterdam and Nevada, make sex work legal in some contexts, but this approach still creates a black market with those who are unable to work within the legal framework.
made under the threat of legal consequence or bodily harm.”62 The Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (Bill C-36) largely contradicts the original Bedford v. Canada decision by the Supreme Court of Canada and “by definition, an approach that espouses the criminalization of clients authorises law enforcement to govern sexual activity between consenting adults.”63

It is important to note the historical moment in which the interviews took place.64 This is particularly salient because I share mutual interests in the politics of sex work decriminalization. Though the decision and what it could mean for the future did not come up in any interviews, there was a lot of dialogue among sex work activists about what this decision means for the movement as a whole. These discussions included ‘ownership’ of the movement and possible legal outcomes, with strong convictions expressed by many sex workers that “criminal law should be reviewed with the aim of decriminalizing, then legally regulating occupational health and safety conditions to protect sex workers and their clients.”65 It should also be noted, however, that not all of the narrators aligned themselves with the struggles of others working in the sex industry and in fact see distinct divisions between erotic dance and sex work.66

63 Ham, “Criminalising Clients Endangers Sex Workers”, 4.
64 Armitage and Gluck, “Reflections on Women’s Oral History”, 6 and 9.
66 Flora, (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 12, 2011); Carson Leigh (interview by author, January 4, 2011); Mistress (interview by author, January 4, 2011).
I began this research project with the intention of only interviewing people who had danced at The Penthouse, along with Danny Filippone (the owner/operator of the club). But once I began the interviews, many narrators suggested I talk to others to get a more complete picture of the club across various time periods. From a sociological perspective, this could be considered respondent-driven or network-based sampling.\(^6^7\) In addition to the eleven dancers interviewed and the interview with Danny Filippone, I interviewed the owner of agency Stripper Entertainment, Randy Knowlan, who acts as a liaison between management at the club and the dancers, and Leah, the head waitress at the Penthouse in the 1990s.

After interviewing Filippone, he offered to assist me in locating other participants should I need more narrators. I suspect Filippone was very calculating in the people he referred me to; for example, he referred me to long-time booking agent Randy Knowlan but was not particularly excited about me pursuing legendary Penthouse dancer--later turned security staff member and hostess--Mavis. Filippone claimed I already ‘knew everything’ Mavis would know, even though my experience of The Penthouse is entirely different than hers. I do not have any reason to believe Filippone was ‘hiding anything’ or there was any kind of falling out between the two after Mavis left the Penthouse. Rather, he has a political and economic investment in seeing the narrative of The Penthouse as unified and cohesive and therefore he attempted to control access.

to those interviewed. I did not ultimately interview Mavis, though I did interview her close friend and successor Leah, who speculated that Mavis could find talking about the club difficult as she left The Penthouse to stop drinking. Unlike Filippone, I see the history of the Penthouse as characterized by multiplicity and fluidity, allowing for dancers to produce their own histories of the club alongside the dominant image that has been crafted for the club by the Filippone family. Existing research on the culture and business of clubs has, as Boyd argues “emphasized men’s capacity to control capital and dominate music production, while diminishing the significance of women’s and girls’ participation and subjective experience…” The way that Filippone has crafted the legacy of his family business ensures a cohesive narration of the club’s history and is also an extension of men’s powerful position in the music and nightclub profession.

Filippone and Knowlan are both referred to by name in this project with their written consent and permission because they are public figures with unique positions and histories. Concealing their identity would be incredibly difficult if not impossible. Because of their influential positions, they are afforded some benefits of living their lives ‘out’ and do not experience the same degree of stigma and discrimination that women working in the sex industry do. The dancers and other employees from the Penthouse, therefore, are referred to by names chosen by them. In many cases they chose to have me use their stage name. The convention in the sex industry, and with dancing specifically, of having a unique name for work often has to do with marketing and attracting customers. It is

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68 Leah (interview by author, Hope, BC, March 10, 2011).
69 Boyd, “Producing Vancouver’s (Hetero) Normative Nightscape”, 171.
often chosen because it is sexually suggestive in some way or reminiscent of a particularly attractive celebrity. But this tradition also reflects the stigma associated with being a sexual labourer, because the name taken on acts as a barrier between the dancer’s work life and ‘real’ life. On the advice of Simon Fraser University’s Research Ethics Board, the dancers and employees at The Penthouse consented to the interview verbally, rather than with a written form, in order to further protect their identities. I have no written record of their legal names. Dancers and other employees are of varying classes, ethnicities, races, sexual orientations, and ranged from 30-64 years old at the time of the interview (see Appendix A). Most dancers had diverse backgrounds and identified as white, which is reflective of dancers in Vancouver on the whole as discussed in Chapter 4. Interviews lasted between half an hour and four hours and were taped using a digital recorder, and narrators indicated whether they were comfortable with follow-up for clarifications after they verbally consented to the interview. All agreed, although few were consulted following the interviews. I have, however, crossed paths with a few casually in the course of completing this project.

As this was a largely unfunded graduate project, I was unable to offer narrators any formal honoraria; however, when the mutually agreed upon interview location took place in a restaurant or coffee shop, I offered to pay for a drink or meal. This offer was accepted on two occasions. Other interviews took

70 Jeremy Hainsworth, “Sexual Rebels and Striptease Artists,” Xtra West, 8 October 8, 2009, 19; Brooks, Unequal Desires; Bruckert, Taking It Off, Putting It On; Egan, Dancing for Dollars and Paying for Love; Ferreday, “Showing the Girl;” Frank, G-Strings and Sympathy; Liepe-Levinson, Strip Show; Ross, Burlesque West; Willson, The Happy Stripper.
place in the homes or offices of the narrators. The women who agreed to participate in an interview did so to disrupt the dominant perceptions of erotic performers as victims and sexual deviants including “negative stereotypes of dancers as prostitutes, nymphomaniacs, survivors of broken homes and sexual abuse, degraded victims of men’s immoral lust, home-wreckers, drug users, and dangers to the social order, the family and nation.”71 Of the eleven dancers I interviewed, every one told me that they were motivated to participate in this project (or that one of reasons they were motivated to participate in this project) was because they wanted to make clear they did not view themselves as victims.

Not every dancer’s experience is defined by stigma, but there are many others who do not want to revisit their years as a sex worker, and it is unlikely these women would approach me to participate in this project. The interviews that inform this work are largely one-sided insofar as those who found their years dancing painful did not answer my call for participants. The small group represented here has in common a willingness to look back at their years as dancers as intrinsically valuable in a number of ways that I will expand and explore in later chapters.72 It is important to note that research that claims to demonstrate the exploitative nature of the sex industry also has structural issues around who is included, interviewed, or researched, and often makes dramatic

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71 Ross and Greenwell, “Spectacular Striptease”, 140.
72 Tracy E. K’Meyer and A. Glenn Crothers, “If I See Some of This in Writing I’m Going to Shoot You: Reluctant Narrators, Taboo Topics, and Ethical Dilemmas of the Oral Historian,” The Oral History Review 34, no. 1 (2007): 82.
generalizations with relatively few or carefully curated participants.\textsuperscript{73} This dissertation argues that sex work is not inherently exploitative. Rather, the first-hand stories of narrators who argue that in some instances the work is rewarding must be taken seriously. Part of the appeal of undertaking such a unique oral history project is the ability to preserve performers’ memories before they are gone and to share the stories of those who have rarely been consulted in the history of burlesque performance thus far.

The relationship between dancing and other forms of sex work was, and still remains, a complicated and sensitive question. Of eleven interviewees who were willing to directly discuss the relationship of dancing with other forms of sex work, four thought that aligning themselves with other sex workers was a way of challenging stigma directed at sex work and feminine sexuality, while six rejected any idea of a connection between dancing and other forms of sex work.

While the undertaking of oral histories is complex, it should not be assumed that a researcher’s encounter with written sources is as simple as reading, recording, and reproducing the archival record. All written sources must also be critically interrogated. This dissertation utilizes a mixed-methods approach that examines the discourses at work in newspaper articles, legal cases and testimonies, liquor board reviews, city council minutes, and records of community groups concerned with moral regulation. City regulations, liquor

\textsuperscript{73} Melissa’s Farley work “Prostitution, Violence, And Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” and “Bad for the Body, Bad for the Heart: Prostitution Harms Women Even if Legalized or Decriminalized” has been widely criticized by scholars like John Lowman and Ronald Weitzer for lack of methodological rigour and for bias. She and other researchers like her also often misquote Estes and Weiner discussing the age of first sexual activity amongst their sample of sexually exploited children. This results in a dramatic, and inaccurate fact about age of entry into sex work.
licensing and the regulation of sex work create the conditions in which The Penthouse was built and where the dancers worked as part of their unique and complex lives. 74 This archival research draws attention to the kinds of regulation, both formal and informal, by which the narrators were governed. Informally, for example, serving staff at The Penthouse had to abide by certain dress codes. 75 In locating the relevant newspaper articles, I have done a keyword search and media analysis of the Vancouver Province, Vancouver Sun, and Globe and Mail for all articles relating to The Penthouse, the holding companies Celebrity Enterprises Limited and San Nicola Holdings, and the Philliponis between 1937-2007. 76 When reading archival sources, I looked for references to sex workers who might otherwise not appear in the history of the club. Many of the records I have examined emphasize the conflict between sex workers and other institutions. Further, the archival sources illuminate the changing relationship between the nightclub and the authorities during various periods of Vancouver’s history. The city records, for example, provide insight into the political climate of the city, and whether or not this climate was friendly towards erotic dancers. It is interesting to note, for example, the historical moments when an Alderman takes issue with an advertisement for a strip club or scantily clad waitresses. More important, however, is the action taken to ‘remedy’ this situation. I discuss how a foundational normative regulatory regime equating sex work with immorality, yet nevertheless fundamentally built on sexual labour, sets the stage for the

74 According to Boyd, “city spaces take on moral geographies.” (178)
75 Boyd, “Producing Vancouver’s (Hetero) Normative Nightscape”, 174-5.
particularly complex circumstances in which dancers have to navigate their rich and unique lives.

The Filippone family archives are located at The Penthouse, and I was very fortunate to be granted unrestricted access to them. This scrapbook contains articles from when the club was featured in the media and photos dating from the club’s inception. Explaining how the scrapbook mostly gets used, Danny Filippone says “we show it for the heritage [tours], every article, it’s a lot of stuff.” As a historical document, this big black scrapbook has been assembled over the years by preserving mentions of the club in the media by people in and around the club, mostly by family members, in order to document a popular history of the club. These records have been neglected a little in the digital age and perhaps are not as complete as Filippone explains (based on high the number of Google Alerts I receive regarding news stories featuring ‘Filippone’ compared to most recent updates of the scrapbook). However, the photos helped me locate more dancers who worked at the club, and the articles, somewhat surprisingly, do not just represent those who spoke favourably about the club. The family collected and preserved news reports from the trial where the journalists clearly had a moral bias against the club, its owners, and the clientele. These and other newspaper articles are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. These records contained useful additions to the media print sources I did not search

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77 Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
comprehensively such as *Express, The Vancouver Courier, and Vancouver Magazine.*

### Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1 provides an overview of The Penthouse and contextualizes it within the history of Vancouver, the history of nightclubs and sexual labour, and the history of Italian immigration. This chapter brings together histories from the club’s lore and the Filippone family history with particular emphasis on Ross Filippone’s first wife, Penny Crowe. Crowe was a dancer at another club in the city and experienced some of the earlier years from a very different position than the dominant patriarchal narrative. This chapter positions The Penthouse within the development and evolution of the City of Vancouver alongside larger trends in the North American consumption of sex and sexuality. It ends by looking at how the practice of erotic dancing was emerging and examines specific trends and shifts in style in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Chapter 2 focuses specifically on the three-year closure of The Penthouse that began in December 1975 because of its association with the sex industry. The club had become a police target because of its reputation as a place to go to purchase the services of a sex worker. The closure demonstrates how patriarchal and paternalistic institutions in Vancouver policed and controlled feminine bodies based on assumptions about sexual morality, ultimately making it more difficult and dangerous for people in the sex industry to conduct their work. This

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78 These are local free news and entertainment features that focus on what’s happening in Vancouver and are published and supported using advertising money.
Chapter also examines the aftermath of The Penthouse closure and its implications for some of the people working there. Sex workers were pushed into the streets, and resulting tensions led some community groups compromised largely of gay white men to lobby for increasing regulation. Though there was resistance and organization on the part of sex workers, the ultimate success of moralist community groups contributed to an on-going trend where people who work in the sex industry are further marginalized and made vulnerable through physical displacement and criminalization.

Chapter 3 discusses the atmosphere of The Penthouse once the club reopened. With technological advances striptease was quickly evolving from a performance that took place alongside a musical band in favour of taped recordings. This resulted in the gradual emergence of some of the conventional forms of striptease and more rehearsed routines that can be seen at a typical club today, such as pole routines and private dances. Chapter 3 discusses how The Penthouse reintegrated itself into Vancouver nightclub culture after a three year closure and the death of long-time figurehead Joe Philliponi, who was murdered in 1983.

Chapter 4 follows The Penthouse and some of the dancers who worked there as the leadership of the club changed alongside shifts in attitudes towards sexuality. The Penthouse’s ‘old-fashioned’ and “classy” vibe seemed quite dated in comparison to attitudes and technological advances in a culture undergoing a boom in pornography production at this time. The chapter opens space for differing memories and accounts of the club, particularly those of the dancers. It
also analyses the lack of racial diversity among dancers in Vancouver as an on-
going trend with special attention paid to the agency that works with The
Penthouse- Stripper Entertainment. I also discuss some of the material objects
such as the curtain and pole, both of which were regularly incorporated into
performances at The Penthouse by some of the women who danced there in the
1980s and 1990s. I end the chapter by discussing how dancers saw striptease as a
performance style while also negotiating the precarity of their paid labour.

Before concluding, I discuss The Penthouse in the context of feminist
positions on sex work locally and look at the overlap between these positions and
the contemporary neo-burlesque movement. I discuss what role neo-burlesque,
as one evolution of striptease, might play in the future of The Penthouse
alongside some of the ongoing considerations for those who engage with this
performance practice.

Undeniably a hub of Vancouver’s current and historic sex industry, the
history of The Penthouse can be used to examine multiple stories of city
regulation, sexual labour, and the politics and experience of erotic performance.
The institutional history of the Penthouse brings together the narrative of the
Phillipone family struggling to develop and maintain a family-run business based
on women’s performance of sexual labour with in the face of municipal regulatory
bodies which aimed to regulate and control it. Oral histories of the women who
worked there highlight the experiences of erotic performers, trace their
adaptation to changing standards and practices in the art of striptease, and place
their experiences in the larger context of the precarious and stigmatized work of
sexual labour. Despite the lasting impact of stigma, dancers have shown and continue to show creative resistance to the erosion of labour rights and lack of job security. Sharing their stories with the goal of de-stigmatizing sexual labour generates part of that resistance.
CHAPTER 1: THE ORIGINS OF JOE’S PENTHOUSE (AND THIS PROJECT): 1937-1974

A case study of The Penthouse, Canada’s longest running exotic nightclub, allows a close and careful investigation of relationships between individual dancers and the overall relationship between dancers, owners, and police over time. This chapter provides an overview of the history of the Penthouse, placing its history as a family business in the context of patterns of Italian immigration to the West Coast, where the legacy of the club shapes the Philliponi/Filippone history. This chapter also discusses the trends in dance performances at The Penthouse in the 1950s and 1960s going into the 1970s, comparing the venue with some of its local contemporary nightclubs and discussing it in relation to larger shifts in hegemonic North American postwar culture regarding expressions of sex and sexuality. The Penthouse is a kind of hybrid space bringing together different types of sex workers and their clients, as well as those seeking to regulate and control those two groups. The Penthouse drew on and contributed to postwar trends that increasingly interpreted and celebrated alcohol consumption and erotic dance as forms of heteronormative, middle-class masculine leisure. But the expressions of “Italianness” in its family management style, architecture, and décor marked it as a space of both modern, postwar sexual culture and a longer history of supposedly ‘disreputable’ and potentially ‘criminal’ behavior.
**Early Days on Seymour Street**

The story of the Philliponi/Filippone family is closely linked to the history of Italian immigration to Canada. As scholars of Italian immigration have shown, Italians were among those recruited to the Americas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹ The Philliponis were from the Calabria region in Southern Italy, a region whose population “had once overwhelming preferred migration to the Americas.”² Economic deprivation and political disruption in Italy, combined with the demand for cheap labour in North America and elsewhere, shaped the experiences of Italian migrants.³ When World War 1 began, approximately nine million people born in Italy were living in the Americas, Europe, Australia, and Africa.⁴ Four million migrants from across Italy left in the thirty years following World War 1, with immigration to Canada estimated at almost 700,000 between Italian unification in 1861 and 1981.⁵

Like other Italian migrants, the Philliponi family carried with them a complex cultural and familial history of religion, language, and food, which shaped their approach to their business as a long-standing, multi-generational family enterprise.⁶ Giuseppe/Joseph Sr., Philliponi was the first of his family to emigrate to Canada in 1921 from the Calabria region in southern Italy; like many men at the time, he left for Canada first, leaving his wife, Maria Rosa (“Nana”)  

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² Ibid., 150.  
³ Gabaccia, “The History of Italians in the United States,” d 34.  
⁵ Sturino, “Italians and Media in Canada,” 19.  
and son Joseph (1913-1983) to follow after he was settled, reflecting the
dominant migration pattern for Italian women who crossed borders as part of
family migrations.7 From 1916-1945, 25 percent of Italian migrants were
destined for North America and 32 percent of Italian migrants originated from
Southern Italy.8 Most southern Italian migrants in this period were married when
crossing borders.9

Giuseppe landed on the east coast and worked his way across the country
until he arrived in Extension on Vancouver Island. He sent for his wife and son
shortly after Benito Mussolini came to power in Italy in 1922.10 Though Danny
and his mother were unable to tell me precisely why Guiseppe Philliponi came to
Canada and how he was employed in Italy prior to the relocation, it is possible he
was part of the 46.9 percent of Italians who were not “economically active” in
1921 and thus was in part pursuing employment opportunities in a new place.11
In response to labour conditions and high unemployment, the labour movement
in Italy was so active that historians Baldassar and Gabaccia claim the period
from 1860 to 1922 was characterized by “the serious possibility of revolution” at

7 Gabaccia, *Italy’s Many Diasporas*, 148; Gabaccia and Iacovetta, “Women, Work, and Protest in
the Italian Diaspora,” 172; Christiane Harzig, Dirk Hoerder and Donna R. Gabaccia, *What is
Migration History?* (Malden: Polity, 2009), 125; Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People:
8 Donna R. Gabaccia, “Italian Migration Worldwide,” in *The Review of Italian-American Studies*,
9 Dirk Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium* (Durham:
11 Luisa Passerini, “Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism,” *History Workshop
Journal* 8, no. 2 (1979): 106; Gabaccia, “The History of Italians in the United States,” 34;
least once a decade. Just because she followed her husband, however, it should not be presumed that Maria Rosa was not involved in the decision making to migrate to Canada. As Franca Iacovetta argues in *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, Italian women actively participated in migration decisions and saw migration as an opportunity for a better life. A customs agent misspelled their last name on their immigration documents and the remainder of the family’s children, who were born in Canada, bear the name/spelling ‘Filippone’: Jimmy/Vincente (1922-2008), Ross/Rosario (1923-2007), Mickey/Domenic Filippone (1924-1978), and Florence (1936-2002).

In 1929, the family moved to Vancouver and Giuseppe purchased the family home, opening a bootlegging operation in the kitchen. In 1938, the land where The Penthouse is now located at 1019 Seymour Street was purchased for $1,400. The family eventually also purchased the property at 1032 Seymour, 1036 Seymour, and 1052 Seymour which they eventually sold to Onni Development Corporation for $7 million in 2006. Giuseppe died in 1949 of a heart attack and was survived by his wife Maria Rosa (who died a short time after Joe, on December 25, 1983 at the age of 99). As described by Danny Filippone’s mother Penny Crowe, Maria Rosa was the matriarch of the large Filippone brood. She would sit down to eat her own meals while her children, in-laws and

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13 In this section, the name or nickname more often used in the sources consulted appears first, with the exception of Nana. Jimmy, Ross, and Mickey were all born in Extension, a small mining town on Vancouver Island (Mackie, November 2007).
grandchildren were working on dessert after three courses of her southern Italian cooking:

When the entire family ate together Nana would always make something special – fritters with zucchini or mushrooms, home made pork sausages, a pasta sauce using chicken livers, hearts and kidneys called “peti”, bowls of fresh unshelled peas or fava beans depending on the season.16

All the Philliponi/Filippone children participated in the family business. Like many working-class children and children of immigrant parents, Joe Philliponi’s contributions to the family economy included paid labour rather than completing his education.17 He got his first job as a teenager delivering newspapers and parcels on a bicycle to contribute to the family income, which prevented him from completing high school.18 Ross and Florence were the only siblings that completed high school; it would not have been typical for an Italian-immigrant family to have a daughter who was the youngest of five children to have an education beyond elementary school at this time.19 In 1941, Ross joined the Canadian Air Force and was stationed in Bella Coola, returning to his family in Vancouver at the end of the war. At the end of WWII, Joe turned the building that is now The Penthouse into a boxing gym for “disadvantaged youth” called

16 In the late 1950s most of Nana’s communications took place in Italian with her family and neighbours. When she met Penny Crowe (then Marks), “her English was minimal and she spoke in a strong Italian dialect. She kept saying “You lika my boy, he’s a good boy” while smiling at me in a friendly way. I knew his mother wanted him to get married and as she had probably given up on an Italian girl, an English girl would have to do.” Crowe, Ma Vie, 9; 13-14. See also Gabaccia et al., “Laboring Across National Borders,” 68.
17 See Lara Campbell, Respectable Citizens: Gender, Family and Unemployment in Ontario’s Great Depression (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Neil Sutherland, Children in English-Canadian Society: Framing the Twentieth-Century Consensus (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976).
19 Gabaccia, “The History of Italians in the United States,” 36
Eagletime Athletics; he organized and sponsored baseball, basketball, hockey, football, and swimming competitions. Jimmy was very interested in amateur boxing and the gym was organized in part to support his interests.

Vancouver was a diverse but small city in the 1940s through to the early 1960s, though it did steadily grow during this time. White Anglophones predominantly inhabited the west side of the city while the east side was comprised of pockets of immigrant communities who lived among a high urban Indigenous population. The port city had more public access to the water surrounding it than it does now. The Philliponi family lived and worked in an area of the city eventually known as Little Italy. This area continued to grow after another global wave of Italian migration between 1946 to 1966: historian Donna Gabaccia notes that “Australia, Canada, and, to a lesser extent, Argentina and the United States saw a new Little Italy grow almost in every major city.”

The Philliponi family has owned and operated a variety of other businesses on Seymour Street and elsewhere since the 1920s, including the complex at Commercial Drive and Grant Street that currently is home to Café Roma, Spartacus Gym, and a BC Liquor Store among other successful longstanding businesses. Though it was fairly typical for Italian migrants to work with their family members, most were contract workers working for wages. Hence, the entrepreneurial Philliponi family businesses could be considered fairly atypical.

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21 Alexandria Beverly (Squamish First Nation) in discussion with author, September 15, 2016.
for this time, especially in Vancouver, which had lower numbers of Italian immigration compared with other Canadian cities like Montreal and Toronto.\textsuperscript{23} Nana and Joe both believed strongly in “owning the dirt that no one can take away from you.”\textsuperscript{24} Their business ventures also included a truck-based delivery service equipped with its own gas pumps, Eagletime delivery, and the Diamond Cab Company (1940). Crowe remarks that “the pale blue taxis owned by the family were a fixture in Vancouver and stationed outside The Penthouse, used by customers.”\textsuperscript{25} Joe, Ross, and Mickey all worked at The Penthouse, with Joe taking the lead in management, Mickey often serving as maitre’d, and the shyer Ross in charge of the books.\textsuperscript{26}

Beginning in the 1950s, Joe was known first and foremost around Vancouver as the figurehead of a successful nightclub business, and secondly as a particularly stylish dresser who grabbed the attention of those both familiar and unfamiliar with The Penthouse. Joe’s trademark clothing combination at work involved baggy pants worn high with the help of suspenders that in turn showed off argyle or hand-made socks, and a loudly patterned jacket or shirt. In contrast, Ross was always dressed in a tuxedo at work.\textsuperscript{27} Crowe remembers that Mickey was considered to be the most “natty dresser who loved expensive Italian clothing, alligator shoes, and gold jewellery but when the family congregated at Nana’s house for a meal he would strip to his undershirt, the vest type just like

\textsuperscript{23} Iacovetta, \textit{Such Hardworking People}, 37

\textsuperscript{24} Crowe, \textit{Ma Vie}, 25.

\textsuperscript{25} Crowe, \textit{Ma Vie}, 25.

\textsuperscript{26} Crowe, \textit{Ma Vie}, 18.

