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Erasure of urban detritus: Toronto's Sin Strip

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Abstract

In the decades that followed the Second World War, as suburban residential developments expanded and city centres became less desirable areas, these spaces entered periods of decline. While for many in the emerging middle class a single-family home was seen as desirable, the city centre remained a destination for artists and then societally repressed LGBTQ communities, populations unable or willing to take part in the twentieth-century exodus to the suburbs. This article explores an example of a red-light district that emerged during this time in the city of Toronto. Campaigns to clean up vice districts began as early as the late 1970s. Toronto is a noteworthy example, both for the swift eradication of adult entertainment businesses (massage parlours and adult film theatres) in 1977 and for the upstanding reputation the city cultivated in the twentieth century. LGBTQ communities became an adjacent target as part of this campaign in Toronto. Beyond the city's swift urban sanitisation efforts in 1977, larger-scale urban gentrification processes have continued since that time. Assimilation into dominant

North American societal norms is arguably impossible – and perhaps undesirable – for many artists and nightlife participants. With the gentrification and subsequent continued eradication processes of urban non-mainstream cultural spaces underway, artists and marginalised communities are inevitably less able to gather or intermingle, coexist and co-create in nocturnal venues when there is less physical space to do so. Furthermore, I argue that cultural creative potential was lost for marginalised artistic and LGBTQ communities with the eradication of Toronto's red-light district and rampant gentrification of the city.

Keywords urban development; twentieth-century history; gentrification; urban planning; red-light district; LGBTQ

Introduction

The 1977 transformation of Yonge Street at Dundas Street, a commercially significant intersection in Toronto, Canada, marks a turning point in the city's urban landscape. These shifts were the result of municipal responses to vice, powerful processes of twentieth-century gentrification and efforts to eradicate traces of the city's undesirable urban detritus. Toronto is Canada's largest city, both by population and by land area, and its urban identity took shape in the post-war decades as suburban residential developments expanded outwards from the city's core. Across North America broadly, following the Second World War, city centres' use began to shift, functioning as locations for commerce, entertainment and pleasure. Nightlife in this period was vibrant on Yonge Street, one of the city's main arterial routes, before a gradual shift in the 1970s that permitted the emergence of a small but significant multi-block section referred to as the Sin Strip. The Sin Strip became a pocket of flagrant sexual desire, the result of a concentration of businesses that offered entertainment and services. These businesses emerged amid the area's general downturn, despite simultaneous municipal efforts to reinvigorate Yonge Street. The period of Toronto's urban history explored here is marked by an event that led to a near-total eradication of the flagrant sexual culture of Yonge Street: the murder of a young boy. While often perceived as the event that spurred the clean-up of the Sin Strip, municipal decisions and political interference were well underway prior to this single tragic event. The complex role of vice in 1970s Toronto along with an exploration of rare documentation concerning the distinct characteristics of Toronto's Sin Strip in the now commercially developed area offer both a reflection on the city's cultural past and considerations for its urban future.

Vice in the urban context

Toronto is Canada's largest metropolitan area and has held this designation for most of the twentieth century. While the seat of Canadian federal government is the city of Ottawa, Toronto has remained the hub of finance, media and cultural production for English-speaking Canadians. As an artist and curator, I view histories of distinct moments and milieus of a city as critical to understanding cultural forces at large, at both local and national levels. This understanding must include the study of a range of artistic production created at key moments in time, the distinct contexts in which they were created and the built environments of these sites, such as Yonge Street in the 1970s. Furthermore, media produced during these key cultural moments, including mainstream print publications, newspapers and independent press coverage, is necessary when considering the broader socio-cultural narratives at play.

During research preparation for an exhibition in 2022 I discovered a visual record of the unique history of Yonge Street's vice district, the Sin Strip, in the early student films of renowned Canadian filmmakers Janis Cole and Holly Dale. I viewed the films *Cream Soda* (1975) and *Minimum Charge No Cover* (1976) privately with director Cole. At the time, these films were not distributed or accessible through any archive or online platform. Although I had previously reviewed archival material as well as literature on Toronto's urban history, particularly the social contexts of sexual and gender minority groups in the broader history of the city,¹ motion picture documentation like Cole and Dale's films remains exceptionally rare. Their footage is a visual record of the city streets at night, its participants illuminated

in Yonge Street's neon light. As I viewed this material, my awareness of Yonge Street's culture in the greater context of Toronto's twentieth-century history began to crystallise.

