River Town Brothel Culture: Sex Worker Mobility, Policing, and Agency 1870 to 1940

By

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For Taylor

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in between, you have been the person and home I can return to whenever the road got bumpy. You, my love, are my inspiration. I dedicate this dissertation to you.

Introduction

At the present time, wherever two or three clubwomen are gathered together the chief topic of conversation is 'soldiers and vampires.' It has been decreed that, while prostitution must go, the 'vampires' must be kept outside the pale. A most peculiar logic this and one which I am utterly unable to grasp—decrying a sin and yet condemning a fellow-woman to follow it for the term of her natural life.

'Surely, my dear,' said a noted club president to me recently—'surely you would not have us condone? If we forgive them and take them back again into decent society, where will the family be? What will become of our social fabric?'

'Madam,' I answered, 'where is the family now? If the present social fabric is only a moth-eaten piece of cloth, patched up on the under side where the patches will not show, then it is high time we began weaving a clean, strong, new fabric wherein the warp shall consist of the fittest we have and the woof be made up of the broken fragments of life.'[1]

Madeleine

In 1919, Madeleine, an unknown sex worker who authored her own autobiography, closed her tome with the above quotation. She notes the predominant focus of female reformers in the Progressive Era was a condemnation of sex work and a call for its eradication. In their worldview, reformers were "soldiers" for society, maintaining a social order fit for their understanding of "family." In this logic, sex workers—unless fully repented—signified "vampires," literally sucking away the lifeblood of society. This metaphor constructs sex workers as a threat to society and, most ominously, to the "family." Such a construction was not uncommon in the turn-of-the-twentieth century United States. Reformers and government officials often saw sex workers, particularly women of color and immigrant workers, as threats to the social order, luring white men into their brothels and infecting them with diseases that those same men would then bring back

[1] Anonymous, *Madeleine: An Autobiography* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004). 328-329.

into the private space of their home and family.[2] This discourse placed all of the blame on the sex worker, as did the reformers Madeleine describes. But Madeleine contests this reductive construction of sex workers and their positioning in the social order of the United States. Instead, she offers an alternative vision of reform in which the alleged dredges of society are not rendered invisible but instead serve as a tool to make society stronger through recognition of their existence. Throughout her autobiography, Madeleine uses her voice to consistently contest outsider constructions of sex workers—a contestation demonstrated by several sex workers in turn-of-the-century river towns. In this dissertation, I recognize sex workers as workers, analyzing their political voices, labor, and social positioning to uncover their historical and cultural significance to cities like Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City.

I argue that despite local and national reform efforts that drove the sex industry underground by the 1940s, workers of the river town red light districts left a lasting cultural imprint on Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City because the spaces they cultivated allowed for cross-sexual, cross-gender, cross-racial, and cross-class communities. Specifically, the river town sex industries both constituted and reproduced constructions of gender, sexuality, race, and class that were built into the literal layout of the industry, the labor of the industry, the product that was sold, and how it was policed. By carefully commercializing the private and navigating policing, workers in the sex industry upheld the divisions of the public and private in river town societies, maintaining the myth of a pure, heteronormative, white middle to upper class society. Through that labor, sex workers and madams carved out a

[2] See, for example, the works of Eithne Luibhéid, *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).; Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

space of belonging for themselves that allowed for greater economic success, mobility, and cross-cultural connections.

Between 1870 and 1940, the sex industries in Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City underwent vast legal and physical transformations. The legal status of the river town sex industries shifted between illegal and legal, depending on each city's reform efforts, economy, political regime, and degree of influence of national trends and laws. The liminal legal status of river town sex industries caused instability for the workers, particularly in Memphis and St. Louis. However, madams in each of these river towns gained stability in their work lives by centralizing red light districts beside sites of transportation, like rivers and railroads, and alongside growing African American communities that burgeoned due to the Great Migration.

In "River Town Brothel Culture," I analyze the shifting locations of red light districts, the legal status of sex workers, brothel culture, and social acceptance of sex workers in Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City. I reconstruct the social worlds of river town brothels in these cities between 1870 and 1940, using the sex industry as my lens. My dissertation expands the historiography on sex work to include a study of sex worker agency and labor in cities beyond the east and west coasts. Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City are underrepresented in the historiographic study of sex work, but as I demonstrate, are significant both because of their unique structures of the sex industry, their interconnections, and relationship to other Mississippi River towns, like New Orleans. Moreover, "River Town Brothel Culture" includes the period between 1870 and 1940 to capture the unique sex industries of Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City, particularly showing the power of Kansas City's sex industry to stave off reform.

To detail these economic and social worlds, I analyze material on sex worker lives that are not readily apparent in the archives, including census records, police records, reformatory records, pictures, maps, interviews, business cards, advertisements, and memoirs. I read across these sources—many produced by middle and upper class historical figures rather than sex workers themselves—to recover sex worker culture, agency, and oppression. Ultimately, by analyzing the labor, mediated agency, and cultural contributions of sex work, I find that in the selling of sex, the sex industry participated in complex articulations of race, class, gender, and sexuality and left a lasting cultural imprint on river towns.

In Chapter One, I explore the creation of a red light district in Memphis, Tennessee. Between 1870 and 1920, a sex industry emerged in Memphis that transitioned from dispersed to consolidated due to disease, natural disaster, and the business acumen of African American entrepreneurs. The sex industry consolidated near the river and alongside a growing African American entertainment district centered on Beale Street. This centralization allowed the industry to thrive apart from mainstream white society until reformers began policing the white madams and workers of Gayoso Avenue. By 1910, African Americans dominated the industry, having been disregarded by reformers, and carved out a space of temporary belonging for both sex workers and people of color in the interzone of Gayoso Avenue, Beale Street, and Memphis' riverfront.

In Chapter Two, I narrate the formation of the sex industry in St. Louis, Missouri. Like Memphis, St. Louis' industry grew up and around the Mississippi River, but the size of the industry and reasons for consolidation greatly differed from Memphis. Specifically, St. Louis was unique in that the government temporarily legalized sex work between 1870 and

1874. This legalization reshaped the industry, drawing in more workers and politicizing madams and sex workers alike. By the 1890s, the industry became increasingly diverse as it grew and African American madams dominated the business. These madams capitalized on white male consumption of sex work, navigating the anti-miscegenation laws of the period to deal in the intersecting forms of racial and sexual desires. St. Louis' industry also evolved with the growth of railroads and the Great Migration, moving to the African American Chestnut Valley neighborhood by the 1900s to avoid reforms and capitalize on the growing city. Like in Memphis, an interzone emerged of cross-cultural, racial, class, gender, and sexual communities that created a space of belonging for those outside the white, middle to upper class social norms.

Interestingly, the core factor in the shared consolidation of African American entertainment districts and the sex industry in Memphis and St. Louis was increased policing. In Kansas City, where policing was far less prevalent, this type of consolidation did not occur. Rather, the African American entertainment district grew up near the sex industry but remained separate. Both grew and expanded, leaving lasting imprints on the city. Thus, in Chapter Three, I explore the influence of the Pendergast political machine on the sex industry in Kansas City. Between 1870 and 1900, the sex industry grew relatively unchecked in Kansas City, diversifying and expanding throughout the city. Although reformers became more active in Kansas City by the turn of the twentieth century, these activists could not challenge the political power of Boss Tom Pendergast, who recognized the financial incentive of maintaining a sex industry in Kansas City. Thus, the development of Kansas City's sex industry defies the trends of Memphis and St. Louis, as it lasted far longer and became more diversified than its counterparts. Ultimately, this anomaly

corroborates the influence of policing on the consolidation of the industry but also demonstrates how exceptional political circumstances still allowed Kansas City's sex industry and other non-white, working class cultural contributors to develop alongside one another and reshape the city's cultural history.

In Chapter Four, I explore the economic, social, and political power of sex workers in Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City. By recognizing a consistent challenge by sex workers to the reduction of their image by outsiders, I explore the labor of their work. Specifically, I argue that these workers performed the labor of constituting constructions of gender, sexuality, race and class through their chosen names, appearance, and workplace performance. Taking ownership of these constructions allowed sex workers to successfully live outside heteronormative constructs, advancing their economic and social mobility. Significantly, however, the majority of sex workers I analyze worked in brothels and thus were mediated not simply by outsiders of the industry but also by madams.

Subsequently, in Chapter Five, I analyze the labor of madams in the sex industry. Specifically, I explore the way that madams navigated the public and private divisions of river town societies to capitalize on oppressive forces controlling women's lives and white male sexual desire. From the recruitment of women to the barriers of gender and sexual constructions of the period, madams recognized the social constraints placed on women and men during this period, capitalizing on the former to recruit more labor and on the latter to exploit male sexual desire and fantasy. As a result, the labor of madams reveals how the sex industry both maintained constructions of a white, middle to upper class social order and also constituted constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Importantly, madams were not the only safeguards of the maintenance of white, middle to upper class social norms; rather, reformers also engaged in this maintenance. In Chapter Six, I explore the various forms of Progressive Era reform of sex work. Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City each displayed different types of reform, from religious-motivated reforms to public health concerns to the total eradication of sex work. Although each city had a unique story about the successes or failures of reform, sex workers consistently challenged all three types of reform. Like Madeleine indicated in the start of this Introduction, their political voices challenged the reduction and control of sex work by outsiders. Instead, sex workers demonstrated their alternative visions of gender, sexual, racial, and class order, undermining the reform efforts of Progressive Era activists and demonstrating how those reform efforts were more about maintaining the white, middle to upper class status quo than actually effecting change.

Ultimately, as I indicate in the Conclusion, this dissertation positions sex workers at the center of the river town social worlds, demonstrating how those workers carved out spaces of belonging; articulated constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality; and navigated the public and private divisions of the social world to maintain white middle to upper class norms. Even though sex work was driven underground by the 1940s in all three cities, these workers left a lasting cultural legacy on these river towns.

As this chapter breakdown indicates, the positioning of these cities alongside a river greatly influenced the structure, population, and policing of the red light districts between 1870 and 1940. The Mississippi River—known by several names including Ol' Man River, the Big Muddy, Old Blue, and the Mighty Mississippi—acts as the lifeblood of the Mississippi River Valley. One of the largest rivers in the country, the Mississippi River flows

from Lake Itasca, Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. Combined with the Jefferson and Missouri Rivers, the Mississippi River system is the largest in North America, connecting an entire region. The Mississippi River system flows between several major cities, including New Orleans, Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City. From the Mississippi River, persons and goods alike can reach majority of North America—taking tributaries to the east and west, like the Missouri and Ohio Rivers. As a result, the Mississippi River system interconnects to create multiple river towns. I argue that there are environmental, economic, and social connections between the towns along the river's banks. Ideas, goods, and persons flowed between the cities along the Mississippi and its tributaries. Although still unique, towns like Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City share a common element: they are river towns.

River towns are an urban space whose economy, society, and spatiality are defined by that city's positioning alongside a river. A river town connects to other river towns—stretching and flowing beyond urban city limits, through rural spaces, land, and other major urban locations. Thus, a river town is defined by its geographical position on a river and, subsequently, its geographical connections to other cities, regions, and the country. Rivers and other major bodies of water are the environmental forces that connect these cities. As Nancy Langston asserts,

> One piece of land is never entirely separate from another, even if we think that a string of barbed wire forms an effective barrier between them. A bit of dirt kicked free by a cow finds its way into a stream and eventually gets deposited miles away. That sediment clogs the gills of a redband trout, far from where the cow had grazed. Moving water connects these places, weaving the threads of the landscape together. The places where land and water combine—the riparian zones—mediate these connections, and what happens in these zones affects areas far beyond their boundaries.[3]

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[3] Nancy Langston, *Where Land and Water Meet: A Western Landscape Transformed,* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2003) 3.

In the Mississippi River Valley, the Mississippi River is that stretch of water that connects different lands. The river defined certain cities, most notably St. Louis and New Orleans, as these cities are positioned at the epicenter and the end of the Mississippi. As a result, these cities became interconnected—creating a river town culture unique to each city but influencing other river towns. Thus, the Mississippi River is not just mighty because of its environmental influence, economic possibilities, or human mobility—it is mighty because river town culture was carried on its waters.

In the Mississippi River Valley, river town culture formed as a result of the steamboat industrial revolution and the resultant moving of all kinds of people between the cities on the Mississippi. As seminal scholar Louis C. Hunter argues, the steamboat revolution occurred in the "trans-Appalachian West" where "a new mode of transportation was most needed."[4] Hunter argues that "the maintenance of economic and cultural contacts between older and newer sections of the country" required new technology.[5] Steamboats provided that technology, especially for the powering of inland commerce on the strong currents of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers.[6] The steamboat opened entire regions to economic, cultural, ideological, and epidemiological changes.

Certain communities of the Mississippi River world, such as the African American community of free and slave laborers, reveal the way the steamboat revolution transformed Mississippi River life. In *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World*, Thomas Buchanan challenges the overt romanticization of Mississippi River steamboat history by revealing its complicated and nuanced connection to African

[4] Louis C. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History (*Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949) 4.
[5] Hunter, *Steamboats on Western Rivers*, 5.
[6] Hunter, *Steamboats on Western Rivers*, 7.

American free and slave labor. Focusing on a diverse world of workers—both "mobile" and those "who never left the river bank"—Buchanan demonstrates how "steamboats traveled the very veins and arteries of the slave system."[7]

Buchanan provides historical fodder for the role of steamboats in the creation of river towns, exploring regional connections and the movement of people through the Mississippi river world. First, Buchanan explores the way that the steamboat revolution required a recruitment of laborers from across the Midwest and South. These workers—previously rarely connected—created a new community. This new labor market, Buchanan argues, came from a diverse number of river towns:

> Just as eastern cities supplied the sailors for the country's ocean ships, western cities supplied the region's inland mariners. Officers most easily mustered crews, which sometimes totaled over 100 diversely skilled persons in large cities such as New Orleans, St. Louis, Nashville, Louisville, Mobile, and Cincinnati. To a lesser extent, smaller cities such as Memphis, Evansville, Baton Rouge, Shreveport, and St. Paul emerged as key labor markets.[8]

This kind of expansive labor recruitment was made possible by the transportation revolution that steamboats offered. Buchanan further argues that steamboats resulted in a unique form of interconnected life in the pan-Mississippi world. He argues that "workers' experiences" were not only defined by life on the steamboat but also by the constant connections to diverse lives on riverbanks. These workers "spent time in cities and journeyed to and from rural areas. The thousands of blacks who arrived in New Orleans landed at the intersection of domestic and international commerce and thus were at a crucial nexus of the black communities through their jobs and thus were vital to building pan Mississippi African

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[7] Thomas Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and The Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) 6-7.
[8] Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi,* 11-12

American culture."[9] Beyond the workers, Buchanan also argues that steamboats provided important travel opportunities for the communities of the Mississippi River Valley. Steamboats had a three-tier structure, allowing for the shipment of both cargo and passengers.[10]

The steamboat routes between cities established the major and minor river towns. Two of the major cities were New Orleans and St. Louis because of their positioning at the end of the Mississippi River line and at the epicenter of so many routes, respectively. Hunter describes these routes:

> In the overall pattern of western river transportation the principal trades were of course those joining the leading commercial centers on the main trunk lines of the Ohio and the Mississippi: Pittsburgh with Cincinnati and Louisville; Cincinnati with Louisville, St. Louis, and New Orleans; Louisville with New Orleans, St. Louis, and, later, Memphis; St. Louis with New Orleans, Galena, and, later, St. Joseph and St. Paul…As river commerce attained maturity such direct connections declined in favor of shorter voyages and transshipment at what were in substance division points. On the Mississippi River the main division point was at St. Louis, with one of less importance at Memphis…While many steamboats in their operations ignored these division points, the tendency, especially among steamboats operating primarily in trades below these points, was not to pass beyond them.[11]

As Hunter points out, these routes resulted in the movements of people and goods consistently between these cities. Key cities included New Orleans, St. Louis, and Memphis. Hunter also notes how these routes connected to smaller rivers and thus, more river towns:

> Each of the leading cities on the trunk lines of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers was at the center of a cluster of lesser steamboat trades joining it with the numerous small towns and communities within the range of its commercial influence, both on the main river and on various tributary streams…From St. Louis these lesser steamboat trades radiated to points on the upper Mississippi as far as Galena and to points on the Missouri, the Illinois, and even the Tennessee.[12]

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[9] Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi*, 16.
[10] Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi*, 9.
[11] Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western River,* loc. 5723.
[12] Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western River,* loc. 5723

St. Louis acted as the epicenter for multiple river tributaries, including Kansas City, which is most significant for this project. Steamboats informed the routes between cities in the Mississippi River valley and established certain cities—most notably New Orleans and St. Louis—as main hubs of steamboat transportation. However, steamboats were not the only form of transportation that revolutionized and connected this region. Competing with steamboats, and eventually reducing their economic and social influence, railroads and railroad lines expanding throughout this region also contributed the creation and connections of river towns.

Railroads were especially important because they allowed for the expansion of smaller river towns like Memphis and Kansas City. Hunter argues that railroads slowly drove out steamboat transportation, particularly in smaller cities, as new and faster lines between these cities became established. He argues that Missouri River steamboat lines suffered the most from the expansion of the railroads, particularly between St. Louis, Kansas City, and Jefferson City.[13] However, for smaller cities like Memphis, the expansion of the railroad to different urban river towns afforded greater opportunity for economic growth. Ultimately, the expansion of transportation led to more connections between cities—along waterways and railroad lines. I argue that these connections greatly influenced the development of river towns. And when travelers and workers stepped off the steamboat or railcar, they experienced the expansive and similar amusements offered by river towns.

One of the most quintessential and famous river towns is New Orleans. Famed for its culture and variety of amusements, New Orleans' history is steeped in brothel culture.

[13] Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western River,* loc. 10830.

Buchanan describes what steamboat workers experienced when they stepped off the boat in New Orleans:

> Most boat workers were more interested in working-class amusements than the more refined gatherings of the city's black elite. Many enjoyed the city's nearly 100 coffeehouses, most of which dotted the fashionable streets between Decatur and Bourbon. Slave boatmen came to coffeehouses to meet agents and masters, and to drink, if the proprietor was willing to ignore city ordinances against selling alcohol to slaves. Time with the city's prostitutes, who labored on the French Quarter streets farthest away from the levee and the most respectable mercantile establishments, was probably a more popular pastime. On Dauphine Street, one boatman found women 'behind the curtains of nearly every window.' It was probably this neighborhood that prompted one pious traveler to exclaim: 'the extent of licentiousness and prostitution here is truly appalling, and doubtless without parallel, and probably double to that of any other place in the whole civilized world.' Another slave boatmen frequently visited a white prostitute named Madam La Blair on Bourbon Street. Irish workers crossed the color line in their sexual adventures, too. An Irish river hand recalled traveling to Dauphine to 'visit' an octoroon woman, visits that, he said, 'cost me very little—often less than a dollar.'[14]

From coffee shops to brothels, New Orleans offered a variety of entertainment options for the travelers passing through the city. Similarly, Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City developed vibrant entertainment and red light districts, catering in location and fare to the travelers from steamboats and railroads. As I indicate, certain brothels in these cities capitalized on the brothel culture of New Orleans, calling upon the racialized desire structured in that city to bolster the selling power of their own businesses. However, this history is often demarcated as separate from a history of mobile workers traveling between these cities. Scholars like Thomas Buchanan have demonstrated how African American free and slave laborers made economic and social connections to other economic communities and social groups in the Mississippi River system. However, Buchanan—in keeping with the larger historiography—does not include sex workers who worked along the banks of the

[14] Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi*, 28-29.

