

Ravishing Vancouver Circa 1948: Life Writing and the Immersive Translation of Noir Aesthetics

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Volume 11, Number 3, 2020

Visibility and Translation
Visibilité et traduction

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077039ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.VT.11.3.3>

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Publisher(s)

York University

ISSN

1918-8439 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Ingram, S. (2020). Ravishing Vancouver Circa 1948: Life Writing and the Immersive Translation of Noir Aesthetics. *Imaginations*, 11(3), 33-78.
<https://doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.VT.11.3.3>

Article abstract

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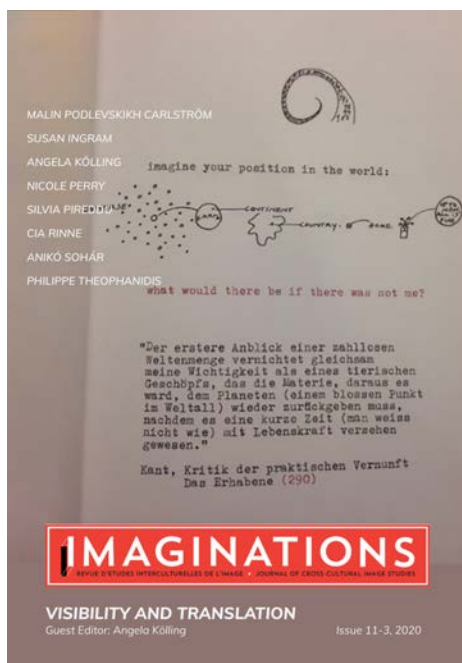
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IMAGINATIONS:
JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE
L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy
and instructions for contributors:
<http://imaginations.glendon.yorku.ca>

Visibility and Translation
Guest Editor: Angela Kölling
December 31, 2020

Image Credit:
Cia Rinne, *Das Erhabene* (2011)

To cite this article:

Ingram, Susan. "Ravishing Vancouver Circa 1948: Life Writing and the Immersive Translation of Noir Aesthetics." *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3, Dec. 2020, pp. 33-78, doi: 10.17742/IMAGE.VT.11.3.3.

To link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.VT.11.3.3>



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RAVISHING VANCOUVER CIRCA 1948: LIFE WRITING AND THE IMMERSIVE TRANSLATION OF NOIR AESTHETICS

SUSAN INGRAM

*This article takes its cues from autobiography scholar Marlene Kadar's expansive, archivally focused feminist approach to life writing in its examination of two exemplars of visual culture: Ivan Sayers and Claus Jahnke's *From Rationing to Ravishing: The Transformation of Women's Fashion in the 1940s & 1950s* exhibition and Stan Douglas's innovatively staged *Helen Lawrence and its sister project, Circa 1948*. It illuminates both works biographically, exploring their creators' relation to Vancouver to better understand the resurgence of noir in Vancouver circa 2014 as a form of translation intended to make historical lessons about crime and corruption visible for those willing to see them.*

*Cet article s'inspire de la vaste étude féministe de la biographie concentrée sur les archives, menée par la spécialiste de l'autobiographie, Marlene Kadar, pour examiner deux exemples de culture visuelle: l'exposition *From Rationing to Ravishing: The Transformation of Women's Fashion in the 1940s & 1950s* d'Ivan Sayers et Claus Jahnke ainsi que la représentation innovatrice de Stan Douglas, *Helen Lawrence*, et son projet frère, *Circa 1948*, l'application et l'installation interactive. Il illustre les deux oeuvres de façon biographique en explorant la relation de leurs auteurs avec Vancouver afin de mieux comprendre la résurgence du roman noir à Vancouver autour de 2014 comme une forme de traduction destinée à créer des leçons d'histoire sur le crime et la corruption visibles à ceux qui acceptent de les voir.*

From September 17, 2014 to March 8, 2015, the Museum of Vancouver played host to an exhibition that staged the city's transformation in the immediate post-WWII years as it went from a war-based economy to a burgeoning consumer society. Based on the collection of guest curators Ivan Sayers and Claus Jahnke,

From Rationing to Ravishing: The Transformation of Women's Fashion in the 1940s & 1950s featured 85 garments plus accessories and traced how the female experience in Vancouver went from one of coping with austerity to showing off the availability of conspicuously sumptuous clothing to their best advantage. Earlier that spring, on March 19, 2014, vaunted Vancouver visual artist Stan Douglas had made his theatrical debut in the city with the world première of *Helen Lawrence*, an innovative merging of theatre, visual art, live-action filming, and computer-generated imagery that he created in close collaboration with acclaimed screenwriter Chris Haddock, best known for *Da Vinci's Inquest*. The cinematically enhanced staging of a cliché noir story set in two representative areas of Vancouver—the crime-ridden Hogan's Alley and the toney Hotel Vancouver—was a sister project of the interactive app and installation, *Circa 1948*, which Douglas co-produced with the NFB. Both *Helen Lawrence* and *Circa 1948* quickly made their imprint nationally and internationally.¹

I had the good fortune to be able to experience both Sayers and Jahnke's exhibition and a performance of Douglas's theatrical creation in person, as I also did the "Lives Outside the Lines: Gender and Genre in the Americas" International Auto/Biography Association conference held to honour Marlene Kadar in May 2017.² Kadar's work was instrumental in expanding the concept of life writing to encompass critical practices, beginning with her pathbreaking 1992 edited collection *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*. In Kadar's conception, life writing "is meant to be a way to see what has been overlooked and to bear witness to that, to understand the activity of bringing a life into view through a text" (Rak 542). It "honors both what people do when they tell, sing, dance, perform, paint, or write their lives and how we might understand the significance of those acts" (Warley 535). As Linda Warley underscored in her touching tribute, "Life writing matters, not only to those who tell their personal stories, but also to those who engage with them" (535). Engaging with Sayers, Jahnke, and Douglas as Kadarian writers enables me to show how they were able to find an adequate aesthetic style to critique Vancouver's globalizing image.

Like Pamela Beattie, Simona Bertacco, and Tatjana Soldat-Jaffe's special issue on "Declining Translation," my contribution does not belong in Translation Studies proper, but rather to "translation plus": "translation, that is, plus an academic discipline or a translational practice that situates its meaning" (Beattie et al. 1). This approach to translation helps me "explore the relationship between memory and meaning in a variety of texts and contexts across great [and also not so great] historical divides" (Beattie et al. 5). Linking Kadar's expansive, archivally focused approach to life writing with fashion and urbanity allows me to literally show how *From Rationing to Ravishing* and *Helen Lawrence/Circa 1948* worked to provide the boutique metropolis that Vancouver has become with a backstory that draws attention to the lines of gender, class, and race that continue to mark the city's imaginary. Turning a spotlight on their creators' biographies, which I do in the first two sections of the paper, adds to our understanding of the significance of crossing and the need to cross these lines, the implications of which form the paper's final section. Looking biographically at Douglas's multimedia sensorium through the lens of Sayers and Jahnke's exhibition reveals the historical materiality inherent in visuality and adds complexity and historical texture to our understanding of the concept of Vancouver.