Certainly, a gritty city's nightlife culture and the presence of vice spur the imagination of many artists, writers and filmmakers. During my research, I reviewed arts publications that commented on Yonge Street activity, as well as the work of Toronto artists active in the 1970s. This included performance artist Margaret Dragu, celebrated Canadian artist trio General Idea (AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal), video artist Rodney Werden, photographer Raphael Bendahan and visual artist Robert Markle. Although this list is a small selection of artists working in Toronto during this time, within the creative output of each of them I discovered traces of involvement in the nocturnal culture found on Yonge Street in the 1970s.²

For much of the twentieth century in most large North American cities, a vice district could be found in the downtown core. In the twenty-first century, residential development has transformed the function and character of central urban environments, often through the construction of condominiums or residential towers. This form of gentrification has been particularly rampant in Toronto over the last 40 years. Analysis of this phenomenon, described as the impact of 'whitening the city' (referring to the displacement from the city centre of non-white residents) is analysed in scholar Zoe Newman's 2002 PhD thesis, which reflects on, at that time, 20 years of residential development prioritised at the expense of multiculturalism and the dynamic urban culture of Toronto.³ Beyond whitening the city through development and gentrification processes, local government's response to vice was heavy-handed. In the years following the 1977 crackdown on Toronto's Sin Strip, the visible presence of sex work was targeted, along with raids on sites for sexual activity frequented by gay and lesbian populations. This aggression from police and government therefore suggests a distinct facet of Toronto's identity – the city's efforts to control its residents' access to sexual pleasure.

Toronto in the twentieth century

In the decades following the Second World War, Toronto's growth sprawled outwards from its densely populated downtown core. The city expanded to suburban areas as highways and freeways offered connection to outlying communities.⁴ This growth followed a trend seen in many North American cities: an economic shift away from city centres as families sought detached homes, while freeway infrastructure and vehicle transportation were prioritised. Although referred to as Canada's New York City by many Canadians, Toronto does not share some of its key characteristics, most notably a high density based on limited landmass for the city's growth. Anchored to a massive lake, Toronto's growth sprawled outwards in three directions: west, north and east. Despite the large land mass that Toronto overtook, its central downtown business district remained the cultural heart of the city. Viewed in archival photographs and film records, throughout much of the twentieth century downtown Toronto remained lively, with heavy traffic and activity on the streets day and night. Although suburbanisation was rampant, the gritty city centre continued to draw populations seeking social networks in the city as opposed to the suburbs. This included queer individuals (referring here to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer individuals, abbreviated as LGBTQ, noting that this is contemporary language; in the 1970s this group had only just begun to self-identify as a community).

The 1970s were a dynamic period for the city's art and cultural scene. Noteworthy Toronto artists and art collectives rose to prominence during this time. Many Toronto artists, photographers, filmmakers and writers lived or worked in the vicinity of the Sin Strip. Woven throughout experimental artworks of the time are a commentary on its emerging sexual culture. General Idea presented a show in 1979 titled *Consenting Adults* at a Yonge Street gallery, while Robert Markle, a Toronto-based Indigenous artist, created neon strip lighting installation works inspired by the burlesque entertainers he favoured at Yonge Street establishments, including those he described in detail in his writing.⁵ Raphael Bendahan, a photographer and filmmaker, completed an in-depth photo essay documenting drag performers backstage at a gay after-hours club known as The Manatee in 1973. The powerful black-and-white photographs capture the entertainers preparing to step onstage, documenting a distinct facet of one of Yonge Street's underground subcultures. Video artist Rodney Werden's long-format works explored sexual desire through a minimalist approach, which presented to viewers the realities of those living in the Yonge Street milieu of the 1970s.