Mississippi River in this vibrant, mobile, working community.[15] This project remedies that omission by exploring the red light districts positioned beside city levees to entice the transient worker population. These sex workers—often ignored, silenced, and hidden from the economic world—were a key aspect of river town society and further reveal the transmission of ideas, cultures, communities, and diseases between the cities positioned alongside the Mississippi River system. Thus, my first historiographical contribution is the recognition of these workers as workers in the interconnected Mississippi River System.

Responding specifically to the history of sex work, labor history, and the history of sexuality, my dissertation also challenges several other historiographic trends. First, by focusing on Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City, this dissertation contests the relegation of the study of sex work to certain geographic spaces on the east and west coasts, like New York City and San Francisco. Focusing geographically on these spaces reflects a larger bias in the history of sexuality that only recent scholarship has challenged.[16] Furthermore, this geographically biased scholarship, like the work of Timothy Gilfoyle, laid the foundation for

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[15] In part, this exclusion is because labor historians have not recognized sex workers as laborers. Scholars of labor history have long debated what should be included in "work." This conversations centers around who the worker is, how scholars understand worker's consciousness, and whether that consciousness is necessary to be included in labor history. The breadth of this scholarship includes: Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977); David Montgomery, *Worker's Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1987); David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Trotter, *Black Milwaukee;* Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses;* Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift;* Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950;* Camille Guérin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999).

[16] Some of the early work reflecting this geographic bias makes up the foundational scholarship in the history of sexuality more broadly. See, for example, George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994). Other scholars have begun to challenge this focus in the history of sexuality. See Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Susan Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2000).

this dissertation but also provides a foil against which critical analysis may proceed. In *City of Eros,* Gilfoyle studies the commercialization of sex, arguing that the antebellum period is a key turning point in the marketing of sex and analyzing the resultant subculture in New York City.[17] Specifically, Gilfoyle looks at the interaction of this "threatening, subterranean counter-society," populated by "prostitutes,…abortionists, pornographers, distributors of contraceptive aids, and the organizers of various leisure institutions."[18] He argues that this subculture "turned sexuality into something to be sold, displayed, and utilized to yield outcome," losing "some of the mystical and spiritual functions it enjoyed in earlier eras."[19] Gilfoyle usefully highlights how prostitution and its consumption by single men in New York City reflects a larger "nexus of social relations in the nineteenth century."[20] His work is some of the earliest scholarship that recognizes prostitution as part of a larger industrial economy and changes to the societal structure of the United States after the Civil War.

However, Gilfoyle draws conclusions intended to reflect all of the United States during this period, reinscribing the concept that New York City represents the United States. Gilfoyle signifies a larger trend in this field—a trend my scholarship directly challenges. Other important spaces often over-represented in the historiography are Chicago and San Francisco. As will be discussed later, Kevin Mumford places New York City and Chicago into conversation in his work *Interzones*. Although incredibly important to the field

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[17] Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex 1790-1920,* (New York City, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992) 8.
[18] Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 20.
[19] Because this counter-culture was viewed as threatening, Gilfoyle also argues that the period between 1880 and 1920 saw increasing public debates surrounding prostitution, making it an ideal period for historians to study because of the plethora of source material. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 18-20.
[20] Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 19.

and to my dissertation, Mumford, like Gilfoyle, does not challenge the primacy of these cities in his analysis.[21]

Rather than assuming that the economic and cultural model of New York City and other metropolitan areas like Chicago and San Francisco represent the United States, I argue that historians must recognize the particularities of smaller industrial cities in the United States, assessing their historical significance apart AND alongside these larger urban spaces. This shift follows a developing trend in the history of sex work by scholars like Alecia P. Long who covers New Orleans and Joel Best who explores the regulation of brothels in St. Paul, Minnesota.[22] Opening my analytical lens to allow for the significance of cities like Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City led to a key contribution of this project: recognizing the mobility of sex workers and their migration from New Orleans to Memphis to St. Louis to Kansas City and beyond. This type of mobility and organization between sex workers and madams has not been studied in any region, in part because scholars have often focused on one major city in their work. In contrast, this dissertation examines the

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[21] San Francisco marks another key site of analysis for historians of sex work because, like New York City, San Francisco is a point of entry for immigrants, particularly "Asian" immigrants coming to the United States. Key work on this space includes Eithne Luibhéid's work in *Entry Denied*. Luibhéid argues that "U.S. immigration control system has served as crucial site for the construction and regulation of sexual norms, identities, and behaviors since 1875," stating that the state reinscribed categories of women, like lesbians and prostitutes, through the practice of exclusion *(*x-xi, 55-76, 77-101, and 103-135). Luibhéid shows how "hegemonic heterosexuality is anxiously manufactured and oppressively enforced by state institutions that include the immigration apparatus" (139). One key site Luibhéid explores to explain state control and production of heteronormativity is the Page Law and discrimination against Chinese women in the late nineteenth century. Luibhéid argues that this law laid the foundation for later forms of immigration exclusion along sexual, racial, and class lines (31-54). Although only a chapter in a larger monograph, Luibhéid's work demonstrates the importance of studying sex work and state regulation of it. Luibhéid effectively shifts the lens away from the East coast but, due to her focus, does not challenge larger historiographical trends of focus on certain spaces in the history of sexuality.
See, Eithne Luibhéid, *Entry Denied*.
[22] Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State Press, 2004); Joel Best, *Controlling Vice: Regulating Brothel Prostitution in St. Paul, 1865-1883* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1998). Also, see, Penny A. Petersen, *Minneapolis Madams: The Lost History of Prostitution on the Riverfront* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

connections between three smaller cities. I will analyze how these three cities are not only connected by migratory patterns but also, economic, cultural, and racial connections that shed light on the mediated agency of sex workers.

Second, this dissertation complicates the historical study of sex worker agency, both seeking to locate that agency as other scholars like Marilyn Wood Hill have done but also demonstrate its material and ideological mediation like Elizabeth Alice Clement. Marilyn Wood Hill argues in *Their Sister's Keeper* that women dominated the sex work industry, running the houses and the business. Given the societal constraints on women during this period, sex work represented an area where women worked largely independent of male influence. Hill focuses her work on the relationships between female prostitutes in New York City. Hill points to a separate culture that those involved in the commercialization of sex created as a system of support for one another. She discusses the acceptance of women as leaders within the public sphere, pointing to the powerful influence of madams and their ownership of brothels.[23] These findings led her to argue that "prostitution and its historical conditions offered a significant degree of autonomy and control in their [women involved in sexual commerce] professional lives."[24] Hill does not connect this autonomous community of women to histories beyond this subculture, but her work provides an important addendum to Gilfoyle in that both study the same spaces but different historical actors.

Other scholars, like Kathy Peiss and Elizabeth Alice Clement, have used the history of sex worker agency as a foil to explore the autonomy of the working class more generally. Kathy Peiss, in *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure Time in Turn of the Century New York*, examines the culture of leisure activity of women wageworkers in turn of the

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[23] Marilyn Wood Hill, *Their Sister's Keepers: Prostitution in New York City, 1830-1870* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 324.
[24] Hill, *Their Sister's Keepers*, 324.

century New York "for clues to the ways working women constructed and gave meaning to their lives in the period from 1880 to 1920."[25] Peiss asks that historians see workingwomen's leisure activities not as "false consciousness," but as windows into their autonomy, self-construction, and interaction with "oppression."[26] Although Peiss does not discuss prostitution in great detail, she demonstrates the development of a separate working class culture through the growth of leisure activity that defined itself against sex work.

Similarly, Elizabeth Alice Clement analyzes working class sexuality, specifically heterosexual intimacy, in New York City between 1900 and 1945 in *Love for Sale*. Clement argues that the New York working class redrew boundaries of "respectability" that delimited gender roles and sexual practices through engaging in premarital sexual acts with courting, treating, and sex work.[27] Clement locates the roots of both a sexual revolution and modern heterosexual practices within the changes to sexuality she traces, historicizing and destabilizing the practice and idea of normative heterosexual practices.[28] Drawing upon a growing body of work on leisure culture, gender, and sexuality in the turn-of-the-century United States, Clement counters most of this literature by analyzing "the urban working class" from their viewpoint.[29] Clement shows the development of "treating," the influence of

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[25] See Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986) 3 and 5-6.
[26] Peiss, Cheap Amusements, 7.
[27] As Clement notes, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham first used the phrase the "politics of respectability" to demonstrate how certain "middle-class 'race' leaders" capitulated to middle to upper class, white standards of morality. But, as Clement asserts, working-class New Yorker's developed their own understanding of sexual "respectability" separate from middle-to-upper class standards. Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006) 5-8. See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).
[28] Clement, *Love for Sale*, 12.
[29] It is particularly important to note Clement's relationship to Kathy Peiss and Joanne Meyerowitz, "who first identified the practice of treating in their explorations of working-class women's social and economic lives at the turn of the century." Clement, *Love for Sale*, 7-10. For examples, see Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986).

working class sexual practices on the middle and upper classes of New York City by the 1920s and 1930s, the acceleration of premarital sexual intercourse by the 1930s, changes in the popularity and method of sex work, and the effect of war on economic and social sexual expression. However, unlike Peiss, Clement extensively explores how these shifts in intimate relations for the working class affected sex workers. She notes the closing of brothels in New York City and the subsequent dispersal of sex workers into working class neighborhoods.[30] She does emphasize the uneasy relationship between these two communities but still places them in conversation, importantly demonstrating that sex workers were not separate from these major shifts in culture.

Clement's refusal to silence sex workers during this major shift in American sexual culture breaks with historiographical trends in which, like Hill, sex workers are analyzed as completely autonomous or, like Peiss, largely ignored as important historical actors. In this dissertation, I take Clement's approach and expand it, both geographically and in scope. Rather than use the working class as my lens and seeing sex workers as important peripheries to this class, I analyze sex workers as mediated historical agents, as workers, as cultural producers, and as cultural consumers—significant not simply because of their autonomous agency or economic enterprises but because of their influence and interaction with "mainstream" economic, cultural, and social milieus.

Third, this dissertation responds and expands the study of race and sex work, specifically the role of the sex industry in constituting and reproducing constructions of race and maintaining white, middle to upper class, social norms. An important aspect of this analysis will be exploring how race and racism mediated sex worker's agency—a topic

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Or see Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
[30] Clement, *Love For Sale*, 76-113.

already covered in part by other scholars like Laura Hapke and Kevin Mumford. Earlier scholarship on this topic, like that of Hapke, has explored the discourse of white slavery and its influence on sex workers' daily lives and reform. In "The Late Nineteenth-Century American Streetwalker: Images and Realities," Hapke utilizes newspapers and literature of the period to demonstrate the racism that structured discourses of prostitution, specifically the contrasting perceptions of white prostitutes and non-white prostitutes. Hapke argues that these dual perceptions seeped into the goals of white women's reform clubs. In attempting to reform white prostitutes, these "reformers" would insist "on seduction" as the cause of prostitution but only for the wealthier, white prostitutes.[31] In contrast, Hapke describes how reporters portrayed African American and working class prostitutes in animalistic terms. Hapke works against these stereotypes of the period by opening up the identity of non-white prostitutes to include their roles as mothers, friends, and workers. She discusses their tough working conditions, the ways in which these women died, and the lack of concern by the society around them.[32] Her work provides a basis for the exploration of the complicated discourses constructing sex workers and how they reflect larger societal oppressive forces but much more work needs to be done.

Similarly, Kevin Mumford, in his book *Interzones*, discusses how the discourse of white slavery during the Progressive Era affected reform. He argues that the idea of "white slavery" did not extend to African American women. Rather, white moral reformers viewed African American women as hypersexual and predatory. This was one legacy of slavery, in that the image of African American women as over-sexualized had been used to justify white masters' sexual abuse of their female slaves. Female reformers who based their

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[31] Laura Hapke, "The Late Nineteenth-Century American Streetwalker: Images and Realities," *Mid-America* 65, no. 3 (1983): 155-156.
[32] Hapke, "The Late Nineteenth-Century American Streetwalker," 157 and 159.

understanding of morality on True Womanhood and Victorian sexual ideals viewed African Americans as sexually dangerous. This was reflected both in the punishment of African American men who had interracial relations with white women and in reformers' focus on reforming white women prostitutes, over African American prostitutes. As a result, Mumford found that "black women" became "disproportionately represented among the ranks of prostitutes" in both Chicago and New York as a result of this racialized reform.[33]

Significantly, however, African American female reformers challenged the presumptions of white female reformers, both attempting to counteract those assumptions and complicate them in their activism. Although my dissertation does not analyze this activism, black female reformers' challenge to outsider construction reveals the complicated relationship between race and Progressive Era reform. Scholars such as Paula Giddings point to the powerful discourse emerging from the southern slave system in which African American women were constructed as sexual objects. The Black Women's Club movement counteracted such constructions, attempting to repaint the image of African American women.[34] Other scholars, such as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, argued that one method for Black Club Women to counteract these problematic discourses was through the "politics of respectability." She argues that the politics of respectability "emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations," signifying African American resistance to derogatory constructions of themselves.[35]

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[33] Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century,* (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997) 20, 14, 16-17, 38.
[34] Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Books, 1996) 32 and 55.
[35] See, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) 187. Significantly, Higginbotham was not the

Still, tension existed in the African American community between methods of "racial uplift," the working class, and deviant sexual behavior. In *Righteous Propagation*, Michele Mitchell details the varied African American reformers' and intellectuals' perspectives on "racial destiny" and sexuality. She notes increasing anxiety about activists attempting to change the "behavior" of African Americans to counteract mainstream views of African American sexuality and how this activism inspired dissent, resulting from "class stratification and intraracial tensions."[36] Similarly, in *Talk With You Like a Woman*, Cheryl Hicks details how the reformation strategies of both middle to upper class white and African American activists affected "the working-class and poor black women in crisis."[37] Hicks details how working class, African American women maintained their own "politics of respectability."[38] Although I do not address this particular activism in this dissertation because I largely focus on sex worker response to Progressive Era reform, such tensions indicate that African American activists contested certain constructions of African Americans as sexually promiscuous and dangerous, worked to counteract such constructions, and this work resulted in great class tension among African American reformers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In my future work, I plan to analyze Black Women's Club work, particularly in St. Louis, to complicate my discussion of Progressive Era reform work, racial constructions, and belonging in the Midwest and South.

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only scholar to levy such a critique. See, also, Crystal N. Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[36] Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004) 12.

[37] Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk with You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010) 3.

[38] See, Hicks, *Talks with You Like a Woman*, 10. Significantly, other scholars also address this tension and privilege working class voices of African American women. See, for example, Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1998).

Furthermore, my work will move beyond a discussion of the discourse about white slavery and its effects in order to explore how sex workers, particularly madams, and the selling of sex constituted certain racial and sexual norms for profit. Mumford begins this work with his concept of "interzones." Mumford defines "interzones" as areas where "cultural, sexual, and social interchange" took place. Interzones were locations of social and cultural subversion, where racial hierarchies were produced and reproduced in certain spaces marked by sexual interaction. He analyzes spaces catering to sexual desire in order to reveal the social construction of race. According to Mumford, these sites reveal modern American culture—particularly its racial hierarchies. Significantly, Mumford's interzones are not only sites of oppression or sites that reveal modern American culture; they are also sites that include brief moments of agency, afforded by mainstream popularity, for the oppressed subjects he explores.[39]

Thus, Mumford begins the historiographical work that I expand with this dissertation. Although he does not challenge the geographic focus of this field, he does begin the work of recognizing the cultural importance of the racial, sexual, and economically marginalized figures in U.S. history. Specifically, by recognizing the brevity of agency his historical subjects experienced, Mumford opens up the analysis of African American

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[39] See, Mumford, *Interzones,* xvii-xix. Usefully, Mumford complicates analysis of these sexualized spaces by keeping race as his key analytical lens. This complicated analytical challenges the work of other scholars who largely focus on sexuality in these spaces and namely, heterosexuality. See, for example, the work of Alan Hunt in his essay "Regulating Heterosocial Space: Sexual Politics in the Early Twentieth Century." Hunt introduces the concept of "heterosocial space" in the cities as "the shifting and changing sites where young women and men come into contact" and have the possibility of engaging in sexual activity. Through examining vice commission reports from 1902 to 1919 in the United States and Canada, he discusses the different levels of reform and reaction during this period. Hunt claims that the vice reports, although different in their method, all had similar purposes, which was to highlight and abolish "commercialized vice." He then states that vice reports typified the institutional control of "heterosocial space" during the Progressive era. Hunt asserts that the reforms aimed at stopping prostitution were more than simply moral repugnance at the act. Instead, prostitution became "an organizing metaphor" for unacceptable gender behavior and a target "for moralization and regulation." Alan Hunt, "Regulating Heterosocial Space: Sexual Politics in the Early Twentieth Century," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 15, no. 1 (2002): 1-2.

relationship to American "modernity." Similarly, I will explore the production and reproduction of racial hierarchies through brothel culture and also analyze how brothel culture afforded certain marginalized individuals economic and social opportunities not available to them in "mainstream" society. My scholarship responds directly to Mumford, expanding and complicating Mumford's thesis in in terms of both historical evidence and geographic focus.[40]

Recognizing the complicated cultural contribution of sex workers also demonstrates this dissertation's important contribution to two major historiographical fields: labor history and the history of sexuality. Notably, little scholarship has brought these two important fields into conversation with one another. Labor historians have done little work in exploring the category of sexuality. There are some key ways these two fields intersect. For example, historians of sexuality, like George Chauncey, have examined the way material conditions, industrialization, urbanization and class status shaped sexual identity and sexual communities.[41] Furthermore, other historians of sexuality, like Mary Odem and Kathy Peiss, have explored how sexuality and class shape whether historical actors are policed or are doing the policing.[42] As Mumford demonstrates, historians of sexuality have also

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[40] This topic has been explored by Eric Lott, focusing on a working class that does not include sex workers. However, like Mumford, Lott provides a fascinating study of how cultural production reproduces racism—dividing classes in United States society. Furthermore, he explores the love and theft of cultural forms from marginalized peoples—in this case African Americans—that shapes the complicated relationship between race, marginalized culture, and "American" culture. This conversation intersects with my project. See, Eric Lott, *Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1993).

[41] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994). See also, Peter Boag, *Same Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

[42] Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States,* 1885-1920 (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 95-127; Kathy Peiss, "'Charity Girls' and City Pleasures: Historical Notes on Working-Class Sexuality, 1880-1920" in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, eds. Kathy Peiss, Christina Simmons, and Robert A. Padgug (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1989) 57-69.

recognized how this policing is mapped on to particular geographic and economic spaces.[43] Finally, as already noted, historians studying sex work have explored the economic conditions that resulted in certain types of prostitution and the mediated agency of these sex workers.[44] However, historians of sexuality and labor historians have not really examined how the category of sexuality mediates "work," and this kind of scholarship seems to be quite new in the field, making it a rich avenue of historiographical contribution.