\textsuperscript{27} John Mackie, “The Penthouse Cabaret on Seymour Street and Ross Filippone was a Classic Rags to Riches Story,” \textit{Vancouver Sun}, November 1, 2007.
Sony Corleone in *The Godfather.*” Mickey’s public style reflected a mid-century style of masculine leisure. Though Crowe is clearly articulating her memories through popular stereotyping of Italians, it is useful to understand Joe, Ross, and Mickey as reflecting different elements of postwar masculine style and masculine presentation, which Mark Jancovich suggests became increasingly important “as a way for a man to distinguish himself from others and assert his identity.”

Developing a particular sense of style was important to Joe and Ross for practical reasons as well, because they wished to stand out from the clientele on busy nights at the club. Their dress, station, and status all signalled the material success on which their images and the future of the club depended.

Jimmy had taken the reigns of both Eagletime Delivery and the Diamond cab company (Figure 2) and, when the latter was sold to Black Top in 1973, he joined his siblings working at the Penthouse doing odd jobs like janitorial work and picking up liquor orders. Both Jimmy’s wife Josephine and the youngest Filippone, Florence, worked in the Penthouse office in the family home, a line of work which was very demanding, particularly prior to 1973 when it was an undeniable challenge keeping all the various companies organized without the aid of contemporary information technology.

28 Crowe, *Ma Vie*, 27.
31 Crowe, *Ma Vie* 27 and 29.
Figure 2:  Restored Logos in 2016.

(Photo: Jessie Anderson.)

All of the business incarnations located at the intersection of Seymour and Nelson were associated with mob activity and organized crime by virtue of the
Italian heritage of their owners, though during the trial discussed in Chapter 2 Philliponi denied any mob association and claimed to have actually deterred a mob takeover of the business.\textsuperscript{32} Assumptions about criminality and the mafia reflected larger patterns of anti-Italian sentiment. Italian entrepreneurs were particularly associated with the Mafia.\textsuperscript{33} Starting with the first wave of Italian migration, “American and Canadian nativists insisted that Italian immigrants were too uneducated, radical, violently criminal, or racially backwards to become good citizens.”\textsuperscript{34} In the 1940s, Italians and those who associated with them were indicative of a “bad life.”\textsuperscript{35} Mainstream discourses around Italian ethnicity included beliefs that Italians were indulgent in terms of alcohol and narcotic consumption and were embodiments of sexual promiscuity.\textsuperscript{36} Because the success of the Penthouse was predicated on performances of female sexuality and alcohol consumption, it became a space that seemed to reflect these underlying assumptions about Italianness.

The Penthouse officially opened as ‘The Penthouse’ in 1947 though the club existed unofficially prior to this. According to the club’s website, The

\textsuperscript{32} Ross Filippone’s later wife, Penny Crowe, was ‘warned’ by friends and colleagues about pursuing Ross romantically based on these rumours: “My dancer friends told me to forget him as he was “part of the mafia” but they had no proof of gangster like activities. A roommate told me the family was actually Jewish but with a name like “Filippone” that didn’t make much sense either” (Crowe 8). Its possible that Crowe’s roommate identified Filippone as Jewish since many West End Cabaret owners were of Jewish descent.

\textsuperscript{33} Gabaccia, “This History of Italians in the United States,” 37; Iacovetta, \textit{Such Hardworking People}, 5; Sturino, “Italians and the Media in Canada,” 23.


\textsuperscript{35} Sangster, “Defining Sexual Promiscuity,” 53. See also Gabaccia, “The History of Italians in the United States,” 34-37 and Iacovetta, \textit{Such Hardworking People}.

\textsuperscript{36} Sangster, “Defining Sexual Promiscuity,” 53.
Penthouse got its name from the private parties held by oldest brother Joe in the private apartment above the family garage in the 1930s and early 1940s. According to his sister-in-law Penny Crowe, the apartment looked like “an old Italian bordello with red velvet couches and curtains, a long bar stocked with many bottles, a large boxed TV, and an ornate bed in the bedroom.” As Crowe was writing a memoir that she was hoping to publish, a project that she later abandoned, it is possible that she was remembering Joe and the family’s ‘hyper-Italian’ style in a way which complemented her frequent positioning of the family in line with contemporary popular culture that adhered to stereotypical Italian families, such as HBO’s The Sopranos, a show she invoked in her manuscript. Even though Crowe’s memories should not be considered more accurate than anyone else’s, her perspective on the Philliponis is unique in its outsider-insider status. It is also a rare perspective, because most histories of the venue are constructed from the point of the view of the various family patriarchs.

Beer and liquor for sale at Joe’s parties would be provided free of charge to patrons, but ice and soft drinks incurred a charge that was used to support Eagletime Athletics since “it was virtually impossible to get a license to sell hard liquor in Vancouver.” Alcohol was a highly restricted and regulated substance often associated with immorality, and public drinking pushed the boundaries of respectable society. These private parties, and the raids which ensued in response to them, became a part of the local culture. The Vancouver Sun’s

37 Crowe, Ma Vie, 26.
headlines often read “Joe’s Penthouse Raided,” thus helping to coin the name of the landmark. In its heyday, according to Vancouver Sun columnist Allan Fotheringham, The Penthouse was “A minor league equivalent to the Eiffel Tower and the Empire State Building,” and one of Vancouver’s most popular attractions.

**Early Days on The West Coast Circuit**

By the time The Penthouse had opened in 1947 and was featuring paid performers, burlesque had officially transitioned from audience expectations of vaudeville parody to striptease, which began in the 1930s. Vaudeville shows featuring burlesque acts drew more attention from moralist and anti-vice groups, which sometimes served as extra publicity for a performance or sometimes turned audiences off entirely. The popularity of these acts may be one reason that burlesque performers increasingly performed solo rather than being included in a larger show alongside a variety of acts. During the Second World War, cities across North America managed burlesque-striptease in ways ranging from prohibition to strict regulation.

Vancouver and other west coast circuit cities like Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Oakland, Portland, San Francisco, and Seattle took a more tolerant approach to regulation, which, while challenging to navigate, was less hostile than cities such as New York. Regulation thus reflected

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41 Allan Fotheringham, Vancouver Sun, December 22, 1977.
42 Brooks, Unequal Desires, 17.
43 Brooks, Unequal Desires, 17.
particular local cultures and histories. For example, in mid-twentieth century London, England at the iconic Windmill Theatre, “sexually glamorous young women were prioritized as a national asset.” This relative acceptability of erotic performances was undeniably complicated.

When dancers came to symbolize national identity as they did at the Windmill, it meant that they were overwhelmingly white and gender normative. For example according to Mort, “rather than adopting glamorous stage pseudonyms, the girls generally retained their own names, while much was made of their local or regional origins, their social ordinariness, and their approachability.” This stood in contrast to the conventional practice of distancing a dancer’s work and private life by using a stage name and often constructing a unique autobiography/ies to share at the club. In contrast, in New York during the Second World War, burlesque, or more specifically, its sexual style and humour, was banned for “undermining the virility of the men who had the responsibility of defending the country.” In post-war Vancouver “nightclub owners faced persistent pressure from anti-vice factions to clean up the acts.” Vancouver had established a pattern of regularly raiding and closing nightclubs in 1946, which was revived as a tactic to maintain control of these spaces from 1950-1952. In extreme cases, nightclub owners and/or performers

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44 Mort, “Striptease” 33.
45 Mort, “Striptease,” 40.
46 Mort, “Striptease,” 40.
47 Brooks, Unequal Desires, 17.
48 Ross and Greenwell, “Spectacular Striptease,” 140.
would be arrested and charged, which usually led to further licensing complications for the establishments.49

In the later 1950s, however, striptease thrived partly because of changing popular cultures of sexual expression. The growing prosperity of the post-war North American period was characterized by increased leisure, an emphasis on material consumption, and increased acceptance of certain public expressions of female heterosexuality.50 The launch of Playboy Magazine by Hugh Hefner in 1953 symbolized the move towards the mainstream popularity of liberal sexual politics intertwined with the idea of “masculine leisure.”51 As Mark Jancovich argues, “Rather than an apolitical titillation, the magazine’s sexual materials were not only integrated into its politics of lifestyle, but became the central signifier of it.”52 Sexual tastes were configured as part of particular consumer lifestyles, specifically those associated with the post-war emerging middle class.53 In attempts to distinguish from middle classes gone by, this new middle class was on a “quest for the new and latest in relationships and experiences” largely focused on consumerism and material consumption.54

49 Campbell, Sit Down and Drink Your Beer, 107-26; Ross and Greenweel, “Spectacular Striptease,” 140.
In the late 1950s erotic representations the female body were also proliferating “into a wider range of artistic and cultural genres, partly due to the heightened sexual imagery of heterosexuality in Hollywood and film productions coming out of other countries including France, Italy, and England.”55 European films of the mid-1950s were regarded by some as embodiments of “obscenity and perversity” while others regarded the sexual content as indicative of mature tastes.56 These practices provided a degree of normalization of commercial forms of sexuality, like erotic dancing, while widespread adoption of the term ‘gentleman’s club’ in the late 1950s and in the early 1960s was meant to signify an upscale establishment featuring striptease.

The Penthouse attempted to tap into these consumerist and ‘gentlemanly’ expressions of masculine sexual leisure and set itself apart from rougher, more working-class taverns and clubs. The term gentleman’s club was sometimes employed to describe The Penthouse specifically.57 At various points throughout The Penthouse’s history, the owners talked about returning the ‘class’ to the establishment. When they did so, they referenced the middle-class masculine sexual leisure associated with this era.

**Where the Dancing Happens**

The Penthouse is a long narrow building that extends 100 feet to the back alley. From the outside, it does not look as big as it feels to be inside a three-
storey nightclub, filled with passages leading to different rooms. A huge awning outside announces the current feature dancer or special event, and on the walls of the exterior are two 15-foot two dimensional dancers made of painted wood surrounded by neon lighting that have been there since the 1950s (see Figures 3 and 4).
Figure 3: The Wood Cutout Figure on the right in 2012.

(Photo: Mary Shearman.)
Figure 4: The Wood Cutout Figure on the left in 2012.

(Photo: Mary Shearman.)
Though The Penthouse now is the only landmark on Seymour Street owned by Danny Filippone, the family used to own a small shop beside the club, which was incorporated into the club in 1968 to extend the Gold Room. The spacious family home with a typical Vancouver gabled roof, set behind a small courtyard, was on the other side of the shop. In front of the house was a neon sign in the shape of an eagle that read ‘Eagletime Delivery’, which was sold later in the 1950s. The small office for Diamond cabs was in the front courtyard of the house beside the side entrance, and the original small Penthouse office was at the top of a curved iron staircase, with two desks for Florence and Josephine Filippone in the front and Joe’s desk set back behind a curtain. Crowe compares the décor of the house to a Fellini movie or an “Italian stage set.” The garage at the house was used to hold supplies for the club. Today, the north side of The Penthouse is a parking lot, which used to be ‘Vie’s Chicken Shack.’ When Vie’s was demolished and then later rebuilt as ‘Vie’s Chicken and Steak House’ at 209 Union Street in Hogan’s Alley, the bare wall left beside The Penthouse was painted with a variety of advertisements for the club. It was recently re-painted in a trendy pattern (Figure 5) to replace the image of a sporting top hat, cane, and gloves that had covered the wall for about 15 years. According to Crowe, upon entering the club:

You walked up two short flights of stairs with red carpeting and painted red and gold wood walls into a lobby and down another flight of stairs into the main Gold Room. This gave anybody a

58 According to booking agent Randy Knowlan, presently the Penthouse has two phone lines. One shows up on call display as J Philliponi and the other as Eagletime Delivery.
59 Crowe, Ma Vie, 9.
60 Crowe, Ma Vie, 10.
61 Crowe, Ma Vie, 13.
chance to make a real entry into the room because each head could turn and look at the staircase.62

Figure 5: Current Mural on the Side of The Penthouse.

(Photo: Jessie Anderson.)

The club was quite popular with men in Vancouver even before receiving its liquor license in 1968. Alcohol was a highly restricted and regulated substance often associated with immorality. Consuming it in public pushed the boundaries of respectable behaviour. As only hotel bars had licenses to serve alcohol, bottles of booze were discreetly hidden under the tables. The Penthouse was a social

62 Crowe, Ma Vïe, 6.
alternative to beer parlours and not very expensive, only charging $2.95 for admission throughout the 1960s. Because it did not have a liquor license, the club was often open until 6 am. When the party was over at The Penthouse, it would continue at the Filippone’s home. Crowe remembers:

Some mornings before we had the license I would go downstairs into the bar in our basement and find Ross there with several other people, all drunk and trying to be quiet and furiously I would shoo them out before the children awoke. Sometimes the revelers were famous entertainers or well-known politicians and lawyers.

Though people did not frequent The Penthouse for the food, Joe imported the first pizza oven to Vancouver in approximately 1957, and also had an open fire/barbeque in the dining room of the club where Karl the cook would prepare steaks and sausages, essentially pioneering the open kitchen concept which later became popular in Vancouver restaurants. The Filippone family home also boasted a homemade barbeque used to cook steaks, sausages, and hot dogs for the immediate family of twelve as well as any special guests brought home by Joe on summer weekends. The Penthouse was where entertainers, businessmen, traveling salesmen, lawyers, and journalists could enjoy dinner and a drink while enjoying top-notch performers including the Louis Armstrong, Nat King Cole, Lili St. Cyr, Sammy Davis Jr., Ella Fitzgerald, Lena Horne, Gypsy Rose Lee, Frank Sinatra, Tempest Storm, the Supremes, Evelyn West, and others. For many

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63 Crowe, *Ma Vie*, 5.
64 Crowe, *Ma Vie*, 17.
65 Chapman, 7; Crowe, *Ma Vie*, 6; Mackie, November 2007.
66 A short but extended list includes the Ames Brothers, Harry Belafonte, Tony Bennett, Milton Berle, George Burns, Gary Cooper, the Crosby Brothers, Sammy Davis Jr., Jimmy Durante, Duke Ellington, Alice Faye, Jacqueline Fontaine, Mitzi Gaynor, Mimi Hines, Harry James, Greg Laikin, Frankie Lane, Joe Louis, the Mills Brothers, Stan Mikita, Wayne Newton, Johnnie Ray, Della Reese, Don Thompson, Sophie Tucker, and Frankie Vaughan.
influential people, it “was the place to see and be seen.” At the end of a show in 1957 held at the Orpheum theatre, Frank Sinatra announced he would be headed to The Penthouse. That night, the line to get in the club went around the block. The Penthouse was instrumental in Vancouver achieving the status and description ‘San Francisco/Las Vegas North.’ Vancouver has also remembered as “the stripper capital of the world” during the 1950s and 1960s.

A hidden hallway at the back of the dance floor in the Gold Room led to a back room where jazz musicians would gather after hours and play to the audience which often included bar staff from surrounding establishments. Black and white photos of the performers, usually with at least one of the brothers, were found in a wall behind the photocopier in the 1990s and have been restored and hung on the wall of the Gold Room, adding to the historic atmosphere experienced by some of the dancers and patrons. Some of the photos also feature autographs and messages; for example, “To Joe, one of the best friends—In fact the best friend I have ever met. Love, Evelyn West.” Because it was an unlicensed establishment, the club did not have to abide by any specific hours of operation so it became a popular afterhours spot for other nightclub staff in the

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68 Mackie, “The Penthouse Cabaret.”
70 Kevin Chong, “Stripped Down: The Penthouse has survived criminal charges, murder, and even the Internet. But can it survive neighbourhood improvement?” Inside Vancouver (Vancouver, BC) January 1, 2009.
city, including house dancer at the Cave Supper Club Penny Crowe, who married Ross Filippone in a traditional Catholic Mass on September 21, 1961.\textsuperscript{72}

Like some of the women who worked at The Penthouse, Crowe had wanted to pursue dancing her whole life and did have some ballet training. However, her pointe work was not strong enough to get her a job dancing in England or France so she emigrated to North America in the late 1950s in search of more success, which she found at The Cave Supper Club in Vancouver. “I did a few high kicks and lied a little about my experience in England and I was hired,” claimed Crowe. “So began a new life.”\textsuperscript{73} Though Crowe’s journey across the ocean to pursue her dreams can be reduced to an act of fearless independence:

It is important to remember that my generation was the last one where girls believed the only real goal in life was to find a husband to support you, buy you a house, and live happily ever after—and that was me. The idea of looking for a job that would lead to a career did not cross me mind or any of the girls I was staying with. Even the flight attendant—whose job we all envied—seemed to be in the most advantageous position to find a husband—our goal in life. When I landed the chorus girl job at the Cave I was not only thrilled to find a job that seemed exciting and far from routine but I would now be in a position to meet many different people—particularly men!\textsuperscript{74}

Crowe’s brief summation of her life shortly after coming to Vancouver from England contrasts with the work of immigration historians who found that women of German and Italian background migrating to Vancouver around the same time often thought of themselves as “passive, submissive, or dependent”

\textsuperscript{72} Crowe, \textit{Ma Vie}, 1; 11.
\textsuperscript{73} Crowe, \textit{Ma Vie}, 2.
\textsuperscript{74} Crowe, \textit{Ma Vie}, 3.
before leaving their homes to pursue a life elsewhere, but who tended to describe themselves as more independent and adventurous after migration.\textsuperscript{75}

**The Local Scene**

The Cave was located on Hornby Street, a little closer to the downtown core than The Penthouse, though you could walk from one club to the other in about fifteen minutes. The former was considered a more elegant nightclub and the choreographer of its house dancers, Jack Card, made the club’s reputation on “elaborate Ziegfeld-inspired productions.”\textsuperscript{76} The City granted the Cave the first nightclub liquor license in the 1950s, years before similar establishments received one, including The Penthouse. Performers at The Cave ranged “from Tony Bennett and Ella Fitzgerald to Tina Turner and the Police.”\textsuperscript{77} It was a one-storey building with big black doors and framed photographs outside advertising current and coming performers, who were often on their way down the coast on the West Coast circuit to the Las Vegas Strip. The interior was decorated to look like a cave with curved ceilings and rough white walls featuring a large raised stage at the back. The Cave opened in 1937, the same year Philliponi’s illicit parties were beginning to gain attention, and closed in 1981.

Crowe was part of an eight-girl chorus line that performed at the Cave twice a night from Tuesday to Saturday. They danced to popular songs from Broadway that followed the theme of the main performer, who earned

\textsuperscript{76} Ross and Greenwell, “Spectacular Striptease,” 142.
approximately four times what the performers in the chorus line were paid.\textsuperscript{78} Not unique to this particular group of dancers, as can be seen in later chapters when Penthouse dancers reflect on relationships formed in the dressing room, Crowe became close with three other members of the chorus line, Donna, Janet, and Norma. They were all subject to strict rules regarding not socializing with customers. Dancers elsewhere, including at the Penthouse, were not held to the same strictures.\textsuperscript{79} Both models were common in Vancouver, though it was more common in the established West End Supper Clubs to have rules keeping performers and patrons separated while East End clubs were more likely to not have such a policy in place. Similar rules of “no mingling” were in place at the famous Windmill Theatre in London, England.\textsuperscript{80}

Despite rules against socializing at some establishments, relationships did develop between dancers, customers, and staff. In one of Ross Filippone and Penny Crowe’s first encounters in the late 1950s at The Penthouse, Filippone asked Crowe to go out with another Penthouse patron. Crowe obliged, and later found out that Filippone had told her companion that sex was to be expected, obviously subscribing to the stereotype of dancers as promiscuous. This also demonstrates how Penthouse management would arrange company for clientele even before escorts began to frequent the club in large numbers. Filippone and

\textsuperscript{78} Miller, “Godmother of Burlesque ran Exotic Museum.”
\textsuperscript{79} Crowe, \textit{Ma Vie}, 4 and 8.
\textsuperscript{80} Mort, “Striptease,” 35.
Crowe began to date seriously a few weeks later as Crowe sought to “prove to Ross that I was different.”

Although alcohol prohibition ended in British Columbia the same year Giuseppe Philipponi immigrated in 1921, the sale of alcohol was still greatly limited: “alcohol was sold only at government liquor stores, and drinking establishments had to be licensed by the three-member Liquor Control Board.”

Though alcohol was still not popular with moralists, a strong culture of drinking emerged in “bars that masqueraded as social or service clubs.” The police often dropped by The Penthouse hoping to bust it for liquor infractions; however, as Ross Fillipone later recalled “we used to have spotters on the roof. You couldn’t miss five or six police cars coming down the street. We’d press a buzzer and tell the waiters, who’d tell the customers. It was a joke.” Customers and staff alike would then hide bottles in drawers under the tabletops while as many as 20-30 police officers would search the club with flashlights before the party continued. Penny Crowe later learned that usually one or two policemen would stay behind after this performance of authority and power to have a drink with Ross in his office at the club, now the office of his son Danny.

The Penthouse was located close to Vancouver’s downtown core, which was largely centred around Granville and Georgia Streets, and which would later

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82 Francis, *Red Light Neon*, 65. See also Campbell, *Sit Down and Drink Your Beer*.
become a prominent stroll of street based sex workers. The area was peppered in the 1960s with a few high-rise buildings, swanky hotels with racist accommodation policies like the Hotel Georgia and the Hotel Vancouver, the Courthouse, and some major retail stores including the Hudson’s Bay Company and Birks Jewellers. Other than these landmarks, most of the downtown area consisted of small stores and upscale restaurants, the latter of which began to pop up the 1950s. One such restaurant was a steakhouse opened by Ross’s friend “Big” Frank Ross. Robson Street was referred to as “Robsonstrasse” because of the high density of European/German owned stores, selling mostly products to people of the same ethnic background. The 1960s was also a period of rapid population growth and development in Vancouver and, between Bute and Hornby streets, new buildings were quickly being constructed. Anything east of Granville, like Seymour Street where The Penthouse was located, was considered a “slightly more seedy part of Vancouver” and was also the heart of Vancouver’s Italian neighbourhood at the time. Crowe remembers:

Directly across from the Penthouse were three homes built in the classic early 20th century Vancouver style with staircases that led up to a covered porch with inverted V rooflines. One was owned by “Emilio”, an itinerant Italian accordion player. He was short and wiry and wore large round glasses, baggy trousers and blouse shirts. Sometimes when he had a few drinks he would wander over to the Penthouse and serenade whoever would listen to him while singing traditional Italian songs. Another house was a family run restaurant—“Iaci’s” the name of the family that owned it who were

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86 Hookers on Davie, produced and directed by Janice Cole and Holly Dale (1984; Toronto: Spectrum Films), DVD.
87 The Filippone trial was the last major case tried at this location. What was then the Courthouse is now the Vancouver Art Gallery, though it is about to move to a new presently undecided location.
88 Crowe, Ma Vie, 9.
89 Crowe, Ma Vie, 2.
first cousins to the Filippones but they weren’t very friendly. For years Iaci’s was known as an Italian family restaurant institution. On the corner of Nelson and Seymour was The California Grocery, a market run by a Greek family that sold Mediterranean products especially Greek and Italian foodstuffs.\textsuperscript{90}

The brothers were very proud of their nightclub and the hospitality they provided in the 1950s and 1960s. Because of the quasi-legal activity taking place, their clientele could be jeopardized if discovered, so the brothers were known for respecting confidentiality and for putting an end to any damaging gossip. This may be because they informally collected information about virtually everyone who walked through the doors, creating a bit of a ‘what happens at The Penthouse stays at the Penthouse’ mentality.\textsuperscript{91} Though the conventional arrangement at a bottle club was for the patron to bring their booze and the establishment to sell the mix, Crowe claims that bottles were quietly produced when necessity dictated, loans were provided to patrons short on cash (later returned with a small interest fee), and Joe or Ross found interested male customers a female companion which usually meant a sex worker.

By the late 1960s, The Penthouse had developed a reputation for being one of the hubs of Vancouver’s sex trade. The venue was described by \textit{Globe and Mail} reporter Anne Roberts as “a supermarket for hookers” where clients and customers arranged and negotiated dates.\textsuperscript{92} In the 1970s, undercover officers frequented the club in order to gather information. If employees at the club saw a worker talking to an undercover police officer, she would be called away to take a

\textsuperscript{90} Crowe, \textit{Ma Vie}, 5; Gabaccia, \textit{Italy’s Many Diasporas}, 150.
\textsuperscript{91} Leah, (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, March 11, 2011).
Vice Squad Detective Norman Elliot claimed to see as many as 200 known prostitutes working at The Penthouse in a single night while he was on a five-month undercover assignment there. Regular patrons of the club, however, estimated that the number of sex workers in the club on any given night was closer to 100. Elliot had to concede on the stand in the criminal trial held in 1975 that not enough evidence was gathered during his time at The Penthouse to lay criminal charges, and that he also drank a great deal while on assignment.

The Coordinated Law Enforcement Unit (CLEU) had other officers working undercover at The Penthouse, including Detective George Barclay and Bruce Ballentine posing as male clientele, and Constable Leslie Schulze posing as a prostitute. Ross Filippone remembered as many as twenty officers in the club at one time.