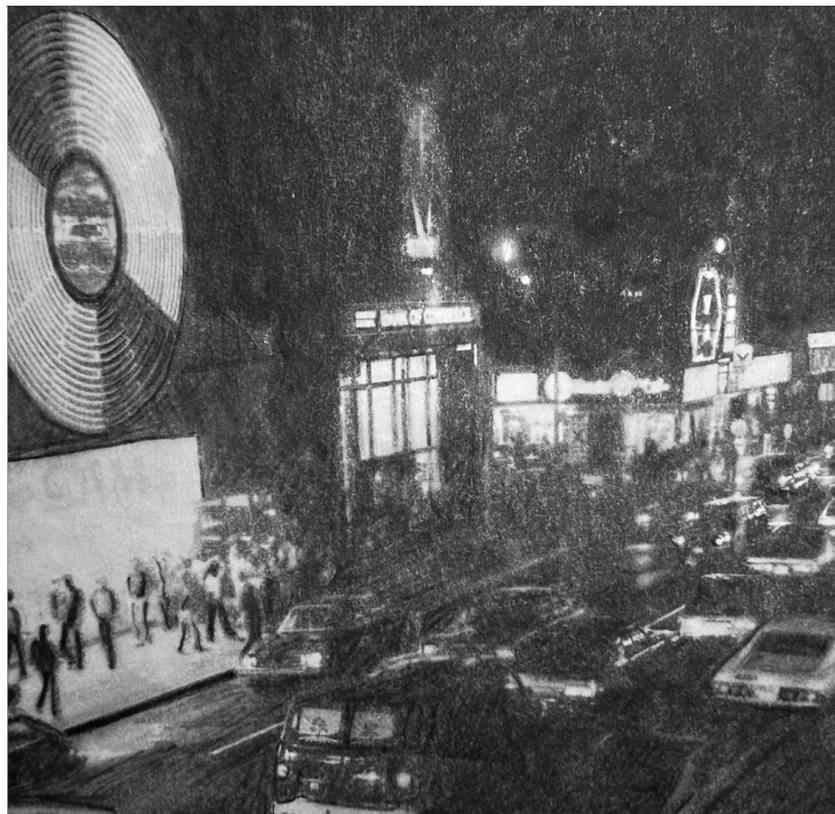
Throughout the twentieth century, Toronto retained a staid, conservative reputation, owing in part to the city's dominant socio-economic class and legal system, heavily influenced by British values.

The label 'Toronto the Good' remained in use, as it had since the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly when compared to Canada's second-largest metropolis, Montreal.⁶ That city was felt to have a wilder nightlife culture, which had flourished during US prohibition and remained vibrant throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The neighbourly, upstanding image of Toronto, however, was tarnished in the late 1970s with the expansion of a small but highly visible vice district around the prominent central intersection of Yonge Street at Dundas Street. Despite a municipal response that later resulted in the rapid dismantling of the city's Sin Strip in 1977, the brief chapter remains a key moment in the city's twentieth-century history. The few visual remnants that remain today, along with the near-total erasure of others, are both necessary for considering the city's cultural past.

Yonge Street nightlife

Yonge Street existed as a central north–south thoroughfare for decades and held significance as an identifier of Toronto. Mid-twentieth-century archival photographs of Yonge Street near Dundas show low-rise mixed-use brick façade buildings lining both sides of the street. Many of these buildings consisted of retail businesses at street level and large display windows, with smaller units used for storage or offices above. Prior to the emergence of the area referred to as the Sin Strip, much of Yonge Street between Dundas and Bloor Street, the city's major east–west thoroughfare that lies a few blocks to the north, had been a hub for late-night entertainment since the 1950s. The area included 24-hour restaurants, music venues and nightclubs. Pinball arcades, popular with youth, were found on Yonge Street, along with record stores and bookshops. Many renowned music venues – such as the Brown Derby, Le Coq d'Or and the Colonial Tavern – were all located within a three-block radius near Yonge and Dundas. American musical acts regularly performed in Toronto given the city's size, its proximity to the US border and appetite for live music. Yonge Street came alive during this time, as represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Yonge Street at night