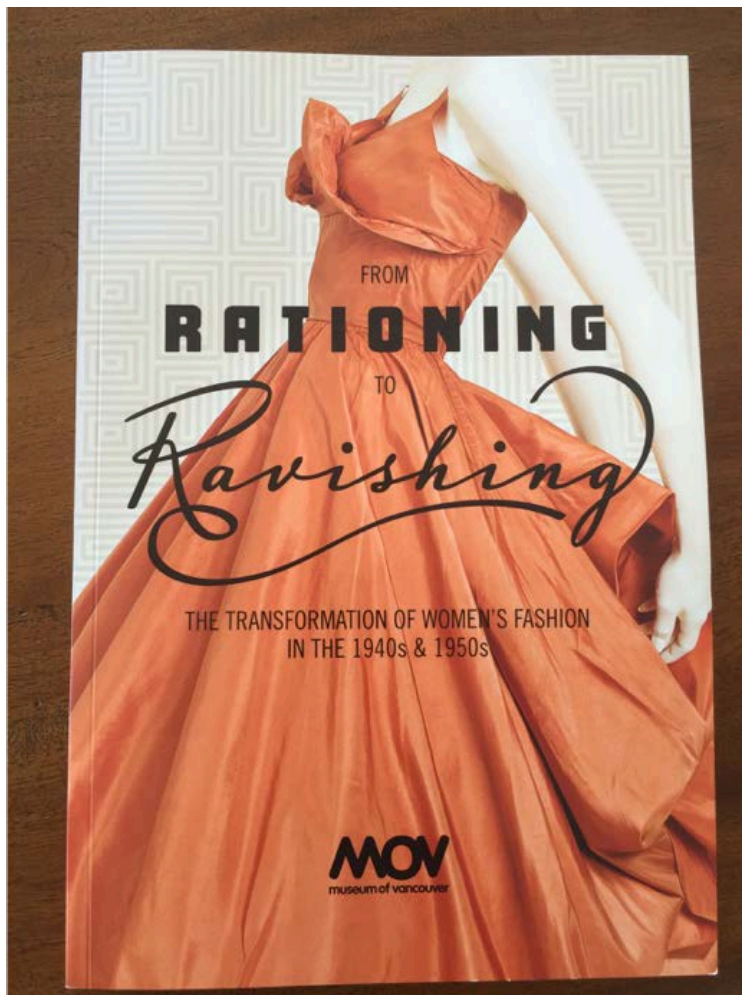


Fig. 1: The From Rationing to Ravishing catalogue



Fig. 2: Helen Lawrence promotional image



Fig. 3: Circa 1948 promotional material

SAYERS, JAHNKE, AND THE EXHIBITING OF THE PAST

From Rationing to Ravishing was designed to show how clothing reflected the major changes in women's lives brought about by the blip of WWII, when women "went from being mothers and homemakers to factory workers, farmers, and defenders of the home front" and then back to being "mothers and homemakers once more" but with a new self-confidence on the basis of that wartime experience (Fig. 4). The museumgoer was shown an example of pre-war femininity (Fig. 5), followed by daytime and evening attire from 1939-1946 (Fig. 6 & 7), then from 1947 to 1955 (Fig. 8 & 9), and finally, as the show's climax, daytime and evening from 1955 to 1959 (Figs. 10 & 11).



Fig. 4: Entry to *From Rationing to Ravishing* (photo: S. Ingram)



Fig. 5: Pre-War Femininity – 1930s (photo: S. Ingram)



Fig. 6: 1939-1946 daytime (photo: S. Ingram)



Fig. 7: 1939-1946 evening (photo: S. Ingram)



Fig. 8: 1947-1955 daytime (photo: S. Ingram)



Fig. 9: 1947-1955 evening (photo: S. Ingram)



Fig. 10: 1955-1959 daytime (photo: S. Ingram)



Fig. 11: 1955-1959 evening (photo: S. Ingram)

The space for the 1955-1959 attire was much larger, brighter, and more glittery than what one might call the war room, which featured a wedding dress made out of a parachute, among other creative treasures (Figs. 12, 13, 14).



Fig. 12: the 1955-1959 space (photo: S. Ingram)



Fig. 13: war bride grouping (photo: S. Ingram)

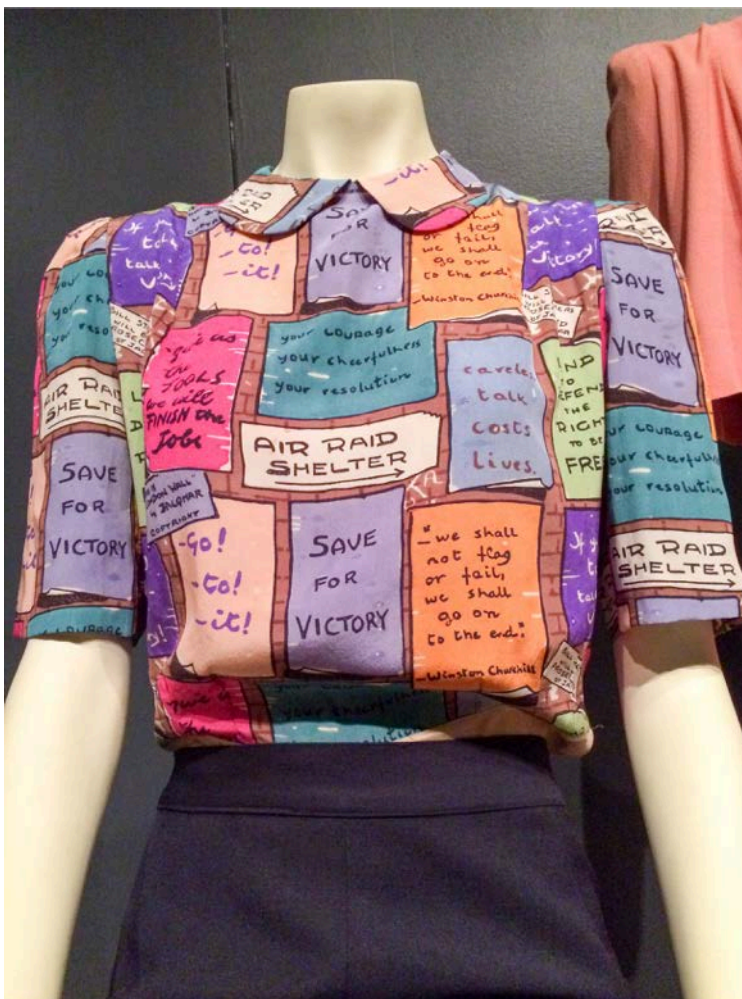


Fig. 14 war blouse (photo: S. Ingram)

These treasures came from the collections of Sayers and Jahnke, who together and separately have been responsible for many, if not most of the historical fashion events and exhibitions held in Vancouver over the past decades (Figs. 15 & 16).