This project fills this major historiographical gap in two key ways. First, directly responding to a major conversation in the field of labor history, this project asserts that sex workers are workers. Although seemingly minute, this ideological move greatly expands my analytical focus for this project. Rather than seeing sex work as separate from "work," this project demands that the selling and packaging of sex is a form of "work."[45] In so doing, this dissertation challenges labor historians to further explore the impact of industrialization—particularly its impact on daily lives, urban spaces, and management practices—on some of the most marginalized workers. Second, this dissertation fills a gap in the history of sexuality by explicitly exploring the connection between work and sexual identity. Part of the effort in recognizing sex worker agency is the recognition that sex workers were part of

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[43] Mumford, *Interzones,* xi-xix.
[44] Gilfoyle, *City of Eros;* Clement, *Love for Sale.*
[45] Scholars of labor history have long debated what should be included in "work." This conversation centers around who the worker is, how scholars understand worker's consciousness, and whether that consciousness is necessary to be included in labor history. The breadth of this scholarship includes: Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977); David Montgomery, *Worker's Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1987); David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Trotter, *Black Milwaukee;* Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses;* Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift;* Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950;* Camille Guérin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999).

the sexual culture of this period as sexual persons. Thus, I look to sex work as a site in which historians can further understand that culture and its major transitions between the 1870s to the 1940s, enhancing historiographical conversations of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Ultimately, this project forces a conversation between labor historians and historians of sexuality, bringing together these two fields in a unique fashion. This project explicitly explores the interaction of sex workers and the historical actors mediating sex worker power to historicize the marginalization of those in the industrial capitalist complex often not recognized in labor history. Moreover, this project explores how sex workers interact with, challenge, and are mediated by sexual and gender cultures of this period. Finally, this dissertation recognizes sex worker resistance to mainstream society but, like Mumford, explores how marginalized peoples reproduced societal oppression. I have chosen key moments to analyze how the larger capitalist structure emerged in these particular cities and reproduced social hierarchy, specifically noting how sex worker culture allowed for those marginalized peoples to flourish but also how this culture reproduced racial and gender hierarchies. Thus, I demonstrate that sex work during this period was not just about bodily exploitation but also about a cultural product that left a larger imprint on American society.

For many historians, the main barrier to analyzing sex workers is an alleged lack of sources. In fact, those in power produced the majority of historical source material remaining on sex workers: reformers, police, and government officials chief among them. As such, many fear that conducting a historical study on sex workers themselves is nearly impossible. I disagree. I argue that studying sex workers is possible through the methodological approach of reading across sources. Key records provide important

information on sex work and brothel culture in southern and midwestern river towns. Census records reveal the location of red light districts, the number of workers employed in the sex work industry, and a large variety of information on race, gender, age, education level, and mobility. Moreover, census records reveal the names of sex workers—whether given or chosen—and thus, key aspects of sex worker culture. Newspapers, specifically crime blotters, indicate the criminal elements of brothel culture. Furthermore, newspapers reveal the larger discursive construction of sex work, including an obsession with sensationalized crime stories that range from murder to suicide to kidnapping. Both memoirs and reformation sources indicate some of the reasons workers chose the sex industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Although heavily mediated, these source bases indicate the opulence associated with sex work, the freedom allotted to workers not constrained by the strictures of heteronormative marriage, and the powerful pull of consumption.

Like other heavily mediated sources, these materials must be analyzed from multiple perspectives. As Nayan Shah indicates, these sources reveal "contradictory and suppressed perspectives and narratives of every day life."[46] Using a multi-level analytical approach, sensationalized crime stories, for example, expose both the mainstream obsession with sex work and certain aspects of sex worker life, including the unique experiences of those positioned outside mainstream society.

As several of the scholars mentioned in the historiographical discussion note, analyzing and historicizing sex work is a difficult process because of the nature and availability of sources. In part, some of the elisions present in the study of sex work result

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[46] Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011) 9.

from this paucity of source material or, at least, an assumed scarcity of sources, particularly in cities outside of New York and Chicago. This dissertation requires a unique approach to source material—one derived from other authors and my own research experiences with this topic. This dissertation reflects on and responds to the methodological advances of Judith Walkowitz, Luise White, and Elizabeth Clement. Judith Walkowitz is one of the earliest pioneers in the history of sex work and her two works, *Prostitution in Victorian Society* and *City of Dreadful Delight*, demonstrate both the difficulties of these studies and the advances made through the post-structuralist turn in historical inquiry. Published in 1980, *Prostitution and Victorian Society* parallels scholarship on sex work in the United States, particularly Ruth Rosen's *The Lost Sisterhood*. Both works represent clear social histories in that they seek to demonstrate the initial causes of prostitution, where and why women turned to it, and how it created an autonomous subculture for women—exploring the oppression of sex workers.[47]

The post-structuralist turn in academic history challenged the early approach of Walkowitz and Rosen—embodied by Walkowitz's 1992 book, *City of Dreadful Delight.* Rather than center her new study on laws and individual actors, Walkowitz explores the discourse of sexual danger to explore the social mobility of women, largely middle class, into predominantly male fields. She notes that as these women moved away from their prescribed gender roles, they encountered a powerful discourse of sexual danger in which they were typified as a "victim" rather than as an actor. This discourse, manipulated and

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[47] Walkowitz explores the Contagious Disease Acts of 1984,1866 and 1989 in London. See, Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980) 69-89). Rosen explores the campaigns, both local and federal, to reform prostitution during the Progressive era in the United States. See, Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1982).

fluid, served to control women's movement in Victorian London.[48] Walkowitz deconstructs this discourse, but she does not seek to rectify the focus on victimization of sex workers in scholarship.

Conversely, Luise White in *The Comforts of Home* examines prostitutes in Colonial Nairobi and their own self-construction as workers. White is one of the only scholars studying sex work that places her narrative squarely in labor history. In her Introduction, White notes that the moralistic response to prostitution has been reinscribed by the historiography on prostitution in that prostitutes are constructed as "victims."[49] Instead, White listens intently to prostitutes' self-narration, recognizing them as workers and couching their experiences in a larger economic history of African workers and farmers. Her work demonstrates the importance of recognizing sex workers as workers, figured not just as victims but also as historical actors and reflections of the economic, social, and legal topography of the cities in which they lived and worked.

With this dissertation, I combine the approaches of Walkowitz and White—deconstructing oppressive discursive forces controlling sex workers *and* recognizing their mediated agency as workers. Clement began this work, but my dissertation expands upon her methodological approach. Clement relies on source material not created by the working class to make her argument, ranging from papers of the Committee of Fourteen to the social workers' interviews with "inmates" at the Bedford Hills Reformatory.[50] Subsequently,

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[48] Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).
[49] Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1990) 8.
[50] For example, Clement uses sources from the Committee of Fourteen like the "Department Store Investigation" to evaluate "how young women used work time and work relationships to define and police" their new understandings of "respectability." See Clement, *Love for Sale*, 58-60. Another example other than May Lewin of sources derived from the Bedford Hill Reformatory is Katharine Berment Davis' (the director of

Clement uses the method of reading "across sources, interpreting them carefully and using them against each other to paint a larger portrait of working class sexual behavior and morality."[51] Clement historicizes the biased sources she employs by detailing the life of the working class individual being discussed or interviewed by a middle class historical actor. However, Clement rarely explores the middle-to-upper class discourses informing the creation of these same sources, particularly the interviews of reformatory inmates she heavily relies upon to support her argument.[52]

At certain points in this dissertation, I will be using similar sources as Clement—sources produced by middle and upper class historical actors rather than sex workers themselves. My methodological approach differs from Clement's, however, in that I deconstruct both the sex worker being discussed and the individual producing the source. For example, I use the records from the Ella Oliver Refuge to discuss the dress of sex workers in Memphis and how reformers viewed their clothing as a mark of their occupation and unfit for mainstream society. Produced by the reformers, these sources are heavily mediated by the presumptions these reformers made. However, this source material is invaluable for this project as this archive provides rare glimpses into both sex worker culture and reformer response to that culture. Like Clement, I will read across the sources to reveal sex worker experience but I also analyze the person producing the source whenever possible. Analyzing both the sex worker in question and the middle to upper class reformer

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the home) report "for George Kneeland's *Commercialized Prostitution in New York City*." See Clement, *Love for Sale*, 79-81.

[51] Clement, *Love for Sale*, 10.

[52] One notable exception I found to this statement was Clement's analysis on the Bedford inmates' denial of involvement with sex-work. As Clement notes, being interviewed by a social worker whose desire was to reform them likely influenced their resounding denial of sex-work. Unfortunately, this is just one example that could have been given more explanatory room and arguably, shows the interment and necessary inclusion of a two-pronged approach to the analysis of the working-class culture's sexual and gender milieus. See Clement, *Love for Sale*, 61.

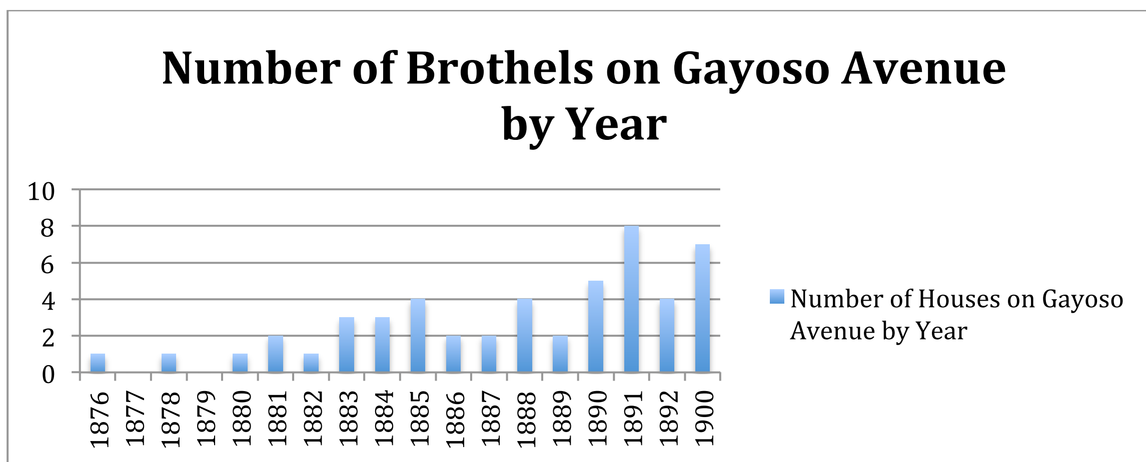
producing the source provides a more nuanced understanding of the power relations informing the resultant archive.[53] Ultimately, I pull on Walkowitz's discursive approach, White's labor history approach, and Clement's method of "reading across sources" to develop and employ an effective methodology for this project. Rather than assume a paucity of source material, I use multiple methods to create an archive on sex workers that is not readily apparent, working to analyze sex worker agency and its mediation between 1870 and 1940.

Although historically distinct and unique according to the experiences within each city, sex workers in Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City shared common work environments, mobility, and policing. The river towns were interconnected, as were the persons who lived in them. Sex workers were a key aspect of this community, traveling between these river towns like other workers and commuters on steamboats and trains and carrying with them diverse sexual cultures, communities, and lives. Their experiences reveal the interconnectedness of the sex worker world and the interconnectedness of the Mississippi River Valley. Collectively, sex workers in these river town brothels constituted and reproduced constructions of race, gender, class, and sexuality, carving out spaces of belonging for themselves and others not part of the mainstream norm.

[53] To be clear, I found it interesting the proposed differences between "treating" and "prostitution" as understood by working-class girls of this period. Clement notes, "prostitution occupied one end of the moral spectrum, and the girls in this store [meaning the store that the Committee of Fourteen had investigated] disapproved of prostitution, in spite of the fact they themselves often treated." Here, I see the new structure of "respectability" created by working-class girls of New York City to serve as exclusionary of sex-workers in order to bolster said "respectability." Clement does not investigate these assertions in depth but with the two-pronged methodology she could have had a parallel narrative that demonstrated the paradox of "respectability" as both liberatory and oppressive. See Clement, *Love for Sale*, 59.

Chapter One

Bluff City River Town: The Transformative Sex Industry and African American Entrepreneurial Spirit in Memphis, TN



When walking downtown in Memphis today, the sounds of blues emanate from Beale Street and signs point tourists toward several Elvis Presley memorabilia shops. In the midst of these known landmarks, Gayoso Avenue seems irrelevant. It no longer glows with a red hue nor do the sounds of piano music drift from its houses. Actually, no houses remain on Gayoso; instead, a large, former shopping mall towers over it. Yet, as the chart above indicates, this street was the hub of the red light district in Memphis from 1880 to 1910. From the Mississippi River to Fourth Street along Gayoso, sex workers sold their wares and a diverse, fluid clientele shopped. This history—barely visible in the larger narratives that dominate Memphis' past—has been torn down, built over, and silenced. Through carefully searching through Memphis' main newspaper, the *Commercial Appeal*, and deconstructing census records, the shared entertainment district of Gayoso Avenue, Beale Street, and the downtown of Memphis emerges, revealing a collective space of belonging for sex workers and African Americans in this segregated river town.

The story of the rise and fall of Gayoso Avenue's sex industry in Memphis, Tennessee begins with the yellow fever crisis of 1878. The migration between Memphis and other cities resulted in a migration of diseases, particularly yellow fever. The 1878 yellow fever epidemic transformed the city and resulted in a rebuilding of the red light district. A combination of natural disaster, African American entrepreneurs, and an unspoken policy of acceptance of the sex industry greatly shaped the rebuilding of the red light district in Memphis. I show that Memphis' sex industry became centralized around Gayoso Avenue to capitalize on the transient river and railroad traffic and the growing African American community that carved a space of belonging on and around Beale Street. As reform efforts in Memphis increased, reformers ignored African Americans, allowing African Americans involved in the sex industry to maintain their businesses without much scrutiny. Before the sex industry was driven underground by local and national reform efforts, African Americans dominated Memphis' sex industry, earning economic success and building up an African American entertainment district that served to counteract the destructive power of segregation in Memphis. At the same time, the location, cross-cultural community, and policing also served to maintain white, middle to upper class social norms—a production that the sex industry perpetuated and capitalized on to gain greater success. Thus, between 1870 and 1920, Memphis' sex industry grew alongside a burgeoning African American community and entertainment district, allowing for a mutually beneficial entertainment district to emerge in downtown Memphis that left a lasting imprint on the city's economic and cultural development.

Memphis in the 1870s: A Transformative Epidemic

Although still largely spread along the riverfront, the 1870s Memphis sex industry was relegated to several different streets rather than consolidated in a centralized zone. Houses were reported to be scattered on Main, Madison, Second, Washington, and Adams.[54] City directories indicate that the red light district was widespread. For example, the 1876 city directory identified 13 different brothels on several streets, including Main, Exchange, Front, Gayoso, Washington, Desoto, and Market Square.[55] This range of addresses indicates that the red light district did not exist in one specific area but instead was spread throughout the modern-day downtown.

Despite being spread out, newspaper and City Directory records also indicate a large population of sex workers in the industry in Memphis in the 1870s. The *Commercial Appeal* reported that the sex industry in Memphis included 18 houses and over 90 "inmates" by 1874. This was an apparent increase from 1873 when only there were only 60 sex workers reported to be working in Memphis.[56] Between 1876 and 1879, directories indicate an increase from 13 brothels in 1876 to 26 in 1879 in Memphis.[57] Importantly, this evidence serves as a foil that shows the transformation of the industry to a consolidated street after 1878.

The sex industry flourished in the 1870s due in part to a symbiotic relationship with the police—a relationship that greatly angered Memphis citizens and resulted in a small

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[54] "News of Bygone Days 100 Years Ago: February 13,1874," *The Commercial Appeal,* February 13, 1974, The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.
[55] *Memphis, Tennessee, City Directory, 1876.* Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.; The *Commercial Appeal* reported that prostitution in Memphis included 18 houses and over 90 "inmates" in 1874. This was an apparent increase from 1873 where only there were only 60 sex workers reported to be working in Memphis. "News of Bygone Days," *The Commercial Appeal*, February 13, 1974.
[56] "News of Bygone Days," *The Commercial Appeal*, February 13, 1974.
[57] *Memphis, Tennessee, City Directory, 1876-1879.* Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

reform movement. The *Commercial Appeal* reported on the police involvement in prostitution in Memphis during the late 1870s to the 1880s. Highlighting one particular house of ill repute, the *Appeal* named Frank Gordon as the landlady of a large brothel at Number 7 Adams Street.[58] On August 24, 1875, police had been called to the house over a reported "domestic disturbance." One of the proprietors, Albert Johnson, had attacked Gordon, leaving Gordon "with a black eye and a swollen face."[59] The *Appeal* writer noted that the police worked to protect Gordon, evidencing their longstanding and mutually beneficial relationship. This incident, along with evidence of a symbiotic relationship with law enforcement, which I discuss in more detail in later chapters, incited middle and upper class residents of Memphis to react to the growing "problem" of prostitution in Memphis.

Some of these Memphis citizens worked with the county government to try and eradicate prostitution and sever its relationship with local law enforcement, resulting in a short-lived reform movement that was undermined by the yellow fever epidemic of 1878. In August of 1875, citizens "presented a petition to the honorable mayor and councilmen of Memphis complaining of the three houses of prostitution on Washington just west of Second and on the corner." These citizens wanted the city government to address the issue instead of trying "to protect these nuisances."[60] The *Appeal* stated that although they "sympathize with the poor creatures (sex workers) and will take their side when they are mistreated…we do not believe in allowing them to locate and carry on their business in the heart of the city." The *Appeal* argued that the women and children of Memphis should not

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[58] City Directories do not list a Frank Gordon but do list a Frankie Eastwood as a madam of a house on Jefferson Street (perpendicular to Adams Street). *Memphis, Tennessee, City Directory, 1877.* Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.
[59] "News of Bygone Days 100 Years Ago: August 25, 1875," *The Commercial Appeal,* August 25, 1975, The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.
[60] "News of Bygone Days 100 Years Ago: August 4, 1875," *The Commercial Appeal*, August 4, 1975,

have to be subjected to such degrading activity within the heart of the city.[61] Although demonstrating an inkling of future reform efforts in Memphis, this movement was short-lived, as the yellow fever epidemic hit the city in 1878.

The yellow fever epidemic changed the face of Memphis and halted its growth significantly. Migration between New Orleans and Memphis in the 1870s, along with poor urban hygiene, are believed to have caused the epidemic. Reports of an epidemic in New Orleans reached Memphis in July of 1878. City officials responded by spreading lime in the streets, burning trash, and quarantining boats on the Mississippi River. However, these efforts did not stem the spread of the disease and by August, the city declared an epidemic. In the 1878 epidemic, more than half the city's population evacuated, with only 6,000 white citizens remaining in the city. Many African Americans did not have the economic means to leave the city, so around 14,000 remained through the duration of the epidemic.[62] The death toll reached 5,000 among the combined white and African American population, a blow to the city from which it would take years to recover. Given the mass evacuation of the city due to the epidemic, few people remained behind to care for the ill.[63]

For the most part, only those on the "edge" of Memphis society, like sex workers, and those without the means to flee, such as African Americans, remained in Memphis. One figure—Madam Annie Cook—gained infamy due to her alleged "transformation" from madam to angel during the epidemic. Annie Cook ran "The Mansion," which was a famous brothel in the 1870s. Located at 34 Gayoso Avenue, Cook's home initially gained fame due to her opulent brothel and the number of girls she employed. The yellow fever epidemic

[61] "News of Bygone Days 100 Years Ago: August 14,1874," *The Commercial Appeal*, August 14, 1974, The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.
[62] Beverly G. Bond and Janann Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2003) 63.
[63] Bond and Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, 63.

wiped out a large portion of the population, including some of Cook's girls and several of her clients. Rather than flee like other Memphians, Cook turned her brothel into a small yellow fever hospital for victims on and around Gayoso Avenue. She and several of her workers nursed sick patients, shrugging off the social stigma brought by sex work to become community volunteers. Annie Cook died of yellow fever in 1879 because of her close contact with the disease.[64]

The yellow fever epidemic was the first major factor to transform the sex industry in Memphis from a scattered but expansive world to a centralized district. Between 1880 and 1900, the sex industry became centralized around one street: Gayoso Avenue. Several key factors contributed to this centralization, including the response to the yellow fever epidemic, a major fire in the downtown area, business-savvy African American entrepreneurs, and unspoken policies of acceptance for sex work in Memphis.