North of the Yonge/Dundas intersection was the location of much of Toronto's underground queer nightlife both before and after the easing of the legal persecution of Canada's LGBTQ community that occurred in 1969.⁷ Although hidden, or known only to those within queer social networks at the time, many nightclubs and bars are recorded to have existed in the area. Well-documented examples include the St. Charles Tavern and the Parkside, both located on Yonge Street. The earliest recorded bar to offer drag entertainment on a weekly basis, the 511, was in the basement of a hotel located at 511 Yonge Street in the 1960s.⁸ Throughout the 1970s, nightclubs and late-night after-hours venues known to be frequented by the LGBTQ community were clustered a few blocks north at the intersections of Yonge at Isabella and St Joseph streets.⁹ The proximity of these venues meant that members of the LGBTQ community could visit many of them in a single night. Given that broader societal acceptance of queer communities was in its earliest stages, the association with Yonge Street as the site of nightlife, expression of identity and experimentation would have undoubtedly been known by many Toronto residents.

The Sin Strip

The visible presence of sex and sexuality plays a role in the urban cultural pulse of a city. Yet in the first quarter of the twenty-first century visible traces of vice in many gentrified North American urban centres have mostly disappeared. Prior to the immediate access to sexually explicit material via the internet, visible vice and a visual culture of available sex could be sought out in most major cities in North America. The examples I focus on are strip clubs, massage parlours and burlesque theatres, all of which were found on Toronto's Yonge Street Strip in the 1970s. Professor Deborah Brock's study on prostitution in Canada notes that cultural attitudes towards sex and sexuality in the 1960s evolved rapidly, owing in part to cultural shifts felt as a result of the post-war population increase.¹⁰ These shifts would be felt more broadly in the 1970s as the baby boom generation entered an age of emergent sexuality, with notions of free love and a previously unseen openness towards sexual experimentation.

Burlesque as a form of entertainment endured as a holdover of vaudeville entertainment in the post-war years. Toronto venues such as the Victory Theatre on Spadina Avenue and the Broadway Theatre on Queen Street both remained in business into the 1960s before closing in 1975 and 1965, respectively. These large venues featured a rotation of different performers and utilised theatrical lights and staging. Performers included comedians, dancers, live musicians and striptease artists. Onstage nudity during this time was prohibited, however, with mandatory flesh-toned pasties used to conceal nipples, along with the complex removal of costume layers while a required G-string remained in place, a practice enforced by Toronto morality patrols.¹¹ Over the course of the 1960s, small music venues on Yonge Street, including the Brass Rail and the Zanzibar as shown in Figure 2, gradually shifted towards topless dancers and later onstage nudity as their primary draw.

The development of Yonge Street's reputation as the Sin Strip occurred slowly over many years in the early 1970s. The first body-rub parlour, a licensed business that offered sexual service massage, opened on Yonge Street in 1972. By 1976, three blocks of Yonge Street between Dundas and Gerrard were dotted with massage parlours and small burlesque venues that featured striptease entertainers, accompanied by external neon signage and window posters clearly advertising the nature of the businesses.¹² The body-rub businesses occupied a unique category as a form of sex work, given that these were businesses licensed by the city. The Criminal Code of Canada did not at the time define prostitution as the transaction of exchanging money for sexual services when initiated by an individual offering their services.¹³ Laws targeting sex work instead focused on acts related to operating a business or establishment that enabled the exchange of money for sex through the enforcement of a common bawdy house law or through vagrancy laws that targeted individuals perceived to be loitering.¹⁴ The bawdy house law would penalise those caught with providing physical space for prostitution to occur, such as an individual with a leased or rented apartment to host clients, or those deemed to be operating a business or establishment that served as a brothel. The body-rub parlours along Yonge Street, while monitored and visited by police, were in a legal grey area as they were licensed by the city. Toronto's municipal government would have undoubtedly understood the nature of these businesses. While the expansion of body-rub parlours did not occur quickly, instead growing slowly in number over the course of approximately four years, this increase would have been known to municipal officials. In tandem with their emergence, within a short four-year span the city's burgeoning red-light district – by this time

referred to as the 'Sin Strip' – became the target of a campaign with a clear focus. The city sought to shut down sexual service businesses, in an attempt to eradicate the highly visible heart of Toronto's seedier side.¹⁵