Fig. 15: Jahnke & Sayers preparing cover dress 1



Fig. 16: Jahnke & Sayers preparing cover dress 2

Indeed, Sayers has curated dozens of fashion shows documenting historical trends; his website (<http://www.ivansayersevents.com>),

which has been up and running since August 3, 2016, documents his prodigious activity (Fig. 17).

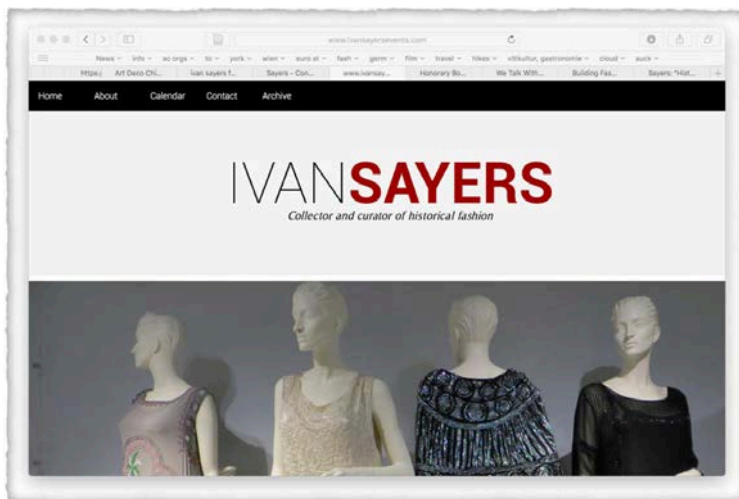


Fig. 17: screengrab of Ivan Sayers's homepage

Who are Sayers and Jahnke, and what traces of them can one find in the archive that is the Internet? In reconstructing their biographical portraits, I followed Kadar's methodology and remained cognizant of the need to proceed cautiously in piecing together the various fragments I found. The amount of biographical material available online surprised me, as did how much it informs both Canadian Fashion Studies and Urban Studies.

Sayers was born in 1946 and came to Vancouver in the 1960s from Summerland in the Okanagan, which he describes as "a very small town with 1,200–1,500 people" (Gheorghiu). His mother worked as the secretary for the Inspector for the Department of Agriculture for the Okanagan Valley and "made a lot of her own dresses," while his father was "a labouring man for the most part...; he worked for the railroad, he worked for the highway," but he also played in a band so "always had a tuxedo" (Gheorghiu). Sayers "started collecting odds and sods at age 13" (Long). He recollects his childhood with fond-

ness in the interviews that people have conducted with him over the years:

Living with his family in Toronto for a year, [he] attended the children's educational programs at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) every Saturday before reluctantly relocating back to the Okanagan. "There was nothing like it in Summerland," he recalls, "so I decided I would start my own ROM in the garage. I made little labels for old things I collected—toys, blacksmith equipment, pocket watches, bits and pieces of china." (Long)

In another interview, he explains how he was "acting in high-school plays and started scouring thrift stores for genuine costumes," and goes on to note, "I think you perform better if you think that you look the part" (Templeton-Kluit).

Sayers started collecting fashion in Summerland with "a black nursing matron's dress, dating from 1931—bought at a hospital thrift store in Summerland for five cents" and claims that his career "started from that purchase" (Templeton-Kluit). His collecting assumed larger proportions when he moved to Vancouver in 1965 to study classical archeology at UBC (his first abode was a rooming house in Kitsilano, where his rent was \$8 per week) (Gheorghiu). He started to collect clothing "because no one was interested in it, so it was a way for me to deal with history in a way that didn't compete with anyone else." His first item was a Victorian dress, which "he bought at the Salvation Army on 12th Avenue" (Long). As he tells it, "I would charm the old gals who worked at the Sally Ann—Gret and Ethel. They would hide items for me up in the attic, for when I'd come in. I'd walk out of there with giant bags of 'old-fashioned items,' all for a dollar. Sometimes I'd even spend my bus fare, and then have to carry it all home" (Long). After graduating from UBC in 1969 with a BA in Classical Studies, Sayers "began volunteering in 1970 at the Centennial Museum (now the Museum of Vancouver), unpacking and cataloguing their costume collection—something that hadn't properly been done since the museum moved from Carnegie Centre to Vanier Park in 1968. Volunteer work led to employment, and within six years he was promoted to curator of history," a position he held

for fourteen years (Long; see also “Ivan Sayers” and “Honorary Board Members”). After a “philosophical difference” with the Board, he resigned in 1991 (Templeton-Kluit), and the following year helped to found what is now the Society for the Museum of Original Costume with the goal of one day housing his and others’ collections in “a permanent museum of historic fashion and fabric arts” for residents of and visitors to the city of Vancouver (“Home”). That goal remains unfulfilled. The Society, however, is very active in promoting the historical study of fashion in Vancouver, hosting live fashion shows, talks on topical subjects, benefit events for the community, and even tours, all led by Sayers. At the same time, he also teaches in the Simon Fraser Continuing Studies program, mostly summer courses for seniors that draw on material from exhibitions and, like his talks, aim to be timely (Figs. 18-25).



Fig. 18: Vancouver Island Museums Overnight Tour poster

The Society for the Museum of Original Costume Presents:

A Century of Fashion in Vancouver

Costume Historian Ivan Sayers explores the changing fashion-scape of Vancouver throughout the decades.

Featuring a live fashion show of historic and vintage clothing and accessories

DELIGHTFULLY BECOMING SILK DRESSES

Tickets: www.SMOC.ca
For info: ranav@shaw.ca
\$22 Non-Members
\$20 Members
\$10 Students

Sunday, April 24th 2016
Location: Hycroft
1489 McRae Ave.
Vancouver
Doors Open: 1pm
Presentation: 2pm - 4pm