Memphis in the 1880s: A Growing Sex Industry and African American Community

The yellow fever epidemic transformed the population of Memphis, changing both the available clientele and the numbers of workers in Memphis' sex industry. The 1880s became a transformative decade for sex work—clearly evidenced by the census records and City Directories of the period. Initially, the yellow fever epidemic wiped out the population in Memphis, resulting in a smaller sex work industry. This population decline is evident by the 1880 census reports, where only six brothels can be clearly identified in the records. The 1880 City Directory indicates a bit larger sex work industry, identifying 16 madams in Memphis.[65] In October of 1880, *The Memphis Daily Appeal* reported that 30 houses of ill fame

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[64] Mildred Hicks ed., "Yellow Fever and the Board of Health- Memphis, 1878" (The Memphis and Shelby County Health Department, 1964), 28.

[65] *Memphis, Tennessee, City Directory, 1880.* Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011

existed in Memphis at that time, with a total of 124 "inmates." Police tallied the number after a young girl ran away from home and ended up in madam Grace Podesta's famous brothel called the "Bon Ton."[66] The police tally indicates that as of 1880, Memphis' sex industry remained beleaguered.

However, Memphis' sex industry still drew a wide-range of workers that migrated to Memphis despite the epidemic. Take, for example, the brothel of Madam Kate Cessna, a white 28-year-old from Pennsylvania. She ran a brothel on Gayoso Avenue in 1880. Although the story as to how she came into sex work remains unknown, it is clear that she was literate, spoke English, and could write. She also rented the house in which she ran her business and had no children. Given the fact that she rented rather than owned her establishment, Cessna was likely of a lower economic class in Memphis. Cessna employed eight workers. All of the workers living in her house were white, literate, could write, and were single. No children lived in the house and none of the inhabitants had ever had any children, as of 1880. The ages of sex workers in Kate Cessna's house ranged from 19 to 30. Most significantly, the inhabitants also came from eight different states including Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia, Kentucky, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and Georgia.[67] This wide range of states suggests that despite the epidemic in Memphis, workers still migrated to Memphis.

Cessna's house reveals some of the legal and cultural realities of brothel life in Memphis. First, Kate Cessna's brothel reveals the education level of her workers. The literacy rate of Cessna's workers challenges commonly held stereotypes of sex worker

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[66] "Local Paragraphs," *Memphis Daily Appeal*, October 13, 1880, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress.
[67] "1880 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 79-1279, Enumeration District 141, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

ignorance and victimhood. As the census records indicate, every sex worker could read and write. Within popular lore characterizing sex work, many girls are characterized as ignorant and thus easily preyed upon by madams and white slave traders.[68] The education level of Cessna's workers contradicts this notion, not necessarily indicating that the workers chose sex work, but at least revealing that presupposed ignorance was not a key factor in their move into sex work as suggested by many reformers of the period.[69] Second, the entire brothel was white, as were the other five brothels identified in the census records in 1880.[70] This is not say that African American prostitutes did not exist in Memphis. Rather, in this consolidation period after the yellow fever epidemic, there are no visible African American brothels in 1880 Memphis.

Arguably, this invisibility results from two key factors: the economic positioning of African Americans in Memphis in the 1880s and the growing power of Jim Crow legislation. Scholars argue that the larger number of African Americans remaining the city after the yellow fever epidemic resulted from their lack of economic power.[71] Many African Americans could not afford to flee the city. Similarly, the sex industry in Memphis reflected an economic and racial hierarchy. Women employed in brothels and those who ran them typically had more economic power than other sex workers. However, in 1880s Memphis, white women were the only visible brothel workers, reflecting a racial hierarchy in the sex industry. African American women were more likely to work as "crib girls" than as sex

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[68] For a discussion of the construction of white women and trafficking, see Laura Hapke, "The Late Nineteenth-Century American Streetwalker: Images and Realities," *Mid-America* 65, no. 3 (1983): 155-156.
[69] Madeleine, for example, challenges the presumption that sex workers must be ignorant. Rather, she indicates that a sex workers' intelligence tended to increase her cost to clients, being a significant draw. See, Anonymous, *Madeleine: An Autobiography*, 69-70.
[70] "1880 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 1279, Enumeration District 140, Found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Library.
[71] Molly Caldwell Crosby, *The American Plague: The Untold Story of Yellow Fever, The Epidemic that Shaped Our History* (New York: Berkley Books, 2006) 19.; Dr. Sybil C. Mitchell, "'Negroes' saved Memphis," *The Tri-State Defender*, 15 February 2007.

workers in brothels. Crib girls or workers were not employed in a brothel but used sex work to supplement their incomes in the evenings. Typically, "crib girls" worked in small, one-room "cribs"—often tangentially positioned as an offshoot to the main red light district of a city. Unfortunately, "crib girls" are often more invisible than workers employed in brothels, as they are not indicated on census records or recorded in city directories. In fact, law enforcement produced the most evidence detailing the lives of "crib girls," as these workers were more susceptible to being arrested than brothel workers because they did not have a madam as an advocate who could pay off police.[72] However, as a result of the racial hierarchy in the 1880 Memphis sex industry, African American "crib girls" are not visible in the historical record during this period.

A long history of anti-miscegenation laws in Tennessee and expanding Jim Crow laws resulted in a segregated sex work industry, also contributing to rendering African American sex workers more invisible in the historical record. Lawmakers amended the Tennessee Constitution in 1822 to prevent interracial marriage.[73] Peggy Pascoe discusses the antebellum commitment to preventing interracial marriage in Tennessee, noting that the white partner in these relationships was often punished. She quotes the 1822 Constitutional Amendment, in which "any 'white' person who should 'presume to live with any negro, mustee, or mulatto man or woman as man and wife' was subject to criminal conviction and a fine of $500 payable 'to any person who will sue for the same.'"[74] In the postwar period, Tennessee maintained a commitment to preventing interracial sex through a series of Jim Crow laws, passed in the 1870s and 1880s. One such law, passed in 1875, stated that

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[72] Michael Rutter, *Upstairs Girls: Prostitution in the American West* (Helena, Montana: Far Country Press, 2005) 22-23.
[73] Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009) 21.
[74] Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 27.

proprietors of public spaces and places of amusement could lawfully segregate such spaces, preventing African Americans from entering.[75] This legalized segregation influenced the sex work industry, resulting in certain types of brothels visible in the census records: (1) all white, (2) all black, and (3) the invisible running of brothels by black men. Importantly, white madams and all-white brothels were more visible in the historical record whereas, as I indicated, African American sex workers tended to work as crib girls, African American entrepreneurs tended to remain in the background, and all-black brothels were rare.

In sum, the census records and city directories indicate a smaller sex industry in Memphis in 1880. Due to the yellow fever epidemic, the industry was reduced and mostly populated by white, educated young women. However, by the 1890s, the sex work industry in Memphis became more diverse and centralized around Gayoso Avenue. Paradoxically, this transformation was set in motion by the yellow fever epidemic and the entrepreneurial spirit of Robert Church.

Memphis in the 1890s: A Recognizable and Formidable Sex Industry

Due to the destruction of the yellow fever epidemic, Memphis' sex industry had largely been abandoned by the 1880s and ripe for development. One entrepreneur—African American Robert Church—recognized the potential in the development of the industry. Born a slave, he was the product of his enslaved mother and slave-owning father. In 1880, census takers recorded Robert Church as a saloon owner, who had lived and worked in Memphis since 1865, with one other person in his employ: Julia McClister.[76] Church

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[75] Black Past.Org: Remembered and Reclaimed, "Jim Crow Laws: Tennessee, 1866-1955," http://www.blackpast.org/primary/jim-crow-laws-tennessee-1866-1955 [accessed September 1, 2015].
[76] "1880 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 1279, Enumeration District 140, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

became one of the most recognizable figures in Beale Street history, making his name and building his wealth through the sex work industry.

When Robert Church first arrived, he attempted to open the first black-owned billiard hall but was refused a permit. He opened anyway. He was indicted for this action and his lawyer called upon the newly minted Civil Rights Bill to defend him. His lawyer indicated that Memphis laws prohibiting billiard saloons applied solely to white men. As reported by the editor of the *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, his lawyer argued:

> that the Civil Rights bill, if constitutional, was an enabling statue, and simply prohibited a negro from being punished in any greater degree or in any other manner than a white man for the same offense. But the Civil Rights bill did not contemplate that a negro or freeman of color should thereby be made liable for offenses for which he was not before liable, simply because white men were liable for such offenses.

His lawyer went on to argue that no statute strictly prohibited free men of color from running and owning saloons.[77] Ultimately, Church was released and allowed to run his saloon.[78]

Robert Church took advantage of natural disaster to advance an innovative business plan. He first opened his saloon in September of 1870 and his influence in Memphis followed the long history of vice in this bluff city river town.[79] In fact, Church's vice-based business—from selling sex to providing sites for gambling—resulted in him becoming one of the first African American millionaires. Church took advantage of the transformations resulting from yellow fever epidemic in Memphis. Like Annie Cook, he refused to leave and instead began buying real estate as his white counterparts fled the city.

[77] Editor, "Editor of the Avalanche," *Memphis Daily Avalanche* Vol. 8, Issue 93 [April, 15, 1866] 3.
[78] Preston Lauterbach, *Beale Street Dynasty: Sex, Song, and the Struggle for the Soul of Memphis* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015) 16.
[79] Lauterbach, *Beale Street Dynasty*, 39.

Church's business model involved renting establishments to madams, indirectly benefitting from the industry and navigating tricky race relations of the period. For example, he rented one such location, 34 Saint Martin Street, to a white woman named Miss Mary Eyrich.[80] The census takers indicated she was a seamstress, living alone with her son but lore tells another story.[81] As Preston Lauterbach discusses in *Beale Street Dynasty*, Miss Eyrich actually ran a brothel disguised as a dress shop. The cover allowed Eyrich to have "models" in her business and provided a clear story for male patrons, who allegedly visited Miss Eyrich to find dresses for their significant others.[82] This business venture indicates the nature of Church's business acumen: he bought and sold in the trade of white female sexuality as a black man but did so by proxy.

A second disaster allowed Church to centralize the district around Gayoso Avenue. As reported by both the *Memphis Daily Appeal* and the *Memphis Avalanche*, a major fire originated at William's Sawmill, "on Second Street, just north of Gayoso." The fire spread quickly down Gayoso Avenue, destroying several boarding houses and brothels. As the *Appeal* reported, Memphis' "soiled doves" and the lumber industry were most affected by the fire. Two madams, Lou Sholes and Blanche McGee, lost their brothels and the furnishings inside. The *Appeal* reported the madams collectively lost 12,000 dollars worth of furnishings, indicating the opulence of their brothels. Unfortunately, however, their insurance only covered a portion of this loss—as was true for most those who lost their businesses on Gayoso Avenue.[83] Robert Church took advantage of these losses and the

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[80] Lauterbach, *Beale Street Dynasty*, 51.
[81] "1880 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 1279, Enumeration District 143, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.
[82] Lauterbach, *Beale Street Dynasty*, 51.
[83] "A Big Blaze," *Memphis Daily Appeal,* July 30, 1885, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress.

precarious financial situation of these madams and others. He purchased several of the scorched businesses on Gayoso. Previously, these businesses were owned by John Overton Jr. and Dr. H. J. Shah—who both wanted to avoid the publicity that the fire brought to the growing red light district they benefited from. Church "amassed property" and maintained his business model of renting establishments to white madams, centralized on Gayoso Avenue and in close distance to his "legitimate" saloon business.[84] Allegedly, Church's business model was to rent houses to madams for extreme sums but not take part in the sex industry directly. In 1893, he got into a legal argument with Madam Biddie Sayers, in which he argued that he could not be held accountable for the actions of his tenants because he only rented the homes. By renting the brothels rather than running them, Robert Church was able to greatly benefit from the selling of sex without the legal ramifications of the business.[85]

Robert Church was not the only business owner benefitting from the expanding red light district. Rather, he was one of many who benefitted from Memphis' wide-open policies. As reported in the *Memphis Public Ledger*, sex workers benefitted from an "unwritten" policy. Judge Pappy Hadden stated:

> You girls are probably ignorant of our rules here but you won't be in a few minutes, for I'll state 'em:
>
> You must stay in the house at night. In the day time you can go ridin' if you conduct yourself so people can't tells you're different from other ladies, but when you violate the rules you must suffer the penalty of the iniquity and divide the wages of sin with the city. Ten apiece, please.[86]

Here, Judge Hadden indicates that sex workers in Memphis could freely live and work in the city if they abided by certain rules. Otherwise, they would be fined. Thus, sex work

[84] Lauterbach, *Beale Street Dynasty*, 66-67.
[85] Lauterbach, *Beale Street Dynasty*, 68.
[86] Lauterbach, *Beale Street Dynasty*, 58.; "David is Down on Dives," *Public Ledger*, May 7, 1888, p. 4.

flourished in Memphis in the 1890s, reflecting the "wide open" policies of Memphis' local government. Although census records do not remain, city directories tell the story of Memphis' expanding but centralized red light district.

Memphis in 1900: A Visible and Centralized Sex Industry

Between 1880 and 1900, Memphis' red light district not only expanded but also became centralized on and around one key street—Gayoso Avenue—creating a recognizable industry populated with familiar faces. Gayoso Avenue became the centralized hub of the red light district by the early 1890s and remained so through the early 1900s. Initially, only one or two brothels existed on Gayoso Avenue, such as the famous "mansion" run by Annie Cook in the 1870s.[87] Cook's mansion remained a brothel—operated by different madams throughout the 1880s. In fact, the City Directory identified many of the same addresses as brothels in these intervening years.[88] The centralization on this street rendered madams more visible, showing how several of the same madams worked for several years in Memphis' sex industry. Kate Cessna, for example, worked as a madam between 1880 and 1888, according to City Directory Records.[89] Frankie Eastwood worked between 1876 and 1888 and Pauline Livingston between 1876 and 1885.[90] Working for a decade or more indicates that madams enjoyed longevity in their positions. Although they sometimes changed houses, they often remained in the business for several years, establishing a clear red light district in Memphis that was highly recognizable as of 1900 on

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[87] *Memphis, Tennessee, City Directory, 1878.* Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011

[88] *Memphis, Tennessee, City Directory, 1880-1885.* Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011

[89] *Memphis, Tennessee, City Directory, 1880-1885, 1888.* Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

[90] *Memphis, Tennessee, City Directory, 1876-1879, 1880-1885, and 1888.* Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

Gayoso Avenue but also on its many cross streets, including Hernando, Desoto, and Monroe Street.[91]

Moreover, by 1900, Memphis' sex industry had grown immensely, become highly centralized, and far more visible. In the year 1900, 24 brothels can be clearly identified within the United States census records, which included around 190 sex workers in total.[92] Moreover, the size of the brothels increased, with each brothel having at least five workers and usually upwards of ten to 11.[93] Obviously, this is a much larger number of workers than seen in 1880, showing both the growth of the city of Memphis and the sex industry.

This increase in the population of the sex industry reflected Memphis' population boom since the epidemic. In fact, Memphis' population had nearly doubled because of a transformation in the transportation infrastructure of the city. The opening of the "Great Mississippi River Bridge" greatly expanded Memphis' economy and stability. Fifty thousand people watched the ceremony as the bridge opened on May 12th of 1892. As Beverly Bond and Janann Sherman argue in *Memphis in Black and White*, "the opening of the Great River Bridge symbolized Memphis' emergence as a New South city."[94] A conglomerate of the Kansas City, Fort Scott and Memphis Railroad interests built the bridge. It was "the first bridge across the Mississippi River below St. Louis." The opening of this bridge ushered in a new era of prosperity for Memphis. By 1892, the population had

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[91] "1900 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 623-1597, Enumeration District 70, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.
[92] "1900 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 623-1597, Enumeration District 70, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.
[93] "1900 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 623-1597, Enumeration District 70, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.
[94] Beverly G. Bond and Janann Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White* (Charleston, SC: Acardia Publishing, 2003) 66.

almost doubled since the epidemic. Transportation was being revolutionized, with the first street cars, a new railroad, paved streets, and street lamps.[95]

The census records provide a snapshot of the industry in the early 1900s. The brothels were segregated by race, with the majority being all-white brothels. Every sex worker on these census records, black and white, was literate and could write. All of the sex workers themselves were single and most were childless. Those who did have children did not have them living with them. In contrast, about four of the 17 madams were married and had children. Some of these children were living with the madams, suggesting that they did not view their profession or homes as being morally corrupt like the reformers thought. The average age of the sex worker was 28. The youngest sex worker was 16 and the oldest was 30. Every madam but one rented her establishment.[96] This final point suggests that there were owners, such as Robert Church, not involved in prostitution that benefited from the sex trade. It could also mean a type of economic hierarchy in the red light district, with building owners at the top, followed by madams, sex workers, and finally, the servants within the brothels. This hierarchy places sex work and its employers within the larger economic structure of Memphis.

Comparing all-white and all-black brothels in the 1900 census records reveals distinctions between white and African American brothel culture, particularly as the industry related to family. Biddie Sayer, a white woman, ran an all-white brothel in 1900. Sayer's place was located at 111 Gayoso Avenue. At the time that the 1900 census was taken, Biddie Sayer was 44 years old. According to City Directories, Sayer had been

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[95] Bond and Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, 66-67.
[96] "1900 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 623-1597, Enumeration District 70, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

working in Memphis as a madam since 1885.[97] She was white, as were all of the girls she employed within her establishment. According to the census, she was the landlady of her establishment and none of her female boarders had recorded jobs.[98] Her brothel included single, young women, ranging in age from 17 to 28. The workers came from several states including Tennessee, Arkansas, Ohio, Illinois, Mississippi, and Maryland. Biddie Sayer was from Maryland. She rented her establishment at 111 Gayoso from Robert Church, and it was one of the largest brothels in her surrounding neighborhood.[99] Like most prostitutes in Memphis, Biddie Sayer and all of the girls working for her were literate and could write. None of the members of her brothel were immigrants and they could all speak English. Biddie Sayer's establishment is similar to other white brothels around her but it was not indicative of those establishments housing only African American women.[100]

One of the famous establishments during 1900 was the "Stanley Club" at 121 Gayoso Avenue, run by Grace Stanley. She and her entire house were African American. The club was known for its "expensive furnishings and a proper regard for amenities." Grace Stanley was "one of the most notorious women in Memphis, and it was commonly held that she was the possessor of great wealth."[101] In fact, Grace Stanley was the only madam who owned her establishment and did not rent it. She was a successful entrepreneur. There could be many reasons for her economic prosperity, including the lure of the supposed exotic nature of African American sex workers or that she was not targeted

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[97] *Memphis, Tennessee, City Directory, 1885.* Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

[98] Given the location of the house and the status of the women at Biddie Sayer's house, it can be assumed that the only means they had to pay for their rent was prostitution.