Figure 2. The Zanzibar nightclub, 1978 (Source: City of Toronto Archives)



Murder of Emanuel Jaques

The history of Toronto's Yonge Street Strip in the 1970s and the rapid shutdown of sexual service businesses include a single event that fundamentally transformed feelings of safety within the city, far beyond the city centre. On 29 July 1977, a murder occurred in an unused space above one of the massage parlours on Yonge Street near Dundas Street, in the heart of the Sin Strip.¹⁶ The victim, a 12-year-old boy named Emanuel Jaques, the child of recently arrived Portuguese immigrants, was sexually assaulted and subsequently murdered by four men. Although the four assailants were immediately identified and arrested, the disturbing crime was linked broadly to homosexuality, at a time when gay and lesbian groups in Toronto were at an early stage in their public demands for equal civil rights.¹⁷ The police and municipal response to the murder, as well as extensive media coverage of both the crime and details of the trial, immediately impacted both LGBTQ and sex-worker communities in Toronto. A moral panic about Yonge Street's flagrant sexual culture emerged in the local press and the neighbourly city of Toronto's sense of ease that had existed before the boy's widely publicised murder was now altered. Within months, most of the body-rub parlours were shut down. This occurred through a dramatic increase in city licensing fees, which made it impossible for businesses to remain open. According to media records, the general climate within the milieu was transformed by the murder. Many who lived and worked in the area recognised that their livelihoods would be impacted.¹⁸

Police behaviour towards queer communities in Toronto was also harsh following the murder of Emanuel Jaques and interactions between the two remained contentious for years. The first of two high-profile raids of a gay bathhouse named the Barracks occurred in 1978 and the second took place in 1981 amid obscenity charges brought against the Toronto-based gay rights publication *The Body Politic*.¹⁹ Extensive local media coverage of the 1977 murder of Emanuel Jaques linked the event to unregulated vice, which had seemed, according to interviewees in local newspapers, to have spread

unchecked. Public animosity was easily fuelled by the city's apparent lack of action as the number of massage parlours and strip venues had grown throughout the 1970s.²⁰ The volume of media coverage focused on the event, along with numerous details included in reports of the crime, readily fanned the flames of crusaders who sought to raze the Sin Strip to the ground. While the murder continues to be cited as the main cause of the municipal government's swift eradication of the Sin Strip, the existence of a detailed 1977 report, *Report and Recommendations of the Special Committee on Places of Amusement*, completed in the months prior to the Jaques murder, is rarely mentioned.²¹ The murder would, however, be inextricably linked to the Sin Strip and to the city's efforts to erase the highly visible and – in the eyes of many residents – undesirable urban detritus.

Repercussions from the event continued to unfold for years afterwards; once massage parlours closed, many sex workers relocated to work on city streets instead, in conditions recognised at the time to be more dangerous.²² From that point on and throughout the 1980s, street-level prostitution in both Toronto and in many Canadian cities continued to be targeted in various ways. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the circumstances of each city, but this is worth noting as a critical area for future additional research.

Life in the red-light district

Non-academic perspectives are necessary in considering the role and cultural value of visible vice within a city, particularly the perspectives of those with intimate knowledge of the culture and social dynamics that can exist in urban centres. A richly detailed first-hand account of the social milieu of both Montreal and Toronto's red-light districts is performance artist Margaret Dragu's co-authored 1989 publication *Revelations: Essays on Striptease and Sexuality*. In a 2023 interview, Dragu explained that through her 1970s' dual involvement in the worlds of striptease and performance art she sought to bring 'Yonge Street to the art gallery and the art gallery to the [Yonge Street] strip club'.²³ Dragu's essay collection records a detailed reflection on her participation in the Canadian striptease scene of the 1970s. In it she contrasts working conditions in Montreal and Toronto, as well as describing the social dynamics found backstage among performers and employees in Yonge Street venues.