SMOC

...perience-always in season at Eaton

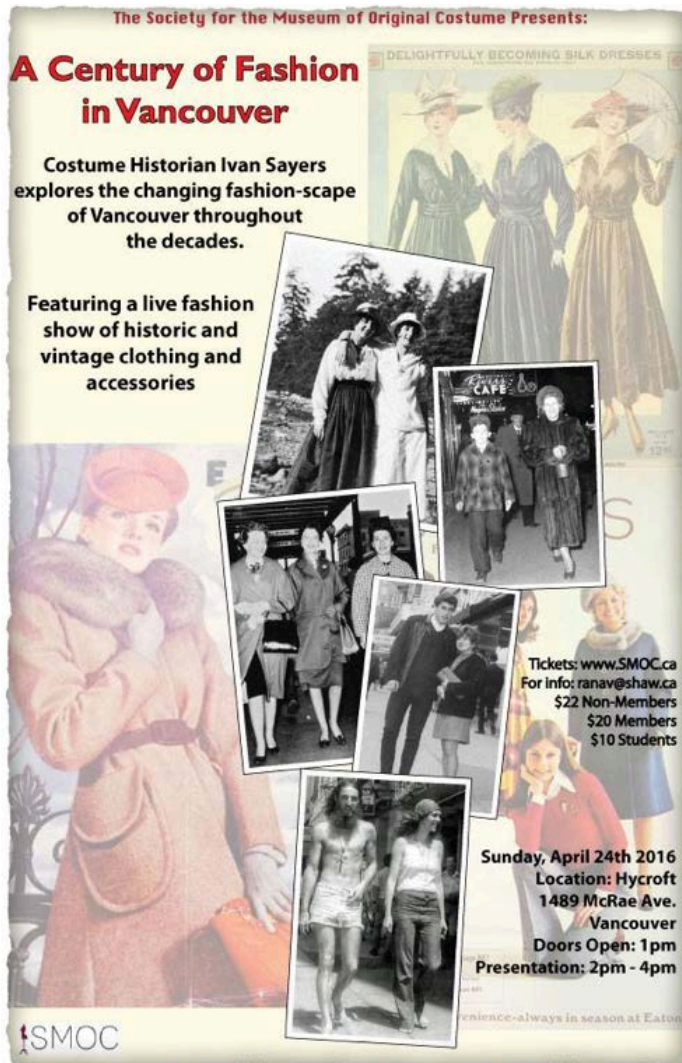



Fig. 19: A Century of Fashion in Vancouver poster.

The Society for the Museum of Original Costume Presents:

FÊTE NOIR - LITTLE BLACK DRESS

Costume historian Ivan Sayers showcases every well-dressed lady's best friend:
The Little Black Dress

A live fashion show of historic clothing and accessories
highlights the LBD throughout the decades.



Sunday October 30th, 2016
Doors Open 1pm
Lecture 2pm - 4pm

Students: \$10
Members: \$20
Non-Members: \$25

Location: Hycroft Ballroom, Hycroft House
1489 McRae Ave. Vancouver

Tickets Online: www.smoc.ca
Further Info: info@smoc.ca


 SMOC SOCIETY FOR THE MUSEUM OF ORIGINAL COSTUME

Fig. 20: Fête Noir – Little Black Dress poster

Society for the Museum of Original Costume Presents

Hearts & Flowers

A History of Romance in Fashion

From the Live Model Lecture Series
with Ivan Sayers

Sunday, February 17
2-4pm

Doors Open at 1
Hycroft, 1489 McRae
Vancouver

Tickets: SMOC.CA
Members: \$20
Non-Members: \$22
Students: \$10



Ca812973642

 Society for the Museum of Original Costume
Love Fashion? Join Us! www.smoc.ca

 @OCMS
 SMOC

Fig. 21: Hearts & Flowers: A History of Romance in Fashion poster

Society for the Museum of Original Costume Presents

The Wearing o' the Green:

Uncovering the Irish Influence in Fashion

From the Live Model Lecture Series with IVAN SAYERS

SUNDAY, MARCH 17
2 - 4pm

Doors at 1pm
Hycroft, 1489 McRae
Vancouver

TICKETS: WWW.SMOC.CA
\$28 Members
\$22 Non-Members
\$18 Students



 Society for the Museum of Original Costume
 @OCMS  SMOC

Fig. 22: The Wearing o' the Green: Uncovering the Irish Influence in Fashion poster



Fig. 23: "Wet-Coast Rainwear" poster

SMOC Society for the Museum of Original Costume

SILENT AUCTION

**\$100
Gift Certificate**

A days shopping at the Salvation Army
with Costume Historian Ivan Sayers

Learn how to spot a fantastic piece of clothing at the Salvation Army
with an true expert of 50 years, Ivan Sayers!

A 50/50 Fundraiser
for the Salvation Army and the
Society for the Museum of Original Costume



Fig. 24: Silent Auction poster

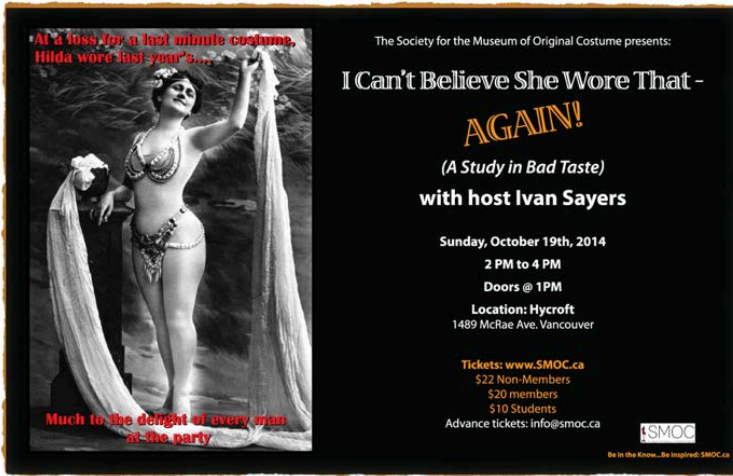


Fig. 25 I Can't Believe She Wore That – Again! poster

The comprehensive nature of Sayers’s collection, which is recognized as one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of historical clothing in Canada, and his power and influence as a collector have affected the shape of other collections, such as that of Jahnke, who was born in 1962 in Edmonton and came to Vancouver in 1981 to study fashion merchandising at John Casablanca College of Design (“Authentication”). Like Sayers, Jahnke “was drawn to the historical significance of all types of vintage clothing. However, he was forced to tweak his niche once he met Sayers: “I realized that he had this enormous collection,’ recalls Jahnke. ‘So I thought in order to not compete with him, I would have to collect something completely obscure, so I started collecting just fashionable clothing from Germany and Austria” (Rowland). This collection debuted in 1999 in the groundbreaking exhibition *Broken Threads: The Destruction of the Jewish Fashion Industry in Germany and Austria*, which Jahnke curated in partnership with the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre and the Original Costume Museum Society. Berg published an expanded version of the catalogue in 2006 (Kremer). (Figs. 26 & 27).