Though The Penthouse was commercially successful even without a liquor license, Philliponi saw the club’s ‘legitimacy’ as a high priority and he actively pursued a liquor license. For years, he was turned down because to receive a license, he needed to be a member or affiliate of the Hotel Association (HA), which kept a monopoly on liquor sales in hotel bars. Since The Penthouse had no connection to any nearby hotels, Philliponi was unable to gain entry to this

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94 Still, Larry, “Penthouse Trial Told Local Mafia Tried Takeover,” Vancouver Sun (Vancouver, BC), September 11, 1976.
95 Still, Larry, “Penthouse Trial Told Local Mafia Tried Takeover,” Vancouver Sun (Vancouver, BC), September 11, 1976.
Philliponi’s solution was to start his own association of B.C. Cabaret Owners (COA) in the early 1950s. The club and its lawyers already had ties to other local and provincial associations to promote it as a legitimate business. The Philliponi family also supported mainstream politics and business organizations in order to increase their legitimacy. Joe supported the federal Liberals and the provincial Social Credit party. Ross was a member of the Vancouver Board of Trade and both brothers were early members of the Confratellanza Italo-Canadese Society, which also had other prominent Italian business owners looking to promote themselves and improve their “image” in the city. The main goal of Philliponi’s COA was to convince legislators in the B.C. government that they should expand the terms under which it granted licenses and, in June 1952, a provincial vote resulted in the relaxation of liquor laws. The COA’s lobbying efforts resulted in more votes on this platform than for daylight savings time, the other major issue up for consideration aside from political leaders.

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97 The way that liquor licenses were initially distributed in Vancouver is similar to the infamous center of burlesque, New York City, in the 1930s. Brooks in Unequal Desires describes a similar landscape where upscale cabarets were granted liquor licenses, whereas venues that housed burlesque were not.

98 Crowe, Ma Vie, 26; The Social Credit Party promoted far right-wing politics including highly discriminatory programs during the AIDS crisis (Petty 5; Robinson, Petty, Patton, and Kang 119).

99 This society still exists in the Lower Mainland and continues to hold events and offer scholarships to students of Italian heritage. In the 1960s, on each October 12th the Society would honour Columbus Day and host a dinner with music and speeches. This networking event was often held at the Commodore, which remains in the same location as the 1920s. The Confratellanza also held an annual Italian picnic and dance in various parks with community centres around the Lower Mainland (Crowe 16).

100 Crowe, Ma Vie, 16; Gabaccia et al., “Laboring Across National Borders,” 62.

101 Chong, “Stripped Down.”

102 Chapman, “Strip Off the Old Block,” 5.
Evolving Performances at The Penthouse

By the late 1960s, The Penthouse had solidified its reputation as the nightclub in Vancouver dedicated to explicit, erotic entertainment with a new liquor license, renovations, and large numbers of performers bringing highly sexualized dancing styles from the West Coast circuit. In 1965, dancers travelled from Las Vegas to Vancouver to perform go-go dancing at The Penthouse; this occurred before local performers took up this style of dance and signifies the club’s changing reputation as an establishment consistently featuring explicitly erotic entertainment. In 1968, The Penthouse was finally awarded a liquor license and able to serve alcohol every day starting at 11 am. This resulted in two major changes to The Penthouse’s atmosphere: it now had to close at 2 am and customers could no longer bring their own liquor to the club, in keeping with how liquor was controlled in the hotel bar setting.103

The year 1968 also marked the first major interior renovations to the club since its opening, renovations that solidified its promotion of erotic dance. The Gold Room doubled in size when the small shop next door was demolished. Crowe explains:

Booth seating that could fit four-six people were installed along one wall and the stage was enlarged with a “runway” extending into the seating area. A curtain was installed so that each stripper’s show could be officially announced and the curtain pulled dramatically open. A pole was also installed and was used by most strippers; for years a curved couch covered with satin or velvet material was another main prop for the dancers.104

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103 Mackie, “The Penthouse Cabaret.”
104 Crowe, Ma Vie, 7.
The pole that was installed on The Penthouse stage was one of the first in Vancouver. To celebrate the new license and the club’s new look, the waitresses were dressed in new uniforms consisting of short skirts and low-cut shirts and Philliponi hired professional live bands to accompany the go-go dancers.

Over the next few years, other small changes took place at the club, but at a much slower rate as Joe and Ross were usually holding out for the best deal. The bands that accompanied the dancers with popular tunes, usually jazz and blues, turned out to be too pricey for the club as competition in the more immediate vicinity grew. In response, Philliponi adopted the more affordable trend of hiring dancers who brought their own taped music. This change shaped the nature of the performance, because dancers created set routines as opposed to sets incorporating elements of modern dance and ballet.\textsuperscript{105} When other clubs were trying to trim their expenses, they opted to give dancers shorter-term contracts and asked dancers to do more at the club in terms of socializing with clients and encouraging them to drink more without compensation.\textsuperscript{106} The Penthouse did not attempt either of these economic strategies until the late 1980s and early 1990s. They were ultimately not very successful.

In the spirit of saving money, The Penthouse also featured fewer headlining dancers like Lili St. Cyr, Gypsy Rose Lee, Tempest Storm, and Evelyn West, electing not to pay the higher stage fees to bring them across the border while they were on the northern part of the West Coast circuit (though sometimes recently-opened hotel bars on Granville would hire circuit headliners to attract

\textsuperscript{105} Mort, “Striptease,” 50.
\textsuperscript{106} Mort, “Striptease,” 47.
additional clientele). Instead the club featured more local dancers from local agencies. Crowe considers this to be the moment when the quality of the dancing went “downhill” as locals usually had less experience. Statements like these also demonstrate an early form of the classist divide between burlesque dancers and ‘strippers’.

Interestingly, some local dancers gained popularity doing routines similar to and inspired by those of the more popular and well-known headliners mentioned above. The famous burlesque queen Lili St. Cyr once performed in a martini glass, and her routine has now become the trademark of Dita Von Teese, the contemporary Hollywood figurehead of the neo-burlesque movement. In Vancouver, one of St. Cyr’s Vancouver contemporaries drew crowds to The Penthouse to watch her perform a similar striptease in a champagne glass, presumably in homage to Cyr’s original piece. These kinds of set pieces borrowed “from a rich reservoir of symbols of white glamour, pageantry and feminine sophistication” and circulated transnationally, including performers at the “Moulin Rouge, the Lido, the Folies Bergère, various nightclubs on the Las Vegas strip, and on Hollywood’s silver screen.” Currently, British neo-burlesque star Immodesty Blaize regularly borrows bits and pieces of iconic performances performed during the Golden Era of Burlesque from her idol, Gypsy Rose Lee.

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107 Until the mid-1970s, headlining dancers in Vancouver’s West End clubs were earning as much as 1,500-4,000 CAD per week for three shows a night. However, headlining dancers of colour at East End club’s were only earning 600-800 CAD per week (Ross and Greenwell 142, 151).

108 Crowe, Ma Vie, 7.


111 Ferreday, “Showing the Girl,” 50.
The practice of borrowing or imitating pieces or gimmicks from other dancer’s routines has been prevalent since burlesque’s inception. Dancers at London’s Windmill Theatre frequently presented a fan dance that “encapsulated the erotic rituals of concealment and revelation.”¹¹² This piece originally gained notoriety in the 1930s, when it was performed by iconic dancer Sally Rand in North America, most notably at the Chicago World Fair in 1933. Throughout the history of burlesque, dancers have continually shared routines, suggesting that the performance practice exemplifies and embodies the “benefits of female solidarity.”¹¹³

Burlesque was historically centred on the artistic performance of dancers, but that began to change by the end of the 1960s. As sex workers increasingly used the club to meet clients in the late 1960s and early 1970s, decreased attention was paid to the performers, making the change in line-up even less important to the club’s overall popularity with nightclub patrons. Women working the club as sex workers paid little attention to onstage performances and this shifted the focus and presumably affected the atmosphere and the experience of other patrons.

**Conclusion**

The origins of the Penthouse are rooted in a hybrid space that celebrates, contributes to, and perpetuates the heteronormative consumer male culture that was developing around it. The Penthouse symbolized an iconic family business in

Vancouver that eventually operated in a legal capacity. The first twenty years that The Penthouse had been open in its official capacity were commercially successful for the newcomer Italian family which both resisted and manipulated to their advantage xenophobic attitudes towards Italian settlers in Canada. The owners successfully navigated a complex set of systems to legally serve alcohol, including forming an advocacy association which influenced a provincial referendum on how and to whom liquor licenses were awarded. However, the club also built its reputation on violating institutional regulations and pushing boundaries of respectable and moral behaviour.

Going into the 1970s the owners, patrons, and those working in and around The Penthouse found themselves on the cutting edge of liberal attitudes towards the performance and consumer consumption of sex and sexuality. The fine line the Penthouse walked regarding its status as a respectable business rooted in erotic and sexual performance had become clear by the mid-1970s, when allegations and charges of prostitution led to the venue being shut down and a sensational trial where the family’s Italian heritage was conflated with criminality and immorality. The repercussions of the closure of the Penthouse would deepen local neighbourhood and city resistance to sex work and contribute to increasingly dangerous conditions for sex workers in the Vancouver.

After a police raid in December 1975, the Penthouse was closed for three years. In this chapter, I discuss how the local political context in Vancouver created the conditions for the raid and justified the ensuing three-year closure. The closure of the Penthouse occurred alongside the struggle for the control of the space among city officials, police, and business owners, and in the larger context of the increased danger of street-based sex work. These “clashes between police, the licensing authorities, and sexual entrepreneurs” like the Philliponis/Filippones marked the urban moral and political climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹ The second part of the chapter shifts the focus from the Penthouse to the streets of Vancouver’s West End and argues that the closure of the Penthouse (along with other local institutions) led to an increase in street-based sex work, which in turn prompted an overall negative and complicated set of community and organizational responses. Unlike scholarship that focuses on the work of feminist and/or religious organizations that worked to criminalize and regulate sex work in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this chapter focuses in part on the work of the two major West End community organizations, SEARCH (Society for Education, Action, Research and Counseling on Homosexuality) and

¹ Mort, “Striptease”, 46.
CROWE (Concerned Residents of the West End).\textsuperscript{2} The membership of both these groups consisted predominantly of self-identified gay men who lived in and, in some cases, owned businesses in the West End. While some individual men developed alliances with street-based sex workers, the larger organizations to which they belonged, especially CROWE, had a largely harmful and alienating effect on sex work in the neighbourhood, enforcing principles of the new homonormativity onto the neighbourhood.\textsuperscript{3} The closure of The Penthouse resulted from these changes in feminist and municipal politics, and resulted in a changed and increasingly dangerous landscape for sex workers in Vancouver.

**Anti-Sex Work Politics**

A number of events lead to the December 31, 1975 raid at the Penthouse. The raid needs to be understood in the larger context of anti-sex-work politics, which re-emerged in the 1970s within a certain strain of feminist activism. The BC Police Commission hired “an interested and neutral” consultant, Monique Layton, to produce a report on sex work in Vancouver. Layton’s background, however, was not in sex work or in criminal law but “in the areas of semiotics, folkloristics and literary criticism.”\textsuperscript{4} Layton submitted a report in September 1975 entitled *Prostitution in Vancouver* (1973-1975). In it, she implicated the

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Penthouse in promoting and supporting prostitution. The report’s release coincided with the re-emergence of (contested) feminist politics touting the inherent exploitation of the sex industry and an increase in community complaints and lobbying against prostitution.\(^5\) While some feminists campaigned against the censorship of sexual labour this was not the hegemonic voice of 1970s feminism.\(^6\) Radical feminism challenged the idea of an empowered/liberated female sexuality that was “advertised for male consumption,” arguing that this was reflective of an unequal power differential between men and women.\(^7\) Radical feminist groups like Woman Against Pornography and Direct Action (the Squamish/Vancouver Five which re-emerged with the ‘Wimmin’s Fire Brigade’) went to great lengths to bring attention to violence against women in relation to sexual labour.\(^8\) In the early 1980s, three Lower Mainland locations of Red Hot Video, an American-owned pornography store that specialized in violent, hard-core and bootlegged or pirated pornographic films was bombed by Wimmin’s Fire Brigade. But the climate that led to this direct action was developing in the 1970s, as feminist activists increasingly put pressure on government to change laws to “protect” women from the violence assumed to be integral to pornography and other kinds of sexual labour.

\(^6\) Mort, “Striptease,” 48; Bell, Good girls/bad girls; Chapkis, Live Sex Acts; Dworkin, Pornography; Ferreday, “Showing the Girl;”; Meulen et. Al., Selling Sex; Ross, Burlesque West; Shaver, “Feminist Defense of the Decriminalization of Prostitution.”
\(^7\) Mort, “Striptease,” 50.
A political shift in municipal politics occurred with the appointment of a new chief constable in the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) in July 1974. Donald (Don) Winterton was dedicated to cleaning up city morals. He identified drugs as a major cause of crime but he also argued that “the biggest problem isn’t drugs. It’s the communications problem - communications with the community.”

Winterton was considered to be relatively young to be taking on this position at the age of 42 and he hired three deputies instead of one. In 1971, Winterton “became an inspector in charge of the troubled West End of downtown Vancouver,” where he preferred to take “his men out of cars and put them back to walking the beat.” Winterton wanted the police to be engaged in the community and promoted projects “like the one in an Italian district where an Italian-speaking cop is on hand at a neighbourhood information centre a couple of nights a week, hangs around the streets in plainclothes on his own time and even shoots pool with local heavies.”

Winterton may have ordered the 1975 Penthouse raid because the club was in violation of bylaw no. 2647, which came into effect in 1923 but had not been regularly enforced. This municipal bylaw stated that management of clubs/bars must deny entrance to a “prostitute or person of ill repute.” Joe Philliponi thought the raid might have been caused by a recent argument with the head of the vice squad, Vic Lake, as the former no longer wanted police officers hanging

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13 Kate Webb, “Vancouver mulls striking 90-year-old bylaw that bars sex workers from clubs,” Metro (Vancouver, BC), December 12, 2013.
out informally at the club.\textsuperscript{14} Perhaps in line with the expectation that police officers should engage closely with policed communities, a young officer, then 21, Australian born Leslie Schulze, “was plucked from the police academy for her first assignment posing undercover as a prostitute” after joining the Vancouver Police Department in April 1975.\textsuperscript{15} She frequented the club four or five nights a week from May to August 1975, taking photographs and taping conversations.\textsuperscript{16} A police vehicle was stationed across the street from The Penthouse and was sometimes occupied by the mayor as well as police officers who took pictures of people entering and leaving the club.\textsuperscript{17} While The Penthouse was the target of formal state regulation through policing measures, the involvement of concerned citizens’ organizations, as I describe later in the chapter, reflected more diffuse methods of regulatory control. Boyd describes this as a form of regulation incorporating both "top down" government regulation and regulation coming from “relatively autonomous citizens, organizations such as hospitals, schools, firms, community bodies and individuals.”\textsuperscript{18}

**The Penthouse on Trial**

After this police investigation the Crown charged the owner/operators with living off the avails of prostitution and bribery in 1975. *The Globe and Mail*, *The Province*, and *Vancouver Sun* covered the subsequent trial periodically, with the latter two local newspapers featuring stories on the trial on a regular basis.

\textsuperscript{14} Francis, *Red Light Neon*, 89.
\textsuperscript{15} Chapman, “Strip off the old block,” 4.
\textsuperscript{17} Crowe, *Ma Vie*, 8.
\textsuperscript{18} Boyd, “Producing Vancouver’s (Hetero) Normative Nightscape”, 176.
None of the publications assigned one single journalist to the trial and, often in *The Province*, no specific reporter was credited for writing the story. The stories were usually featured in back sections of the papers; however, the two local newspapers used sensational and highly sexual headlines to try to grab readers' attention. *The Sun*, for example, featured headlines like “Busiest Hooker Wore Badge” on September 25, 1976 and “Penthouse trial told of local Mafia takeover” on September 11, 1976. Other examples of sensational, sexualized headlines reporting on the most salacious elements of the trial included “Cabaret ‘kind of union shop’ for hookers,” also from the *The Sun* on September 18, 1976/“Penthouse activity just a question of ‘boy meets girl’,” from *The Sun* on December 3, 1976/“I cherish my life- ex-Penthouse girl,” from *The Province* on September 22, 1976/“Club girls ‘not big tippers,’” from *The Province* on October 5, 1976/“Just beautiful girls, says club manager,” from *The Province* on December 1, 1976/ and “Penthouse girl made $20,000” from *The Province* on September 3, 1976.19 Most of the headlines alluded to the bodies of sexualized women and always qualified the women as desirable within a heterosexual economy. Referring to them as ‘girls’ in particular was infantilizing and objectifying. Most of the stories ran without accompanying photos. This local news coverage was an important part of how people in Vancouver understood the trial. The audience of these articles learned about the closure of the club and the subsequent trial from sources that never sought the voices of sex workers.

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themselves. This supports the analysis of sex work by John Lowman, whose research found that the voices of sex workers were rarely sought by media sources on issues pertaining to them.\(^\text{20}\)

The three brothers who owned and operated the establishment, Mickey and Ross Filippone and Joe Philliponi plus a doorman, Jan Sedlak, and a cashier, Minerva Kelly, were charged with keeping a common bawdy house, living off the avails of prostitution, recording bets, public mischief, conspiring to corrupt public morals, and attempting to bribe a member of the Liquor Control Board. The bribery charge was especially peculiar, as Philliponi had recently given the member of the Liquor Control Board in question two bottles of B.C. wine and a homemade cake his mother had made. Joe Philliponi’s Christmas lists were famous, and included city council members, law enforcement, and local celebrities. He usually did not give anyone more than a bottle or two of B.C. wine. Because this occurred long before B.C. wine developed its current reputation, it was perhaps the cake that was the point of contention. No other evidence was introduced or proven in court indicating Philliponi had treated the member of the Liquor Control Board in a particularly unique way, and this point ultimately led to the charges being declared unfounded by the Supreme Court of Canada.\(^\text{21}\) The balance of The Penthouse staff charged were accused of accepting tips from sex workers when customers were sent their way, and local authorities took exception to staff charging sex workers entrance fees three or four times a night when they re-entered after leaving with a date. Today some of these


\(^{21}\) Roberts, “Life Near the Top.”
practices make up an “informal economy of favours.”

22 For example, dancers sometimes tip-out staff at a higher rate if they ignore club rules while servers often reward hosts with higher tip-outs if they seat a ‘high roller’ in their section.

The raid and trial illustrated the process of gendering space and the power struggles involving dancers, sex workers, owners, and police within that space. The importance the police placed on Schulze’s undercover work was staggering and poses interesting questions about the social construction of the Penthouse. The undercover work of one female police officer played a “pretty important” role in justifying the raid while a plethora of undercover and more senior male officers did not manage this task.

23 Women entering the academy at the VPD made up 24 percent of the force, a notable minority in the first police force in Canada to accept women in June 1912.24 However, women were not armed in the field until 1973, and the RCMP did not accept women into the force at all at this point. Don Winterton, the chief of the VPD, endorsed having officers in the community and saw an opportunity to use Schulze (who later used her married name McKellar) as an undercover sex worker at The Penthouse. Schulze was able to work the scene from an angle that was inaccessible to the male undercover officers already on assignment there. The success of the case was placed on her shoulders,

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24 Kristin Hardie (curator of the Vancouver Police Museum) e-mail message to author, March 1, 2016.
relying almost entirely on her experiences and observations while at the club. The reliance of the police, the courts, and the city on the work of one young, female, undercover police officer demonstrates that women had a great degree of impact within this venue on a number of levels: as regulators of female sexuality and as women whose sexuality was understood as threatening.

The trial did not start until September 1, 1976 and lasted until March 1977. The Crown argued that management used women exchanging sexual acts for money to draw customers to the establishment.25 The case was called the “Charge-sex trial” by local media, a play on the credit card name ‘Charge-Ex’ (now VISA), as the club was accused of advancing money from credit cards to customers wishing to buy sex with a hefty surcharge of twenty percent.26 When asked if he felt he was violating his agreement with credit card companies, Joe Philliponi testified that his club acted as a bank of sorts: “I don’t give a shit what you do with the money. You can throw it out the window as far as I’m concerned. I can go into a bank and say, ‘Look, I’ve got two prostitutes outside in a cab and I need $200.’ The bank clerk wouldn’t care.”27 The main argument of defence attorney Russ Chamberlain throughout the trial was to ask whether other businesses, such as stores that sold their goods to sex workers, should also be charged with ‘living off the avails’?28

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26 Francis, Red Light Neon, 88.
28 Crowe, Ma Vie, 30.
The trial, as it played out at court, provided a kind of sexual spectacle for the city. Witnesses called to the stand in Judge William Trainor’s courtroom included patrons of the nightclub, a sex worker disguised in a wig and sunglasses who feared being beaten if she was recognized,\textsuperscript{29} a couple of high school girls who went to The Penthouse to see what sex work was about, James Rogers, an inspector with the Liquor Administration Branch, various employees of the club, including cocktail waitress Jeanet Mauro, and a sex worker who claimed she had to perform oral sex on Ross Filippone in order to work out of the club. The defense lawyer, Russell Chamberlain, later introduced evidence that the woman was unfamiliar with Filippone’s penis.\textsuperscript{30} In what was supposed to be a strategic move, Chamberlain called Ross, rather than Joe, to the stand. Joe’s boisterous personality and accompanying brazen remarks might have left the court with mixed opinions about his character, whereas the defense hoped that Ross would embody the image of a family man who dedicated his life to a local business that was part of Vancouver’s landscape. According to Crowe, however, Ross was nervous about speaking in public and “ended up sounding disjointed and unsure of himself.”\textsuperscript{31}

Also gracing the stand was Schulze, who was becoming a bit of a local celebrity and gaining recognition for the large part she had played leading up to the raid and closure. While being examined in court, Schulze testified that she


\textsuperscript{30}Francis, \textit{Red Light Neon}, 90.

\textsuperscript{31}Crowe, \textit{Ma Vie}, 30.
was “the busiest girl in town” as she left the club every night with a gaggle of male clients who were actually other undercover officers.\textsuperscript{32} Schulze stated that sex workers were required to pay multiple entry fees in an evening, \$2.95 every time they re-entered the club after leaving. When later called to the stand, Philliponi denied that this policy was uniquely applied to known sex workers: “Everyone who went out had to pay again to get back in, unless there was a personal okay from management.”\textsuperscript{33} Because of her celebrity status, Schulze believed she became a target for the mob.\textsuperscript{34}

Schulze testified that she “pretended to agree to have sex with a waiter if she lost a bet on a football game” on the night of August 7, 1975.\textsuperscript{35} When Schulze arrived at the club that night, Mickey Filippone was watching a game between the BC Lions and the Edmonton Eskimos. The latter team was up by 20 points. If Schulze bet on the Lions and won, she alleged, she would walk away with 200 dollars and, if she lost, she had to have sex with the headwaiter, Mike, while Mickey watched. When the Lions lost, Schulze pulled Mike aside and told him she could not honour her bet for a week due to a venereal infection. While on the stand, Schulze was accused by the defence of lying to ensure the success of her first assignment and memorizing her notes before trial. She was also questioned extensively regarding the loss of her handwritten notes, which were replaced by typewritten ones based on her memory.\textsuperscript{36} Throughout the course of the trial,

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{32}{Chow, “Busiest Hooker Wore Badge.”}
\footnote{33}{Chow, “Busiest Hooker Wore Badge.”}
\footnote{34}{Chapman, “Strip Off the Old Block.”}
\footnote{35}{Chow, “Busiest Hooker Wore Badge.”}
\footnote{36}{Wyng Chow, “Court Told of Sex Bet on Football Game,” \textit{Vancouver Sun} (Vancouver, BC) September 24, 1976.}
\end{footnotes}
Philliponi denied that he knew sex workers were using the club as a place to arrange transactions and when asked upon reopening if the women were continuing to work at his establishment, he replied: “We let anyone and everyone in, regardless of color, creed or profession. I’m not going to accuse someone when a woman comes in to have dinner alone. It’s not up to us to accuse people of what we think people are.”

In March 1977, all those accused, except Mickey Filippone who had been sick and in the hospital most of the trial with a leg infection, were found guilty of conspiracy to live off the avails of prostitution and fined. Joe and Ross were sentenced to sixty days in jail. In December 1977, however, the convictions were overturned and all those charged were found “not guilty on all counts” by the BC Court of Appeal. This verdict was upheld by the Supreme Court of Canada in 1978 when it concurred that the charges were unfounded, as determined by the verdicts of the lower courts. Though those accused were ultimately not convicted, Crowe confirms some creative bookkeeping took place at The Penthouse: “I understood that Ross skimmed money off the cash flow every night. I don’t know if it was openly discussed with Joe but he must have known what Ross was doing and he was in agreement because it meant that they both paid lower income taxes because their figures weren’t truthful.”

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38 “Penthouse Girl Made $20, 000.” The Province (Vancouver, BC), September 3, 1976.


40 Crowe, Ma Vie, 18.
The Penthouse ultimately reopened as an exotic nightclub late in 1978 and the legal system was out 2 million dollars. McKellar continued working for the Vancouver Police Department and was recognized as one of the “world’s top cops” in 1987 when she received an award from the International Association of Women Police.\footnote{Kristin Hardie, e-mail message to author, March 1, 2016.} She was recognized at a ceremony in New York along with six other female officers from different countries citing patrol duty as her favourite part of policing.