Although not records of Toronto history, additional autobiographical writing on the topic includes the work *Branded T* by Times Square peep-show performer Rosalynne Blumenstein, as well as the writing of Samuel R. Delany in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, published in 1999, and Bruce Benderson, *Toward the New Degeneracy*, published in 1997. Delany and Benderson each recount their observations of the interactions among residents and visitors to New York City's Times Square in the 1990s, as well as their experiences with male sex workers. Blumenstein's memoir revisits her years in New York's Times Square during the 1980s and her negotiation of performance in peep shows as a form of sex work that facilitated her survival as a transgender woman. Each of these authors shares their perspectives as sexual entertainment labourers while peeling back the layered social dynamics they each navigated. The close relationships and deep bonds between fellow entertainers are mentioned throughout each of these pieces of writing, all told from autobiographical perspectives that are less often considered in academic writing on the lives of those rooted in red-light districts.

The scholarly writing of Phil Hubbard, longtime researcher of urban geographies of prostitution, and Marilyn Papayanis's work on New York's closure of Times Square theatres and peep shows offer discourse around the regulated and unregulated commercialisation of sex in major cities. The cross-cultural and inter-class contact detailed by each of these writers, along with the social fabric woven within these intimate interactions, are argued to be valuable and necessary to a city's function. The aggressive actions of Toronto municipal government to eradicate its Sin Strip were therefore telling. By seeking to stamp out visible vice in the city, Toronto's municipal government revealed an attempt to take control of the city's sexual appetite. While recorded histories of Toronto rarely focus on the Sin Strip, I argue that, despite this omission, the area itself and the culture that existed there remain a noteworthy moment in the city's past. The attempts to dismantle this culture speak to the conservatism engrained in the very design of the city's centre.

Visible presence of urban vice

Over the course of the twentieth century, many North American cities sought to eradicate unsanctioned red-light districts within their city centres. New York aggressively targeted Times Square pornographic theatres and peep shows in the 1990s, while in San Francisco ongoing attempts to gentrify the city's Tenderloin district have continued into the twenty-first century.²⁴ Vancouver's clean-up of a prostitution hub near Davie Street, historically a residential area located in a picturesque part of the city's downtown, occurred in the years prior to the 1986 World Expo.²⁵ As a result of the clean-up, prostitutes were forced to relocate to isolated areas outside Vancouver's central business district.²⁶ Montreal, a city with a long-standing reputation as wild and sexually liberated, has sought in recent years to rebrand the city's former red-light district as the Quartier des Spectacles, an open-air plaza with arts pavilions and pedestrian walkways.²⁷ The very presence of a vice district in a city, particularly street-level prostitution and the visible advertisement of sexual services, was noted by Papayanis to reflect an 'unwelcome image of our own cultural detritus', threatening a city's fundamental notion of its own civility.²⁸

In each of the above examples, the cities mentioned utilised processes of redevelopment, gentrification or neighbourhood intervention. At present, in many of these cities, street prostitution, strip clubs and massage parlours have been almost entirely swept from sight.²⁹ This is not to overlook that a small number remain – in each major Canadian city at least one long-standing strip club remains in its original location: Vancouver's The Penthouse, Toronto's Zanzibar and Montreal's Café Cléopatra. Given that each of these nightclubs is now surrounded by condominium towers and rampant redevelopment, however, their future survival is likely at risk.

It is unsurprising that, for a city referred to as 'Toronto the Good', the process to eliminate the visible presence of vice, sin and flagrant sexuality was swift. As stated by Hubbard, moral panics manifest as a public anxiety which target a population 'seen to undermine national values, whether from within or without'.³⁰ A single event, the murder of a child, fuelled this moral panic in Toronto, with the highly visible vice district an easy, clear target.