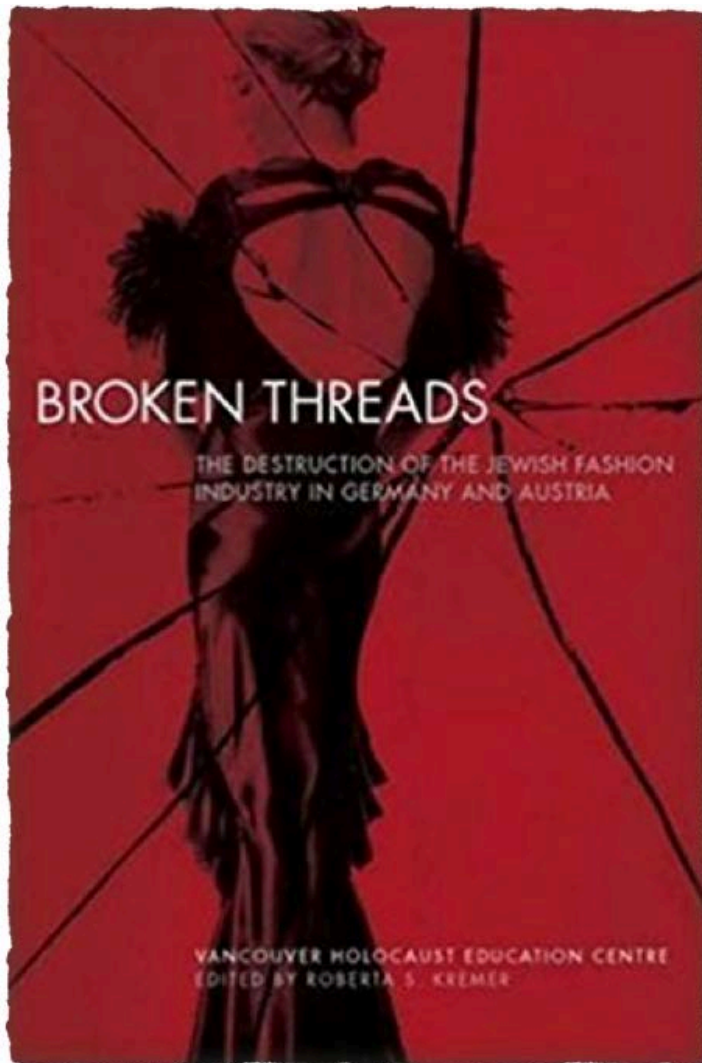


Fig. 26: cover of the Broken Threads catalogue



Fig. 27 Jahnke lecturing at the 2nd annual Canadian Fashion Symposium, Museum of Vancouver, Nov. 14, 2015 (photo: K. Sark)

Jahnke also lectures, although not as extensively as Sayers, and is as recognized a part of Vancouver’s cultural scene as Sayers. Jahnke and items from his collection were the subject of conceptual photographer Jeff Wall’s 2010 *Authentication: Claus Jahnke, costume historian, examining a document relating to an item in his collection*, which has been displayed internationally in various orders. In the piece, Wall juxtaposes images of the collector in his apartment checking “the authenticity of a white cotton shirt in his collection by comparing it to a reproduction in an antiquarian catalogue of the Jewish department store Nathan Israel” with three other images: “the cover of a 1932 winter season N. Israel-catalogue with Leni Riefenstahl in an alpine outfit on the cover,” a close-up of the catalogue open to the page “illustrating what [Jahnke] presumes is the shirt in his collection, in the second row from the top, second from the left,” and an image of the shirt itself (Stone). It might seem odd that a men’s white shirt should be such a valuable collector’s item, but Jahnke underscored that the one in the photograph “still has the label N-Israel on it, a particularly valuable asset as it shows the item’s origin” (Stone). Moreover, as

Jahnke explained to Wall, “men’s shirts are rare as collector’s items; they used to be worn until they were threadbare, or too old to keep, often then they were reused as rags” (Stone) (Figs. 28-30).



Fig. 28: Authentication: Claus Jahnke, costume historian, examining a document relating to an item in his collection 1 (<http://www.thegeorgeeconomoucollection.com/exhibitions/jeff-wall>)



Fig. 29: Authentication: Claus Jahnke, costume historian, examining a document relating to an item in his collection 2



Fig. 30: Authentication: Claus Jahnke, costume historian, examining a document relating to an item in his collection 3 (<https://dailyartfair.com/events/article/575/jeff-wall-marian-goodman-gallery>)

Jahnke's work determining the shirt's provenance as part of the Berlin fashion industry that was destroyed by the Nazis shows the way fashion collectors' work can imbricate their locality with world historical events, making available not only items, but the histories they embody. That is certainly true of the three major exhibitions Sayers and Jahnke have curated together: *Women's Fashion of La Belle Époque* from September 2006 to March 2007, *Art Deco Chic* from March to September 2012, and *From Rationing to Ravishing* from September 2014 to March 2015. In each case the lived effects of a period of pivotal social change were made palpable for the Museum of Vancouver's visitors.

That there is a catalogue for the latter exhibition is a tremendous development, as there are only scant traces of the first two exhibitions, especially *La Belle Époque* (Murrills). The Curator Biographies at the back of the *From Rationing to Ravishing* catalogue reveal some additional information to what I was able to discover online. In the case of Jahnke, the catalogue reveals that he was "brought up in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia," which provides a valuable

clue about how he and Sayers may first have met or what may have solidified their connection in Vancouver (*From Rationing to Ravishing*). Sayers's biography is more startling. It claims that he "was born in Cornwall, Ontario, and moved to British Columbia at the age of two" (*From Rationing to Ravishing*). From the online material I found, I had been under the impression that Sayers was from Summerland and had accompanied his parents on a move to Ontario; however, that move seems to have been a return.

What does this biographical material add to our understanding of Sayers and Jahnke's exhibitions? In the first instance, it gives us better insight into the process of their cooperation. Sayers's prodigious activity lecturing and teaching in addition to collecting underscores the pedagogical impulse that generates the concept for each exhibition. Sayers knows his audience. They come to his events and classes as well as his exhibitions. They are like "the old gals... [he charmed] at the Sally Ann—Gret and Ethel," who would put away clothes for him. In fact, Gret and Ethel could be their mothers or grandmothers (as "old gals" they would have been in at least their 50s or 60s in the 1960s). Sayers in many ways owes his collection to this constituency. He is the first to admit that his best pieces have come "from older women who have held on to something because of its sentimental value. It might have been their mother's or their grandmother's. Sometimes I think they are giving it to me so they can pass on the responsibility of caring for it!" (Long).

DOUGLAS AND THE DREDGING UP OF THE PAST



Fig. 31: still from *Helen Lawrence*

Turning now to Stan Douglas's efforts to expand our understanding of live theatre, it is striking that we meet up once again with the same type of period immersion. The actors in *Helen Lawrence* appear as though outfitted from the *From Rationing to Ravishing* exhibition (Fig. 31). As the title of his first comprehensive show *Stan Douglas: Past Imperfect* (held at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart and the Württembergischer Kunstverein from September 15, 2007 to January 6, 2008) indicates, Douglas's art is characterized by a revisiting of past events and previous works, notably E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann*, *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, Karl Marx's *Capital*, Samuel Beckett's *Film*, and Arnold Schönberg's *Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene*.