It is important to note that The Penthouse was just one of two Vancouver nightclubs raided and closed on December 31, 1975. The Zanzibar was also known for its flourishing indoor sex trade. The latter club burned down shortly after the closure and the owner was charged with arson but never convicted. The impact of the closure of both these clubs reverberated in neighbourhoods throughout Vancouver. The closures forced many women to move to street-level prostitution because of the lack of tolerant and safer indoor spaces. Similar effects were seen in Toronto in 1977 when “body rub parlours” along Yonge Street were raided and closed.\footnote{Lowman, “Deadly Inertia,” 37; Francis, \textit{Red Light Neon}, 91.}

It was only much later that local authorities applied a more critical stance to the practise of raids and closures. In 1987, Vancouver Regional Crown counsel stated The Penthouse raid was a mistake because of the ensuing displacement of sex workers. This answer was given in response to a question about why charges were not being laid against commonly known escort agencies proliferating...
throughout the city.\textsuperscript{43} The statement implied that charges had not historically been laid against indoor escort services because the closure of these businesses could result in more women working on the street in unsafe and isolated areas.\textsuperscript{44} The Penthouse had once been a place where sex workers worked off the streets in a controlled environment that offered safety and security. In comparison, sex workers working on the street worked in a “high-risk” occupation, often alone, “in dangerous areas, at night, and with cash on hand.”\textsuperscript{45} When the Penthouse was closed, initiatives to clean up the streets leading up to Expo ’86\textsuperscript{46} pushed workers further east into industrial areas.\textsuperscript{47} According to John Lowman, the closure of The Penthouse contributed to a rise in Vancouver’s street prostitution. He also argues that the danger associated with street sex work can be connected to the on-going violence against and disappearance of sex workers in Vancouver.\textsuperscript{48}

Not long after the raid and closure of The Penthouse, the federal government changed the criminal law related to sex work. In 1985, the communication provision, Bill C-49 section 213 of the \textit{Criminal Code}, was added to the existing federal regulations pertaining to keeping a common bawdy house and living off the avails of prostitution. The addition of the communication law

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{44} Crowe, \textit{Ma Vie}, 30; Francis, \textit{Red Light Neon} 103; Lowman, “ Deadly Inertia,” 38.
\textsuperscript{46} These initiatives are eerily similar to raids on massage parlours leading up to the 2010 Olympics.
\textsuperscript{47} Other initiatives to clean up the city included moving or removing sexually suggestive advertising from obvious and public venues, including sidewalks (Inwood).
\end{quote}
put street-based sex workers in the marginal position of being unable to evaluate prospective clients, since doing so would be considered communicating in a public place for the purposes of prostitution. This Bill included motor vehicles in the definition of public places and was supposed to be reviewed and amended after three years.49

But the closure of clubs like The Penthouse and the introduction of the communication provision of the *Criminal Code* did not make sex work safer. Since the mid-1980s, more than 65 sex workers who worked on isolated strolls in Vancouver have been murdered. The circumstances surrounding the closure of The Penthouse serve as a strong argument for the decriminalization of sex work, the results of which would enhance workers’ safety by not necessarily placing them in an antagonistic relationship with the law. According to a woman who reflected on her time at The Penthouse in an interview with John Lowman:

> Customers were screened when they went into the Penthouse. If there was a weirdo, the bouncers at the Penthouse would protect you. The Penthouse was a good place. It really was. Everyone knew prostitutes were there. There were cops in there all the time but who cares about them. Mainly they were there for customers who were being ripped off and as soon as they found out in the Penthouse that you were ripping someone off, you didn’t work there anymore.50

**The Penthouse Closure, Street Sex-Work, and Community Politics in Vancouver’s West-End**

The closure of The Penthouse resulted in sex workers moving their business en masse to the streets of Vancouver’s West End, a process which created increased community conflict and resulted in another critical report.

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50 Lowman, “Vancouver Field Study of Prostitution,” 278.
similar to the one that had contributed to the club’s original raid and closure. In 1977, the Vancouver Police Board prepared a report for Vancouver City Council, “Street Prostitution in Vancouver’s West End,” which discussed the area bordered by English Bay, Stanley Park, and Robson Street. Gary Forbes, the Corporal who penned the report, expressed concern that the public might think police were “getting a ‘cut’ for not getting rid of hookers” and suggested officers were demoralized because of the increase in visible sex workers.51

Before extensive urban development in Vancouver, the area now known as the West End was an extension of Stanley Park. Mansions were built in the area and the upper class inhabited the West End predominantly because of its close proximity to desirable locations such as beaches, the shopping district, and places to eat out. As Vancouver grew larger in the 1910s, the upper class moved to Shaughnessy and their houses in the West End were turned into rooming houses.52 In the 1950s and 1960s, extensive urban development in the West End saw the creation of many high-rise apartment buildings and towers to house mostly single men. Between 1950 and 1955, 90 buildings were erected.53 Prior to 1956, zoning limited buildings to under six stories; however, as most of the buildings were made of wood they could not be built taller than two stories due to city regulations.54 These are the three-floor low-rise apartment buildings in the

54 Ibid., 40.
West End that are currently being bought up by developers and leading to a
decrease in the affordable housing in the area. In 1985, however, rents in the area
were affordable. It was easy to find rent in the West End for around 250 dollars a
month. The zoning changes in 1956 allowed taller buildings, but anything over
80 feet still required special authorization from the city. The result of these
changes was the demolition of most single family and rooming houses to build
apartment buildings, primarily of one-bedroom suites. By 1966, the West End
had 40 percent of the apartment suites in the city, with only 23 percent of the
apartment blocks. High-rise buildings of predominantly one-bedroom
apartments presented a variety of living possibilities to residents, including
affordable housing, living outside the expectations of the nuclear family, and a
relatively anonymous relationship between landlords and tenants. It was in the
1960s, potentially in part due to these factors, that drugs, street youth, and sex
work became visible in the West End, before the mass influx of street level sex
workers fifteen years later.

It was in this changing West End environment that Layton wrote her 1975
report. In it, Layton estimated that Vancouver was home to 300 sex workers. Layton had hoped to focus on “teenage prostitution in Vancouver” but soon
discovered it would be impossible to isolate this issue from the sex work economy

55 Terence J Fairclough, *The Gay Community of Vancouver’s West End: The Geography of a
Modern Urban Phenomenon* (Unpublished Masters Thesis: University of British Columbia,
57 Gray, Keddie, and Kwan, “Patterns of Neighbourhood Change,” 45.
58 Bouthillette, *Queer Scapes*, 55.
in general. According to Layton, “pushers, pimps, boosters, hookers, hustlers, narks, cops, all belong to the same scene.”60 She interviewed 100 female sex workers, who she gained access to via select law enforcement agents, including morality squad detectives and probation officers as well as outreach workers from City Centre Youth Resources. At a time when issues of ethics and consent were rarely discussed in relation to social science research, this meant that her interviews were often done in the presence of authority figures.61 Layton also conducted interviews with some of the probation officers, police officers, outreach workers, as well as immigration officers and community groups with an interest in sexual health like the V.D. Clinic and SEARCH. Most of these latter interviews took place “over a large quantity of beer.”62 Despite the problematic structure of the interviews, Layton argued there was no reason to believe anyone would lie to her in their interview because they were experts in their field.63 When Corporal Gary Forbes’ 1977 VPD report “Street Prostitution in Vancouver’s West End” was released, Vancouver prostitution numbers had jumped dramatically. Authorities estimated that as many as 650 prostitutes worked in the entire city, with 300 working on the streets and 200 of that number working in the West End.64 The increase in prostitution was attributed to the removal of vagrancy laws in 1972. Section A of the vagrancy laws had allowed the police to demand justification for a person’s presence in public while Section C allowed the police to interrogate suspected prostitutes specifically. The report stated that the

removal of the vagrancy laws meant that the police could do little about prostitution and that this, in turn, led to negative public perception of the police as the whole.

City Council did not discuss the 1975 Layton report in any of its open meetings, though the 1977 Forbes report was discussed in some depth. On October 14, 1977, advocates from local organizations like the Downtown Eastside Residents’ Association (DERA) and the Committee of Progressive Electors (COPE) expressed concerns to City Hall about re-introducing a by-law that would be similar to previous vagrancy laws. Towards the end of October, members of the Police Department presented the report to Council, highlighting the difficulties in controlling prostitution. At this point, the police began lobbying for clearly worded direction from City Council in a section called “Frustrations, Concerns, and Recommendations.” It was suggested in Forbes’s report that City Council consider suspending the business licenses of restaurants, cabarets, hotels, and other businesses suspected to be working too closely with sex workers. This discussion took place while The Penthouse was closed for the trial and court proceedings. City Council did not discuss prostitution again until June 1, 1978, when Alderman Bellamy expressed concern about prostitution and the Mayor agreed that there were many complaints from citizens. The following month, suggestions from the Police Department were heard, including closing the liquor store located at Davie and Bute. As a result of the complaints from residents and the report from police, Council moved to lobby the federal

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65 Vancouver City Council Minutes, Vancouver City Archives, Vancouver, October 14, 1977.  
66 Vancouver City Council Minutes, Vancouver City Archives, Vancouver, BC, June 1, 1978.
government to introduce new legislation to regulate all persons involved in street prostitution. In addition, the city moved to further examine the issue. On September 14, 1978 Council appointed an “Advisory Committee re: Prostitution and Pornography,” after which issues of street level prostitution were not discussed at greater Council for the rest of the 1970s.67

Approximately 50 of the 200 sex-workers in the West End were reported by Layton to be working regularly on intersections on Davie Street close to nightclubs and bars, specifically at Bute, Jervis, and Broughton.68 The remaining 150 could be found either on Pendrell Street (which runs parallel to Davie), often at the same cross-streets as the lucrative ones a few blocks over, while others circulated in the bars.69 The ‘problem’ of sex workers in the West End was not just about female workers; the 1977 report cited a spike in male prostitution in the 1970s and was peppered with references to “transvestites” and “crossdressers.” The report claimed that most of the sex workers consulted identified as heterosexual and engaged in queer sex at the request of their clients, charging $25-30 for oral sex and $50 for anal sex, though some also exchanged sexual favours for things including temporary housing.70 The legendary documentary film Hookers on Davie shows the diversity of folks working and living in the West End. In the film, Michelle a sex worker in the West End explains that “Davie street has everything on it from pushers to pimps to

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67 Vancouver City Council Minutes, Vancouver City Archives, Vancouver, BC, September 14, 1978.  
68 Layton, “Prostitution in Vancouver,” 2.  
70 Hookers on Davie, produced and directed by Janice Cole and Holly Dale (1984; Toronto: Spectrum Films), DVD.
prostitutes to transies to little boy hustlers...”71 One dancer interviewed who worked at The Penthouse prior to the raid and closure also remembered sex workers at the club who were not cisgender women.72

Layton’s report advocated for culturally specific supports for those involved in the sex industry, including lenient sentencing for those not caught up in cycles of addiction.73 The proposed solution to clean up the West End was to work with the community to get support and co-operation on the “prostitution issue.” The first group to work with the police on this initiative was the Society for Education, Action, Research and Counseling on Homosexuality (SEARCH).74 In a move similar to Philliponi’s founding of the COA, SEARCH was formed in 1974 in part by owners of clubs in the West End who wanted to gain liquor licenses, including the owners of Zodiacs, BJ’s, and Faces. These clubs were operating as illegal bottle clubs, just like The Penthouse once had.75 Other business owners who were founding members of SEARCH included proprietors of Richard’s Street Service Centre, Playpen Central, and Have a Gay Stay, a company that facilitated gay-friendly travel arrangements for men.

The collaboration between SEARCH and the VPD was significant because SEARCH was based in the West End and was willing to work and collaborate with the police. This approach differed from other contemporary organizations, such as

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71 Hookers on Davie, produced and directed by Janice Cole and Holly Dale (1984; Toronto: Spectrum Films), DVD.
75 Faireclough, The Gay Community of Vancouver’s West End, 85.
as the Gay Alliance Towards Equality (GATE), which accused the police force of
discriminating against them while simultaneously targeting the West End
because of its reputation and concentration of queer folk.\textsuperscript{76} SEARCH grew out of
a smaller group called the Gay Information Service and made seven
recommendations to City Council and the police regarding licensing and gay
clubs. GATE, however, wanted it noted in the Council Minutes that they would
never recommend any kind of police surveillance in the West End.\textsuperscript{77} In contrast,
SEARCH was a fairly mainstream organization interested in improving the
relationship between the West End and the rest of Vancouver. For example, well-
known local Unitarian minister J. McRee Elrod was a board member of SEARCH
and answered questions about navigating being both Christian and gay in its
newsletter.\textsuperscript{78}

This was not the first initiative that SEARCH had worked on with the VPD
specifically or the greater Vancouver community more generally. Starting in 1976
SEARCH held clinics run by a volunteer medical team that would provide
anonymous testing and information on sexually transmitted infections including,
but not limited to, gonorrhea, genital warts, syphilis, hepatitis, and pubic lice.
These clinics also promoted the use of condoms. SEARCH also worked closely
with the group Gay People of UBC.

\textsuperscript{76}Fairclough, \textit{The Gay Community of Vancouver’s West End}, 47.
\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{78}}Gay Alliance Towards Equality Fonds, File 2-59, SEARCH. UBC Rare Books and Special
Collections. Vancouver, BC.
In 1978, SEARCH received numerous inquiries about gay rights and the law. The same year, SEARCH began to hold monthly dinners at Sir Edgar’s restaurant that featured a guest speaker and a question and answer period to determine what issues were of most concern for residents of the West End. Tickets for these dinners were available at Playpen Central, the Shaggy Horse, and the SEARCH office. Despite active liaising between the community and the police, by 1979, West End residents, including Gordon Price, NPA member of Vancouver City Council from 1986-2002, were not interested in figuring out how to share the neighborhood with sex workers. Residents and organizations began organizing to eradicate street-level sex work in the area, eventually displacing SEARCH from the project and sex workers from the neighbourhood. This shift is indicative of what Lisa Duggan has referred to as the rise of the “new homonormativity” in conjunction with the mainstreaming of gay rights post-Stonewall, where predominantly white middle-class gay men were seeking access to power and respectability via dominant forms of consumer capitalism, resulting in the gentrification of urban neighborhoods. The work of some gay activists, mostly members of CROWE, who tried to "Shame the Johns" out of the West End and to eradicate street sex work offers “an unsettling twist to stories that reveal power of binaries...to co-construct regulatory discourses of ‘self’ and ‘other’ with often lethal effects.”

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In 1981, CROWE (Concerned Residents of the West End) was officially founded in an apartment building on Pendrell Street. Many of its founding members, like Gordon Price, had been actively trying to prohibit visible sex work in the West End for years. CROWE sought to make changes in the West End by gaining media attention, lobbying various levels of government to increase penalties for sex work, and installing more roadblocks in the area to make it more difficult for sex workers to arrange and meet dates. In a recent interview in response to the unveiling of the West End Sex Worker’s Memorial, Price retrospectively justified the actions of CROWE as follows:

The point of CROWE — and we reiterate this constantly — we’re not talking about prostitution here. If government wants to legalize it and regulate it, great! But there is a fundamental question, about as Canadian as you get, of peace, order and good government. Do the people who live here have a reasonable expectation that there will be, you know, a fundamental level of civility? That their streets aren't going to be effectively a 24-hour sex bazaar? And ... if government can't or isn't willing to demonstrate to maintain peace and order, what happens then?  

CROWE’s tactics became more direct as their group grew over time. CROWE members believed that visible sex work became an issue in the West End in 1978 and became a “severe” problem by 1980. Up until the formation of CROWE, they argued, “West End etiquette is to ignore the issue.” CROWE was responsible for developing the infamous ‘Shame the Johns’ campaign, which called for the community to take action against sex work in the streets by

82 Pete McMartin, “Can a neighbourhood be complicit in murder?” Vancouver Sun (Vancouver, BC), Sept. 20, 2016.
harassing johns, taking pictures of transactions, and reporting license plates.\textsuperscript{85}
Some Vancouver socialist groups counter-picketed holding signs with slogans like ‘Fight Poverty Not Prostitution’ and ‘Dear John’ Letters = Police Harassment.’\textsuperscript{86}

CROWE’s actions received attention and support from city councilors, including Alderman Nathan Divinsky. Federal justice minister (and later Prime Minister) Jean Chrétien was labeled by CROWE as ineffective because he stated the issue of legislating sex work was a provincial rather than federal issue, at least until a Supreme Court ruling.\textsuperscript{87} In 1982 a position paper CROWE examined the federal government response to sex work and suggests what, in their view, needed to change. They noted that the \textit{Criminal Code} addressed sex work in section 195.1 and they questioned at what point ‘soliciting’ became sex work. The city of Vancouver’s jurisdiction did not cover sex work and loitering laws were based on problems such as impeding traffic or multiple noise complaints. The punishment for loitering was a fine, but CROWE advocated for imprisonment of sex workers and their clients. In rare cases when sex workers were criminally charged, the cases were usually thrown out of court because of inadequate evidence. CROWE thus concluded that charging sex workers was ineffective and

\textsuperscript{85} CROWE, Minutes (Mss.1449, Box 973-B-6, File 1, CROWE Minutes), Gordon Price Fonds, Vancouver City Archives, Vancouver, BC, August 25, 1981.
expensive and that the laws pertaining to sex work needed to be changed to protect communities and the West End specifically.\textsuperscript{88}

In 1982, no longer content with the results of the action of their small group, CROWE began to widen its membership base and solicit support from the wider community, though it still mainly identified with gay men. The organization divided into three sections: one to deal with membership relations, one to handle publicity and lobbying, and one to strategize potential solutions and actions.\textsuperscript{89} At CROWE’s first press conference, attendance was controlled in order to “assure the conference is not disrupted by persons of divergent viewpoints who insist on dominating for the sake of effect.”\textsuperscript{90} In other words, sex workers and their allies who were trying to organize and provide a counter-narrative while the neighbourhood organized against them were explicitly excluded.\textsuperscript{91} At the press conference, CROWE expressed interest in organizing large rallies to catch the attention of the provincial and federal governments. CROWE ended up forging connections and relationships with politicians in the Progressive Conservative party, notably Pat Carney, who was the Vancouver Centre MP. The date of a protest march organized by CROWE in April 1982 was changed so that Carney could be in attendance and draw national media attention.

\textsuperscript{88} CROWE, Position Paper: How We Got to Where We Are or Who’s Responsible for This Mess? (Mss.1449, Box 973-B-1, File 5, CROWE Newsletters 1-4), Gordon Price Fonds, Vancouver City Archives, Vancouver, BC, 1982.
\textsuperscript{89} CROWE, “Newsletter #1.”
\textsuperscript{90} CROWE, Minutes (Mss.1449, Box 973-B-6, File 1, CROWE Minutes), Gordon Price Fonds, Vancouver City Archives, Vancouver, BC, August 26, 1981.
\textsuperscript{91} CROWE, Minutes (Mss.1449, Box 973-B-6, File 1, CROWE Minutes), Gordon Price Fonds, Vancouver City Archives, Vancouver, BC, August 26, 1981.
CROWE’s actions caused tensions and resentment in the West End as some less vocal residents thought a different model of sharing the community with street-based sex workers could benefit all parties. CROWE disagreed and stated: “It is not prostitutes who are being oppressed; it is we, the residents of the West End.”92 In contrast, a small gay publication in the West End published a letter from resident Hoddy Allen who found CROWE’s Shame the Johns actions distressing “because many participants appear to be gay men.”93 This, however, was a rare example of a West End resident pushing back and drawing a connection between the interests of gay men and sex workers within broader campaigns of sexual liberation.94

Crowe and federal politicians did not always argue the best approach to eradicating, regulating, or controlling sex work. Federal Cabinet Minister Judy Erola spoke against harsher prostitution laws in line with the position of the Status of Women National Action Committee, fearing police would gain the power to demand why people, especially women, were present in public, as they did before vagrancy laws were dissolved in 1972. Erola believed that being approached by sex workers was less frightening than being approached by police; CROWE countered by stating that Erola did not understand “the harassment and intimidation” felt by West End residents living among sex workers.95 Some government officials were worried that supporting a bawdy-house system, which

95 CROWE, “Newsletter #2.”
CROWE tentatively supported as a means of reducing street-level prostitution, would further marginalize youth, trans, and queer folk who would unlikely be able to gain access to the corresponding licenses and would end up back on the street.\footnote{CROWE, “Newsletter #3.”} CROWE also thought that sex workers were an economic threat to respectable businesses in the West End. They argued that the neighbourhood was developing a poor reputation and that this would deter potential customers. CROWE also thought that patrons could also be deterred by aggressive solicitation from street-based sex workers.\footnote{CROWE, Minutes (Mss.1449, Box 973-B-6, File 1, CROWE Minutes), Gordon Price Fonds, Vancouver City Archives, Vancouver, BC, September 17, 1981.}

The conflict between CROWE and sex workers in the West End continued to grow. CROWE believed that sex workers in the West End were prepared to defend themselves against local clean-up efforts, claiming “the hookers are organized to the degree that they have walkie-talkies, signals, back-up protection from pimps and organized territory established.”\footnote{CROWE, Minutes (Mss. 1449, Box 973-B6. File 1, CROSE Minutes), Gordon Price Fonds, Vancouver City Archives, Vancouver, BC, September 24, 1981.} Further, some involved with the street-level sex industry allegedly threatened to burn down St Paul’s Anglican Church if they allowed CROWE to use their space.\footnote{CROWE, Minutes (Mss.1449, Box 973-B-6. File 1, CROWE Minutes). Gordon Price Fonds, Vancouver City Archives, Vancouver, BC, September 24, 1981.} Ultimately, as the Shame the Johns campaign gained supporters and momentum, sex workers were forced out of the West End via a court injunction issued on July 5, 1984. The injunction banned sex workers from west of Granville Street and forced some to relocate to more isolated and industrial areas of the city.\footnote{Francis, \textit{Red Light Neon}, 107.} Price and CROWE were
successful insofar as they reduced the visibility of sex work on the street in the West End. For them, however, this was only a partial victory as CROWE was intent on entirely criminalizing prostitution.

Gordon Price went on to become the first openly gay city counselor in 1986. He remained focused on the regulation of sex work despite concerns expressed from community members and groups, including ASP (Alliance for the Safety of Prostitutes), regarding his stance on the issue. Price’s tactics and agenda were also questioned by his city colleagues in the 1980s, including Bev Ballantyne who, in a letter to the Mayor, argued that Price provoked unnecessary public paranoia and panic providing “misinformation about my community’s liveability.” Ballantyne conceded that there were many important issues the West End Liveability Project should address and the city was undertaking to assess how the West End was faring post-injunction. But Ballantyne was concerned that under the supervision of Price, “concerns about facilities for small children and single parents, juvenile prostitution, appropriate facilities for teens, slum landlords, deteriorating buildings and business fronts along Davie,” were ignored in favour of an exclusive focus on reports of street solicitation from one of the five advisory committees participating in the project of assessing the West End.

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In conclusion, the raid, closure, and trial involving The Penthouse nightclub that started in 1975 all demonstrate an attempt to enforce hegemonic moral regulations and sexual respectability in urban Vancouver. The result was escalation of a dangerous and ongoing cycle of marginalizing and isolating street-based sex workers. The closure of The Penthouse resulted in an increase in street-based sex workers in the West End, resulting in a largely hostile response from local residents. The growth of groups like CROWE, which attempted to force out sex workers on the basis of creating a respectable, business-friendly gay neighbourhood, ultimately helped perpetuate stigma and fueled policies that enabled and justified fatalities and violence. Resistance to the vigilante Shame the Johns movement was voiced by groups of sex workers and their allies as well as a minority of West End residents. However, the activist projects in the West End that were ultimately successful were those which endorsed and enforced a very particular homo and sexual normativity.
CHAPTER 3: “NOT GUILTY ON ALL COUNTS”: REOPENING 1978-1983

The reopening of The Penthouse in 1978 after its three-year closure coincided with a major shift in the club’s history and reputation. At first, the newly opened club had few patrons.¹ During this period, conventions and performance style associated with striptease were slowly changing, as the industry, for example, began to embrace performances with full nudity. In this period, Joe Philliponi was somewhat resistant to industry changes and nostalgic for what he would have considered the ‘golden age’ of his ‘gentleman’s club’.

Previously licensed as a ‘supper club’ by the City of Vancouver, the new license for the club, which was difficult to obtain, was for an ‘exotic nightclub.’²

By the time of the club re-opened full nudity in strip shows with a license was legal in Vancouver, where the courts had deemed it to not be obscene.³

Because striptease as a kind of dance is very difficult to articulate in regulatory

¹ Upon reopening, sex workers were not officially allowed in the club. As demonstrated by quotes in the Globe and Mail, Philliponi was not keen on this new rule because he did not want to make assumptions about people. Clearly, the dynamics of the club pre-closure were good for business. Though I am unable to pinpoint when sex workers did return into the club, Annie Temple, Danny Filippone, Flora, Randy Knowlan, Leah, Carson Leigh, and Mistress confirm they have been banned from the club again as of the 1990s. Though Filippone assured me that street sex workers were no longer allowed in the club, anecdotal reports from workers in the club suggest that this rule is not as rigid as Filippone suggests. When Danny Filippone says “VIPs and prostitutes don’t mix” he is referring to VIP dancers who work the crowd selling private dances and pointing to competition between the two groups of sexual labourers. This competition manifests differently in erotic establishments in North America, where some single women are not permitted to enter a club without a male escort (Brooks 109). This heterosexist conception of competition exists outside of erotic venues, however, in these kinds of clubs are usually figured as male spaces where women can only be workers, not customers.