In researching this series of events and the history of the area, first-hand visual records of those that lived and worked in the Sin Strip remain rare. The previously mentioned short films co-directed by Janis Cole and Holly Dale are important exceptions. *Cream Soda* and *Minimum Charge No Cover* each include footage of Yonge Street shot between 1975 and 1976. They provide invaluable documentation, highlighting personal perspectives of individuals who lived and worked in the area at the time, interviewed on-camera by the two young women directors. The first of the pair's two films, *Cream Soda*, offers an intimate perspective of the interior of a body-rub parlour in the Yonge Street vicinity, as well as interviews with a handful of women who worked there, filmed in their dressing area with the business owner's permission. *Minimum Charge No Cover* takes a broader look at the lives of Yonge Street residents, as shown in Figure 3, which includes two of the women featured in *Cream Soda*, as well as a group of drag entertainers' preparation for a performance inside one of the nightclubs. The footage of Yonge Street at night, filmed from the second-storey window of a business located on the Sin Strip, is captivating.

The two films are shot with a palpable, intimate connection between the filmmakers and their subjects. Camaraderie and closeness are evident among the women, which was only possible because of the filmmakers' involvement in the milieu themselves. As with the writing of Delany and Benderson, the clear depth of these relationships is key in these works. Cole and Dale's films are accounts far removed from academic theorising or sterile interviews conducted by writers or researchers unfamiliar with these social networks. Viewed with this understanding, the films animate the culture of Yonge Street in the late 1970s, both the bawdy and the banal. The social contact, at times even the redundant nature of the interactions between workers and clients reflect an unpretentiousness towards sex and sexuality. As emphasised by Delany, this type of 'relaxed sexual atmosphere' is indeed necessary for a truly metropolitan city.³¹ The actions of the municipal government against the culture of Yonge Street can therefore be seen as an attempted act of suppression.

A symbolic remnant of the area's deleterious past was the Warwick Hotel, a crumbling relic demolished in 1980. In 2023, I accessed a personal collection of ephemera and press clippings that had belonged to a longtime drag entertainer at the Warwick Hotel named Brandy, which were held at Canada's LGBTQ archive, The ArQuives, located in Toronto. In a 1980 printed interview held in the collection, Brandy spoke about the sadness and loss of a community that would occur with the

destruction of the hotel, as the striptease entertainers and other longtime hotel residents were soon to be forced out by the closure.³² This type of establishment, a basement dive bar with live music, ageing striptease performers and a seasoned drag entertainer emceeing the nightly entertainment, had become a relic of Yonge Street's past.

Figure 3. still from *Minimum Charge No Cover* (1976)



I do not intend to dismiss the harsh reality that crime was a component of the Sin Strip or that many in the area participated in the sex industry involuntarily. In unregulated, black-market economies there is an increased likelihood of exploitation, abuse and violence.³³ Evidence of these harmful elements of life on the Sin Strip are detailed in the *Report and Recommendations of the Special Committee on Places of Amusement*, prepared by the Toronto municipal government in 1977.³⁴ Of particular concern at the time was evidence that American pimps had begun to intervene in the business of Yonge Street, which the report noted had the potential to create additional unrest. However, the area itself could not be solely to blame. Women interviewed in the report described frequent police harassment, as well as physical and sexual violence enacted by police officers.

Any attempt to defend the vice district's cultural significance amid evidence of the gruesome murder that occurred on Toronto's Yonge Street Strip in 1977 would be contentious. In the decades since the murder of Emanuel Jaques, Canadian media has rarely revisited the event and, when it has, has focused on the symbolic scar left on the city.³⁵ Scholarship on the subject, meanwhile, has included consideration of the broader impacts of gentrification on Yonge Street, including economic considerations, particularly shifts caused by commercial and residential developments in the city centre. The historic culture of the street, however, with live music, entertainment and sexual energy, is overlooked.

Gentrification of Yonge Street

The intersection of Yonge and Dundas has yet to be rejuvenated in the ways municipal politicians envisioned in the years that followed 1977. An independent 1980 newsprint publication titled *The Downtowner* included an illustration of a proposed future redevelopment for the Yonge/Dundas intersection with green spaces and trees dotting the street. This proposal was never realised and to date Yonge Street at Dundas remains a commercial hub built around a central open-air concrete plaza. Along with the forceful closure of street-level sexual service businesses in 1977 following the murder of Emanuel Jaques, a transformative event for the area that year was the opening of the Eaton Centre, a large indoor shopping centre, shown in Figure 4. Sociologist Evelyn Ruppert's detailed exploration of the moral economy of cities explores the consequences of the Eaton Centre's arrival on the Yonge Street corridor.³⁶ As pedestrian traffic was directed indoors to the shopping centre, commerce was

further redirected away from street-level businesses along Yonge Street. In 1977, the brief, raunchy era of Toronto's Sin Strip was abruptly finished.