[99] Lauterbach, *Beale Street Dynasty*, 68.

[100] "1900 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 1597, Enumeration District 70, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

[101] William D. Miller, *Memphis During the Progressive Era: 1900-1917* (Memphis, TN: Memphis State University Press, 1957) 90.

by the white authorities for reform or censure because of her race—both issues I will discuss in later chapters.

Grace Stanley's brothel was also different from the all-white brothels in that along with the five sex workers she employed, she had her family working for her as hotel waiters and porters, including her mother, two half brothers, nephew, and niece. Her niece, 15-year-old Effie Linton, even attended school while she lived at the brothel in 1900.[102] White madams rarely had their families living with them and also rarely had extra employees living in the house like maids or waiters. This suggests that the African American community did not necessarily relegate sex workers to the margins of society like the white community. Rather, as suggested by the family living with Grace Stanley, perhaps they allowed for traditional family ties even within these non-traditional homes.

Compared to Sayer's brothel, Stanley employed younger workers but these workers were all educated and from a wide variety of states. Her workers ranged in age from 17 to 23. Many of the white brothels had older women, past 25, working in them, but Stanley's Club and other African American brothels did not. All of the inhabitants of Grace Stanley's household were literate and could write. Finally, all of her workers were from all different states, including Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, and Tennessee.[103] Like her white counterparts, this suggests that Stanley and Memphis' African American sex industry writ large were connected to other states, pulling a migratory population to Memphis to work in their businesses.

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[102] "1900 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 1597, Enumeration District 70, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.
[103] "1900 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 1597, Enumeration District 70, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

Importantly, Grace Stanley's success corresponded with a growth in African American businesses and communities in the same cross-section of streets as the sex industry, including the growing entertainment district of Beale Street. In 1900, Robert Church solidified the placement of the African American entertainment district on Beale Street by opening an auditorium, known as the "Park," that sat 2,000 people and was reserved for African Americans.[104] This venue became "the center for social life for most of the black people of Memphis." From "graduations" to "dances" to "conventions," the "Park" was one of the main venues for African American celebrations and entertainment. For many years, it was one of the few venues in which African Americans "could perform for black audiences."[105] Thus, Beale Street became a key site of escape for African Americans, particularly escape from the growing segregation and racial violence of Memphis.

Segregation structured the spatial layout of the city, clearly dividing the growing African American and white population of Memphis according to race. In 1890, 44% of the population was African American. For the labor force, this meant that 33% of the male laborers were African American and 75% of the female laborers were African American. Despite the large numbers of African Americans in Memphis, the city remained segregated. Several "black neighborhoods that began developing in the suburbs of the city in the post-Civil War period spread outward by the late nineteenth century."[106] All of the "hospitals, schools, churches, hotels, restaurants, and cemeteries" were segregated.[107] Segregation and subordination of African Americans was enforced through vigilante violence. Indeed, the

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[104] Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue: Life and Music on Black America's Main Street* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1981) 13.
[105] McKee and Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue*, 14.
[106] Bond and Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, 71.
[107] Bond and Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, 71.

1890s marked a peak of racial violence in Memphis, including an increase in the number of lynchings of African Americans.[108] For example, Ida B. Wells, a crusading black journalist, saw her friend Thomas Moss lynched in front of his own grocery store because he outsold his white competitors. Protesting the violence through a column in Memphis' newspaper, *Free Speech*, Wells faced threats of lynching as well.[109]

Despite racial violence, Memphis continued to prosper; by the turn of the twentieth century, the city had "quadrupled in size." In 1899, the city "annexed 12 square miles to the east and north" of the original city. This change in size also resulted in a change in the economy of Memphis. The downtown began to be built, with some of the first skyscrapers of the city going up. Several new mills and factories opened, providing more jobs.

Unfortunately, this prosperity did not change racial divisions. African Americans were still excluded from government, segregated into separate business and residential districts, and even prevented from attending publicly sponsored events like the Tri-State Fair.[110] As a result, African Americans sought alternative sites to succeed like Beale Street. Blues music was in full swing, with W.C. Handy at the helm. By 1900, a "small but significant group of black entrepreneurs opened businesses on Beale Street as a way to gain economic independence." Although "known for its gambling houses, music, restaurants, saloons, and other places of entertainment," it soon became a haven for African American economic, social, and religious interests.[111] Beale Street flourished as the site of "Black-owned banks, funeral homes, insurance, and real estate companies, newspapers," and

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[108] Bond and Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, 72.
[109] Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work: A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the United States* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1996) 163.
[110] Bond and Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, 78.
[111] Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, inc., 2000) 34.

churches.[112] Growing alongside Beale, Gayoso Avenue became the home of Memphis' red light district. The two streets intersected, sharing workers and clientele. Thus, despite racism engrained in the political, economic, and social structure of Memphis, Beale Street and Gayoso Avenue afforded African Americans and other marginalized peoples, like sex workers, a space to flourish.[113] And as will be discussed below, by 1910, African American sex workers gained control of the sex industry, developing and expanding their businesses.

Memphis in the 1910s: Racist Reforms and a Separate African American Sex Industry

By 1910 and beyond, growing reform efforts had transformed Memphis' sex industry. A majority of the country had started reform projects in mass numbers and Memphis followed suit, with prostitution being one occupation some women's clubs hoped to eradicate in Memphis. Alleged white slave trafficking dominated the national and local discourse shaping the reform efforts of Memphis' white clubwomen. For example, in 1910, after years of lobbying by white female reformers, Congress passed the Mann Act, also known as the "white slavery act." This Act prevented the movement of a person across state borders for immoral purposes and demonstrated the increased hysteria surrounding the alleged white slave trafficking problem.[114] Many reformers believed that innocent white women, usually new to the city and from rural areas, were particularly susceptible to the lure of the sex industry by growing numbers of immigrant men.[115] In Memphis, as I discuss

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[112]Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 35.
[113] Still, African Americans in Memphis had less political and social influence, dealing with racism at all levels of Memphis' social structure. For example, E.H. Crump, often known as Boss Crump, ran the political machine in Memphis for nearly 30 years; he treated African Americans with a "paternalistic attitude." During his mayoral stint from 1909 to 1916, Crump met only "a few of their needs," and ultimately, reflected the racist notion that "black citizens" were "inferior to whites," having a "proper place" excluded from white society and power. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 30-33.
[114] "Federal Mann Act," US Legal, Inc., http://prostitution.uslegal.com/federal-mann-act/ (accessed April 3, 2016).
[115] Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century,* (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997) 16-17.

in more detail in Chapter Six, local reform efforts responded to this alleged threat of white slave trafficking, building reform houses to save "innocent" white women from the sex industry. However, these discourses reflected the racist assumptions of these same clubwomen, as they did not see African American women as susceptible to the same lures or worthy of being "saved" more generally. Rather, white female reformers often constructed African American women as advocates of the industry and naturally predisposed to the selling of sex.[116] Subsequently, the 1910 census records tell a far different and far shorter story than in 1900 about sex work in Memphis—a story in which race figures prominently.

1910 census records indicate that there were only a few all-white brothels and most had either mixed races or all African American females employed in red light district, demonstrating the racist reform efforts of Memphis' clubwomen. Overall, the number of sex workers in 1910 was far less than in 1900. According to the census records, the average age of the sex worker in 1910 was 22, six years younger than in 1900. The youngest sex worker in the census records was 14 and the oldest was 28. As in 1900, almost all of the sex workers were literate and could write. A majority of the sex workers were single and most did not have children. Also, similar to 1900, any women who had children only had them living with them if they lived within African American brothels.[117] A major difference, though, was the change in race of the sex workers. In 1900, there were far more all-white brothels, but by 1910 African American women dominated the industry. This is an extremely

[116] Mumford, *Interzones*, 47-48. Notably, however, African American female reformers fought against these stereotypes. See, for example, Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Books, 1996).; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
[117] "1910 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 624-1519, Enumeration District 118, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

significant change resulting from racist reform efforts that were inspired by a national movement to eradicate sex work in the United States.

The identification of sex workers in census records further evidences the growing local and national reform movement to eradicate sex work in Memphis and the United States. In 1900, census takers did not record occupations for sex workers. In contrast, the census takers in 1910 at first wrote that the prostitutes were simply boarders with nothing written under occupation or wrote "none" under occupation. Then, these initial entries were crossed out and replaced with the generic "worker" and sometimes with "none." This was true for majority of the women identified as living in brothels during this period. These changes to the original documents of the census records show that concern over prostitution was national as well as local. Federal census takers did not want the records to suggest that there were prostitutes, and they therefore tried to cover it up. If women were given the occupation of "boarder," it would have been easier to assume that these women were prostitutes. Although saying "none" is not much better, it still shows that federal census takers did not want to think that women paid for their board by being boarders i.e. sex-workers. This was not the case in 1900 and this change mirrors the growth in social consciousness that both the nation and Memphis had undergone between 1900 and 1910.[118]

Two brothels demonstrate the type of brothels and sex workers in Memphis in 1910. Maude Bernstein ran the first and her establishment was located around 200 Gayoso Avenue, near Biddie Sayer's new location.[119] Bernstein was a 19-year-old white woman from California. She was one of the younger madams, being the same age as several of the women working for her. Still, this did not seem to be unusual. For example, famed New

[118] "1910 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 624-1519, Enumeration District 118, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.
[119] The exact address is illegible but her establishment is located right before 211 and 219 Gayoso Avenue.

Orleans madam Norma Wallace was also quite young when she first became a madam.[120] Maude Bernstein's house had seven prostitutes in it, ranging in age from 16 to 27. The girls came from several different states, including Alabama, Texas, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Iowa. All of the girls were white and literate. None of the girls had children and they were all single.[121]

Mattie Lee's establishment reflected some similarities to Maude Bernstein's brothel in literacy and age range but differed in the familial structure of the business. Lee employed four sex workers. All of the Lee's workers appeared to be literate and could write—a fact that seems to be true for almost every sex worker identified within the census.[122] The youngest woman working for Lee was 16 and the oldest was 28. All of the women in the house were African American and were identified as such in the census records. Beyond the race of her workers, Lee's brothel differed from Bernstein's because her household also included her daughter and two grandsons. Like Grace Stanley, Lee's establishment included more than simply sex workers. It included her family.

Lee's inclusion of her family is particularly important for understanding the differences between African American and white women of the same economic class of Memphis' sex industry. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, in *Living in, Living Out: African American Domestics and the Great Migration*, demonstrates the importance of familial connections to the African American community. She shows how whenever young African American women were sent to work in the city, they often lived with family members, sent money back to

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[120] Christine Wiltz, *The Last Madam: A Life in the New Orleans Underworld* (Boston, MA: DiCappo Press, 2000) 30.

[121] "1910 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 624-1519, Enumeration District 118, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

[122] "1910 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 624-1519, Enumeration District 118, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

their family, and considered time spent with their family of the utmost importance.[123] Thus, as the census records demonstrate, both in 1900 and 1910, this system of kinship ties reached even the lowest rungs of society, influencing the ways in which African American women set up their brothels.

Lee's brothel is indicative of two key changes in 1910: the familial culture of the African American sex industry and the growing African American role in the sex industry, whether alongside the former main red light district on Gayoso or beyond. By 1910, a growing African American red light district emerged that was adjacent to the Gayoso Avenue sex industry. Rayburn Boulevard and S. Rayburn Boulevard became the site of a predominantly African American red light district. Located South of Gayoso and Beale Street, this newly formed red light district included at least five new brothels in 1910. Like African American brothels on Gayoso Avenue, several brothels housed families, including married couples and children. For example, Dora Smith ran a brothel with six workers but also housed her 9-year-old son, Herma Clemons.[124] The existence of this new African American sex industry offshoot indicates that African Americans maintained successful brothels despite heightened reform efforts. As I will discuss in Chapter Six, reformers in Memphis tended to focus on reforming white sex workers, often leaving African American sex workers alone. As such, African American sex workers in 1910 Memphis had expanded their business and gained some stability.

Overall, between 1900 and 1910, two changes can be seen in the census records. The first change is a significantly lower number of sex workers and brothels in Memphis. The

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[123] Elizabeth Clark Lewis, *Living in, Living Out: African American Domestics and the Great Migration* (New York: Kodansha America, 1996) 147-172.
[124] "1910 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 624-1519, Enumeration District 1222, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

second is far less segregated establishments and far more African American sex workers in comparison to 1900 and the number of white prostitutes in 1910. Arguably, this transition in the sex industry reveals the growing "interzone" of Memphis.[125] I will discuss the cultural contributions of interzones in more detail in later chapters. Ultimately, however, I want to highlight the mapping of interzones onto Memphis' city streets that remained even after local and national reform efforts rendered Memphis' sex work industry invisible.

By 1920, Memphis' sex industry is no longer visible in the historical record. A combination of the reform efforts mentioned earlier and the growing national efforts to eradicate the sex industry moved it underground. By 1918, the U.S. government passed other legislation to further curtail the rights of sex workers, such as the passage of the Chamberlain-Kahn Act or the Public Health and Research Act of 1918 that gave governments the right to test women suspected of sexual deviancy for sexually transmitted diseases.[126] With the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment, prohibition of alcohol profoundly restructured the sex industry. Specifically, brothels either disbanded or moved underground; whereas, other areas of the sex industry diversified to remain distinct from the sale of alcohol.[127] In Memphis, brothels had disbanded and the visible sex industry had disappeared. However, despite being pushed underground, Memphis' sex industry left a lasting legacy for the city.

The cross section of society in downtown Memphis that I discuss in this chapter, literally mapped onto the corresponding streets, reveals a dynamic community of African American entrepreneurs and sex workers. Despite segregation and enhanced reform efforts,

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[125] See, Mumford, *Interzones,* xvii-xix.
[126] Alexandra M. Lord, "'Naturally Clean and Wholesome': Women, Sex Education, and the United States Public Health Services, 1918-1928" in *Social History of Medicine* 17, 3 (2004): 427.
[127] Clements, *Love for Sale*, 177.

entrepreneurs like Robert Church and Grace Stanley straddled the sex industry and leisure culture of Memphis, catering to both white desires and African American communities. As I will discuss in more detail in regards to St. Louis, these types of interzones allowed for expansive social and cultural exploration, giving birth to musical creations and creating safe spaces for the social downcast of these river towns. Thus, even though by 1920 there are no detectable brothels on or around Gayoso Avenue, these interzones left a lasting cultural imprint on the city. Sex workers and African American entrepreneurs greatly benefitted from the intersection of these two communities in Memphis, creating spaces of escape, musical exploration, and leisure in Memphis between 1880 and 1920.

Ultimately, Memphis' transformative sex industry and red light district reflect key aspects of river town brothel culture. First, the industry was greatly shaped by both natural disaster and individual entrepreneurs. The consolidation of the sex industry on and around Gayoso Avenue occurred after both a yellow fever epidemic and a fire eradicated much of the clientele and buildings of the former red light district in Memphis. In rebuilding, individuals like Robert Church capitalized on a key aspect of the river town: mobility. The industry became centralized near both the river and the railroad station, allowing the industry to recruit both clientele and workers from the transient working class population of this region. Moreover, this consolidation of the sex industry occurred around the growing African American entrepreneurial district, surrounding Beale Street. Finally, census records reflect the racist reform efforts of Memphis' Progressive era activists, resulting in a disproportionate number of African American sex workers still in the industry by the 1910s. Although driven underground by the 1920s, it is important to recognize the space of belonging that African American sex workers carved for themselves in Memphis and the

cross cultural, class, and race community of Gayoso, Beale, and many other cross streets of this river town bluff city.

Chapter Two

Legalization and Politicization: St. Louis and the Influence of River Town Migration on the Sex Industry

Traveling upriver to another river town, St. Louis, a story similar to Memphis' growth and decline emerges, but on a much larger scale and with a clear difference: unique governmental responses to public health. The history of sex work in Memphis has largely been silenced in the larger historiography and general remembrance of Memphis history. Conversely, in St. Louis, the stories of famed sex workers are a large part of the folklore surrounding the city. The construction of St. Louis as the gateway to the "wild west" has shaped much of this folklore. Although often romanticized, one great advantage for scholars of sex work is that this folklore surrounding sex work and constructing the gateway to the West as "wide open" is that sex work and brothel culture is more remembered in St. Louis than in Memphis. As such, it is much easier to locate the red light districts of St. Louis. And, just as in Memphis, the red light districts were centered around the levees and railroads—demonstrating the role of river town sex workers in the transient workforce of the Mississippi River system and later, railroad traffic between 1870 and 1920.

However, St. Louis differs from Memphis in that the driving force that changed the industry was governmental response to healthcare concerns. Specifically, in response to several epidemics, St. Louis officials temporarily legalized sex work, unintentionally politicizing the industry and expanding it far beyond Memphis' sex industry. In fact, sex workers developed an overtly political voice in St. Louis, using the legal system to contest their marginalization. The expansion and mediated acceptance of sex work gave rise to a

large cross-section of sex workers and African American entrepreneurs, creating an interzone where cultural, sexual, and economic exchange took place and shaped the city.

The mobility of sex workers between Memphis, St. Louis, Kansas City, and other river towns is apparent in the government reaction to that mobility, particularly in St. Louis. As sex workers moved between river towns, governments like those in St. Louis believed sex workers carried with them not just their persons but also possible communicable diseases, constructing the sex workers as a disease-ridden threat. As such, this mobility resulted in public health scares—the most extreme of which was in St. Louis. As discussed earlier, the Yellow Fever scare in Memphis greatly changed sex work and the general life of the city. The Yellow Fever epidemic also greatly affected sex work mobility because St. Louis used the epidemic and others as fodder for changing its policy towards migratory persons—particularly sex workers—between these two cities.

In St. Louis, the confluence of industrialization and concern over public health altered sex worker legal rights and social acceptance. St. Louis battled disease and economic downfall prior to Memphis, between the 1830s and 1850s. Although afflicted by the yellow fever outbreak in 1878 as the disease traveled up the Mississippi, St. Louis did not have as severe an epidemic because St. Louis had already battled several severe cholera outbreaks and, thus, had greater governance of public health. Specifically, the cholera outbreak of 1849 claimed 4,000 lives and another 1,500 more six years later. As a result, citizens of St. Louis became increasingly concerned with public health, reworking the sewer system so completely that St. Louis had one of the most "advanced" sewer systems in the United States by the eve of the Civil War.[128]

[128] Andrew Hurley, Editor, *Common Fields: An Environmental History of St. Louis* (St. Louis, MO: Missouri History Museum, 1997), 5 and 151.