² Leah (interview by author, Hope, BC, March 10, 2011).

codes, regulation frequently happens in relation to which body parts can or cannot be exposed.\textsuperscript{4} Changing regulations regarding bodily display thus led to changes in the burlesque tradition as certain components of the tease were lost or transformed. Striptease, however, has a long tradition of adapting to the regulatory environment. A similar moment of adaptation occurred with the invention of ‘pasties,’ the small decorative nipple coverings created in New York in the 1930s when full breast exposure was prohibited in public.\textsuperscript{5} In the context of permission for full nudity beginning in the late 1970s, new elements of seduction became staples of striptease performance. Dancers exaggerated particular conventions such as turning their backs to the audience to take off clothing, drawing that movement out as long as the music allowed in order to keep the audience engaged, and simultaneously and frequently looking back with coy, seductive expressions to ensure the audience had not lost interest.\textsuperscript{6} Dancers would literally share ideas and techniques of "flirty moves and cute little things to do" as the industry adapted and changed.\textsuperscript{7} Carson Leigh characterizes the industry as a close-knit community of dancers mentoring each other after hours at the club.

It was after Philliponi’s death in 1983 that the new manager, Danny Filippone, would introduce new changes to bring the Penthouse in line with conventions and practices more closely related to ‘stripping’. This chapter

\textsuperscript{4} Jackson, “Revealing Contemporary Constructions of Femininity,” 362.
\textsuperscript{5} Because exposing particular body parts is frequently articulated in a way that conflates sex and gender, male dancers often are not ‘technically’ erotic dancers. Such is the case in Las Vegas (Jackson, “Revealing Contemporary Constructions of Femininity,” 362).
\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Anatomy of Burlesque}.
\textsuperscript{7} Leigh, Carson (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 4, 2011).
examines the changing practice of striptease in the larger context of radical feminist protest against sexual labour and argues that the women who performed at the Penthouse resisted assertions that their work was exploitative or that they were victims in need of rescue.

**The Re-opening of the Penthouse**

After the family members were acquitted of criminal charges, oldest brother Joe Philliponi approached the City in 1978 to reinstate The Penthouse’s license to operate a cabaret and booking agency. He was refused. The mayor of Vancouver, Jack Volrich, was known as a crusader against vice and Philliponi publicly stated that the City was illegally denying the licenses on the grounds of morality. This reason was declared invalid through case law as the BC Court of Appeal overturned the denial of a license to a sex shop located in Prince George earlier in 1978.

Regardless of what the city thought about the morality of the patrons at The Penthouse, the liquor control and licensing branch issued the club a license to serve alcohol with food. Along with the business license reinstated to the club on September 13, 1978, these two licenses allowed The Penthouse to reopen its doors in November 1978. The Philliponis were required to hire an independent third party manager, an idea that Joe Philliponi was not keen on:

“First, we’ll have to find out what his duties are. I can’t see what he’s going to do.

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10 McMartin, “Reopening Plans.”
Keep the hookers out!”¹¹ Perhaps the manager would not be keeping sex workers out, but the surveillance that was instated when the club reopened was meant to do just that. Prior to raiding and closing the nightclub, the police and city officials had been collecting pictures of people entering and leaving the club, which still sit in a restricted file housed at the City of Vancouver archives. This surveillance requirement was a continuation of the tradition the mayor had participated in and of which he was was particularly fond.¹²

The threat of surveillance was also used as a tactic of regulation and control, as demonstrated by the contents in another restricted file in the City of Vancouver archives. Part of the Gordon Price fonds in the Concerned Residents of the West End series contains nine photographs.¹³ Seven of these photographs are of fashionable young people on the street engaged with either a car stopped beside them or police officers on foot. Another photograph is of someone in high heels sitting at the corner of Jervis and Pendrell, and the final photo is a relatively close-up shot of hairy legs. The photographs contain no photo credit, so it is impossible to determine who took the pictures or under what circumstances. However, given the history of CROWE and the longstanding regulation and surveillance of sex work undertaken by city police, it is clear that the intention behind them was to ‘expose’ sex work and sexual deviance. Some of these photos appear to have been copied and used in a publication assembled by CROWE

¹¹ Joe Philliponi quoted in Roberts, “Life Near the Top.”
called “Street Prostitution in a Residential Neighbourhood: The Threat to Vancouver’s West End.” Though the clarity of many photos have been obscured via photocopying and the originals are not available, the person sitting at St. Paul’s Anglican at the corner of Bute and Pendrell was probably recognizable to many who worked or lived there. Though the story behind the photo of the legs remains a mystery, one of the nine restricted photos had clearly been glued to another page for reproduction in the CROWE publication which also included photocopies of newspaper articles, testimonials from affected West End residents, summaries of meeting minutes, and hand drawn maps indicating busy street corners. The caption above the photo of the women in high heels sitting in front of St. Paul’s read: “Hookers solicit outside churches on Sunday mornings, and even during weddings and funerals.” The door to the church is clearly visible in this photo and the woman is the only one present. Recently, at the unveiling for the Sex Worker’s Memorial in front of the same church, sex worker Jamie Lee Hamilton joked about how sex workers in the 1980s would take Sundays off to give churchgoers more space. The publication by CROWE was intended to be a sensational portrayal of sex work in the neighbourhood.

Presumably the hyper institutional regulation of The Penthouse was undertaken to protect the public from what was considered inherent vice in an

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16 Jamie Lee Hamilton, Unveiling of the West End Sex Workers’ Memorial (Vancouver, BC, September 16, 2016).
adult entertainment venue. This is how, according to Jackson, “restrictive business code ordinances that dictate surveillance and restrict licensing, work cards, and alcohol are justified.”17 The conditions placed on the club provoked a shift in vibe and it was not the grand reopening to symbolize the club’s return to being a landmark nightclub in Vancouver that Philliponi had hoped for: “Our place was well known as a cabaret. People dropped in for entertainment and dinner. People don’t want to pay a minimum for dinner when they’re not hungry.”18 The cheapest thing on the menu to fulfil the minimum requirement was spaghetti and meatballs for $3.95, which was apparently worth every penny.

For Joe Philliponi, preparing for the reopening of The Penthouse in 1978 meant that re-establishing “class” was a priority. He searched the continent for the best dancers he could find: “If we are going to go on the girlie theme, I want good strippers... not like these other clubs where the girls just get up on stage and show everything. People appreciate a good show.”19 Philliponi’s statement equates hypersexual feminine sexual performance with sleaze, or low art, whereas value was placed on performances that required thoughtful preparation, props, and probably some kind of narrative conveyed through or alongside striptease.20

His other priority was sorting out the liquor licence requirements he needed to make the business profitable. In early 1979, about a year after the City

17 Jackson, “Revealing Contemporary Constructions of Femininity,” 360.
18 Joe Philliponi quoted in Roberts, “Life Near the Top.”
19 Joe Philliponi quoted in McMartin, “Reopening Plans.”
first refused to reinstate some of Philliponi’s licenses, the “tough guy with a heart of gold” proved the licensing denials were unfair at the BC Supreme Court.\textsuperscript{21} Things still were not easy for Philliponi, who had to wait some time for his cabaret license and was told he could not renovate the second floor of the venue. Philliponi wanted a steak loft with subdued piano music to “add some class to the establishment.”\textsuperscript{22} In one of its incarnations prior to the 1975 closure, The Penthouse had been a steakhouse. Despite delays and construction disagreements, the Cabaret returned in the summer of 1979, and Joe Philliponi was often found in his office adjoining the nightclub.\textsuperscript{23}

Philliponi’s nostalgia for a time pre-trial when local celebrities frequented The Penthouse was likely part of the motivation for the prominence of the headlining dancers who Philliponi hoped would attract a desired clientele. In this period, Philliponi attempted to brand the Penthouse by hiring big name burlesque entertainers who evoked older burlesque styles of entertainment associated with glamour or what he referred to as ‘class.’ Media and advertising representations of erotic dancers in advertisements or newspapers have historically not been very specific or individualized. For example, when dancers appear in the media they are often presented as faceless. In contrast, the ‘golden era’ of burlesque, brought many dancers mainstream fame and attention.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{21} Though media accounts, and the few I spoke to who knew him, characterize Joe’s charisma as endearing and charming, Crowe often offers an alternative interpretation of demanding and domineering, particularly concerning his relationship with her then husband, Ross (Crowe 15).

\textsuperscript{22} Joe Philliponi quoted in McMartin, “Reopening Plans.”


Similarly, as discussed in Chapter 1, the large wood cutouts of showgirls that adorned the front of The Penthouse (Figure 6) beginning in the 1950s drew attention to the venue by associating it with popular burlesque and cabaret performances. Although these are not representations of ‘real’ women, they signalled to passers-by and patrons, who might either be intrigued or offended, the kind of entertainment featured at The Penthouse. The physical bodies of the dancers are a threat to the dominant social order and are marked by the stigma of being a sexual labourer. Sex workers’ public sexuality “can be framed as uncontrollable because they are throwing off social norms that limit sexuality to a private, non-commodified experience.”

25 Jackson, “Revealing Contemporary Constructions of Femininity,” 357.
In the late 1970s, Philliponi made it a practice to personally hire many of the headlining dancers who worked at the club. Some big name burlesque entertainers worked at The Penthouse after it re-opened and remained there until Philliponi’s death. It seems that Joe treated headlining out-of-town dancers better than the local dancers frequenting the club. This resulted in many of the autographed photos with cute notes addressed to the managers currently on the
wall in the Gold Room (as discussed in Chapter 1). It also suggests that ambivalence toward local dancers was a reflection of Philliponi’s desire for “class” at the establishment and the changing expectations of the audience based on the emerging industry conventions.

Two of the most well-known dancers employed by the club during this time were Chesty Morgan and Big Fannie Annie. Both continue to work in various facets of adult entertainment and both were closer to the beginning of their long and fruitful careers when they were dancing at The Penthouse. Chesty Morgan holds the Guinness World Record for largest bust measurement at 73 inches and after concluding her contract dancing at The Penthouse used connections, some of which she made at the club through Ross Filippone, to launch her career as a now cult favorite B-Movie actress. Her most famous film is probably *Deadly Weapons*, the ‘weapons’ in question being her considerable assets that enable Morgan to take on the mob throughout the movie. Big Fannie Annie, after dancing at the Penthouse, continued as an acclaimed circuit dancer before becoming a burlesque instructor. Now she teaches regularly in New York as well as at the Burlesque Hall of Fame/Miss Exotic World Pageant in Las Vegas. The Miss Exotic World Pageant developed yearly reunions organized by Jennie Lee, “The Bazoom Girl,” for striptease artists who had performed during the golden age. Lee’s burlesque memorabilia outfitted the nightclub she owned after her time performing ‘The Sassy Lassie’. After Lee’s death, Dixie Evans collected Lee’s memorabilia and opened the Strippers Hall of Fame at a ranch in Nevada.26

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26 Miller, “Godmother of Burlesque Ran Exotic Museum.”
Dancers’ Perceptions of Their Work

As the burlesque and striptease industry was slowly changing, many feminist activists in Vancouver (and more broadly in North America) were simultaneously protesting sex work and pornography as an expression of women’s oppression. For both liberal and radical second wave feminists, working as an exotic dancer was neither a viable occupation nor a feminist act. Women who were working in the skin/sex trade were popularly viewed as exploited by patriarchy and in need of rescuing. While this dissertation does not explore feminist organizations which opposed sex work in this period, the backdrop of that movement clearly contributed to the raid and closure of the Penthouse, as well as the experience of dancers in the club itself. Oral histories with the dancers demonstrate that dancers resisted a feminist framework that understood them as exploited victims in need of rescue. Of the eleven dancers I interviewed, none viewed their time as dancers as fundamentally exploitative. Annie Temple, who danced at the Penthouse the early 1990s remembered: “My generation was raised to think it was exploitative.” But based on her own experience working in the clubs, she resisted that interpretation: “it’s not exploitative, that’s a bunch of bullshit people are trying to feed down our throats.” Temple further explained that this ideological framework forced her to constantly prove to others that she was not a victim, a process that she still clearly resents: “it's stupid, we shouldn’t have to do that.” Rather than identifying herself as an exploited victim, Temple described her experience dancing as something that made her more open-minded, less judgmental, stronger, and more independent. Dancing allowed her

to move from Kelowna to Vancouver at the age of 23 to pursue education and leave behind a painful personal situation ending in an abortion. Temple argues that “dancing made me challenge my assumptions of everything” and that she found resilience challenging attitudes that “didn’t jive with my experience” by taking part in positive activism projects some of which are elaborated on in Chapter 5. Mistress discussed similar sentiments in our interview, saying "there’s a ton of misconception where the exotic dance business is concerned, which is mostly due to the erroneous stereotype all strippers are drug addicts and prostitutes. I need to say now, for the record, believe it or not, they weren’t.”

Similarly, Caron Leigh understands her career as a dancer as a positive economic choice. Leigh started a ten-year stripping career at 20 leaving a job answering phones at a sheet metal company because she felt “imprisoned in what was going to be a long corporate career as a secretary...and as illustrious as that may sound to some people, it felt like hell to me.” Train as a dancer since the age of 3, she described being on stage as always feeling very familiar and natural: “it didn’t seem raunchy or risqué, it seemed safe so I thought I’d take a crack at it.” Throughout her time spent dancing, Leigh always considered herself to be an artist and performer. Further, Leigh saw her time in the industry as “self-actualizing; dancing gave me the ability to see myself internally that I’m the creator of myself rather than being a receptacle created by others.” She feels that dancing:

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28 Mistress (interview by author, Burnaby, BC, January 6, 2011).
29 Leigh, Caron (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 4, 2011).
Was a way to see myself as having permission to speak, the ability to say when I going to work and when I wasn’t going to work, and where I was going to work, and what music I was going to dance to, all these types of things, self-defining mechanisms.”

Leigh imagines that if she had never danced, she would feel less connected and defined by her own tastes and desires.

Both Temple and Leigh were fairly ambivalent about aligning themselves explicitly as feminists at the time we sat down to talk. Nevertheless, both described their experiences in striptease as broadly feminist. The narrators knew I had an interest in discussing feminism and their relation to it alongside their experiences dancing as they all saw the questions I wanted to ask in advance and were invited to comment on them. I believe this invited the dancers to reflect on their experience dancing in ways they were not often asked about. Carson Leigh indicated that she had tried to rehearse an answer (when I asked about whether she experienced any connections between feminism and dancing) and seemed a little embarrassed by this admission when she tripped over her words and lost her train of thought. When I asked why she had tried to prepare such an organized response to one of the questions, she replied that it was to ensure she was representing her experience as a dancer in a “positive” light. She felt that positive depictions of erotic dance were not very often reflected in representations of erotic dancers.32

An Uncertain Future

The closure of the Penthouse and its subsequent re-opening, along with changes in the city’s regulatory framework and shifting feminist frameworks on erotic dance, combined to make the future of The Penthouse uncertain. Joe Philliponi came out of the three-year closure and trial exhausted; he still retained his charismatic personality, but, according to family members, he was beginning to “slow down” and engage in some new and slightly out of character behaviours, including spending the night at Sunset Beach. Post trial, Ross also spent substantially less time at the club and sometimes was there as little as once a week.

On the morning of September 19, 1983 at the age of 69, Joe Philliponi was found dead on the floor of his office attached to the nightclub by his brother Jimmy, who was coming to work in the office located in the family home. Their elderly mother lived in the adjoining home but she was completely unaware of what had transpired, as she could not see or hear. Two armed robbers, Scott Forsyth and Sid Morrisroe, hoping to find millions of dollars in the safe, had shot Joe in the head after discovering the safe yielded only $1,200 in cash. They were apprehended within a few weeks and eventually found guilty of first-degree murder. Philipponi’s funeral was held at Holy Rosary Cathedral, where his siblings had been married, and was well-attended by over 800 people, “everyone

from shoeshine boys to politicians from Vancouver, Victoria and Ottawa and hundreds of curious lookers-on.”36

When the news of Philliponi’s death began circulating among dancers who were then employed at the club, reactions were mixed, reflecting the ambivalent position many of them felt about the Philliponi family and the club itself. Some women appreciated the stability of the work offered at The Penthouse. For example, one of the headlining stage dancers at the time of Philliponi’s murder was Karisa York from California who stated: “He was always dependable. Whenever I needed a job he was there. No matter which part of the country, the U.S. or Canada, he could always put me to work. If he could take advantage of you he would, but basically he was okay.”37 Local house dancer Sheila was less enthusiastic about Philliponi, saying: “He was always giving me a hard time. I just hope I’m not out of the job... I’m sorry for the rest of the family.”38

The ambivalence expressed by these two dancers at the time of Philliponi’s death stand in fairly stark contrast to the dominant legacy which represents him as a charismatic businessman. As we will see in the next chapter, dancers who worked at the Penthouse contributed to building the reputation of the club, but they were generally uninvolved with the family and business history of the venue. Like the two dancers mentioned above, they remained focused on their own craft and working conditions. After Joe’s death, the future of the Penthouse remained

36 Crowe, Ma Vie, 27. See also Jack Brooks, “800 Gather as Mass to Mourn Slain Joe,” Vancouver Sun (Vancouver, BC), September 22, 1983.
37 Miller, “Godmother of Burlesque Ran Exotic Museum.”
38 Miller, “Godmother of Burlesque Ran Exotic Museum.”
uncertain until new management and new practices, more in line with the changes to the industry in the 1980s, were introduced by Danny Fillipone.

In this chapter I discuss the changing landscape of The Penthouse alongside changes in the industry of erotic dance and a gradual decline in clientele. It begins by examining the change in ownership at the Penthouse following the murder of Joe Philliponi in 1983. His death corresponded with the shifts in the erotic dance industry away from more explicitly burlesque styles to that of striptease performances characterized by pole-dancing and taped music in the 1980s and VIP dancing (also known as table, lap, or private dancing) in the late 1990s. After exploring the changes undertaken by Danny Fillipone to meet these business and economic challenges, I explore the labour challenges faced by dancers and argue that many of these issues are still pertinent for those working in the industry today. I argue that the erotic dance scene in Vancouver continues to be racially stratified, where dancers ‘presenting’ as white have greater access to job opportunities. Finally, I end by pointing to Vancouver dancers' acts of resistance to the precarious nature of their work and attempts by employers to change the terms of their employment.

The research in this chapter is based on interviews with Fillipone, archived advertisements featuring the club, and interviews conducted with dancers who worked at The Penthouse between 1978 and 2012. Though Katherine Frank has argued that there has been a wealth of knowledge produced about strip-clubs, the historical record of erotic dancers remains sparse due to entrenched stigma.
relating to sex work.¹ This chapter challenges the erasure of erotic dancers from history by using the venue of The Penthouse Nightclub as an entry point to understanding the dancers as workers and performers in the context of a changing industry.

‘Capitalizing on Excess’: The Penthouse and Changes in Management in the 1980s

Following Joe Philliponi’s murder in 1983, The Penthouse might have reached the end of its long-standing reputation as the premiere adult entertainment nightclub in Canada. Penny Crowe remembers that there was no clear replacement for Philliponi: “we all knew instinctively that the brains and energy has left the family because neither Jimmy, Ross, or Florence had the insight or strength to step into Joe’s shoes and we all inwardly wondered what would happen.”² At the same time, many strip clubs in the city were losing clientele, perhaps due to the popularity and accessibility of film, including pornography, which threatened the relevancy of live performance.³

In retrospect, however, the 1980s were probably a perfect time for ownership of The Penthouse to change hands. In popular culture, hair-bands abounded and media images of excessive consumption gave stripping a central place in ‘sex, drugs and roll n’ roll’. Courtenay Love allegedly jumped into the


² Crowe, Ma Vie, 27.

³ Similarly this theory periodically comes up when discussing declining theatre audiences, however, a pre-recorded performance is ultimately very different from a live one and though I am trying to make a relatively complex issue fit into a short footnote it ultimately is not as simple as ‘video killing the radio star’.
middle of a jello fight at the No. 5 Orange located in downtown Vancouver, which is not impossible given that she was based on the West Coast. An increasingly visually-oriented music industry and a boom in music video production from the 1990s onwards was characterized by themes of both hyper-sexuality and excess. The Penthouse fared well in this context. Fillipone smartly capitalized on these depictions of excess and began to develop the club’s continuing alternative income stream as a venue for movie and video filming. Rumour has it that Bon Jovi’s album *Slippery When Wet* was named after watching mud wrestlers at The Penthouse. The Penthouse has been featured in Snoop Dogg/Lion and Avril Lavigne’s music videos, feature films like *Frankie and Alice* (2010), and is the regular set for the Chick A Dee Club, a fictional strip venue on television’s crime-drama *Intelligence*.4

Furthermore, the 1980s also saw a boom in the pornography industry that was closely tied to striptease. Duos, striptease performances involving two dancers, had been mirroring male-fantasies of lesbian sex in straight male pornography since the mid-1970s. Duos “were intended to ‘double men’s viewing pleasure’, and they were enthusiastically applauded by aroused male customers at nightclubs.”5 These trends in the 1980s normalized striptease to some degree and can be seen as contributing to Brian McNair’s concept of ‘striptease culture’

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4 Chapman, “Strip off the old block,” 7.

in which “sex is the most important thing in the world.” Striptease performance became somewhat normalized as exposure to hyper-sexualized images in music and film grew more prevalent in mainstream popular culture. Eventually, images of striptease and pole dancing in popular culture grew more prevalent in both music videos and feature length Hollywood Blockbuster films. In our discussions, interview participants frequently referenced films like Showgirls (1995), Striptease (1996), Coyote Ugly (2000), Moulin Rouge (2001), or Burlesque (2010) as a way to relate their experience as dancers, commenting on the way in which media depictions did not adequately portray their reality. As Carson Leigh asked me: “have you seen Dancing At the Blue Iguana? It [the atmosphere at The Penthouse] was nothing like that…” Though normalization of strip-tease culture may have mitigated some of the stigma felt by dancers, it was still a profession filled with ‘bad girls’ as far as dominant discourse was concerned. Images produced and reinforced by hegemonic culture may normalize the hyper-sexualization of women and images of striptease, but actually being a sexual labourer comes with stigma.

Clearly, The Penthouse needed new management for a number of reasons. Though Ross Filippone had been by his brother’s side throughout the tumultuous early years of The Penthouse and the three-year closure, there was no guarantee that he would take control of the business. Unlike his brother, he had a family and he did not hold the same larger than life local celebrity status instrumental in

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6 Brian McNair, Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratisation of Desire (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

the club’s “reputation that extended well beyond the city limits.” Two months after his uncle’s death, Danny Filippone was called to meet his father in his office at their house. He remembers his father immediately said to him at the meeting: “We have a big decision to make. I don’t do what Joe did, he was the front guy, I’ve always been the guy who runs the books and stuff behind the scenes. We need to know if you’re prepared to step up and take helm.” At the time of this discussion, Filippone worked three jobs that he enjoyed; at the racetrack, teaching racquetball, and part-time serving responsibilities at The Penthouse. He agreed to take over management on the condition that he could do it his “own way, including changing the dancers that they used, cover charges, basically a list of things they had to agree to- which they did. Before that meeting I literally cannot recall thinking this is what I was going to do forever.” Filippone often speculates about what he would have pursued as a career if he had not been approached to take over the management at The Penthouse including “something athletic, may be something in communication or advertising, or teaching, I’ve always been really good with kids.” It is entirely possible that if that conversation with his father had a different outcome, it could have been the end of The Penthouse, as the property would have sold for a tidy sum leading up to Expo ’86.

But with this international event on the horizon, Danny Filippone had a chance to prove himself as manager. From May until October 1986, the club was

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8 Francis, Red Light Neon, 7.
9 Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
10 Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
11 Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
busier than Danny had ever seen it and he acknowledges “that really gave me a
taste of what it was like to manage a club full-time, trying to deal with the staff,
trying to deal with the dancers...” Danny had begun working at The Penthouse
in 1980, but was accused by family members of irresponsible personal and
business behaviour, such as giving away too many free drinks and leaving for
hours at a time to party elsewhere. Danny’s mother, Penny Crowe, imagines
these allegations were true, but also notes that the accusers were caught
embezzling money. Still, it was difficult to punish or reprimand Danny in any way
because of his family ties.