Figure 4. Eaton Centre, 1977 (Source: City of Toronto Archives)



Yonge Street's sexual culture was not entirely eradicated. A small number of strip clubs outside the Sin Strip area continued to operate into the 1980s and 1990s, although this type of adult entertainment establishment is now rare. In 2024, two remnants of the Yonge Street Sin Strip, the Zanzibar and the Brass Rail Strip clubs, remain in operation. The Zanzibar has resisted demolition and remained in the same location for 75 years. Its marquee and neon-lit front signage are still illuminated; however, it is now overshadowed by a mammoth glass-and-steel structure belonging to the Toronto Metropolitan University campus located nearby, as shown in Figure 5. Perhaps most starkly, the stretch of Yonge Street between Dundas and Gerrard, the location of the former Sin Strip, has been in another phase of redevelopment since 2024. Yet vast sections of street-level retail remain vacant, while the culture of the street itself is grim and characterless.

Conclusion

The twentieth-century evolution of Toronto's Yonge Street at the Dundas Street intersection marked a dramatic shift. As this writing has shown, the city's response to the presence of vice, processes of gentrification and efforts to eradicate visible traces of the culture that existed there were powerful. Through researching the work of artists that resided in Yonge Street as an entry point, I engaged with the history of the Sin Strip from the perspective of those that participated in its culture. While scholarly and theoretical viewpoints offered a broader vantage, it was through this viewing that the significance of Yonge Street in the scope of Toronto history came into focus. For artists, the area offered inspiration, opportunities for experimentation and connection to a vital underground energy. The importance of

Yonge Street as an early hub for LGBTQ individuals to socialise in nightclubs and bars, given that in the 1970s there was not yet broad societal acceptance, is a component of the area's history which has disappeared. These spaces were of vital importance for early community development. While I have articulated the socio-cultural challenges that existed in the area, the area's significance is clear in both the autobiographical writing of participants in the milieu and the scholarly research.

Figure 5. The Zanzibar nightclub, 2024



The chronology of events that led to the transformation of Yonge Street has been noted as a distinct facet of the area's history. While the murder of Emanuel Jaques remains a mark on the city and carries a disturbing association with Yonge Street, as I have described, despite media reports of the time, the isolated event did not singularly lead to the dismantling of the Sin Strip. Additional factors included the city of Toronto's efforts and the detailed municipal report on the presence of street-level vice on Yonge Street, as well as the arrival of a shopping centre, each of which shaped the street's transformation. The impacts on sex workers and the LGBTQ community of Toronto, due to the transformation, continued for many years. Despite the city's attempts to erase the unsightly characteristics of Yonge Street, the brief existence of the Sin Strip remains a significant moment in the city's twentieth-century cultural history.

Notes

- ¹ Chambers et al., *Any Other Way*; Benson, *Then and Now*.
- ² Monk and York University Art Gallery, *Is Toronto Burning?*, 13–15.
- ³ Newman, 'Whitening the inner city', 40–2.

- 4 Soloman, *Toronto Sprawls*.
- 5 Callaghan, *This Ain't No Healing Town*, 151–6.
- 6 Clark, *Of Toronto the Good*.
- 7 Chambers, 'Pierre Elliott Trudeau and Bill C-150', 261–2.
- 8 Herbert, *Writing in the Sand*.
- 9 Benson, *Then and Now*, 110–12.
- 10 Brock, *Making Work*.
- 11 Mann, *Underside of Toronto*, 322–32.
- 12 Bell et al., *Good Girls*, 93–6.
- 13 Statistics Canada, *Crimes Related to the Sex Trade*.
- 14 Brock, *Making Work*.
- 15 Hill, 'Strip is dying but girls are lively', 1.
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Research ethics statement

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Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

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