Still, this advanced system did not negate public health threats, in part because St. Louis had difficultly keeping up with its massive growth during this period and difficulty screening travelers coming into the city.[129] The post-bellum period in St. Louis witnessed the cities "transition from a commercial river town to an industrial metropolis," with a growing population to fuel this massive shift.[130] In 1867, St. Louis suffered a third cholera outbreak, claiming the lives of 3,500 people and resulting in the establishment of the St. Louis Board of Health. This new board passed multiple "nuisance policies," regulating not only industrial factories but also riverboats and their occupants traveling from places like Memphis.[131] Riverboats were not allowed to land in St. Louis without every passenger being inspected, quarantined, and the boat completely sanitized of disease. These heightened regulations indicate that St. Louis feared the mobile workers coming from less healthy locales in the South, like Memphis.[132]

The new Board of Health considered sex workers to be an extreme public health threat, leading St. Louis to temporarily legalize sex work in order to further regulate the health of workers. On July 10th, 1870, St. Louis passed the "social evil bill." This law required that all sex workers register with the government, endure consistent health checks, and pay fees to legally operate in the city.[133] Although repealed by 1874, this legalization had unforeseen effects including politicizing the industry. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter Six, St. Louis sex workers maintained a highly political voice in the decades

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[129] Hurley, *Common Fields*, 5 and 107-125.
[130] Hurley, *Common Fields*, 4.
[131] Hurley, *Common Fields*, 152-153.
[132] Hurley, *Common Fields*, 152.
[133] Duane Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice: Prostitution and the St. Louis Social Evil Ordinance, 1870-1874" *Gateway Heritage* (Fall, 1990): 24-25.

following the legalization of sex work in St. Louis, consistently contesting the government's and reformer's rights to control the sex industry.

The legalization of sex work between 1870 and 1874 in St. Louis also grew and diversified the industry, allowing sex workers to create enclaves of belonging for sex workers and other populations on the edges of St. Louis society. Between 1880 and 1890, the industry became increasingly racially diverse, resulting in more visible African American workers and madams. Capitalizing on white male sexual desire, African American madams became the faces of the sex work industry in St. Louis, navigating local and national concerns over anti-miscegenation laws to maintain businesses that reflected larger cultural obsessions with race, desire, and sexual consumption. These madams not only dominated the industry but also spearheaded its move to the African American Chestnut Valley neighborhood, following natural disaster, reform, and the opening of the railroad that changed the cityscape. As a result, the cross-racial, class, and sexual community of Chestnut Valley emerged, where the growth of a diverse, dynamic, and innovative community of sex workers, who—similar to those in Memphis—carved spaces for belonging for themselves alongside other social outcasts of the period that left a lasting cultural imprint on the city.

St. Louis in the 1870s: A Legalized Sex Industry

One infamous madam, Eliza Haycraft, provides useful entry to understanding sex work in St. Louis in the 1870s. She rose to fame and fortune simultaneously with the explosion of sex work in St. Louis—an explosion that led to unique reforms and a powerful change to the positioning of sex workers. Born in 1820, Eliza Haycraft experienced extreme poverty, limited opportunities, and never received an education. However, by her death in 1871, she was one of the wealthiest women in St. Louis. She entered the sex industry to

support herself, rising through the ranks from sex worker to madam to landlord. Her considerable wealth resulted from not just her management of brothels but also her real estate holdings. She purchased several homes in the red light district and rented to other madams, a common business practice of successful madams during this period. She is well remembered in St. Louis history, being commemorated as one of the 250 most influential people in St. Louis history on the 250th anniversary of the city's founding. This remembrance did not result from her extreme wealth; rather, Haycraft became well known as a philanthropist, often taking in the city's poor, feeding them, and providing them financial aid.[134] Her death was widely reported in Milwaukee, Idaho, Colorado, and San Francisco.[135] Arguably, she is well remembered not for being a wealthy madam but instead for her generosity, which salvaged her "fallen" reputation.

Significantly, Haycraft built her expansive business on and around the riverfront, providing a footprint for a growing industry. As both newspapers and tourist manuals indicate, St. Louis' sex industry dominated the riverfront in the 1870s. For example, one lengthy tale published in the *St. Louis Globe Democrat* in 1881 describes "a broil in a brothel" where one man died. The article locates the brothel on Poplar Street, near the riverfront.[136] In an article published in October of 1876, the *St. Louis Globe Democrat* identifies a more specific address of a brothel—105 Poplar Street—the locale of an attempted murder of a sex worker in Minnie Kraedler's brothel.[137] In fact, the *St. Louis Globe Democrat* locates several brothels in its pages between 1877 and 1881: 705 and 707 Christy Avenue, 715 North

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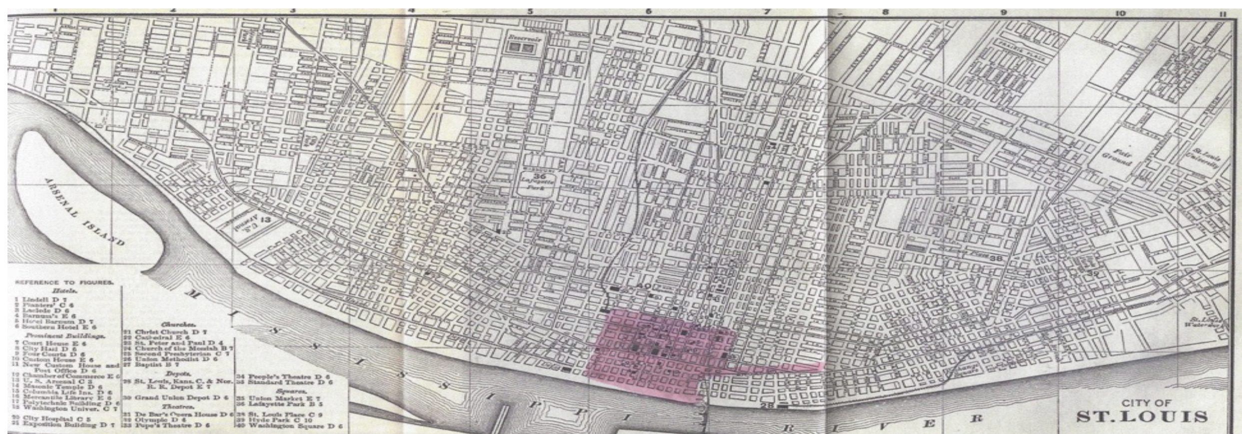
[134] 250/250, "Eliza Haycraft," http://250in250.mohistory.org/people/381 (accessed June 15, 2015).
[135] See, for example, "By Telegraph," *Daily Central City Register*, Issue 298, July 11, 1869.; "Eastern News," *The Owyhee Avalanche,* Issue 49, July 17, 1869.; "This Morning's Dispatches," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel,* Issue 161, July 10, 1869.
[136] "A Broil in a Brothel," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, March 20, 1881, page 2.
[137] "Blood in a Brothel," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, October 8th, 1876, page 4.

Seventh Street, and Fourth and Almond Street.[138] These newspaper references indicate a larger and more dispersed red light district than Memphis', with a central hub by the levee and some districts scattered near factories and other entertainment districts.

Similarly, reporters J. A. Dacus and James Buel describe the varied red light districts in their work on St. Louis, *A Tour of St. Louis: Inside the Life of a Great City*. Writing in 1878, Dacus and Buel tell the St. Louis visitor:

> If one determines to spend a night in the street and among the 'all night houses,' it might be well 'to take in' a part of Broadway, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth streets, with the east and west streets intersecting them, from Franklin Avenue south to Spruce Street. In this district streetwalkers and gamblers do most abound. The vicinity of large hotels are favorite waiting places for the fallen women who seek their prey on the thoroughfares. Sixth Street, between Washington Avenue and Market Street, is much used by these degraded beings. Chestnut Street, from the Courthouse to Eleventh Street, is also a much traveled highway of bawds after nightfall.[139]

Notably, this description locates sites where sex workers solicited work in hotels and on the streets, rather than in a designated brothel. According to historian Duane R. Sneddeker, each section of the red light district catered to varying tastes and class levels, ranging from



City of St. Louis Map, 1885

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[138] "A Bloody Pair," *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 318, April 3, 1877.

[139] J. A. Dacus and James Buel, *Tour of St. Louis: The Inside Life of a Great City* (St. Louis, MO: Western Publishing Company, 1878) 465-466.

high class and expensive brothels downtown, to "lower grade saloons and houses" on Almond Street, and to the "infamous Wild Cat Chute" North of downtown, where mostly women of color worked.[140] As such, the 1885 Map of St. Louis depicts the main corridors of sex work in St. Louis from 1870 through 1910.[141] The prominent red light districts existed on or near the Mississippi River levee. The higher-class brothels and hotels existed in the main square indicated by the highlighted portion. The offshoot of that district, following Broadway north, indicates the "wild cat chute" where most women of color worked in tenement housing cribs and in conjunction with other jobs. Like Memphis, this location was key for red light districts because it was a transitional space for river and railroad workers, meaning a consistent clientele passed through this area daily.

Census records reveal 32 brothels in St. Louis in 1870 and these brothels contained a diverse workforce by age, race, and literacy. For the most part, these brothels were located along with Mississippi River in Wards 5, 6, and 8. The two largest brothels provide a snapshot of the industry: Madam Kate Clark's house and Madam Lottee Toffee's house. The houses were about ten blocks away from each other, encompassing a large portion of the red light district between them and existing in different census wards. Kate Clark ran the largest of the brothels in the 1870 census records, with 21 workers in her employ, including 19 sex workers and two servants.[142] In a close second, Lottee Toffee employed 15 women and three servants.[143] Madam Clark employed 18 white women as sex workers and one

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[140] Duane R. Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice: Prostitution and the St. Louis Social Evil Ordinance, 1870-1874" *Gateway Heritage* (Fall, 1990): 23, 44. Janice Tremeear, *Wicked St. Louis* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2011) 85.
[141] University of Texas Library, "Historical Maps: St. Louis," http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/st_louis_1885.jpg (accessed June 11, 2015).
[142] "1870 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, Roll M593-814, St. Louis Ward 5, found in History Library Film.
[143] "1870 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, Roll M593-818, St. Louis Ward 8, found in History Library Film.

African American woman, named Julia Hawkins. Madam Toffee employed all white women as sex workers. However, both brothels included women of color as domestic servants. Madam Clark's workers ranged in age from 16 to 26, with Madam Clark in the middle of that age range at 22. Madam Toffee's workers ranged in age from 18 to 45—a much broader range than Kate Clark's house. Significantly, Madam Toffee was one of two workers in her home that were only 18 years old. Despite her age, Madam Toffee had amassed 3,000 dollars in personal real estate as of 1870. Kate Clark had amassed 7,000 dollars in personal property as of 1870. The 1870 census records also indicate that all of Kate Clark's workers could read and write, reflecting the same literacy rates as Memphis' sex industry workers. Conversely, five of Madam Toffee's girls could not read or write, including Madam Toffee herself. Another two workers could read but not write.[144] This evidence about age, race, and literacy indicates that the larger industry of St. Louis encompassed workers from more diverse backgrounds and perhaps with less formal education than workers in Memphis.

The large number of women working as sex workers reflects the boom in the sex work industry in 1870 St. Louis. However, some argue that this was not a boom at all. It was actually a decline in the number of women working. The social evil legislation, legalizing sex work and requiring registration, made sex workers far more visible in 1870 to the average St. Louis citizen and to the government. Police Chief James McDonough estimated that around 5,000 sex workers lived in the city prior to the law and only about 718 women decided to stay after the implementation of the law.[145] Arguably, both numbers are

[144] "1870 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, Roll M593-814, St. Louis Ward 5, found in History Library Film.; "1870 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, Roll M593-818, St. Louis Ward 8, found in History Library Film.
[145] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 25.

quite large, especially when compared to Memphis during the same period. The large number of sex workers reflects the large population in St. Louis—a population that had grown exponentially by 1870 to make St. Louis one of the largest cities in the country.[146] Moreover, as a key stop for both the steamboats and railroads, St. Louis attracted a transient population that simultaneously attracted sex workers to serve that population.[147] Importantly, the social evil legislation did not stem the growth of sex work for long in St. Louis. Rather, by 1873, the number of sex workers and brothels had risen. From 1871 to 1873, the number of brothels rose from 99 to 133 and the number of workers from 480 to 653.[148]

Kate Clark became a prominent proponent of the legalization and demonstrates the resulting politicization of St. Louis sex workers. After the 1870 law went into effect, sex workers were able to interact with police and the government on somewhat equal footing—resulting in a highly politicized population.[149] This politicization of the sex worker population was maintained throughout even the heaviest reform periods, with far more workers speaking out about their own well being and challenging reformers. Even after the law was repealed, there was a marked difference in the political voices of sex workers in St. Louis compared to Memphis.[150] I argue that this marked difference resulted from the brief period of legality that transformed sex work in St. Louis—a discussion I will explore in more detail in Chapter Six.

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[146] Katherine T. Corbett, *In Her Place: A Guide to St. Louis Women's History* (St. Louis, MO: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1999) 101-102.
[147] Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western River,* loc. 5723.
[148] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 25.
[149] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 27.; "Title Unknown," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, August 17, 1873.
[150] See, for example, "Local Brevities," *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 268, February 16, 1887.; "The Hundred-Yard Law," *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 95, August 26, 1886.; "Forced to Remove," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 343, May 2, 1887.

Because of the social evil law, the state of the red light district is also more apparent in the years between census collections. The social evil law resulted in the creation of the Social Evil Hospital, which eventually turned into the St. Louis Female Hospital. Although the social evil law was repealed in 1874, a policy of toleration was still in place and many sex workers readily identified themselves as such.[151] This is particularly true in the St. Louis Female Hospital records where admitted patients were asked their occupation. Intake nurses recorded that sex workers were either "prostitutes" or part of the "social evil"—reflecting the local vernacular for the sex industry in the post-legalization period.[152] Reformers had repealed the law in an effort to limit sex work in St. Louis. However, the hospital records indicate that this goal was not met. Rather, sex work appeared to increase. This evidence reflects a response to regulation: when sex work was legalized in St. Louis, the number of workers declined. When sex work became illegal (again), the number of sex workers increased.[153]

Between 1876 and 1880, around 600 self-identified sex workers visited the St. Louis Female hospital, reflecting only a portion of the sex worker population in St. Louis during this four-year period. Each patient at the St. Louis Female Hospital provided their name, occupation, year of arrival in the city, age, and race. The hospital also recorded the patients' ailments, health status, and home address. Between 1876 and 1880, sex workers visited the hospital from several different locations but the two most popular locations were 717 Christy Avenue and 109 Poplar Street. Both locations are in the prime red light district of St.

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[151] "7th Annual Report of the Health Department of the City of St. Louis: Fiscal Year 1884," (Saint Louis, MO: A. Ungar and Col., Steam Printers, 1883) 320.
[152] Volume 1: Patient Register Containing Names of Patients Admitted to the Hospital, 1876-1886, Box 1, Folder 1, Female Hospital of Saint Louis Records, Bernard Becker Medical Library Archives, Washington University School of Medicine.
[153] Volume 1: Patient Register Containing Names of Patients Admitted to the Hospital, 1876-1886, Box 1, Folder 1, Female Hospital of Saint Louis Records, Bernard Becker Medical Library Archives, Washington University School of Medicine.

Louis during this period. Moreover, the records provide a clearer picture of the red light district, showing brothels on S. Main, Broadway, Almond, Poplar, Christy, Carr, Biddle, Olive, Spruce, and the surrounding cross streets.[154]

Importantly, these records largely reflect the white sex work industry in St. Louis, with only 26 African American self-identifying as sex workers using the hospital resources, compared to the nearly 600 white sex workers recorded by the hospital.[155] Like in Memphis, this evidence does not suggest that African American sex workers did not exist. Rather, this evidence indicates that African American sex workers lived, worked, and were supported in separate parts of the city than their white counterparts. In fact, as I will discuss later in this chapter, two of the most wealthy and famous madams were both African American.

The hospital records provide other important data that challenges several key presumptions about sex workers. First, the records indicate a broad age range of sex workers between 14 and 47.[156] This range challenges the presumption that sex workers only worked at young ages. Still, the vast majority of workers were indeed young, between 17 and 23. Despite the majority being of a young age, evidence indicates some sex workers could remain in the business, even into their forties, revealing that workers could have longevity in this industry. Similarly, although a vast majority of the workers were single, a significant

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[154] Volume 1: Patient Register Containing Names of Patients Admitted to the Hospital, 1876-1880, Box 1, Folder 1, Female Hospital of Saint Louis Records, Bernard Becker Medical Library Archives, Washington University School of Medicine.
[155] Volume 1: Patient Register Containing Names of Patients Admitted to the Hospital, 1876-1880, Box 1, Folder 1, Female Hospital of Saint Louis Records, Bernard Becker Medical Library Archives, Washington University School of Medicine.
[156] Volume 1: Patient Register Containing Names of Patients Admitted to the Hospital, 1876-1886, Box 1, Folder 1, Female Hospital of Saint Louis Records, Bernard Becker Medical Library Archives, Washington University School of Medicine.

number were also married or widowed—around 116 of these workers.[157] Again, the majority of workers reflect the presumptions about sex work: that young, single women were either lured into the life or chose the life for "immoral" reasons. Yet, a significant outlier suggests that even women who lived within the confines of marriage worked as sex workers.

Finally, the St. Louis Female Hospital records indicate how long a patient had lived in the city and what country she was born in. A vast majority of sex workers were born in the United States, with a few workers from England, Switzerland, Cuba, and other countries around the world. However, most of the recorded workers had not lived in the city for a long period. In fact, nearly 100 sex workers who came to the hospital had only lived in St. Louis for less than a year between 1876 and 1880. Only about a third of the workers had lived in St. Louis for more than ten years. Another third of the workers had lived in St. Louis for less than ten years and the final group, less than one year.[158] This evidence suggests that sex workers were migrating to St. Louis in large numbers and many of those were new to St. Louis. Although this data set does not indicate what cities or states the workers originally came from, it nonetheless evidences a connection between sex work and migration in St. Louis between 1876 and 1880.

Ultimately, the 1870s was a key decade for the sex industry in St. Louis. Because the St. Louis government briefly legalized sex work between 1870 and 1874, the sex industry was transformed. First, although initially fluctuating after the passage of the Social Evil

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[157] Volume 1: Patient Register Containing Names of Patients Admitted to the Hospital, 1876-1886, Box 1, Folder 1, Female Hospital of Saint Louis Records, Bernard Becker Medical Library Archives, Washington University School of Medicine.
[158] Volume 1: Patient Register Containing Names of Patients Admitted to the Hospital, 1876-1886, Box 1, Folder 1, Female Hospital of Saint Louis Records, Bernard Becker Medical Library Archives, Washington University School of Medicine.

Legislation, the industry increased in size—becoming far larger than Memphis' sex industry. Second, the industry became entrenched on and around the riverfront, similar to Memphis. However, unlike Memphis, the industry reflected more diversity in the age and literacy level of its workers, likely because of its size. Still, both cities indicate that African American workers were largely invisible in the sex work industry as of the 1870s. Collectively, this evidence suggests a large, diverse, sex industry located on and around the riverfront of St. Louis. As later decades suggest, however, the population and location of this industry would greatly change in the 1880s and 1890s.