The ambiguity of *Past Imperfect* gestures towards Douglas's interest in failed utopias, which is also on display in his projects on Detroit and Cuba, but what is not captured by this ambiguity is his immaculate attention to period detail. His restaging of the Gastown riot of 1971 in *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971* (2009), for example, "involved more than 100 actors portraying riot police, hippies and Mounted Police":

Douglas and a team delved into the history of this infamous incident with an eye to showing it through a new and unlikely perspective, recreating the event with as much historical accuracy and verisimilitude as possible in a photograph enacted on set with actors dressed in period costume. The set was erected with meticulous attention in a parking lot of the Pacific National Exhibition (PNE) in the spring of 2008, and includes details gathered from primary records and through interviews conducted with living participants—police, bystanders and protesters—directly involved in the riot. The set, including a recreated façade of the Woodward’s building, was stocked with detailed period accents, including facsimiles of posters advertising rock concerts on in Vancouver at the time of the riot, and such things as watermelon rinds littering the concrete, that according to testimony, people were eating on the day. (“Stan Douglas, Abbott & Cordova”)

Douglas’s long-standing interest in the social and political contexts of art can be seen in *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art* (1991), which he took the lead in editing, and in *Hors-champs*, which he created during his stay at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris the following year. The latter work, “which has come to be revered in the art-film world, depicts a jazz performance he staged and filmed in a Paris television studio, invoking the rich jazz tradition forged by expatriate African-Americans in France. The musicians play ‘Spirits Rejoice,’ the 1965 composition by the free-jazz pioneer Albert Ayler, written after race-related riots in Harlem and other urban neighborhoods” (Kennedy).

Helen Lawrence and *Circa 1948* were not Douglas’s first treatments of the immediate postwar period. In *Midcentury Studio* (2011), he “assumed the role of a fictional, anonymous photographer to create a series of images hypothetically produced between 1945-1951” and “constructed a veritable ‘midcentury studio’ using authentic equipment as well as actors to produce carefully staged, black-and-white photographs that painstakingly emulate the period’s obsession with drama, ‘caught-in-the-moment’ crime-scenes, curious and exotic artifacts, magicians, fashion, dance, gambling, and technology” (“Press

Release”). As one interviewer remarked of “Cricket Pitch, 1951,” which was photographed in 2010 and “purports to be a traditional vintage print,” Douglas’s technique of combining multiple shots with digital technology “makes Photoshop look like amateur hour” (Fargo).

Despite this palpable interest in history, Douglas, who was born in Vancouver on October 11, 1960, is not forthcoming about his own history. He “dislikes questions about his own biography” (Kennedy), and there are very few images of him online (Fig. 32).



Fig. 32: one of the few online images of Stan Douglas (<https://news.artnet.com/market/stan-douglas-at-tribeca-film-festival-12965>)

An African-Canadian whose “father was a neurologist, and his mother an administrator” (Kennedy), Douglas grew up near UBC and went to Lord Byng Secondary “with the children of professors and bike-gang members” (Lederman). He studied printmaking and sculpture at the city’s storied Emily Carr University of Art and Design in 1982 and embarked on what became a highly successful career as a visual artist. His online CV, which lists solo exhibitions, selected group exhibitions, special projects and exhibitions, monographs and solo exhibition catalogues, selected books and group exhibition catalogues, essays and published texts, lectures, bibliography, awards and public collections, totaled 36 single-spaced pages in 2016 (“Stan Douglas CV”), something Marsha Lederman mentions in the piece she wrote

on the occasion of Douglas's being awarded the "prestigious and lucrative Hasselblad Award" (Lederman).

Douglas claims to have been drawn to Vancouver's immediate post-war period on account of the historical entanglements of race and class in this transitional time that have tended to go forgotten. As he stated in an interview for *The Guardian*: "We know what wartime is like. We know what the 50s are like—the nuclear family, the sudden call to order and morality. But we don't really understand the interim period, from 1945 to 1950. How did society go from one to the other? And what decisions were made to change society? I was interested in that liminal period, as I always am in my work" (Farago). However, given that one of the principal settings of *Helen Lawrence and Circa 1948* is Hogan's Alley, "a Vancouver neighborhood that was home to a sizable black population for several decades and was demolished in the 1970s in preparation for a highway that was never built" (Kennedy), one cannot help but think that the history of the setting was more important to Douglas than the time period itself (for a reading of how Hogan's Alley also figures in Wayde Compton's 2014 *The Outer Harbour*, see Ingram).

One cannot help but wonder whether Douglas's attention to this liminal period was raised by its absence in the Museum of Vancouver's permanent collection. The build-up to WWII and the war itself are given full representation in a section on "Boom, Bust and War: Vancouver in the 1920s-1940s" (Fig. 33). We indeed learn what wartime was like, especially for "Canadians of Japanese descent—the Nikkei," who "built a thriving community" in "Vibrant Powell Street," but after the bombing of Pearl Harbor "were stripped of their possessions and sent to internment."



Fig. 33: "Boom, Bust and War: Vancouver in the 1920s-1940s" (photo: S. Ingram)

After this, the museumgoer then follows a technicolour arrow and leaves the stark colours of that part of the exhibition and crosses a hallway, where the neon signs of "Downtown: The 1950s" beckon, enveloping the museumgoer in postwar prosperity (Figs. 34 & 35). The transition is abrupt and presented as miraculous. How the city suddenly became a lively, happening place with cabarets like the Smilin' Buddha, cinemas showing films like *Forbidden Planet* (1956, dir. Fred M. Wilcox), jukeboxes, fast cars, and street photographers who "captured countless people out enjoying the magic and excitement of downtown," seems not to matter as much as the fact that it did suddenly transform.



Fig. 34: Dolled up for Downtown (photo: S. Ingram)