Danny had been working at the club and the other family businesses in
various part-time roles since the early 1980s, including as a bus boy and waiter
one or two nights a week. Though he was apprehensive about taking on so
much responsibility at a young age, the prospect of spending more time with his
father is what eventually made Danny decide to work regularly at The Penthouse.
According to Crowe, Ross was rarely home due to working long hours at the club.
In her unpublished manuscript, she often describes herself as a single mother in
an emotional sense. She commends Ross for the financial benefits he provided
for the children Joey (1962-), Danny (1963-), and Maria (1965-), which is
distinct from any financial support she herself felt she was owed. But ultimately

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12 Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
13 Crowe, Ma Vie, 28.
14 Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
15 The night that Danny was born, comedian George Burns was performing at The Penthouse. He
   “handed out celebratory cigars to club patrons” (Chapman, “Strip Off the Old Block,” 1).
their marriage disintegrated once the children were grown-up and pursuing their own interests.\footnote{Crowe, \textit{Ma Vie}, 14.}

Penny later discovered, or perhaps acknowledged, that part of Ross’s emotional unavailability and what she considered excessive time spent at the club was due in part to his dependency on alcohol. Ross gave up drinking in 1980 upon the recommendation of his physician, but he did pass his addiction onto both his sons, Joey and Danny.\footnote{Crowe, \textit{Ma Vie}, 19.} I suspect that assumptions about owners and frequenters of strip clubs at this time are part of what made Danny and his father’s co-dependent substance use relatively acceptable. Substance use and addiction in the form of rampant alcoholism and other kinds of drug use came up in discussion with the dancers, though not framed in terms of their own experience or use but as a part of the atmosphere and as a job hazard.

When he quit drinking, Ross took up jogging and later racquetball, which he often played with his son Danny, and went on to compete in the sport until his death in 2007 at the age of 84.\footnote{Crowe, \textit{Ma Vie}, 20; Filippone (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011; Mackie, “The Penthouse Cabaret.”} Ross worked at the club one night a week almost religiously until his death.\footnote{Leah (interview by author, Hope, BC, March 10, 2011).} According to dancers, agents, and other staff I interviewed, Danny’s charismatic personality was integral to the club’s survival and continuation after his uncle Joe’s death. Those who knew the original Penthouse owner, as well as those who only knew him via his legend, frequently
compare Danny’s charismatic personality and leadership to that of Joe. Though Danny’s energy is most often conveyed as something he just intrinsically “had,” stories from the 1980s depicted him dancing on tables, hosting events, or eating other people’s food often under the influence of alcohol. Sometimes his behaviour was described as inconsistent or erratic. This charisma played out in his relationship with the dancers as well. Mistress loved when Danny would operate a follow spot to highlight the dancers:

[The Penthouse] was one of my favourite gigs, and the reason [The Penthouse] was one of my favourite gigs was because they had a spotlight, like a real spot, and when they were in the mood they would follow you around with it, that bright light, you just feel like I am a star, I just loved that. I mean the other places had lights, but this was like a real spot, I remember that more than I remember anything else.

Upon discovering that I was following the story of the Philliponis and the institutional history of The Penthouse as much as that of the dancers, I became very interested in why Danny’s older brother Joey did not take on, or maybe was not offered, Ross’s share of the nightclub when he decided to pass it on to his other son. Joey was rarely brought up in conversation with Danny and Penny Crowe, and there was a clear but unspoken understanding that my interest as a researcher was not to prod too far into their family lives. Thus, I initially did not ask family members about Joey. Even after fairly regular contact via e-mail, Crowe never responded to an e-mail where I asked directly about Joey.

Furthermore, despite the notoriety of the family and the club following the 1975

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20 In contrast, Danny’s mother, Penny Crowe states that Danny’s personality is more similar to his godfather’s Mickey, who would not have been as well known to those about The Penthouse during this era because of his ill health (Crowe 28).

21 It could be a coincidence as her current husband was quite ill while we were communicating so she may have had other things on her mind.
closure and criminal trial, the dancers knew very little about the family and most assumed some sort of connection to organized crime: “not Hell’s Angels but Italian mafia I thought.”

Some of the waitresses knew more about the family, but only those in and around the scene at the club. Leah was head-waitress in the 1990s and explains that there were some benefits to perpetuating the mobster stereotype: “we had a certain amount of protection because of the rumour it was mobbed up. I think that also helped when other levels of organized crime started to takeover other businesses. The Penthouse never had that problem.”

The only narrator I felt comfortable asking about Joey, and who seemed to have some insight into this family decision, was Randy Knowlan, a long-time booking agent for The Penthouse. Knowlan is also an acquaintance of Danny’s. When I asked Knowlan why Danny rather then Joey took over the business, his response was: “Have you ever met him?” Knowlan then explained that Joey likely was never offered the opportunity because he simply does not carry “the personality” that many believe both Danny and his Uncle Joe share. He then went on to tell me that when Danny’s sons take over the nightclub, the situation will be identical, as the youngest has the “Philliponi charm,” and the oldest does not.

Knowlan implied that this charisma is genetic, tracing it to the family’s Italian heritage. Danny’s mother also seems to share this assumption. These

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23 Leah (interview by author, Hope, BC, March 10, 2011).
24 The only sharply contrasting description of Danny I have encountered is from his mother in her manuscript where she describes him as weak and sickly. “He had colic, and then he developed asthma and a skin rash and was always sick” (Crowe 14). He also described himself as a youth as “skinny and not very big, I didn’t really start growing until the 80s”.
stories about the personality, charisma, and charm, however, can be understood not as “essential” personality characteristics, but part of the mythology that has grown up around the family story, history, and business. Part of this family history is connected to the idea that a certain strong ‘personality’ type was the appropriate leader of a business often on the margins of mainstream society. But the issue of ethnicity is also relevant. Aaron Chapman, a writer and collaborator of Danny’s, equates The Penthouse’s on-going success with the “family’s characteristic ebullience” which is mentioned after loosely confirming the club’s historical mobster connections. Ebullience, charm, personality, charisma: all of the descriptions of the various Penthouse owners from the Philliponi family are conflated with the performance of a certain type of ‘Italian-ness’. In interviews, however, Danny was generally uninterested in engaging with the question of Italian immigrant business owners in times of anti-Italian sentiment, pointing out to me on a few occasions how “not Italian” he was, particularly in his appearance.

Changes in the Industry: Erotic Performance in the 1980s

From the club’s inception The Penthouse has been on a quest for “class.” In the context of erotic dance, ‘class’ is acquired through an association with the style of dance connected to the golden age of burlesque rather than more recent incarnations of striptease bump n grind. Veteran dancer of the nineties Carson Leigh explains this further by reflecting on the neo-burlesque movement and

27 Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
relating her experience as follows: “at the time I started, girls did theme shows, there was more of a mental aspect to it with storylines for the shows, you know, and I think that’s nice touch ‘classier,’ less graphic.”

But that ongoing quest for glamour and class existed in tension with changes in the industry and the larger culture. As a result, burlesque and striptease performances were rapidly changing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, especially with the advent of taped music recordings instead of live musicians. Paying one dancer instead of a dancer and her band was more economical; therefore stage shows became less popular than lap and pole dances. This shift in focus shortened the already short-career life for a dancer as dominant beauty standards dictate that a youthful, nubile body is an attractive and desirable body. “Let’s face it,” recalled former dancer Klute, “at a foot away, a thirty-year old body doesn’t look anywhere near as smooth as a seventeen-year olds does.”

The stage show became a way for dancers to ‘advertise’ in order to be chosen for other, often more lucrative, ventures such as soliciting customers for private dances which were offered throughout clubs in the Lower Mainland by the end of the late nineties.

These changes were exacerbated by other economic challenges. Cabarets and supper clubs like The Cave, which were once The Penthouse’s main competition, were closing by the 1980s. This trend would only continue

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31 Quoted in Becki L Ross, Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex, and Sin in Postwar Vancouver (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009) 222.
throughout the 1990s, likely because of the rapid spread of internet pornography. Rayelle, who has danced in Vancouver on and off since the early 2000s speculates, “[t]here’s a lot less bars... Honestly, I think it has to do with the Internet. You can get so much more access there than what we’re providing.”

Hotel bars like The Cecil on Granville Street, one of The Penthouse’s major competitors in the 1990s and later voted the second best place in the world to dance by feminist dancers and advocates in 2009, closed its doors in July 2010. The Cecil Hotel was 101 years old and in its place a 23-storey residential tower is being built. Like many hotel bars, The Cecil added dancers in the mid-1970s. The manager reportedly felt stigma being associated with a strip club, including the usual rumours of connections to organized crime, and much like Philliponi reportedly dreams of opening a classic supper club with big booth seating.

Changes to the dancing profession were also taking place in a time that Vancouver Sun journalist John Mackie describes as “the exotic dancer boom” in an era of ‘sex, drugs, and rock n roll’. The Penthouse was at the forefront of this movement as it manifested in Vancouver. Scarlett, who danced in Vancouver in the 1970s, recalls:

Many, many, many hotels at that time were converting their beer parlour into a place that had, even if it was a small stage, a little postage stamp in the corner kind of stage, they were fixing up the place with better sound systems or lights or whatever or some kind of facilities so a dancer could come because they knew it would make them money and it made a huge difference to their business,

32 Rayelle quoted in Chong, “Stripped Down.”
33 Via The Naked Truth’s online social networking tool developed for and by the community in 2001.
34 Smith, “Cecil’s Legendary Stripper Bar Closes to Make Room for a new Condo Tower.”
it wasn’t just walking into a beer parlour to see a bunch of young
guys playing pool and a bunch of old farts sitting around nursing
some beers; it was a much more of a happening place.36

Similarly, Filippone remembers the influx of hotel bars that featured erotic
entertainment in the 1980s: “Competition was fierce. If you had a hotel and you
had a pub downstairs, if you didn’t have exotic entertainers you weren’t very
smart. People were cashing in on it.” To compete with other strip venues,
Filippone began planning special theme shows at The Penthouse where
entertainers could make use of some pieces of the venue that make it unique.37

Both Fillipone and the dancers responded to these larger changes in a
number of ways. The pole at The Penthouse was one of the first in the city
installed in the late 1970s. Even as other poles were being installed at the hotel
bars, the dancers who took great pride in their pole work saved their best for The
Penthouse because of the superior pole quality and new large stage. Melony
Sweetcheeks recalled: “The poles [at the hotel bars] are dreadful, too short and
too close to the audience, I couldn’t do anything.”38 A red curved velvet couch or
chaise longe added to the stage as a seemingly permanent prop at The Penthouse
was received with mixed reactions from dancers. Flora and Carson Leigh kept
their routines far away from it, suspicious of its cleanliness.39 But Mistress
remembers it differently: “It was a lovely prop, I loved it, but all the girls
complained, ‘that thing must be filthy I don’t go near it’ but I did, I did, I loved

37 Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
38 Melony Sweetcheeks (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, February 9, 2011).
39 Flora (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 12, 2011); Leigh, Carson (interview by
In preparation for our interview, Carson Leigh visited The Penthouse’s website and noted a panoramic view of the Gold Room: “they still have that shitty, fucking red velvet chaise lounge on the stage, it must be so gross.”

In the later 1980s the culture of strip clubs was yet again changing, and Danny continued to watch his competition around him closely. However, rather than absorbing the runoff of those businesses, he was experiencing a steady decline in clientele himself. By this point, his father was only spending one night a week at the club and Danny was solely in charge of all major decisions and ventures. Danny devised a plan to increase foot traffic through the doors that consisted of renovations that closed the club for three months and streamlining the club as much as possible with the kind of style and service provided by mainstream dance clubs on the developing Granville strip. To do this, Danny invited his cousins and silent partners on a pub-crawl and asked them to observe the physical layout and atmosphere of the surrounding businesses. When they returned to The Penthouse, Danny presented them with his plan, but he was greeted with push-back on the renovations as major ones had taken place about five years earlier. He got agreement on one immediate change that proved vital in turning around the business: match the type and quality of alcohol served at The Penthouse with those served on the strip. This meant that someone who was out partying and decided to pop into the club could keep drinking whatever cocktail or beer they had been drinking earlier. This change subverted the association

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40 Mistress (interview by author, Burnaby, BC, January 6, 2011).
42 I thought this was a rather innovative way to attract business to The Penthouse when Filippone first mentioned it. However, Brooks acknowledges a similar practice in her study of strip clubs in New York City (33).
that clubs featuring striptease artists were dives serving overpriced bad beer and low quality hard liquor. Instead, The Penthouse now served the same drinks as everyone else. Danny dropped the prices of drinks at the club to be comparable to the prices on the Granville strip. The plan worked and business started to boom. The other changes that followed included new bars, a new stage, a new DJ booth, overhauling the kitchen and bathrooms, new tables, chairs, and booths, and an extensive clean-up and new paint job on the exterior of the club. When the renovations were finished and Danny returned to work in the late 1990s, it was the same year he got married and had his first of two sons. He had a new drive to make the club successful.\footnote{The most recent interior renovations took place at The Penthouse in 2001, and the most recent painting of the exterior was in 2015.} This also corresponded with Danny changing his drug and alcohol habits in order to devote more time and energy to The Penthouse.\footnote{Crowe, \textit{Ma Vie}, 29.} When we spoke, Filippone echoed that the club probably could have been doing better if he had been more focused on it and less on his own party habits. Prior to settling down with his wife Jackie, Danny apparently dated a string of dancers. Leah described Jackie as “a bit of a shock to the rest of us cause she’s not bombshell-ey at all” and explained his choice of wife in gendered and racialized terms: “but I guess it’s the Madonna/whore thing with Italian families, you can have fun with those girls but you can’t marry them.”\footnote{Leah (interview by author, Hope, BC, March 10, 2011).}

\textbf{Whiteness and Race in the Industry of Erotic Dance}

While the industry and the performance styles were changing by the 1980s, the racialization of the industry has remained somewhat static. Scholars
have analysed and criticized the whiteness of the industry, noting that most clubs primarily featured and promoted white dancers. Ross and Greenwell argue that clubs in Vancouver’s West End (1945-1975), including The Penthouse, primarily featured white dancers while racialized women were featured at clubs in the East End and expected to perform routines to fit racial stereotypes.\(^{46}\) The pattern identified by Ross and Greenwell is that once a dancer began bringing in large crowds in the East End, she was often invited to perform in the West End where she could make more money for herself and the club. Such is the case with Miss Lovie, who worked as a go-go dancer at The Penthouse in 1969.

As Siobhan Brooks, academic and former dancer at the famed Lusty Lady Cabaret in San Francisco recalls in the introduction to her book *Unequal Desires: Race and Erotic Capital in the Stripping Industry*, some of the daily operations of the club where she worked were decidedly feminist. Dancers’ safety was ensured both on and off stage, friendly and supportive relationships developed among the dancers, and refreshments were provided in the dressing room to ensure comfort of employees. Yet there were problems even in the unionized environment. For example, only about one in four performers were women of colour. Management defended this discrepancy claiming that customers preferred white dancers. Brooks noted that this decision was made without any consultation with the customers and reinforced a “stratification based on race (and class) of ways women in desire industries are positioned differently based on these variables.”\(^{47}\) Brooks further pointed out how dancers’ bodies became

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46 Ross and Greenwell, “Spectacular Striptease,” 142.
47 Brooks, *Unequal Desires*, 16.
signifiers of class: “Slim bodies are associated with the middle class, whereas curvier/overweight bodies are associated with the working class.”

A similar racialized labour market pattern existed in the Vancouver industry as well. Dancers available to perform at The Penthouse have been booked since the late 1980s by ‘Stripper Entertainment,’ a local agency founded, owned, and operated by Randy Knowlan. Using the ‘Wayback Machine,’ an online internet archive, I analyzed the racial backgrounds of dancers based on the availability of the Stripper Entertainment website (www.strippernet.com) between July 20, 2001, the first time the site was archived in a format that is still accessible, and November 30, 2003 before the website was reformatted. Conducting this analysis of the club’s web-based advertising is an important piece of this project because “another way erotic capital is marketed within desire industries is through club Web sites that advertise upcoming dancers, display images of club settings, and show pictures of women.” When looking at Stripper Entertainment’s website, race was identified and categorized by how I perceived the racial presentation of that dancer. The way I and readers of the ads perceived dancers’ racial presentation may be different from how the dancers self-identified, but I imagine the dancers are aware of how their racial presentation affected their erotic capital.

The agency boasted that the number of female dancers available was 115 on May 27, 2002. Of the 115 dancers, 15 photos were not available. Of the

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49 Though not completely overhauled until November 30, 2003 the website was nevertheless updated 7 times during this time period.
50 Brooks, Unequal Desires, 71.
remaining 100 dancers, I identified 79 as white, 7 were likely light skinned Latinas or visibly of First Nations heritage, 5 were Black, 1 appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent, and 8 were racially ambiguous. Those who were racially ambiguous were included in the percentage 'visible minority'. Sometimes the stage names of the dancers helped me decide how to categorize them. Of these 100 dancers available to work at The Penthouse, only 21 percent of the dancers as of May 27, 2002 were visibly not white, demonstrating the racial stratification of erotic entertainment that Brooks argues was a pervasive phenomenon on the West Coast circuit.

This over-representation of white dancers does not vary greatly across the seven dates I looked at. On January 20, 2002 only 12 percent of the dancers advertised by Stripper Entertainment were women of colour, and the date with the highest percentage of working female dancers of colour is July 28, 2003 with 22 percent. The stage names of dancers of colour are often racialized, as demonstrated by stage names such as Asia, Cinnamon, Eva, Jayde, Alesha Lopez, Miel, and Coco Rio. Ross and Greenwell note that in the 1970s, First Nations dancers were underrepresented in the industry and a “biracial First Nations dancer’s best chance of success lay in passing herself off as anything other than Native reveals the uniquely denigrated status of Native women’s sexuality in a province long steeped in anti-Indian discourse and practice.” This trend clearly continues in the industry today.51

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Some scholars have argued that since the Second World War, dancers have become increasingly diverse, as representations of femininity have moved from narrowly conceived national and racial ideals towards fantasies revolving around an idea of sampling a certain “cultural aesthetic.”52 But this does not translate to racial diversity in the industry itself. Based on the analysis of Stripper Entertainment and the work of other scholars, it is clear that the workforce in Vancouver, like elsewhere, remained racially stratified.53 The majority of dancers employed by Stripper Entertainment are clearly not employed to communicate this convention through diversity in body types and skin tones.

The percentage of women of colour working The Penthouse on any given night is probably much lower than the already limited representation from the agency. Using December 25, 2002, the first available archive of the Penthouse’s website, the only women featured on the website were both white.54 On January 30, 2003, more dancers of colour were added to the website when ‘Penthouse History’ was activated. Here African-American dancer Miss Lovie can be found featured with the Gogo Trio dancing at The Penthouse in 1969. However, the photos used to advertise the featured dancers are of two white women and were not updated until April 23, 2003. On June 23, 2003 a ‘photo album’ of “dancers past and present” was developed and only 10 of the 96 photos feature women of colour. This photo album updated on January 31, 2004 featured 10 women of colour in the 95 photos present. Also at this time, a new feature on the website

52 Mort, “Striptease,” 52.
53 Mort, “Striptease,” 48. See also Brooks, Unequal Desires.
54 When I have been at The Penthouse over the past few years, I have only observed staff members who I read as Caucasian.
appears comprised of a ‘virtual tour’ of the club and panoramic views of the club which visitors to the site can browse through. As of January 9, 2007, The Penthouse’s website has the same layout as it does currently. At this point, the “TONS of photos of dancers” disappears although other features, including ‘Penthouse History’ and ‘Virtual Tour,’ remain the same. Further, a few new sections are added including ‘Penthouse in the Press’ and ‘Filming Schedule’, the latter of which advertises the venue as a shooting location for the film and television industry. The website features a few copies of posters reflecting headlining dancers, or special events, which rotate with some regularity from this point onwards. Most photos of women throughout the site, however, appear to be stock photos, as is the woman on Danny Filippone’s business card (who he likes to joke is his wife). All are of white women. This layout shift marks when people browsing the website begin to “visually experience the club rather than the women.” This is an explicit move on the part of The Penthouse’s to cultivate the club’s public reputation as a historical space. But I would also argue that removing most of the photos of local dancers from the website is also an advantageous move for them as it mitigates dancers getting ‘outed’ and having to navigate the ensuing repercussions that accompany the stigma of working in the sex industry.

Most of the dancers I interviews were reluctant to talk explicitly about the racialization of the industry. When asked to comment on the extent of diversity within the industry, for example, several interpreted that to mean diversity of

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55Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
56 Brooks, Unequal Desires, 79.
body type or hair colour rather than race. In our conversation Melony Sweetcheeks said,

I remember thinking it was a real variety as far as Vancouver goes—which is known to be far less diverse when it comes to stripping that other cities like Seattle. It was pretty diverse, I danced with women of colour there, and they would have some natural girls on. Most dancers in Vancouver are blonde and petite with implants, cause that’s what the market wants.

Overall, the overwhelming predominance of white dancers remains a characteristic of the industry to this day.

**The Labour of Dancers: Risk and Economic Precarity**

Dancers’ relationship to their labour was structured by the precarious nature of their work. Mistress can remember many conversations among dancers during the 1980s about how to pursue unionization but believes this goal was unachievable because of the way the circuit works in British Columbia coupled with the stigma dancers felt. This stigma unfortunately can become internalized as Melony Sweetcheeks also alluded to.\(^{57}\) Annie Temple sums the situation up simply as “you can’t pursue labour issues as a dancer, cause no one would hire you.”\(^{58}\) Carson Leigh concurs that dancers were not that organized as a group for a number of reasons: “what I can say though is that when working conditions changed there was mass upheaval, tons of girls quit, even before VIP dancing when sets went from 15-18 minutes [in the early 1990s], probably 30-60% of the dancers quit over just that...all these news girls, swarms, came in and were totally

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\(^{57}\) Sweetcheeks, Melony (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 7, 2011).
\(^{58}\) Temple, Annie (interview by author, Surrey, BC, January 31, 2011).
fine with it, there is no shortage of women to do it, that’s for sure.” Temple and Leigh both make it clear that changes to working conditions were often resisted informally by dancers. But because women have long worked in low-waged and sex-segregated industries, their labour was easily replaced. The nature of the labour market thus made it difficult for dancers to collectively organize.

Dancers recognize and identify various elements of danger associated with their work and had a great deal to say when we began talking about risks during our interviews. Sometimes they were surprised by their memories of danger: “I didn’t consider these things before I started. It is risky. I thought it was totally safe the whole time.” The dancers’ experiences of danger in the workplace do sometimes overlap with stereotypical media accounts that characterize dancing life and lifestyle as dangerous. The dancers I spoke to identified several regular workplace hazards: risks to physical health and safety, risks to emotional health and wellness, and health risks associated with substance use. Two of the narrators who participated in this project, Flora and Annie Temple, were both motivated by these risks to work for safety standards in the industry, and both currently identify as advocates for dancers’ workplace safety. They see themselves as following in the tradition of dancer organizing in Vancouver as started by Marcia, founder of the now defunct Vancouver Exotic Dance Alliance that began its work in the 1980s. Marcia went on to work as an agent with

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Stripper Entertainment which attempted to provide health insurance to dancers and now continues to work in the industry managing one of the few venues left in the Lower Mainland, the Byrd Pub and Flamingo Hotel in Surrey, BC.62

Flora argues that the problematic way dancer employment is legally defined results in a lack of occupational health and safety. The vast majority of dancers work freelance or as private contractors and thus can choose when, where, and how often they work. Though this flexibility is attractive to many dancers, they do not have access to most federal and provincial labour legislation because the terminology of employer-employee regulations does not apply to private contractors. Dancers therefore find it difficult to access benefits available to some other workers, such as sick leave and vacation time.63 Other threats to physical health and safety that Flora addresses are poor lighting, slippery poles, and unsecure stages with holes that are difficult to navigate in stiletto heels.64

One of the most prevalent stereotypes associated with erotic dancing is its association with sexual and physical violence.65 Yet only one of the dancers I spoke with had experienced sexual assault at her workplace. She speaks as a current advocate for sex workers’ rights and argues that British Columbia is relatively organized with policies from management that treat assault seriously, banning any customers or support staff who have caused harm and generally

63 Becki Ross, interview by Anna Maria Tremonti, The Current with Anna Maria Tremonti, CBC Radio One, October 15, 2009.
64 Flora (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 12, 2011).
exercising a zero tolerance policy toward violence. For example, management at The Marble Arch fired the bouncer who grabbed Annie Temple’s breasts when she worked as a VIP dancer in the late 1990s. Leah’s experience as a waitress at The Penthouse is similar: “I’ve had people put their hands on me without permission many, many times but they get tossed out in the alley, that’s fine.”

This quote indicates that experiences of violence in the strip club setting are certainly not limited to dancers.

Only one narrator decided to pursue working in sex work by exchanging sexual contact for money. But while dancing is sometimes perceived as a “safer” form of sex work, dancers who do not exchange sex for money are also exposed to a variety of bodily fluids. These include saliva, vaginal secretions and semen, all of which can be found on props, furnishings, equipment, costumes, clothing and body surfaces with which dancers come into contact.

None of the dancers I spoke with openly talked about any personal experience with substance use as a way to cope with their work or managing the surrounding stigma. Many added that it could be considered a health risk of the job, suggesting that there is something unique about dancing regarding substance use when compared with other service industries that are closely associated with liquor. As discussed in Chapter 1, the prevalence of substance use and the

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66 Leah (interview by author, Hope, BC, March 10, 2011).
performance of female sexuality contributed to stigma against erotic dancers specifically. In turn, it is this stigma that can impact many facets of their lives.