St. Louis in the 1880s: Visibility and African American Sex Workers

In 1880, the sex work industry in St. Louis remained alongside the riverfront and employed a wide-range of workers; however, a key difference in 1880 St. Louis is that far more African American sex workers were visible in the industry. Around 260 sex workers are clearly identifiable within the 1880 St. Louis census. Census takers identified majority of these workers as prostitutes, living in brothels with landladies as madams. Similar to the St. Louis Female Hospital Records, the census records indicate several key sites for sex work in the city. In fact, the census records corroborate the hospital records, indicating the majority of the same locations for the sex work industry. According to the census records, Elm Street, Myrtle Street, Almond Street, and Christie Street had multiple brothels. Like in Memphis, these streets reveal a large red light district alongside the Mississippi river.[159]

In 1880 St. Louis, the youngest sex worker was 14. Essie Langdon lived and worked in a brothel on Elm Street run by Madam Vic Debar. She was white, as were her four fellow workers. Their brothel also employed a housekeeper, 50-year-old Maggie Anderson. Vic

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[159] "1880 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, found in History Library Film.

Debar was a 29-year-old madam from France. Her workers were from diverse locales, including Ireland, New York, and Indiana. They were all quite young, including 14-year-old Essie, 16-year-old Lillie Howard, and two 17 year olds: Mollie Richards and Effie Lawrence.[160] The census taker did not indicate any other information about this brothel, however. Newspapers, particularly the *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, indicate that the brothel was high class. Madam Vic Debar provided clothing for her workers, along with room and board, and her workers maintained financial solvency.[161]

At 45, Lizzie Sheridan was the oldest sex worker in 1880 St. Louis. She lived and worked in her own space on Almond Street, alongside other sex workers. In fact, a brothel run by Mary Banks and her husband was two doors down from Sheridan. However, Sheridan's work signified a different type of sex work, separate from brothels. She was one of many white workers visibly present in the census records that rented their own rooms and independently worked as sex workers.[162] Most women at 45 had either aged out of the industry or moved on to the management role as madams. When she was 46 years old, Lizzie Sheridan attempted suicide. The *St. Louis Globe Democrat* colorfully described the event. Allegedly, Sheridan "got unusually drunk…and concluded that life was not worth living." She "plunged into the river feet foremost" but was "buoyed" by her clothing. As she "floated down the river," she shouted "lustily for help" because the water caused her to change her mind. As the writer asserted, she "repented of her purpose as soon as she felt the

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[160] "1880 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, Roll 717, Enumeration District 4, found in History Library Film.

[161] "Justices' Cases," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 95, August 28, 1887.; "Multiple Classified Advertisements," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 128, September 25, 1881.

[162] "1880 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, Roll 717, Enumeration District 2, found in History Library Film.; Notably, although Sheridan worked independently, she was not a "crib girl" like I discuss later in this chapter. Rather, Sheridan identified as a sex worker and this was her sole occupation, making her more visible in the census records unlike "crib girls."

(to her) unusual fluid."[163] This last assertion suggests that the writer thought of Lizzie as dirty and unused to the feel of water—whether literal, figurative, or both it is unclear—but suggests the writer's disgust with Lizzie Sheridan. As both an older sex worker and independent operator, Sheridan represented outliers in the industry but she experienced similar societal ire.

St. Louis' sex industry appears less segregated by race and more segregated by class of sex work and brothel, resulting in more visible African American sex workers. Although the majority of the workers in this main district were still white, there were several houses that employed women of color. For example, Madam Lucy Ford ran a brothel on Elm Street. As the records indicate, Madam Ford was African American, as were all her workers. However, Madam Ford worked in the midst of several other brothels on Elm Street who all employed white women and were run by white madams such as Vic Debar and Edith Seiffarts.[164] Importantly, the shared locations of these brothels indicate that the sex industry was not entirely segregated in St. Louis.

Some "houses of ill fame" employed both white women and women indicated as "mulatto" in the census records. For example, also on Elm Street, Madam Bertha Andrews ran an almost all-white brothel except for 26-year-old Anna Robertson, who was listed as "mulatto" by the census takers. Robertson enjoyed African American culture and life, taking part in a dance party in East St. Louis for which she was arrested and fined.[165] In fact, the racial mixing of houses appeared acceptable with the exception of "black" and "white" workers—no brothel employed both. Rather, "black" and "mulatto" workers lived and

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[163] "Changed Her Mind," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 38, June 27, 1881.
[164] "1880 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, Roll 717, Enumeration District 4, found in History Library Film.
[165] "East St. Louis," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 99, August 27, 1881.

worked in the same brothels and "white" and "mulatto" workers lived and worked in the same brothels but "white" and "black" workers never appeared to work in the same house. This evidence indicates some segregation but not strictly separate districts.

The one exception was Madam Mary Phillips. An African American, she ran a brothel on 610 Carr Street in 1880. She employed four white women, all identified by their first name only: Martha, Laura, Agnes, and Carrie. This brothel was unique in the census records, as Mary Phillips was the only person of color running a brothel with only white workers. This business model, however, was not unique to Mary Philips, as figures like Robert Church in Memphis indicate. In 1878, she was arrested "for being the keeper of a bagnio." Witnesses testified that she "was a procuress and bartered in white girls of tender age only." The workers and witnesses testified that Madam Phillips coerced young white girls to work for her and violently prevented them from leaving. Police "rescued" four workers from the home and fined Madam Phillips $100.00.[166] However, this punishment did not deter Madam Phillips. Rather, in 1880, she ran a similar house—the one exception being that the workers were all in their early twenties.[167] It is clear by both the tone of the *St. Louis Globe Democrat* story and the arrest that Madam Phillips dealing in white female sexuality was socially unacceptable. The *Globe Democrat* titled her "a bad woman" and this moniker reflected her larger social positioning in both the sex industry and St. Louis society.[168] However, as I indicate later in this chapter, by the 1890s African American madams learned to navigate the intersecting desires of sex and race and their catering to white men's sexual desires allowed them to operate with less interference than Phillips.

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[166] "A Bad Woman," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 170, November 7th, 1878.
[167] "1880 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, Roll 717, Enumeration District 28, found in History Library Film.
[168] "A Bad Woman," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 170, November 7th, 1878.

Still, a key element of the sex industry population remained invisible—African American "crib" girls working in the "wild cat chute" of St. Louis. It is important to recognize that a majority of the workers designated as "prostitutes" in the records lived and worked in brothels. As already indicated, brothel prostitution could be of different classes, depending on the madam and house a worker was in. However, brothel prostitution was decidedly safer and more lucrative than crib prostitution. Like in Memphis, little evidence remains regarding crib prostitution. Anecdotal evidence indicates that crib prostitution existed, en-masse, along the "wild cat chute." This "chute" was literally positioned off of the main red light district, along Broadway. Allegedly, women of color populated the "chute."[169] In fact, the "chute" was known as a place where "ebon-hued offenders" lived and worked—meaning it was the center of African American nightlife in St. Louis.[170] Moreover, it was also considered the center of African American music and culture in St. Louis, where "real" African Americans lived as alleged by one story on a music troupe from the Wild Cat Chute.[171]

Unfortunately, these workers remained largely invisible within the historical record. For example, the *St. Louis Globe Democrat* mentioned a sex worker of color named Margaret Henry from the "wild cat chute."[172] However, Margaret Henry cannot be located in corresponding census records. In part, this is because most "crib" prostitutes only worked part-time and often held another job. Crib sex workers were identified as different kinds of workers, rendering them invisible in both the census records and the St. Louis Female Hospital Records. Thus, visibility of African American sex workers depended on the type of

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[169] Janice Tremeear, *Wicked St. Louis* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2011) 85.
[170] "Iowa Fugitive Captured," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 101, August 30, 1879.
[171] "Amusements," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 302, March 24, 1878.
[172] "Calaboose Carols," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 296, March 12th, 1880.

sex work they did. The African American sex workers and madams who lived and worked in brothels, however, often made a name for themselves and enjoyed economic success. Like in Memphis, some of the most famous workers in St. Louis in the 1880s and 1890s were African American, such as Priscilla Henry and Sarah "Babe" Connor.

St. Louis in the 1890s: The Dominance of the African American Madam

Priscilla Henry was born in 1819 as a slave in Florence, Alabama. She died at the age of 76 in her brothel at 206 South 6th Street, surrounded by her workers. Her time in St. Louis allowed her to amass a fortune—so much so that before her death she returned to the plantation where she was born and purchased it. When she first came to St. Louis, she worked as a washerwoman but soon decided to open a brothel on South 7th Street.[173] As the census records indicate, she ran a brothel that employed five women between ages 19 and 30. She employed all women of color: Sadie Brown, Aggie Quincy, Mollie Brown, Lettie Lee, and Lizzie Ford.[174] Henry capitalized on the location of the red light district and her "place became the rendezvous of the reckless and lawless element that followed the river-roustabouts, deck hands and adventurers, both black and white."[175] Henry became famous up and down the Mississippi and eventually needed to expand. She moved to a mansion at 206 South 6th Street. Henry lived on South 6th Street until her death in 1895. While there, she became extremely wealthy and purchased several homes in St. Louis. Like madams before her, Henry purchased homes and rented them to other madams, increasing her wealth. Throughout her tenure as a madam in St. Louis, Priscilla Henry maintained a

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[173] "Her Wealth is Nothing Now, Wicked, Notorious Old Priscilla Henry is Dead," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 4, 1895.
[174] "1880 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, Roll 717, Enumeration District 11, found in History Library Film.
[175] "Her Wealth is Nothing Now, Wicked, Notorious Old Priscilla Henry is Dead," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 4, 1895.

romantic and business relationship with Thomas Howard. Beyond a romantic relationship, Howard became her investment manager. Howard, however, was not altruistically aiding Henry but attempting to defraud her. In fact, he was accused of such and of her murder—as her niece claimed Howard poisoned Henry with the aid of Henry's personal cook, Florence Williams.[176]

Henry's life and work reveal a key aspect of the St. Louis sex industry in the 1890s: anti-miscegenation laws and the construction and maintenance of white male sexual desire. Missouri, like many states in the antebellum and postbellum period, had a lengthy history of expansive anti-miscegenation laws. The first, passed in 1835, prohibited marriage between "blacks and whites" in Missouri.[177] After the Civil War, in 1866, Missouri enhanced the penalties for such unions.[178] By 1879, the penalty became two years in prison.[179] As the population of Missouri expanded and became more diverse, the anti-miscegenation laws also expanded to include more than just black and white relationships. In 1899, the Missouri Supreme Court revoked the right of white men to marry "Indian" women, asserting that these marriages were not upholding the sanctity of marriage.[180] By 1909, Missouri banned interracial marriage between "Mongolians" and white persons, reflecting a national trend to limit the rights of Asian immigrants in the United States.[181] As Peggy Pascoe indicates in *What Comes Naturally*, a vast majority of these laws served to limit the legal rights of men of color to marry white women and protect the legal rights of white men

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[176] "Disgrace of a St. Louis Broker," *The Milwaukee Journal,* August 16, 1895.
[177] Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 21.
[178] Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 30.
[179] Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 63.
[180] Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 102.
[181] Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 91 and 163.

to own the sexuality of both white women and women of color.[182] Significantly, Priscilla Henry recognized desires of white men during this period. She structured her business to cater to the maintenance of white male sexuality but respected the anti-miscegenation laws as those laws pertained to men of color.

To cater to white male sexual desire, Henry opened two brothels next door to each other: 206 and 208 South Sixth Street. One brothel housed women of color and the other, white women. Caucasian men frequented both; whereas, African American men were only allowed to frequent the latter. Henry avoided violating the spirit of the anti-miscegenation laws of the period by policing African American men's sexual appetites and keeping them away from white women. However, she still capitalized upon white men's racialized desire.[183] Even though anti-miscegenation laws were in full effect in Missouri in the 1880s and 1890s, Henry indicated that she understood these laws were meant to police men of color's sexual desires and protect white female sexuality for the consumption of white men only. Arguably, Henry's savvy negotiation of the law, racial desire, and the sex industry indicate the further politicization of St. Louis' sex industry, as she seamlessly navigated complicated legal and social barriers to successfully operate her business.

Henry maintained a longstanding relationship with the police to maintain this precarious division of houses by race and was protected as a result. St. Louis newspapers openly discussed the exploits of white men at Henry's place. Two such men, M. Michaels—alias John Brown—and Henry Williams—alias Dutch Hiney—got into a fight with Sadie Brown, one of Henry's workers. The men were arrested and charged with "disturbing the

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[182] Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 10-11.
[183] Sarah Bryan Miller, "'Priscilla and Babe' Tells the Story of Gilded Age Madams," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* January 23, 2015, http://www.stltoday.com/entertainment/books-and-literature/reviews/priscilla-babe-tells-the-story-of-gilded-age-madams/article_b2ab7c86-984f-5b27-a058-21004647588d.html (accessed June 10, 2015).

peace…and fighting and striking Sadie Brown."[184] This incident indicates a long-standing relationship with the police and Henry. Rather than arrest her workers or Henry for being involved in a house of ill fame or violating anti-miscegenation laws, the police broke up the fight, arrested the perpetrators, and charged them with both fighting and hurting Henry's workers. This evidence suggests that Henry maintained a productive relationship with the police that provided protection for her business and workers. Arguably, such a relationship was common and apparent in the historical record through stories such as this one. The protection by police made brothel life preferable to other forms of sex work and far less dangerous for workers like Sadie Brown.

Police also maintained Henry's control over men of color frequenting her brothel, preventing those clients from causing trouble in her business. On March 3, 1887, a group of young African American "minstrels" decided to have an evening out in the red light district of St. Louis, with a "local prize-fighter" named Dan Daly. Daly chaperoned the group, bringing them to prominent houses and, as the *Post-Dispatch* reported, "gave the town the appropriate glow of red." By this phrase, the *Post-Dispatch* reporter indicated that the group of men visited several different brothels to enjoy their evening. Significantly, river town brothels offered far more than just sex. In fact, many offered entertainment, alcohol, food, and different forms of sexual entertainment, from floorshows, to company, to sexual acts. Thus, this particular group of men went to several brothels in the district, becoming more intoxicated as the evening wore on. Around 4 am, they entered "Priscilla Henry's mansion" at 206 S. Sixth Street. This brothel housed all women of color. The men became rough in the parlor with the workers. Madam Henry "walked into the room with majestic stride,

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[184] "Local in Brief," *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 187, November 23, 1881.

determined to preside over all proceedings that took place within the precincts of her mansion." She continually admonished the men, greatly angering Priscilla. One man even assaulted Henry. Henry instructed her workers to shout for the "watch" and cry "murder."[185] Like the earlier story, Henry's instructions indicate a longstanding relationship with the police and the belief that the police would protect them. And they did. Several officers came to Henry's brothel, immediately dragging out the group of men. Three were arrested—as was Priscilla—and taken to the Four Courts together.[186]

When Henry died, she left much of her property to her family, including her six nieces.[187] Her nieces made sex work a family business, using their willed home and considerable wealth to maintain a brothel at 4262 Garfield Avenue. They were often fined for "disturbing the peace" and caused much anger because this home—their family home—was outside the prescribed or "understood" red light district of St. Louis, but their wealth allowed them to maintain the business despite interference.[188]

Henry continued to dominate the sex industry in St. Louis until the arrival of Sarah "Babe" Connors. Sarah Connors was born into slavery, like Priscilla Henry. However, she was much younger than Henry. She was from Nashville, Tennessee and moved to St. Louis around 1879. Initially, she worked in a brothel as a sex worker. She lived at 610 Myrtle Street in a house run by Florence Slater. The house included eight people: Madam Florence

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[185] "Painting the Town Red: A Gang of Negro Minstrels Try the Experiment," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 4th 1887.
[186] "Painting the Town Red: A Gang of Negro Minstrels Try the Experiment," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 4th 1887.Henry spent a lot of time at the Four Courts, often being charged with keeping a house of ill fame. Interestingly, Henry spending time at the Courts kept her workers out of trouble and likely acted as a formal payment for being allowed to continue keeping her business, as she appeared several times between 1876 and 1895 but was never shut down.
[187] "Her Wealth is Nothing Now, Wicked, Notorious Old Priscilla Henry is Dead," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 4, 1895.
[188] "Priscilla Henry's Nieces: Three Sisters Sent to the Work-House for Not Being Good," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* May 13, 1896.

Slater, five sex workers, and two children. All the workers were women of color. Sarah Connors, known as "Babe" in the sex industry, was 22 years old in 1880. She moved quickly up the economic ladder in the sex work industry. Many lauded her beauty. In her short obituary, a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* writer noted, "she was strikingly tall, a mulatto, with a good figure, and she dressed as well as almost anyone in her half of the world."[189] Allegedly, it was her beauty and business acumen that caught the eye of William "Bill" Mara. Mara was well known as the lover of Eliza Haycraft and upon her death in 1871, Haycraft left her brothel to Mara. Once Connors and Mara became close, Mara employed Connors as the new madam of Haycraft's old business.[190]

Over the course of her career, Babe Connors lived in and ran three different houses. The first, backed by Bill Mara, was on 606 Clark Avenue. She moved from this location to compete with Priscilla Henry. Her new place, nicknamed "The Castle," was at 210 South 6th and right next door to her biggest competition.[191] Finally, after Henry's death and a slow shifting red light district, Connors purchased a double house in 1898 at 2310 Chestnut Street. This house had two sides that were connected by a door—she kept one side as her residence and the other as her business.[192]

Babe Connors' brothel was well known for diverse entertainment. She only employed women of color—usually lighter skinned and, allegedly, all her girls came straight

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[189] "A Notorious Woman Dead: "Babe" Connors, One of the Famous Characters of St. Louis, Passed to her Reward," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 5, 1899.
[190] "On Bill Mara's Grave: Little Liza Died of Starvation Because Her Heart was Broken," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 11, 1896.
[191] *St. Louis Missouri, City Directory, 1893.* Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.
[192] "The Fabulous Babe Connors," *Afro Magazine Section*, December 18, 1956, https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2205&dat=19561218&id=zM8lAAAAIBAJ&sjid=1PQFAAAAIBAJ&pg=2341,3016691&hl=en (Accessed June 10, 2015).; *St. Louis Missouri, City Directory, 1899.* Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

from New Orleans. Her touting of the "creole" sex workers she employed reflects the cultural capital of New Orleans in the sex industry. Like Henry, Connors bought and sold women of color's sexuality for the pleasure of white men, reflecting a national obsession with a particular type of woman of color who had been hypersexualized as part of the main attraction of New Orleans' Storyville.[193] Her favorite floorshow included having her workers dance, sans underwear, on top of a mirrored floor. Her floorshow was free but clients needed to pay for other serves al la carte.[194]

Importantly, Babe Connors' "palace" on Chestnut Street was located in the heart of the newly formed red light district and African American music scene of St. Louis, also known as Chestnut Valley. Connors took advantage of this location, drawing in clients interested in more than just sex. Specifically, she employed local singers, such as Mammy Lou, who was well known for original songs like "Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" and "Frankie." Both songs became famous, sung by blues singers in later years. Although legend informs many of the stories connected to Babe Connors' brothel and Mammy Lou, there is credibility to the story that the song "Frankie" or "Frankie and Johnie" originated in Babe Connors' brothel. In 1899, the *St. Louis Globe Democrat* reported that Allen Britt was shot by Frankie Baker for cheating on her. Similar stories appear in the *St. Louis Republic.* Frankie Baker was eventually arrested but successfully pleaded self-defense. The papers reported this incident occurring at 212 Targee Street, which was part of the Chestnut Street

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[193] *Storyville: The Naked Dance*, documentary, directed by Anne O. Craig and Maia Harris (Shanachie Studios, 9/12/ 2000).