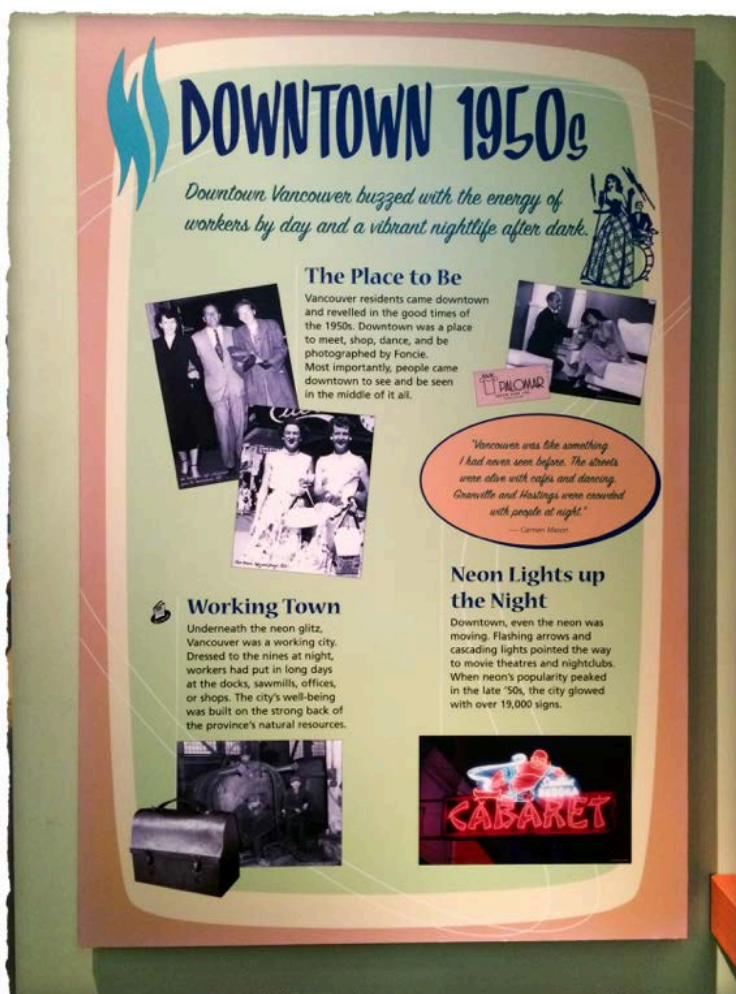


Fig. 35 Downtown 1950s (photo: S. Ingram)

Helen Lawrence helps to fill the gap by telling the story of the eponymous beautiful blonde, who is committed to a psychiatric institution after her husband is murdered and who arrives back in Vancouver from Los Angeles in search of a former lover, who is involved in all

sorts of shady deals and manages to stay one step ahead of her. If one searches online for Helen Lawrence, one is directed to the 1935 film *Murder in Harlem*, in which the small role of “Helen Lawrence” is played by Helen Davis. *Murder in Harlem* is one of the 40-some films written, directed, and independently produced by Oscar Micheaux, the first major African-American feature filmmaker, and it is typical of Micheaux’s oeuvre in being “an exuberant bricolage that drew upon whatever personal experiences and storylines he felt would amount to a compelling narrative compatible with his views about the place and conduct of blacks in America” (Bernstein 8). In *Murder in Harlem*, “a black night watchman at a chemical factory finds the body of a murdered white woman. After he reports it, he finds himself accused of the murder,” but a white man is subsequently found to be responsible (“*Murder in Harlem*”). A remake of Micheaux’s silent *The Gunsaulus Mystery* (1921), which was inspired by the “Mary Phagan/Leo Frank case of 1913 to 1915, in which a Southern black factory sweeper provided the crucial evidence which found his Jewish superintendent guilty of—and eventually lynched for—the murder of a Southern, white, teenage, female employee” (Bernstein 8), *Murder in Harlem* also drew on another sensational Atlanta trial: the murder of Dorothy Stanfield, whose body was discovered by a black watchman (Green 177). Micheaux revisited this material in novel form in his 1946 *The Story of Dorothy Stanfield*.

I relate this history because Douglas’s approach would have us believe that he wanted someone to dig it up just as he does in his extensive researching, just as “*Murder in Harlem...* shares with other Micheaux films its suggestion, through its repeated and sometimes contradictory flashbacks, that uncovering ‘what really happened’ requires persistence and intelligence to see beyond white ‘truths’ printed in newspapers or offered in trial testimony” (Bernstein 18). This digging up of the past is precisely the mechanism that provides noir with its narrative drive (Fig. 36). Noir is about revealing that which is intended to stay hidden, which goes some way to explaining how it has now resurfaced in Vancouver aesthetics.

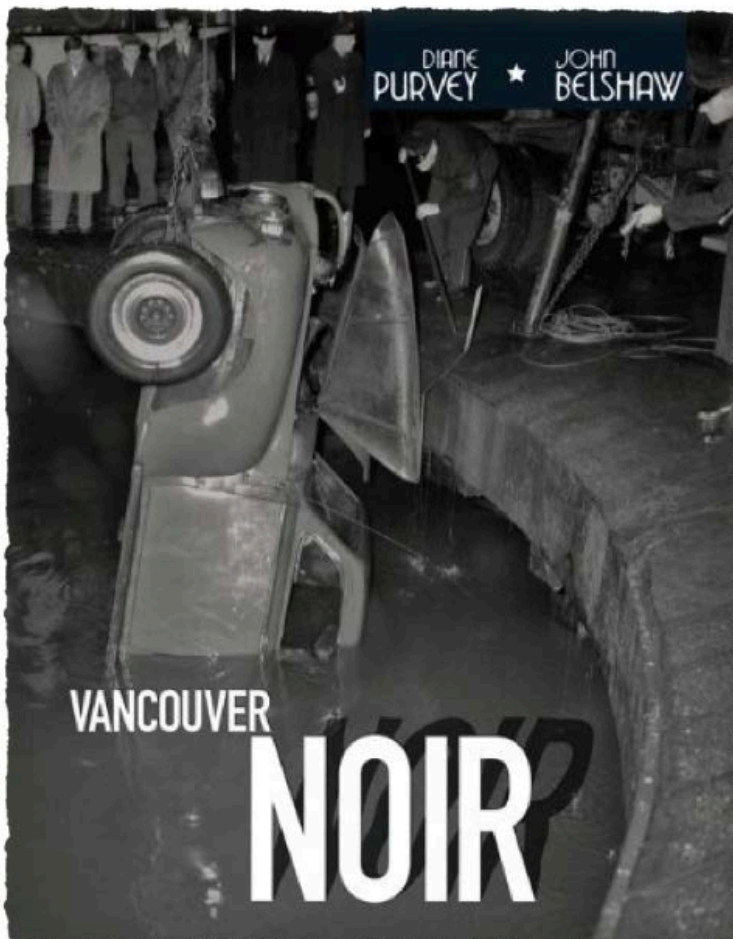


Fig. 36: cover of Vancouver Noir

Noir is the sign of a desire for disclosure, a desire for the kind of rough justice that is capable of tackling issues of corruption, when not only the police are seen as incapable of maintaining order but the law itself is seen to be in need of policing. In many ways, noir is the ultimate modern genre, an epistemic sign that time is out of joint and

society is not just in the midst of disturbing changes, but in need of a cathartic change capable of dealing with entrenched criminality.

WHY VANCOUVER NOIR CIRCA 2014

Douglas's evoking of the immediate postwar period takes on further significance when one considers how nicely it meshes with both Jahnke's collecting interests and those of Sayers's aging audiences, some of whom could have fond childhood memories of the period (Sayers, one remembers, was born in 1946, so it is not inconceivable that a good portion of his audience is of a similar, if not older, generation). Harkening back to the glamour of the immediate postwar period and the attention it calls to the underbelly of the city's history provides a longer narrative in which to situate the changes Vancouver has been undergoing since Sir Li Ka-shing bought up False Creek following Expo '86, unleashing the form of mixed-use, vertical urban density now known as "Vancouverism," bringing waves of first Hong Kong and now mainland Chinese immigration to the city, and driving up property prices well beyond its see-through skyline (Coup-land).