All of the dancers I interviewed emphasized the benefits and positive aspects of their work and downplayed the risks. As discussed earlier, this is a small sample of people who are willing to talk openly about their experiences dancing. For this group, however, long-term benefits included improved self-esteem, an opportunity to overcome extreme shyness, and a connection to their bodies they had not previously enjoyed. For this group, the benefits ultimately far outweighed any temporary risks. Flora and Carson Leigh chose to emphasize that dancing for a living is/was a tiny albeit influential part of their overall lives, and a part they both see as enriching an otherwise unexciting life path. As Leigh argued before dancing she: “felt imprisoned in what was going to be a long corporate career as a secretary, phone answerer, and coffee maker...I would have been stuck as a secretary.”

Dancers also expressed that they needed to exercise extreme caution when pursuing any activism surrounding occupational health and safety while working in the clubs. In a workplace characterized by lack of job security, they were acutely aware that there was always another dancer available to take their place. As Carson Leigh told me:

Even before VIP dancing when sets went from 15-18 minutes, probably 30-60% of the dancers quit over that, just outraged and went on to get pregnant and married and things like that to get out of it. Shows went from 15 to 18 minutes and we got paid the same and then GST came in, which was a huge uproar, and then I guess VIP dancing. Those are 3 instances that weren’t organized in any

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68 Leigh, Carson (interview by author, January 4, 2011).
way, but responses to working conditions. All these new girl swarms came in that were totally fine with it. There is no shortage of women to do it. That’s for sure.

Some club owners and managers foster this precarious work environment because it is a way to turn dancers’ marginalized and stigmatized status into a way to maximize their labour. I was relieved to hear accounts of grassroots and successful dancer activism in regards to working conditions, largely due to collaboration and cooperation amongst dancers. For example, from time to time clubs in Vancouver have tried to institute mandatory floor time, which is a certain amount of time a dancer needs to spend in the bar mingling with customers. This time is usually only compensated by tipping from the customers a dancer may interact with, so the monetary rewards of this activity are minimal. When Carson Leigh and Annie Temple were dancing, they remember either taking part in or observing other dancers resisting this requirement. The main tactic they used was sitting together to have a drink while the club was open before the shows started instead of mingling with and entertaining customers which was what management was trying to stimulate with the implementation of mandatory floor time. Carson remembers that: “we put on our little lingerie dresses and sit at a table and talk to each other and that was our form of protest but it was mandatory to be in the bar, and be available for part of your shift.”69 Temple remembers some bars backing down on mandatory floor time but the introduction of VIP dancing in the late 1990s changed the landscape of erotic dancing in the province.70 Carson remembers similar style protests: “so we tried

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70 Temple, Annie (interview by author, Surrey, BC, January 31, 2011).
some of that, and then all these news girls came up and started making a killing and we’re all lazy being bitches, not making money.”

With the rise of information technology in the 1990s the No. 5 Orange and the Marble Arch wanted to start taping stage shows and broadcasting them on the internet. The dancers as individuals said that refusing gigs arranged by their agent at certain clubs was a dangerous move for their dancing career. On the whole, however, there was widespread outcry amongst stage dancers across North America regarding taping shows without providing compensation, so many dancers refused to dance at these clubs. Though a few dancers were willing and did have their shows taped because of the lack of variety in the line-up, the clubs were forced to remove the cameras in order to attract more dancers and thus clients back to the club.

Attempts at unionization have been made in the Vancouver erotic dance scene as far back as the late 1980s, but like other female-dominated or low-waged industries, collective organizing has been difficult. These difficulties are deepened by the stigma faced when being publicly identified as erotic dancers. Leigh remembers that “at one point [in the 1990s] dancers were in contact with a

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particular union and some smart person, 137 pipefitters or whatever, had a union connection but nothing came of it.”73 Around this time many agents, club managers, and owners got together to create a master list of all the dancers in the city and agreed on a standard amount to pay each one. A by-product of this list is that dancers who lived in the city were paid less than those who travelled to Vancouver to dance, even if they had similar styles or assets, such as intricate choreography, costumes, props, and any desirable cosmetic enhancements. Local dancers believed that the price assigned to them was directly correlated to their willingness to engage in sex acts with those sitting around the table making decisions as to how much they were worth.74 Dancers and some other agents, managers and owners disagreed with the “price fixing” and found a lawyer willing to bring a class action lawsuit against those involved on the condition that “enough” dancers would get involved.75 Local dancer turned agent Marcia managed to get a copy of the names and corresponding prices to support the case.

One dancer supporting the legal action managed to coordinate a local dancers’ meeting via word of mouth in dressing rooms where the lawyer would be in attendance to explain what actions would were needed to move forward.76 A more formal way of advertising the meeting was not used for fear of backlash from managers and owners. The meeting was held in a hall at Hastings and Renfrew that donated the space for free upon discovering the intent of the

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73 Leigh, Carson (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 4, 2011).
74 Jacquie Carstensen, “Re: Meeting Notes re: Book anthology chapter,” E-Mail to Annie Temple and contributors (January 9, 2011).
75 Cartensen, Jacquie, “Re: Meeting Notes re. Book anthology chapter,” E-mail to Annie Temple and contributors (January 9, 2011).
76 Carstensen, Jacquie, “Re: Meeting Notes re: Book anthology chapter,” E-Mail to Annie Temple and contributors (January 9, 2011).
meeting. The meeting had quite a large turnout and though some agents supported the dancers’ initiative, none showed because they feared backlash from the club managers and owners. There, the lawyer stressed the importance of everyone in attendance being involved and that real names, addresses and contact information would have to be included on the application. This requirement doomed the legal action because many dancers feared the stigma of publicly declaring their profession. Unfortunately, after this meeting it was clear that not “enough” dancers were willing to take this risk for a myriad of reasons:

Back then [the mid 1980s], I was one of the few dancers who actually paid taxes every year and used the same ‘expensive’ Chartered Accountant downtown as Melissa Wolf and Tyson Lee so as to legitimize my profession however; this wasn’t the case for most of the girls.77

In the twenty years following Joe Philliponi’s death, much changed at The Penthouse, including different approaches to management, renovations, and labour activism. With larger cultural changes, including the growth of music videos and internet pornography, both the owners and managers of the Penthouse and the dancers themselves embraced and adapted new styles of performance. Even with these types of changes, however, the racialization of the dancers remained largely white, with clubs more likely to promote and advertise dancers racially marked as white. Finally, dancers responded to changes in the conditions of their employment through informal labour activism. Locally, the dancers resisted price fixing in the 1980s and attempts to extend their set times by 3 minutes without any additional financial compensation. The standard set length

77Carstensen, Jacquie, “Re: Meeting Notes re: Book anthology chapter,” E-Mail to Annie Temple and contributors (January 9, 2011).
changed from 15 to 18 minutes in the early 1990s across clubs in the province, a change at first resisted by many dancers. Later in the 1990s private dancing, more commonly known in BC as VIP dancing, was introduced to Vancouver first at The Paramount and quickly became an expectation at strip clubs in the Lower Mainland. This dramatically changed what it meant to work in a strip club because a stage show is very different than a private show in terms of a performer’s proximity to the audience. Some dancers continue to resist the erosion of their labour rights and drastic changes to their performance expectations without adequate workplace mechanisms to protect them. Yet labour resistance remains difficult because it could threaten their employment and unleash the stigma of being a sex worker into other facets of their lives.
CHAPTER 5: THE LEGACY AND FUTURE OF THE PENTHOUSE

In this final chapter I summarize the major turning points for The Penthouse and conclude by discussing its current position in Vancouver’s economic, political, and moral climate. Unlike many of the Lower Mainland’s exotic nightclubs such as The Drake and the North Burnaby Inn, The Penthouse has not been sold and bulldozed to build accommodation. According to Danny Filippone, both business and the club’s reputation have only improved following major renovations, technological advances, and the buying out of his cousins, a process which began in the mid-1990s.1 Despite maintaining the “exotic feel,” Filippone states that what has kept the club alive is its ventures outside of being a strip venue. This simultaneously generates income for the venue and distracts from, or romanticizes depending on the target audience, its history and its links to the sex industry. Filippone thinks what draws audiences to The Penthouse now, whether people are coming in on a regular night or for a special event, is that his operation is “an updated club. With feeling and history...we’re cashing in on that, on different types of people.”2

However, this brand of nostalgia rests on downplaying the relationship between sex work and erotic dancing. Previous chapters demonstrate that the dancers themselves generally speak of ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’ when

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1 Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
2 Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
discussing their dancing careers. But this chapter argues that many remain ambivalent about linking erotic dancing with other kinds of sex work. I end this chapter by discussing the development of neoburlesque, and suggest that its performance style of challenging gender and sexual norms may help maintain the relevance of erotic dance.

**Nightclub Nostalgia and the Reality of Sex Work**

The Penthouse currently brings in additional income by organizing tours meant to draw on its iconic past. When referring to people who experience the club on tours organized by the Heritage Vancouver Society, Danny Filippone claims, “they just want to be entertained, they just want to see the inside of the club and get a feel for what it was like back in the days.”

The Heritage Vancouver tour that I attended at The Penthouse had a fairly mixed age adult demographic and appeared to be comprised predominantly of white, heterosexual, able-bodied (to climb the many stairs) people who are able to afford an almost fifty dollar ticket for an approximately hour long tour followed by a buffet of Spaghetti and meatballs, made from one of Filippone’s grandmother’s recipes. Some people on the tour helped Filippone facilitate, including a former police officer who used to be present when the club was raided for alleged liquor infractions. Retired officer Grant MacDonald enjoyed sharing stories of drinking with the management in the office after putting on a bit of a show of power by wandering around the club in uniform. Though the majority of the tour attendees laughed along with this

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3 Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
4 Grant MacDonald, “Secrets of The Penthouse Tour” (presented by Forbidden Vancouver, Vancouver, BC, April 27, 2009).
story and ones like it, I imagine more recent occurrences of police officers sharing controlled substances with suspects would not receive the same jovial reactions and would more likely be received as a misuse of power by the state. It was also interesting to note that women, particularly dancers, were absent from the tour and only casually referenced when Filippone and others gestured to vintage posters hung in largely unused areas of the club and preserved almost like a museum with glass cases of old bar glassware and match books. The club’s reputation is built on the women’s performance of sexual and emotional labour, but that is not highlighted or acknowledged in the construction of the hegemonic memory of the venue. Tour attendees are invited to stay for the evening’s entertainment following the spaghetti buffet. Nevertheless, the crowd in the Gold Room thinned out pretty quickly upon completion of the formal tour.

The nostalgic presentation of the Penthouse elides a direct or upfront acknowledgement about the relationship between the Penthouse and the quasi-legal profession of sex work. Such an acknowledgement could be economically damaging to the business, since powerful local feminist-moralist groups such as EVE (Exploited Voices now Educating), Rape Relief, and REED (Resist Exploitation Embrace Dignity) all fight for the abolition of sex work because of its perceived link with human trafficking, which has been a regular source of moral anxiety and panic. Abolitionist groups, often “an unlikely union of evangelical Christians with feminist campaigners,” advocate for a criminal system that

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targets clients like the one pioneered and currently employed in Sweden. This union initially seems unlikely since conservative religious groups are usually interested in the “link between reproduction and sexuality” while both liberal and radical feminist analysis rejects that connection. Where these two perspectives meet is in the view of sex work as bringing together the exploitative aspects of both capitalism and sexuality: “erotic dancers’ interpersonal sexualized encounters blur the privacy of sexuality, nudity, and emotionality within the public market.” For both religious conservatives and radical feminists, sex work reduces female bodies to commodities to be bought and sold in the commercial marketplace.

Upon close examination, criminalizing those in search of sexual services is just as dangerous to sex workers. Criminalization results in “sexist practices which deprive male and trans workers of a voice in the debate” and reinforces the stigma of sex workers of all genders. Self-identified radical feminists contribute to this rigid system of classifying women as victims, often without consulting the women who engage in these practices. The current debates surrounding skin trade work are often just as reductive as the virgin/whore dichotomy, by either employing ‘right to choose’ rhetoric or by situating performers as victims of their

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7 Vance, *Pleasure and Danger*, 3; Weitzer, “The Mythology of Prostitution.”

8 Jackson, “Revealing Contemporary Constructions of Femininity,” 365.

circumstances, by equating sex work “as violence against women,” and by reducing women to “exploited vaginas.”\textsuperscript{10}

My dissertation is informed by a (radical) sex positive framework that views the consensual expression of sexuality as something dancers and other kinds of sex workers should get to decide for themselves. Dancing could be understood and experienced as a form of empowerment or it could be borne out of economic necessity, but regardless, dancers should be judged neither for their career choices nor for their motives in choosing that career in the first place.\textsuperscript{11} Some self-identified abolitionist feminists would undoubtedly question my feminist status by denying the simplistic ‘right to choose’ reasoning. As Baptie et al argue: “choice is non-choice. For equality’s sake, I do mind.”\textsuperscript{12} The labour analysis that Bruckert brings to this debate about ‘choice,’ however, addresses this oversimplified view as it pertains to sex industry work and erotic dance:

in terms of labour-market location, opportunities and obligations, it is immediately apparent that strippers are choosing their occupational location in an economic climate characterized by unappealing choices. Stripping may not always be a ‘nice’ job, but neither are the alternatives. For some [women], stripping may be a viable strategy to realize the economic and social benefits afforded by participation in the paid labour force while also offering sufficient flexibility to accommodate their many other commitments.\textsuperscript{13}

This quote clearly illustrates that the conceptualization around ‘choice’ in the sex industry, touted as dangerous and exploitative by radical feminist analysis, does

\textsuperscript{10} Baptie et al.
\textsuperscript{12} Baptie et al.
\textsuperscript{13} Bruckert, \textit{Taking it Off}, 31.
not exist as simply as implied. All employment ‘choices’ are made within the confines of a patriarchal and capitalist market where sexual labour is positioned as both a service and highly stigmatized because of the sexuality a dancer is presumed to embody and carry; as labour historian Eileen Boris argues, the “body becomes constructed through its labor.”  

Carr asks when considering sex worker and performance artist Annie Sprinkle’s ‘Public Cervix Announcement:’ “can you be exploited if you want to be exploited?”

Beyond the discussion of choice and empowerment is how the industry and the workers within it conceptualize the nature of sexual labour. In our interview, booking agent for Stripper Entertainment Randy Knowlan exclaimed: "I'm sick of trying to explain the difference between hookers and dancers." This statement exemplifies the overlap and confusion that exists at the boundaries of different kinds of sexual labour. The majority of the dancers interviewed for this project saw a distinction between erotic dancing and most other forms of sex work. Mistress explains this distinction by arguing that "We dancers preferred to think of our job as an art form, whereas prostitutes, we considered, were providing a service." She continues to expand the division between the two traditions by saying "an industry that was desperately and consistently fighting to have their legitimacy recognised by the general public frowned upon such behaviour." Finally, she insists that that this division was in fact symbiotic,

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17 Mistress, (interview by author, Burnaby, BC, January 6, 2011).
claiming that "it was commonly known that prostitutes dismissed the exotic
dance industry for its exhibitionism."\textsuperscript{19}

A minority of the dancers interviewed allied themselves with traditions of
sex work even if they thought of dancing as very different from exchanging sexual
acts for money. Carson Leigh, for example, explains that she did not see herself
as a sexual labourer while dancing but ten years after leaving the industry tells
people she "used to be a sex industry worker."\textsuperscript{20} The boundaries between erotic
dancing and sex work, even to some of those who maintained this distinction, are
always fluid. Adding other kinds of sexual performance, such as neoburlesque, to
this discussion of how to identify erotic dancing makes the divisions between se
work and dancing even less clear.

The Future of Erotic Dance and The Emergence of Neoburlesque

The emergence of neoburlesque as an art form inspired explicitly by
feminism addresses some of these debates around sexual labour, performance,
and choice. Carson Leigh explains:

I was one of the girls who saw us as the exploiters not the exploited,
these poor sad pathetic men who had no choice but to be a slave to
their smaller minds and all we had to do was put on a smile, take
their money and laugh all the way to bank with it and do better
things with it like provide for our families or something like that.\textsuperscript{21}

In my interview with Filippone, he commented on what he sees as the
future of his family’s business, which he is positioning in relation to newly

\textsuperscript{19} Mistress, (interview by author, Burnaby, BC, January 6, 2011).
\textsuperscript{20} Leigh, Carson (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 4, 2011).
\textsuperscript{21} Leigh, Carson (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 4, 2011)
emerging forms of erotic dance. He is often quoted in local media as moving towards “class” and away from the seedy strip image that was largely a result of the sensational media coverage of the trial and closure. Presently, there is resurgence in the popularity and visibility of burlesque performances, with a staggering number of neoburlesque performers and troupes located in Western Canada, including the very popular Sweet Soul Burlesque. This style of striptease, which is largely inspired by the ‘Golden Era of Burlesque,’ often portrays feminist ideals, including subverting popular and pervasive media images of beauty with full-figured dancers, dancers of colour, and presenting alternatives to a passive feminine sexuality. Neoburlesque seems to be equally inspired by the growing popularity of ‘performance art’ that began in the 1970s while also growing out of more mainstream striptease conventions. Fillippone sees neo-burlesque culture and the shows the club often produces as helpful to The Penthouse’s future, since the golden era of burlesque coincided with some of the most lucrative days at the club. As contemporary performers often explicitly align their performance with a feminist message, I contend that elements of this relationship clearly exposed in post-feminist thinking have been present throughout the trajectory of this history.

The final chapter of Becki Ross’s comprehensive history of burlesque in post-war Vancouver speculates that the strip-show of yester-year could be headed for extinction. For different reasons, Case concurs: “the naked body, then, seems

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an antique notion- nostalgic and sentimental in its referencing system.”23 I contrast this perspective with a business owner whose success depends on the industry’s survival and his perspective on the future.24 I present Filippone’s opinions on the acceptance/acceptability of the skin trade in today’s West Coast culture, exploring whether overlaps with the sex trade are as prevalent as they have been in the past, and examine the role that living in a ‘striptease culture’ plays for the actual strip industry.25 Filippone routinely answers the question, “Are all strippers hookers?” (which is not what I asked, but how he interpreted my question) and states: “That’s truly not the case. No. I mean are all of them drug users? No...Do some of them do drugs? Sure... Its just the whole stigma with strippers, its how it goes.”26 This incredibly defensive response to a question I was not really posing suggests that on some level Filippone also feels the stigma attached to the business. As much as he tries to move beyond the confines of a ‘strip club,’ he still grapples with this legacy. Striptease is changing and evolving, just as it did toward the end of the Golden Era of Burlesque.27 Themes from the long history of the club show potential for something other than a linear history that ends with the death of the industry.

The division between neo-burlesque and ‘stripping’ is not nearly as clear cut as ‘common sense’ dictates, and positing that some kind of essential

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24 Debra Ferreday also asserts “sex work has persisted and even flourished in post-industrial societies” (“Writing Sex Work On-line” 277).
25 See Brian McNair, Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and Democratisation of Desire (London: Routledge, 2002).
26 Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
27 Goldwyn, Pretty Things.
difference exists can be interpreted as an instance of classism.\textsuperscript{28} The genealogies of these traditions are startlingly similar in so far as both are based in performances of “a sexuality that depended first and foremost on excessive femininity of appearance and gesture.” Differences that do exist between these traditions lie with the performers, and sometimes audiences, rather than the practices themselves.\textsuperscript{29} Neoburlesque dancers are generally hobbyists who do not perform six days/ nights a week.\textsuperscript{30} Research indicates that most performers are amateurs: “One thing all the groups have in common is they’re made up of ordinary women in their late 20s to early 30s, with day jobs and no prior intention to ham it up and take their clothes off in common.”\textsuperscript{31} Though there are many differences in the audiences and venues, neo-burlesque audiences are usually reported to contain more women (particularly under 40) than the ‘typical’ night at a strip club.\textsuperscript{32} Elsewhere, however, it has been noted that since the 1940s women have been “regular and enthusiastic” patrons of burlesque performances and some clubs offer incentives to female customers, including reduced cover

\textsuperscript{28} Similar challenges exist when talking about sex work more generally, “Should the wider definition of sex workers include all those in the sex industry such as erotic dancers and phone sex operators? Should we include those with just one ‘sugar daddy’ client? What is a ‘professional mistress?’” (Cusick et al 709).


\textsuperscript{30} Since the ‘economic crisis’ of 2007, strip clubs and agencies receive approximately twice the applications from potential dancers that they did prior to 2007 (Blau). A similar increase in interest from potential sexual labourers happened prior to the 2010 Olympic winter games in Vancouver. However, those already involved in the industry said they did not experience the boom in business that was anticipated (Baron). The sex industry has not seen any substantial or consistent growth in many years (Cusick et al 707).


\textsuperscript{32} Ferreday, “Showing the Girl,” 47. I spend the occasional evening at strip clubs. For example, when I interviewed Danny Filippone, I went to an industry holiday party, The Naked Truth Award show, and took someone out to celebrate an anniversary. The award show was the only night of these that probably wasn’t ‘typical’, and on each of these occasions I was notably not the only woman in the club who did not work there.
charges and exclusive drink specials.\textsuperscript{33} Further, striptease audiences have historically been comprised of mixed classes.\textsuperscript{34}

Though both conventional striptease and neoburlesque can be framed as “legitimate, artistic form of sexual expression, communicating a message of fantasy, not a prurient selling of sex,” the often-intense interaction with customers now customary and expected in a conventional striptease venue also serves to divide the two traditions.\textsuperscript{35} This component of emotional labour challenges the status of conventional striptease as a form of “respectable artistic expression,” especially as economic competition drives the performers to be in a closer relationship with the audience they are pleasing. This creates the need for dancers to play a particular sexualized role and decreases their freedom to create ‘edgier’ shows and sets that may challenge the audiences’ expectations.\textsuperscript{36} This interpersonal connection can be integral to conventional striptease as audiences can be more interested in a human connection than the performance of the striptease itself.\textsuperscript{37}

Many neoburlesque dancers actively work to bridge division between the two ‘kinds’ of striptease. The tensions and the conversations between these two kinds of dancing are evident in the careers and self-identification of performers Crystal Precious, who self-identifies as a stripper, and Sasha Van Bon Bon, who has worked in other facets of sex work and now has been involved with making

\textsuperscript{33} Mort, “Striptease,” 50.
\textsuperscript{34} Anatomy of Burlesque, produced by Peter Raymont and Lindalee Tracey (Toronto: White Pine Pictures/Canadian Television Fund, 2003), DVD.
\textsuperscript{35} Jackson, “Revealing Contemporary Constructions of Femininity,” 357.
\textsuperscript{36} Jackson, “Revealing Contemporary Constructions of Femininity,” 358.
\textsuperscript{37} Jackson, “Revealing Contemporary Constructions of Femininity,” 365.
feminist performance art for the past decade with the Scandelles, a popular queer troupe based in Toronto using "stripping as performance and practice."\textsuperscript{38} Inspired by feminist theory and surrealism, notable works by Van Bon Bon include a cabaret piece called Les Demimondes which was inspired by and addresses the dichotomy that the arts and the media are allowed to profit off the sex industry while those working directly to provide these services often remain criminalized.\textsuperscript{39} Precious chooses to label herself as a stripper as she sees similarities between her performance mode and that of women hired to dance regularly in nightclubs. Precious’s alignment is a form of solidarity expressed between those who engage with a feminine performance, which is oft criticized as oppressive by contemporary radical feminists. Demonstrating her solidarity with other kinds of sex workers, Precious headlined Pivot Legal Society’s annual Vancouver fundraiser ‘Passion for Justice’ in 2014. Pivot is one of the organizations demanding that sex work be decriminalized in Canada to make the occupation safer.

Both Precious and Van Bon Bon often incorporate spoken word into their performances, which is a slight variation from ‘mainstream neo-burlesque’ and ensures that their stage performances are accompanied by a literal voice. This practice “demonstrates the problematic status of the burlesque performer, who, by ‘speaking back’ to her audience, challenges received notions of sexual

\textsuperscript{38} Ferreday, “Showing the Girl,” 48.
objectification.” This practice is reminiscent of some big name dancers from the ‘golden age’ and also a more vaudevillian style of burlesque, showing one cycle that exists within the performance tradition.

Even less overtly feminist styles of burlesque emphasize a certain amount of feminist language in the descriptors, as stated here by professionally trained “Broadway Burlesque” dancer and resident of Coquitlam, BC, Leigh Torlage. Torlage states that in burlesque, the “emphasis is on confidence and how to entertain an audience. It should be empowering and fun.” One of the first scholars theorizing the neo-burlesque movement, Debra Ferreday, argues that this style of performance “powerfully dramatizes the fact that femininity is not reducible to a single object or practice: that feminine identities are multiple and may be experienced as pleasurable.” While this may be more evident in neo-burlesque performance, I would argue it is not unique to it. Conventional striptease artists are obliged to perform multiple sets in an evening which are not the same and, in order to be profitable, must convincingly perform pleasure if they are not actively experiencing it, a requirement for success in many lines of employment.

