

*Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*, by Clare Sears. Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2015. x, 202. \$79.95 US (cloth), \$22.95 US (paper).

In *Arresting Dress*, Clare Sears (San Francisco State University) introduces the 1863 San Francisco law against cross-dressing and examines its impact over the next four decades. Although the law, which made it a crime for a person to appear in public “in a dress not belonging to his or her sex,” prompted more than one hundred arrests, this still seems a pretty flimsy scaffolding upon which to create an entire book, even a volume as slim as this one (2). Sears, however, notes that San Francisco was hardly unique. Between 1848 and 1900 thirty-four cities in twenty-one states passed similar legislation. Moreover, she extends her study of cross-dressing beyond the courtroom to include newspaper scandals, freak-show and vaudeville performances, and commercial slumming expeditions to support her conclusion that cross-dressing and the prohibitions against it produced “new definitions of gender normality and abnormality that haunt us today,” and “impact the social meanings of city space, race, and citizenship” (3).

Although Sears is intent on contributing meaningfully to lesbian, gay, and transgender history, she resists the temptation to assume that all cross-dressers fit into one of those three categories. Nor does she jettison those who defy easy categorization, but uses transgressors (including feminist dress reformers and young women dressed as men to participate more easily in slumming tours) to expand and illustrate her points about the power and meanings of assumptions about binary sex and gender.

Sears’s first chapter, titled “Instant and Peculiar,” covers familiar territory in its discussion of single-sex dances in Gold Rush San Francisco, a community that was virtually all male. Her second chapter, “Against Good Morals,” details the legal efforts to ensure public decency as the city’s population grew, initiating municipal intervention into moral life through laws against cross-dressing as well as prostitution and gambling.

Sears is at her best when she is telling the fascinating stories of the various people who were arrested for cross-dressing, or whose experiences shed light on the practice. They provide what she calls “windows onto dominant ideologies, anxieties, and classifications of the time” (16). She is less successful in her efforts to subject various cross-dressers to something she calls “trans-ing analysis” and in other heavy-handed attempts at theory. These efforts feel like holdovers from the dissertation upon which this book was based. They overly complicate *Arresting Dress* and limit its audience.

This limitation is particularly unfortunate in view of the things that *Arresting Dress* does especially well. Sears deftly uses a variety of well-placed illustrations (newspaper clippings, political cartoons, posters, and

photographs) to explain and expand her arguments. She also, in a surprising twist in view of her emphasis on the prevalence of cross-dressing, successfully challenges the popular notion of frontier San Francisco as a “wide open” permissive town.

Moreover, although the law was reserved for public instances of cross dressing, Sears extracts from relatively thin evidence some important insights into private acts as well — in people’s homes and in commercial performances. She notes, for example, that by the 1870s, people arrested for cross-dressing on San Francisco streets could be jailed, but stage performances by female and male impersonators (sometimes billed as “illusionists”) were widely acclaimed. Her best chapter, “Indecent Exhibitions,” examines those performances as well as slumming tours that included Chinese theatre featuring all-male, cross-gender casts, concluding that such entertainment allowed audiences to react “with fascination and titillation, perhaps; with discomfort and disdain; but also with identification, attraction, and desire” (120).

Another strength is Sears’s coverage of the impact of cross-dressing laws on changing notions of governance, particularly in efforts to regulate prostitution and otherwise promote morality. Such concerns immediately incorporated strong racial and ethnic components as Chinese and Mexican women were disproportionately targeted. At times the ties Sears makes between wide-ranging discussions of prostitution, beggars, and various reforms of the social and political body seem far from her main subject matter, but Sears has a way of making the entire social and political milieu ultimately serve to support her assertion that the prohibition of cross-dressing was “concerned not only with gender transgressions but also with race, citizenship, and disease” (72).

Sears notes in her conclusion that the intense pressures to conform to nineteenth-century gender norms generated both fear and subterfuge, but also opposition and resistance that contested social and political boundaries. The national furor over the 2016 Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act (restricting students in North Carolina public schools to use only the bathrooms designated for the sex to which they were assigned at birth) reveals ongoing legal efforts to enforce long-standing notions of gender normativity, as well as continued challenges to such strictures.

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