The hedonistic, conspicuous approach to fashion consumption that marks the latest wave of immigrants can be found in the popular reality TV show *Ultra Rich Asian Girls*, which ran for two seasons in 2014 and 2015 (Fig. 37 & 38). To quote from a review of it in the Hong Kong newspaper *South China Morning Post*, the show "features a group of pretty, Putonghua-speaking women guzzling champagne, zooming around in Lamborghinis and spending money like there's no tomorrow. 'As long as we have fun, who cares about spending a little bit of money,' opines 'Crystal Chen,' in between catty remarks about a fellow diva's nose job" (Young).



Fig. 37: Ultra Rich Asian Girls at <www.hbictv.com>



Fig. 38: a screengrab from *Ultra Rich Asian Girls*

The stylistic contrast between the crass opulence of the *Ultra Rich Asian Girls*, on the one hand, and the elegant glamour of *Helen Lawrence* and of Sayers and Jahnke's exhibitions, on the other, could not be starker. As much as Vancouver likes to imagine itself as the warm and fuzzy, teal-coloured, fleece-wearing place that Douglas Coupland playfully depicts in *City of Glass*, and as much as the city

begs to be associated with environmentalism (see Eidse et al.), local cultural practitioners have their fingers on the pulse of the cultural battles lurking beneath the city's postcard surface.

Indeed, once one makes the connection between Douglas's multimedia work and Sayers and Jahnke's exhibition and begins to dig into the topic, it quickly becomes clear that both are part of something larger. Something about Vancouver and its immediate post-WWII look seems to have encouraged it to leap tiger-like into our immediate past. It would seem that Vancouver has been having what one might call "a noir moment." Interest in Vancouver's immediate post-war period that emerged circa 2014 includes the *Vancouver Confidential* anthology, which appeared in 2014 and is based on *Vancouver Noir*, John Belshaw's earlier 2011 collaboration with Diane Purvey. The publisher describes the latter history as arguing that, "Noir-era values and perspectives are to be found in the *photographic record* of the city in this era, specifically in police and newspaper pictures," which "document changing values by emphasizing behaviours and sites that were increasingly viewed as deviant by the community's elite" ("*Vancouver Noir*," emphasis mine). An example of Vancouver noir published in 2014 is Sam Wiebe's *Last of the Independents*, which was inspired "in part by a quote from a Raymond Chandler essay, *The Simple Art of Murder*, in which he writes about the difficulty of 'how to make a living and stay fairly honest'" (Sherlock). One of the story strands of the first season of *The Romeo Section*, a television series created and written by Douglas collaborator Chris Haddock, which debuted on CBC in 2015, features a noirish murder in which an inconvenient husband is done away with, a theme already rehearsed in *Married Life* (2007, dir. Ira Sachs), with its intricate plot of cheating, murder-bent spouses set in 1949. Indeed, 2007 has already received credit as the year in which interest in Vancouver noir became visible:

The high level of public interest probably began in 2007 with Daniel Francis's award-winning biography *LD: Mayor Lewis Taylor and the Rise of Vancouver*. Taylor is in a way the key to the whole story because he was a wide-open-town sort of mayor and served nine terms, with himself, the police, and the underworld in one another's pockets. His nemesis was

the two-term right-wing mayor Gerry McGeer, infamous for standing in Victory Square during the Depression and literally reading the Riot Act to the unemployed. (Fetherling)

In confronting us with uncomfortable realities that are natively clad to underscore their seductive qualities, this resurgence of noir in Vancouver requires reckoning with. Why do so many noir plots deal with the violent consequences of marital infidelity? Perhaps because that theme resonates with our nagging sense of being cheated on. Vancouver may have acquired a veneer of global respectability with its boutique status. Its see-through skyline may make it look all dolled up, but as Lance Berelowitz notes in *Dream City*, “if Vancouverites really want to scare themselves, they look at Los Angeles” (Berelowitz 228). In his chapter on “Hollywood North,” Berelowitz enumerates “the historical, social, political and economic” as well as “topographical, geological and ecological similarities between Vancouver and Los Angeles,” noting that “[t]he disparities of wealth that immigrant cities manifest are on full display” in both cities and “mirrored in the aesthetic ethos of both cities” (233, 231).

Noir aesthetics seem to be filling a gap in the city’s history by importing a cautionary tale from its big sister to the south and thus providing a cautionary, modern backstory for the boutique metropolis Vancouver has become. Whether interacting with the *Circa 1948* app or reacting to the larger images projected onto the enormous scrim that covered the expanse of the stage in the case of *Helen Lawrence*, one is transported to the past in the same way one is while walking through the *From Rationing to Ravishing* exhibition. Both are temporary experiences and experienced as such, with that experience now echoed in the virtual forms in which they continue to live on. The pasts in both cases are conjured in a fleeting way, creating the effect that the pasts had been rescued from the debris of history for the short period of time that the viewer could share physical space with them.

Sayers’s and Jahkne’s collecting and curating work keeps alive memories of a Europe whose fashions no longer stand for the aristocratic and bourgeois conspicuous consumption they originally did, but

rather for a lost world of elegance, sophistication, and learning, the boundaries and limitations of which Douglas's hard-hitting tale of racial erasure encourages us to reflect on. Taken together, Sayers's and Jahnke's interest in things classical, from archeology to roped-shoulder constructions, and Douglas's interest in things local, from lighting to gauze, help us to appreciate the struggle their work is engaged in, and to appreciate how much work still needs to be done to translate across the lines of gender, class, and race in Vancouver to prevent them from becoming further entrenched.

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NOTES

1. *Helen Lawrence* was at the Festival TransAmériques in Montreal from May 22 to 24, 2014, at the Munich Kammerspiele in Germany from June 18 to 27, and then at the Edinburgh International Festival in Scotland from August 24 to 26 before it returned to North America, first to Canadian Stage's Bluma Appel Theatre in Toronto, where it played from October 12 to November 1, and then it was off to the Brooklyn Art Museum in New York, and deSingel in Antwerp. The *Circa 1948* app was launched as part of the Tribeca Film Festival on April 22, 2014, where it was also on display. The installation then travelled back home to Vancouver, where it was displayed at both Simon Fraser's downtown and Surrey campuses (September 18 to October 16 and October 27 to November 13).¹
2. It is a privilege to dedicate this piece to Marlene Kadar and to thank Eva Karpinski and Ricia A. Chansky Sancinito for their extraordinary organizational efforts that made the IABA of the Americas symposium, where I presented much of the material that went into this paper, the memorably moving event that it was.²