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41 Michael Kissinger, “Candy Girl Cabaret Director Reveals Sweet Spot for Brainiacs: Broadway, Burbs and Burlesque, "The Vancouver Courier" (Vancouver, BC), March 26, 2008.
42 Ferreday, “Showing the Girl,” 49.
43 Ferrreday, “Showing the Girl,” 49.
Another feature of neo-burlesque identified by Ferreday is the way in which it works “to destabilize the ways in which dominant feminine identities become normalized.” Dancers who rely on monetary tips from the audience as income may not have the opportunity to challenge feminine ideals to the same degree as neo-burlesque performers. Conventional striptease artists have to test the preferences of the audience to determine how to best perform their stage personae to produce the most income. Frequently stage names are chosen to compliment this alter ego, not just conceal the dancer’s ‘real world’ identity. For feminist performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan, here may lie the “real power in remaining unmarked.” Phelan discusses the unique ability of performers who are not restrained by strict boundaries of gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity to exercise power through the “instability of female subjectivity.”

Some claim that the oft-female dominated community that forms around neo-burlesque performances is unique. However, it may be more precise to see burlesque communities as extending traditions of female camaraderie. Mistress recalls her time dancing prior to the emergence of neo-burlesque in a similar way: “I loved the travel opportunities, the camaraderie between the dancers, the artistic self-expression...I could go on and on actually...” Mistress’ remarks bear similarities to stories of sharing performance practices recounted by many narrators contributing to this project. Opportunities for community building and artistic self-expression are associated with neo-burlesque culture and sometimes

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44 Ferreday, “Showing the Girl,” 49.
assumed to be a defining feature compared to conventional striptease. Music, for example was often a point of conflict as multiple dancers often want to use the same popular songs.\textsuperscript{48} This makes sense as music is integral to a striptease performance, and feeling connected to your accompaniment in some way will manifest in your body and have ramifications on your overall performance.\textsuperscript{49}

Filippone is well aware of the growing popularity of neo-burlesque in its various forms, as well as Vancouver’s role in setting this trend. The Penthouse has hosted one highly anticipated fundraiser for the Vancouver Dyke March every year since its inception 16 years ago called ‘Diva’s Den,’ “a sexy strip show celebrating Queer Women. An Event for past, present and future women.”\textsuperscript{50} According to Filippone, events like Diva’s Den are just one possibility for the future of striptease and The Penthouse, as both shift away from the notion that female performers in the erotic context exist exclusively for the consumption and pleasure of heterosexual male clientele.\textsuperscript{51} In Brooks’s study of race and erotic capital one of the narrators notes that dancing for a female audience is nourishing. This sentiment is echoed in conversation with Melony Sweetcheeks in Vancouver who no longer dances on the circuit, but still considers erotic performance a huge part of her life as she now competes, teaches and trains others in pole dancing.\textsuperscript{52} Lower Mainland journalist Kevin Chong estimates that

\textsuperscript{48} Ferreday, “Showing the Girl,” 59.
\textsuperscript{49} Anatomy of Burlesque.
\textsuperscript{51} Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
\textsuperscript{52} Brooks, Unequal Desires, 58.
at any given night at The Penthouse the audience is comprised of at least one-third women.53

Whether this kind of evolution is Filippone’s first choice is debatable as both he and Knowlan alluded in their interviews that this generation of Filippone management would prefer to operate venues more like the bars seen along the Granville strip.54 Filippone also has alluded to the fact that his Uncle Joe would want him to prioritize music over the dancers to ensure the longevity of the club, implying “music” necessarily entails more diversified performances and more profit than striptease.55 Interestingly, it can be inferred that Filippone has no desire to change the sexual atmosphere of the space as both the kind of music venue Filippone is leaning towards and a strip club are coded as sexual spaces within the heterosexual matrix.56 So while the sexual atmosphere would remain the same with a hypothetical shift in entertainment, it is possible that the venue would carry less stigma than it currently holds.57 It seems that The Penthouse will continue along its current trajectory, however, as tweaking its licensing is a potentially risky business situation. Licensing regulations have led to the closure of other nightclubs in the area, such as the Odyssey, which was located a few blocks away from the Penthouse on Howe Street. Despite outcry from its predominantly gay male clientele, it was closed in September 2010 in part because of the disturbance it caused to the surrounding condominium residents. The Penthouse seems to be protected in its current “iconic” form as quasi-official

53 Chong, “Stripped Down.”
54 Chong, “Stripped Down.”
56 Boyd, “Producing Vancouver’s (Hetero) Normative Nightscape,” 177.
57 Boyd, “Producing Vancouver’s (Hetero) Normative Nightscape,” 178.
heritage site, bolstered by endorsement from the BC Hall of Fame (Figure 1), with the historical licensing it holds following the three-year closure. It may be that the club’s time as a target of City officials has ironically secured its longevity.58

Because of the importance of the public image of The Penthouse to its owner/manager, the answers and information collected from Filippone, particularly in regards to sex work, might not reflect the full complexity of the situation. As Graham Murdoch notes, interviews “are always performances in which respondents assume identities and manage impressions.”59 For example, Filippone claimed to me that street-based sex workers have been barred from the club since the renovations, but conflicting reports state that on slower nights Filippone has actually invited working women into the club to interact with and attract clientele, as they had been welcomed historically.60 Filippone’s testimony about and management of these issues may nevertheless be interesting and useful, as it shows patterns between how he and his predecessors, recorded in court transcripts and countless media items, have handled perceived ‘threats’ to his business. Filippone’s challenges are vastly different from his uncle’s and father’s. Brooks notes in her study of clubs in New York City, where zoning has become increasingly complex and precarious since Mayor Giuliani’s 1995 laws, that questions from researchers in this regard “can signify city control or fear of the club being raided by the police and shut down. This is particular concern for

58 Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
60 Leah (interview by author, Hope, BC, March 10, 2011); Carson Leigh (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 4, 2011) and Annie Temple (interview by author, Surrey, BC, January 31, 2011).
clubs... that are located in low-income communities of color, where members of the community feel criminalized by the police.” Despite Vancouver’s historic attempts to obliterate erotic nightclub venues, Filippone alluded to feeling secure in this regard. But he highlighted other challenges, including keeping up with the liquor preferences with the patrons along the neighboring Granville Strip.

Further, when considering the second half of the above quote from Brooks, it is interesting to reflect on Seymour Street as originally part of ‘the Italian neighbourhood’ and how in a relatively short period of time, the dominant culture subsumes Italian ethnicity into whiteness. For the current owner, part of taking on the marker of whiteness was and remains a conscious choice of downplaying his Italian roots and heritage: “I don’t look like an Italian. I like to talk, I’m a friendly guy, I like people. I’m not one of these, as my wife calls it ‘A nightclub owner that you see on TV, when they have those typical strip bars that we’ve seen thousands of times’…” This comment again brings to light discussions in previous chapters of how the associations of the venue have led and continue to lead to stereotypes and assumptions. When Filippone states “not that I’m against Italians, the way they look, the way they dress…” while simultaneously disassociating himself from “Italian” markers, he demonstrates how race is socially constructed and dependent on unclear and shifting categories. This marks him as different from the previous owners of the club, who were more comfortable embracing markers of Italian identity.

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61 Brooks, Unequal Desires, 27.
63 Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
dissertation concludes by reflecting on the trends in The Penthouse’s rich history and speculates on implications for the future of the skin trade. I locate major shifts in the 1980s as the connection to pornography intensified, and again in the late 1990s with the birth of the official neo-burlesque movement coinciding with the introduction of VIP dancers to conventional strip clubs in Vancouver. These moments resemble previous moments in The Penthouse’s history and offer a promising future for striptease. The venue, as described by Mistress, is “the perfect combination of dive bar and classy joint,” making it an attractive venue for a wide range of people. Her use of the word “joint” still signifies a certain element of seediness; however, that is inescapable for a strip venue because of the stigma attached to striptease and the venues where such performances regularly take place. Joe Philipponi would probably be pretty content with his venue being labeled a “classy joint.”

What happens ‘behind the scenes’ at places like the Penthouse is still largely unregulated, demonstrating how battles over licensing and enforcement are generally done to protect the general population rather than the ‘bad girl’ dancers. In British Columbia, a blog project initiated by the BC Coalition of Experiential Communities called Trade Secrets shares information on health and safety and encourages sex work professionals to ensure their own workplace well-being because of the lack of external regulation or protection.

Developed through a series of focus groups and 46 in-depth interviews with funding from Vancouver Coastal Health, Trade Secrets, a project co-

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64 Filippone, Danny (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 20, 2011).
ordinated by Annie Temple, discusses the importance of avoiding moves in a striptease act that result in contact between props and orifices, and suggests that dancers should exercise common courtesy by thoroughly cleaning up after shows and washing anything that looks unclean before the club opens. I interpret these suggested measures as a public health approach; when any type of risk is present, precautions need to be implemented to reduce the chance of transmission. Unfortunately, practices like this contribute to the increase in responsibilities placed on the dancers and reduces their take-home compared to time spent at work. It also reinforces the stigma of sexual labour as inherently unclean or unsafe rather than emphasizing the lack of meaningful regulation of potentially unsafe work environments. Other practices that are imposed and thus make the compensation less lucrative include dancers paying $1.50 per song in royalties back to the club, demanding mandatory floor time, or requiring the performance of VIP dances.

Trade Secrets has been influential beyond the Rocky Mountains. SHIFT, an organization in Alberta that provides support services for people in the sex industry, has begun cloning the project, addressing the unique provincial legislation for dancers working in that province. Many, if not most dancers, travel extensively across provincial if not national borders and that makes projects like these especially important to understand and critique; it is the dancer’s responsibility to be familiar with each set of regulations. Cleanliness

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and safety of dancer accommodation then becomes an additional consideration regarding physical health and safety as discussed by narrators in this project, because they often use distant dancing contracts as a means to access travel opportunities across provincial boundaries.

Despite the past raid, trial, and closure, and the ongoing economic challenges of operating a successful nightclub, The Penthouse remains secure as a local institution. The Filippone family has benefited financially from selling surrounding property at various points in Vancouver’s aggressive real estate history and now exists harmoniously with Vancouver’s law enforcement, holding all necessary liquor and venue licenses. Though the venue may still represent promiscuous sexual morality, the tours arguably attract people who were intrigued by the venue but are not comfortable attending on a regular night. Time passing and nostalgic ideas of what is ‘classy’ are used to promote the club’s official history while the dancers continue to work and navigate stigma without being directly celebrated as integral in creating the club’s legendary status within the city. Filippone is quick to identify characteristics of the neoburlesque surge that keep the club a unique and exciting performance venue. However, he fails to locate the dancers who are there 6 nights a week as part of the club’s history and future trajectory. Similarly, though neoburlesque dancers are often hailed as empowered through striptease, sex workers performing this kind of labour are usually positioned as oppressed by the practice despite the similarities in style and practice. Striptease is intrinsically connected to the history and success of The Penthouse as a venue, and it still holds a future for performers and workers of this craft and trade.
CONCLUSION

The first chapter of my dissertation provided an overview of the history of the Penthouse since the Philliponi/Filippone family purchased the land shortly after immigrating to Canada from Italy. The venue’s history is placed in the context of larger themes such as the patterns of Italian immigration to the West Coast. The complex cultural histories of the Philliponi family shaped their approach to their businesses as a family-run endeavour.

The Philliponi family worked together to build a successful business in downtown Vancouver. The Penthouse’s success as a business, as well as its reputation, has been crafted in a patrilineal manner which rests on the character and charisma of the male owners/operators. But its success was ultimately built on the stigmatized labour of two groups of sexual labourers: erotic dancers who are selling varying degrees of sexual fantasy and sex workers who are exchanging agreed upon sex acts for money. One of these groups lacks institutional support and is vulnerable to exploitation by unclear labour regulations while the other group is more or less criminalized under Bill C-36. Both groups of sexual labourers can be affected and impacted in sometimes lasting ways by the stigma of being a sex worker. The voices of the women working in and around The Penthouse are usually absent from its on-going institutionalization as a landmark with historical significance.
Understood largely as a kind of performance rather than on the continuum of sexual labour, neo-burlesque dancers are often understood to be ‘classier’ than working-class strippers. But strippers in turn can also be complicit in the marginalization of other kinds of sex work, particularly street-based sex workers. This demonstrates the diversity of contemporary attitudes in relation to sex work, even from those located across and within the spectrum of sexual performance and sexual labour. Some of the dancers I spoke to understood their work in the context of solidarity with other kinds of sex workers, especially those who do not enjoy even basic labour regulations. Nevertheless, some dancers did not see a correlation and thought exchanging sex for money was “completely unacceptable to me, total infiltration, those sorts of people were not welcome in the industry, I just wanted them to stick to what they did, and I’ll stick to what I do, there was no room for overlap.”¹ Penny Crowe, dancers, and staff all remember that these tensions have existed in various ways at numerous points of The Penthouse’s history.

In the second chapter, I discussed how the local political context in Vancouver created the conditions for a police raid in 1975 and justified the ensuing three-year closure of The Penthouse. The closure created a ripple effect on sex workers and local Vancouver neighbourhoods. Many of the sex workers who had been working inside The Penthouse were pushed onto the streets with limited options for safe places to work. The latter half of the second chapter follows the impact of this displacement as sex workers moved increasingly to Vancouver’s West End. The closure of the Penthouse (along with other local

¹ Leigh, Carson (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 4, 2011).
institutions) led to an increase in street sex work, which in turn prompted a complicated set of community and organizational responses, including a damaging Shame the Johns campaign undertaken by CROWE, an approach not unlike abolitionist/prohibitionist feminist actions currently seen in the city.

Chapter 3 discussed and demonstrated how the stigma of being a sexual labourer is used as a way to enforce and regulate appropriate behaviour through conditions placed on the club to monitor who was entering and exiting upon its re-opening. Chapter 3 also explained how particular representations of dancers become emblematic of The Penthouse and other famous burlesque theatres. The lived realities of the dancers, however, showcase dancers’ complexity. Dancers often ‘talk back’ to dominant feminist narratives dictating that sex workers are necessarily oppressed victims of patriarchy. The narrators’ stories complicate hegemonic ideas about sex workers as ‘victims’. My dissertation is also informed by (radical) sex positive debates, which view the consensual expression of sexuality as something dancers and other kinds of sex workers should get to decide for themselves.

Though Katherine Frank has pointed to the wealth of knowledge produced about strip-clubs, the historical record of erotic dancers remains sparse due to entrenched stigma relating to sex work3 In this chapter and throughout this dissertation, I challenge the erasure of erotic dancers from history by using the venue of The Penthouse Nightclub as an entry point to understanding the intersection between the experience, representation, and regulation of erotic

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dance, and urban and business development. Impossible narrow beauty standards permeating culture perpetuated by the rise of the internet and information technology, including pornography, have made it increasingly difficult to make a living out of being a live performer. A double standard becomes which normalizes hyper-sexuality and the idea or fantasy of striptease and other kinds of sex work belies the material reality of sex work, which remains a job that still makes people uncomfortable. This stigma continues to create dangerous conditions that are magnified for people of colour or folks falling outside of the conventional expressions of femininity and masculinity.

Chapter 4 of my thesis follows the work of Ross and Greenwell and establishes that the racial stratification of erotic capital in Vancouver from the 1980s has remained. Dancers who are white, or who pass for white, enjoy more work opportunities at The Penthouse. This is in keeping with trends in distribution of erotic capital elsewhere in North America. White or white passing, women have the most relative opportunity within the local striptease economy of Vancouver. But simultaneously, there is an overrepresentation of Indigenous street-based sex workers experiencing extreme levels of violence resulting from both colonialism and the longstanding the stigma of being a sexual labourer.4

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Despite clear instruction upon re-opening that sex workers were not to enter The Penthouse, dancers from the 1990s remember at least half the audience on any given night were sex workers:

I presume they catered to that crowd too cause there was a projection screen to the right of the stage showing soft-core porn. It was so different than any other club I worked in that showed, like, sports. The Penthouse never showed sports. They really seemed to be a part of that culture that was my perception.\(^5\)

Pressures on erotic dancing eventually forced sex workers who exchanged sex for money to leave The Penthouse again. The introduction of VIP dancing across the province was introduced in the Lower Mainland in the mid 1990s, and clubs quickly capitalized on this trend as well. Almost every bar that could fit in even the smallest stage for a dancer could adapt this trend for increased profit. At The Penthouse, the already existing dynamic between the stage dancers and sex workers was complicated by the introduction of VIP dancing as a new norm. According to Annie Temple, who is still an active sex worker rights activist, renovations in the club at the end of the 1990s marked the point where management ended an era of tolerating sex workers using the space in some capacity. Although anecdotal reports suggest some sex workers exchanging sex for money have been invited to return to the club, the fact remains that the marginalized and stigmatized status of sex workers leaves them vulnerable to inconsistent expectations and this can provoke dangerous misunderstandings with customers and management.\(^6\) Sex workers could arrive at the club one night

\(^5\)Leigh, Carson (interview by author, Vancouver, BC, January 4, 2011).
expecting to be welcomed inside and instead be turned onto the street by management, which is a more dangerous environment in which to exchange sex for money.

The final chapter summarized the major turning points for The Penthouse and concludes by discussing its current position in Vancouver’s economic, political, and moral climate. Despite maintaining the “exotic feel,” Filippone states that what has kept the club alive is its ventures outside of being a strip venue. This simultaneously generates income for the venue and both distracts from or romanticizes its history and links to the illicit sex trade.

The final chapter continues to analyse my interview with Filippone and where he sees the future of his family’s business. He is often quoted in local media as moving towards “class” and away from the seedy strip image that was built on of the sensational trial and closure and perpetuated in the mainstream media via stereotypes about Italians, criminality, and gangsters. His vision of the future is connected to the current resurgence in the popularity and visibility of neo-burlesque performances. A staggering amount of neo-burlesque performers and troupes are located in Western Canada, including the very popular Sweet Soul Burlesque. Neo burlesque seems to be equally inspired by the growing popularity of ‘performance art’ that began in the 1970s while also growing out of more mainstream striptease conventions. Fillippone sees the neo-burlesque culture and the shows the club produces as an important part of The Penthouse’s future, because the golden era of burlesque coincided with some of the most
lucrative days at the club and capitalized on masculine leisure and lifestyle of the 1960s.

My dissertation concludes by reflecting on the trends in The Penthouse’s rich history and speculates on the implications for the future of the venue. I locate major shifts in the 1980s as the connection to pornography intensified and the expectation of VIP dancing later in the 1990s as a basic job requirement. This trend drastically changed the expectations of performance and proximity to the audience. Some dancers adapted well to the changing climate of dancing, while others did not. Leigh cites the expectation of performing VIP dances in addition to stage shows as contributing to her ultimate departure from dancing, though she did stay in the industry as a receptionist for an agency:

I was a stage dancer, I need a whole big stage with wings and aprons and a hydraulic riser you know I need the whole nine yards, I need the whole thing, so for me to have a person's lap, the space between one theatre seat and the next theatre seat, its just not the kind of dancing I do...so it wasn’t going to work out.

By the late 1990s, on the West Coast and elsewhere, the official neo-burlesque movement was born. These shifting moments in the history of erotic dancing, such as the shift from partial to full nudity in performances or the addition of VIP dancing, reflect the ever-changing dynamics of the club, the industry, and the performance of stripping itself. Standard striptease performance conventions are always changing in response to economic challenges, technology and perceptions about sexuality. In the future, advocates and allies in the striptease and sex work industries will need to continue the
difficult work of destigmatizing all forms of sexual labour in order to mitigate the harms caused by ongoing stigma against sex workers.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Demographics of Dancers and Other Employees at The Penthouse

Flora: Caucasian; British; Heterosexual; Middle-Class Background; 33
Leah: Caucasian; Scottish and Blackfoot; Bisexual; Middle-Class Background; 44
Carson Leigh: Caucasian; Norwegian and Scottish; Lesbian; Working-Class Background; Late 30s
Mistress: Caucasian; British; Bisexual, Working-Class Background; 45
Crystal Precious: Caucasian; Canadian; Bisexual, Working-Class Background; Early 30s
Scarlett Lake: Caucasian; Canadian; Heterosexual; Working-Class Background; Early 60s
Melony Sweetcheeks: Caucasian; Irish, Polish, Ukranian; Middle-Class Background; Queer; 32
Annie Temple: Metis; Malaysian, Irish, English, First Nations; Working-Class Background; Queer; Mid 30s
Sample Interview Questions

For Dancers:

When did you start working at The Penthouse and how did you end up dancing there? (Agencies?)

If you hadn’t decided to dance for a living, what do you think you would have done instead?

Could you please explain what The Penthouse was like when you first started working there and what you imagine it to be like now? How do you think things have changed over time? (What was the audience like?)

When you were working at The Penthouse did you find there was an obvious preference in dancer ‘types’ and do you think that has changed at all over the years?

When you were working at The Penthouse what were the fines for dancer lateness etc., if any? (Was there a minimum number of customers required before a dancer could go on-stage? Who was responsible for promotion?)

Can you please tell me what area of town you lived in when you were dancing?

When you were at work, was there ever any discussion of the closure and trial in the mid-1970s? If so, what sense did you get of this time?

What do you think about the current burlesque revival (neo-burlesque)?

How would you define feminism (there are no wrong answers)?

Do you think burlesque and other kinds of erotic dancing have any relationship to feminism? Can you explain your answer?
What is your relationship to feminism?

Do you think there is a social stigma attached to erotic dancing and if so, can you comment on if general attitudes have changed over time?

What do you think the risks, if any, for dancers are?

What was security like at The Penthouse?

What was your sense of the popular notion that clubs are associated with organized crime?

When you were dancing did you notice any organizing or advocacy started by other dancers, or yourself- this may have been related to working conditions or other things? Can you tell me the names or any organizations or groups if there were any?

How has dancing influenced you as a person? What do you think would be different about you if you didn’t dance, if anything?

What was your favourite music to dance to?

Is there anything you would like to add about your experience at The Penthouse or the way dancers are portrayed in society at large?

What racial group to you consider yourself to be a part of?

How would you classify your ethnicity?

What do you identify your sexual orientation as?

Could you please tell me which of the following age groups you fit into: 19-21; 22-30; 31-45; 46-56; 57-64; or 65+
For other employees at The Penthouse:

When did you start working at The Penthouse and how did you end up there?
(Can you describe your decision to start working at The Penthouse, what other kinds of work had you done?)

If you hadn’t worked at The Penthouse what do you think you would have done instead?

Could you please explain to me what The Penthouse was like when you first started working there and what you imagine it to be like now? How do you think it has changed over time? (What was the audience like?)

When you were working at The Penthouse did you find there was an obvious preference in dancer ‘types’ and do you think that has changed over the years?

When you were working at The Penthouse what were the fines for dancer lateness etc., if any? (Was there a minimum number of customers required before a dancer could go on-stage?)

Can you please tell me what area of town you lived in when you were working at The Penthouse?

What do you think about the current burlesque revival (neo-burlesque)?

How would you define feminist and how do you relate to it (there are no wrong answers)?

Do you think burlesque and other kinds of erotic dancing have any relationship to feminism? Can you explain your answer?

Were there any risks associated with your job?
Did you experience any stigma because you worked at an exotic nightclub?

What is your sense of the popular notion that clubs are associated with organized crime?

What was security like at The Penthouse?

During your time at The Penthouse did you notice any organizing or advocacy related to working conditions (this may been related to other clubs as well)?

Were there any organizations or groups?

Do you think anything would be different about you if you hadn't worked at The Penthouse?

Is there anything you would like to add about your experience at The Penthouse?

What racial group to you consider yourself to be a part of?

How would you classify your ethnicity?

What do you identify your sexual orientation as?

Could you please tell me which of the following age groups you fit into? 19-21; 22-30; 31-45; 46-56; 56-64; or 65+

For Danny Fillipone:

Why/how did you decide to take over management of The Penthouse?

If you hadn’t decided to work at The Penthouse what do you think you would have done instead?

Could you please explain what the club was like when you started working there and how things have changed, if they’re changed, over the years? (Have any of the
changes been related to legislation? What agency did the club book dancers with prior to Stripper Entertainment? What are the clientele at the club like?)

Could you please tell me about your family and your sense of your family’s legacy?

What do you think about the current burlesque revival (neo-burlesque) and how does it fit into the atmosphere of The Penthouse today?

How would you define feminist (there are no wrong answers)?

Do you see burlesque and other kinds of erotic dancing as having any relationship to feminism? Can you explain your answer?

Do you think there is a social stigma attached to erotic dancing?

What do you see the risks to the dancers as, if there are any?

Have you found that you have experiences any discrimination because of running an exotic nightclub like The Penthouse and has this changed over time?

Can you describe what it was like growing up during the trial?

How do you think your influence has shaped The Penthouse? Do you think the club would be the same place today under someone else’s management?

Is there anything you would like to add about your experiences at The Penthouse or the way it/exotic nightclubs are portrayed at large?

For Randy Knowlan:

Why and how did Stripper Entertainment get started?
When did Stripper Entertainment become the booking agency for The Penthouse and why, do you think, did they decide to go with you versus other more established agencies in Vancouver?

How do you see Stripper Entertainment fitting into the larger industry in Vancouver? (Both now and at its inception)

If you had not become an agent, what do you think you would have done instead?

What was The Penthouse like when you were first there in relation to what it I like now?

Do you have any stories about working with Danny and Ross over the years you wouldn't mind sharing?

Do you express any social stigma due to your involvement in erotic entertainment?

How do you think the presence of Stripper Entertainment has shaped the industry in Vancouver?

Is there anything you would like to add about your experiences of The Penthouse, or the industry in general?