[194] "The Fabulous Babe Connors," *Afro Magazine Section*, December 18, 1956, https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2205&dat=19561218&id=zM8lAAAAIBAJ&sjid=1PQFAAAAIBAJ&pg=2341,3016691&hl=en (Accessed June 10, 2015).

Neighborhood and where Connors' new double-house brothel was.[195] This story, as well as the new location of Connors' brothel, foreshadows the growing interzone of Chestnut Valley. However, Connors died young and before she could see what Chestnut Valley would become, succumbing to kidney disease in 1899. Her move to Chestnut Street foreshadowed a massive shift in the structure of the red light district in St. Louis: a shift towards centralization on one street.

St. Louis in the 1900s: Centralizing Near the Railroad and Alongside Chestnut Valley

By 1900, nearly the entire sex industry in St. Louis had moved to Chestnut Street and some surrounding cross streets. Natural disaster, reform, and a shift in the type of travel to the city all contributed to the centralization of the sex industry. First, in 1896, a tornado hit St. Louis, destroying much of the former red light district—including both Priscilla Henry's former houses and Babe Connors' brothel. As such, Connors' move to Chestnut Street was fortuitous. However, these more unforeseeable circumstances were not the only factors resulting in the centralization of the red light district. Rather, both reformers and opportunity informed the changes to St. Louis' red light district by 1900.

In the mid-1890s, a new organization called the Pure Home Association formed to purge St. Louis of vice. As the Secretary noted,

> our sole object is to rescue our homes and their surroundings- our wives and our children—sons and daughters—from contract and contamination. The values of our real estate located there have little or nothing to do with our motives. Should we succeed, and other districts will organize as we have done and insist upon the enforcement of law, it remains to be seen whether the city's morals will not be set 'forward' rather than 'back' five years.[196]

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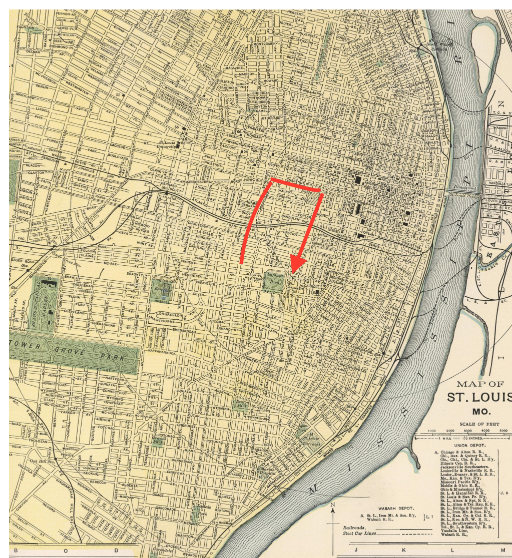
[195] "Kiel Opera House and Four Courts and the story of Frankie Johnny," *St. Louis Police Veteran's Association*, http://www.slpva.com/historic/police212targee.html (Accessed August 1, 2015).
[196] J. Clause, "The Pure Home Association's Work," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 11, 1895.

Essentially, the Pure Home Association fought for the removal of the red light district from their neighborhood. The Association focused on the Union Station neighborhood. In the 1890s, more and more sex workers moved to the Union Station neighborhood, due to proximity to the train station.[197] The Association did not seek to completely remove sex work from the city but instead to restrain the district to certain areas. Specifically, the Pure Home Association hoped to prevent any "keepers of immoral resorts from locating in the district south of Market Street to the railroads between Jefferson Avenue and Twentieth Street."[198] For reference, see the following map of St. Louis from 1890, where the red box indicates the segregated district.[199] Although a small area, reformers felt as though their neighborhoods were being encroached upon and changed by the sex industry. The Pure Home Association hoped to expand their sphere of influence, challenging the location of brothels North of this marked area on Walnut and Eugenia Street.



The Pure Home Association even called upon their children to help. A 14-year-old daughter of the executive office of the Pure Home Association, Elsie Myrtle Clouse, petitioned the police to remove the houses of ill fame from her neighborhood on Walnut Street. She pleaded, "please come over and help us….Do, please. My mother and the family are disturbed nightly by boisterous conduct, obscene language and course insults. Come

[197] "The Power of Organized Effort," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 28, 1895.
[198] "Pure Home Association," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 16, 1894.
[199] "Map of St. Louis, MO in 1890," (Buffalo: New York, The Matthews Northrup Co., Complete Engraving and Printing Works, 1891).

over and help us." However, her petition was overshadowed by indignation that her father had familiarized her so much "with the profession of prostitution."[200]

Moreover, the Pure Home Association had begun to anger "political and real estate circles" with their petitions to expand their sphere of influence. As such, the houses on Walnut—about 12 in all—were allowed to stay.[201] To aid in their fight, the Pure Home Association invoked the 100-yard-law, wherein a house of ill repute could not be within 100 yards of a school or a church in St. Louis. Several madams fought the law and Association, such as Minnie Wilson and Alice Turner, demonstrating their politicization as I discuss further in Chapter Six.[202] The Association was particularly concerned about the nearness of the district to the Lincoln School, where many of their children attended.[203]

The red light district moved and risked the ire of the Association because the previous district had been partially destroyed and the opening of Union Station heralded new opportunities for the sex industry. Travel had "increased five-fold" in that area after Union Station opened—making it ideal for the red light district.[204] On September 1, 1894, St. Louis opened the grand Union Station at 1820 Market Street. This station could accommodate far more travelers and trains a day, greatly increasing the number of people visiting the city.[205] For the sex industry, increased numbers in transient travelers meant more

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[200] "Terrible Excess of Zeal: Fourteen-Year-Old Girl's Petition Against the Social Evil," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* September 13, 1895.
[201] "Terrible Excess of Zeal: Fourteen-Year-Old Girl's Petition Against the Social Evil," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* September 13, 1895.
[202] "Minnie Wilson's Fight Against the Pure Home Association," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 9, 1895.; "Let Off by the Judge. Reformations Among Barbers and Bawdy Women Made of Record," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 5, 1895.
[203] "No Rest for the Scarlet Women: to the Editor of the Post-Dispatch," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 6, 1895.
[204] "The Scarlet Women: Pure Home Association Will Not Allow Them to Invade a New District," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 12, 1895.
[205] "The New Union Station Open: the Grand Structure Formally Dedicated to the Traveling Public," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 2, 1894.

clients and moving closer to the station made complete sense. As such, many madams moved to the surrounding area, resulting in the ire of the Pure Home Association. The Association succeeded in preventing many brothels south of Union Station but could not prevent the centralization of the district just one street north of Union Station on Chestnut Street.

By 1900, the sex industry had become centralized on Chestnut Street, creating what is known today as Chestnut Valley—an African American neighborhood from the turn of the century known for the growth of African American culture and music. Significantly, Chestnut Valley was the home of "ragtime" in St. Louis. Like other northern cities, St. Louis had become the destination of a growing number of migrating African Americans, moving from south to north in the Great Migration. Many historians, such as Davarian Baldwin, examine Chicago as the key site of the Great Migration.[206] In fact, the path of the Illinois Central Railroad "bypassed St. Louis," guaranteeing that majority of African Americans taking the rails north would end up in Chicago. However, the Mississippi and Missouri river were other major sources of transportation during this period that ensured that St. Louis would become the eventual home of many African Americans. And as a result, Chestnut Valley became the home of "ragtime," nurturing the talents of musicians such as Thomas Turpin and W.C. Handy.[207]

However, like in Memphis, Chestnut Valley in St. Louis was not just the home to ragtime but also the "sporting district" by the late 1890s. Of the approximately 70 houses of "ill fame" identified in the St. Louis census records in 1900, all but nine brothels were on

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[206] Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
[207] Dennis Owsley, *City of Gabriels: The History of Jazz in St. Louis, 1895-1973* (St. Louis, MO: Reedy Press, 2006) 1-2.

Chestnut Street.[208] Despite this centralization, the largest brothel in the 1900 census records was located at 525 South 4th Street. Run by Mary Murrell, the location of this brothel indicates that not all sex workers had moved to the new red light district but instead remained, along with a few others, in the previous red light district nearer to the river rather than the train station. Mary Murell employed 17 workers total: 15 sex workers, one house porter, and one cook. The sex workers ranged in age from 18 to 42. At 69, Madam Murrell was the oldest in her home. All of her workers were white, as was Murrell. Most of her workers were single, although two had been married, like herself.[209] Importantly, Mary Murrell had been working as a madam for several years by 1900. The first mention of her in the newspapers was in 1888, where she was arrested for operating a house of ill fame.[210] By 1900, therefore, Murrell had been a madam for at least 12 years in St. Louis. Despite her longevity in the field, Murrell's brothel was located alongside few other houses and separate from the newly forming red light district in Chestnut Valley.

On Chestnut Street, majority of the brothels had three to five workers living within them. The largest brothel on Chestnut Street employed seven workers. Run by Jessie Lyons, this large brothel was located at 2007 Chestnut Street, surrounded by other houses of ill fame. Madam Lyons had worked in the business for at least 15 years. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* mentions Lyons in 1885, when she was charged but not prosecuted for "assault and battery."[211] By 1886, Lyons was "charged with keeping [a] disreputable house[s]."[212] She

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[208] "1900 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, found in History Library Film.
[209] "1900 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, Roll 890, Enumeration District 69, found in History Library Film.
[210] "Before Judge Cady: A Number of Cases of Interest in the Police Tribunal This Morning," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 30, 1888.
[211] "The Charge Changed: Michael Devanney Bailed Under a Charge of Murder in the Second Degree," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 22, 1885.
[212] "Purifying Pine Street: A Delegation of Frail Females Face the Police Justice To-day," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 19, 1886.

appeared to run a successful house at 1217 Pine Street, employing not only sex workers but also servants such as Dora Anderson.[213] She moved from Pine Street to Chestnut Street. Lyons lived on Chestnut Street as early as 1896. In March of that year, one of her workers, Pearl Clifton, attempted suicide. Lyons' house porter, Arthur Nichol, found her and immediately called the "patrolman."[214] By 1900, Pearl Clifton no longer worked for Lyons, at least not under that particular name. Instead, Lyons employed seven sex workers, all white, between ages 18 and 38: Minnie Wohltman, Marie Bender, Mary Gougnous, Ruby St. Claire, Minnie Moore, Mable Brown, and Jennie Jones.[215] In 1900, Madam Lyons did not employ any permanent, live-in servants.

Another brothel on Chestnut Street employed not only sex workers but also several servants, revealing different business models of brothels in St. Louis in the 1900s. Madam Ollie May and her sister Nettie ran a house down the street from Madam Lyons at 2015 Chestnut Street. Ollie May had been a madam in St. Louis since at least 1893 but at a different location: 1223 Chestnut Street. Ollie May's brothel differs in several key ways from Madam Lyons' house. First, Ollie May ran the house with her sister Nettie May. They also employed a cook, chambermaid, housekeeper, and porter, suggesting wealth. All of their employed sex workers were white. However, all of their servants were African American. Finally, their sex workers ranged in age from 18 to 22—a far narrower range than at Madam Lyons' house and far younger group of workers.[216] Importantly, Ollie May appeared to maintain this formula for her houses. In 1893, she was charged with keeping a house of ill

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[213] "Local News," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 15, 1886.
[214] "Took Carbolic Acid: Pearl Clifton Tries to Kill Herself for a Perfidious Man," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 23, 1896.
[215] "1900 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, Roll 895, St. Louis Ward 14, found in History Library Film.;"1900 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, Roll 895, Enumeration District 215, found in History Library Film.
[216] "1900 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, Roll 895, St. Louis Ward 14, found in History Library Film.

repute after she allegedly tried to drag a wondering young woman named Emma Cook into her home. In response, police arrested May and all her workers, described as May Green, Corinne Palmer, Ella Rud, Hazel Baxter, and Florence Hall. Her workers ranged in age from 19 to 23.[217] Both Madam Lyons and May provide a glimpse into the average house on Chestnut Street but do not provide much evidence regarding the racial make-up of the new red light district, beyond the racial division between sex worker and supplemental staff.

Chestnut Valley was well known as an African American neighborhood, including several saloons and musical venues that gave birth to St. Louis' "ragtime" scene. In 1900, the vast majority of sex workers living and working in Chestnut Valley were white; however, there was more racial mixing in Chestnut Valley than in previous red light districts. This contrast is striking, indicating that like in Memphis, neighborhoods housing people of color also housed vice districts. This combination suggests that the racial and sexual outlaws lived and worked alongside one another in southern and Midwest river towns. Few all-black brothels existed on Chestnut Street. One, run by the widowed Lottie Jones, was at 2112 Chestnut Street. She employed six workers but not servants. Lottie Jones was 29. Her workers ranged in age between 20 and 28 and were African American, like herself. She was one of the only madams of an all-black brothel on Chestnut Street.[218] The vast majority of sex workers were white and many of the servants in these brothels were African American. This distinction suggests an interesting racial division in the St. Louis sex industry in 1900 wherein the workers were white, the support staff African American, and

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[217] "Used Main Force: A Fallen Woman's Daring Attempt to Secure a Country Girl," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 12, 1893.
[218] "1900 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, Roll 895, Enumeration District 215, found in History Library Film.

the neighborhood largely African American. Arguably, this urban environment and cross-section of race and sexual practices suggests the emergence of an interzone.[219]

By 1910, much had changed in St. Louis, driving the red light district underground and rendering it virtually invisible in the census records. As will be discussed in the reform chapter, many different kinds of reforms—from civic improvement, purity associations, to prohibition—resulted in the dismantling of the red light district on Chestnut Street.[220] The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* mentions the eradication of the tenderloin or red light district.[221] Assaults on the industry came from all manners of people—from reformers to city developers to churches.[222] By 1910, there is some mention of the district being forcibly moved back toward the river, alongside Valentine and Lucas Avenues.[223] However, the census records do not correspond with this move.[224] This invisibility does not mean the district did not move but rather that growing social unrest and lack of support resulted in the silencing of the sex industry—wherein sex workers would not readily identify themselves and worked hard to remain anonymous. Like in other cities, the Progressive Era activists targeted the sex industry from multiple perspectives, driving it underground.

Despite being moved underground, however, the sex industry in St. Louis left a lasting cultural imprint on the city. First, as I discuss in more detail in my later chapters, the temporary legalization of the industry resulted in heightened politicization of sex workers in St. Louis. Moreover, this temporary legalization grew the industry, politicized it, and

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[219] Kevin Mumford, *Interzones*, xii-xiii.
[220] "To Remove the 'Tenderloin?': 'Boulevarding' of Chestnut Street from Broadway to Twentieth Has Been Begun," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 11, 1904.
[221] "Women Ordered Driven Out," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* October 30, 1909.
[222] "City and Country are Clinched in Prohibition Fight: Question of Revenue is the Principal Theme of Debate on Bill to Submit to Vote," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 9, 1909.
[223] "Removal of Tenderloin to Market Street Considered: Commission of Three Planned to Select New Site for Resorts Now on Lucas," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* June 10, 1910.
[224] "1910 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, found in History Library Film.

resulted in a large expansion of the industry by the 1880s. This large industry, located largely along the riverfront in the 1880s and 1890s, was more diverse and less racially segregated than in Memphis. By the 1890s, African American madams dominated the industry and created business models that catered to white male sexual desire for women of color and avoided violating the spirit of anti-miscegenation laws of the period. These same madams also spearheaded the move of the industry away from the riverfront and to Chestnut Valley, growing the industry alongside the railroad and an increasingly vibrant African American community. The intersection of the sex industry in St. Louis with the growing African American music scene resulted in a fruitful collaboration and a lasting legacy of belonging for those at the bottom of the social hierarchy in St. Louis.

Chapter Three

Famous Madams: Kansas City and the Historical Memory of the "Paris of the Plains"

For adventurers or itinerate laborers traveling west, Kansas City became an ideal stop along the Missouri River. Like Memphis, Kansas City was a small town, but unlike Memphis, Kansas City was well known as a vice town, guaranteed to give a visitor a good time. Often constructed as the last city before the "wild west," Kansas Citians are proud of their "untamed" history, including sex work, Boss Tom Pendergast, and a vibrant jazz culture. A myth of fraternal, homosocial freedom, this construction of the "West" and "frontier culture" in places like Kansas City as "wild" endured scholarly critique.[225] Despite this critique, popular lore still shapes this city's public history. Kansas City boasts several famed madams, often citing relics from the period of vibrant sex work in Kansas City as evidence of the town's "wide open" past.[226] For example, one of the most famed madams of Kansas City was Annie Chambers. She is so revered in Kansas City folklore that relics like a nude painting and mirror, salvaged from her famous brothel prior to its demolition, are hanging throughout Kansas City landmarks. Chambers lived and worked as a madam in Kansas City from the 1870s through the 1920s. She died on March 24, 1935 and arguably Chamber's life and death paralleled the experiences of sex workers in Kansas City.[227]

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[225] Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Immigrant Padrones and Contract Laborers in North America, 1885-1925,* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 142.; Susan Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).

[226] For a discussion of the term "wide open," see Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2003) 4.

[227] Jason Roe, "Secrets of Chambers," Located http://www.kclibrary.org/?q=blog/week-kansas-city-history/secrets-chambers (Accessed June 5, 2012).

The story of the rise and slow fall of Kansas City's sex industry greatly differs from Memphis and St. Louis due to the Pendergast political machine. Although Kansas City's sex industry developed along the riverfront like in Memphis and St. Louis and became increasingly racially diverse by the early twentieth century, Kansas City's sex industry did not centralize or move underground like the industries in Memphis and St. Louis. This was due to the fact that outside forces, such as disease, natural disaster, and reform did not shape Kansas City's sex industry. Rather, Boss Tom Pendergast maintained a safe space for vice to flourish in Kansas City, resulting in a widespread and long-lived industry that did not need to centralize or move underground to survive. Although some local and national reform efforts seemingly affected the industry, resulting in the sanitization of census records for example, Kansas City's sex industry maintained a visible presence in Kansas City until the late 1930s. In fact, Kansas City developed a vibrant alternative culture, peopled by sex workers, gamblers, and musicians of color, who reshaped the city's cultural history and challenged the efforts of reformers to implement normative social structures into the city's economic and social order.

The 1870s Kansas City Sex Industry: A Small but Distinct Red Light District Alongside the Riverfront

Like in Memphis and St. Louis, the Kansas City red light district centered around the Missouri River and levee in the 1870s. Kansas City had a "stratified" neighborhood structure. As Amber Clifford notes,

> Although the elite depended on working-class people to keep the city's bawdy reputation alive, working-class city dwellers were kept separated from the benefits of such big business. Kansas City's neighborhoods were clearly stratified. Wealthy residents lived primarily in Quality hill, a Cliffside area on the east side of the city away from livestock barns and the railroad. Quality Hill overlooked the city's working-class neighborhoods, known as the West

> Bottoms and the North End. The West Bottoms, located between Quality hill and the Kansas state line along the southern edge of the Missouri River, became the center of industry in Kansas City. Home to meatpacking houses, railroad yards, and factories, the West Bottoms was also home to most working-class Kansas Citians, who lived in overcrowded tenements. Disease and muddy streets in the flood-prone area compounded the poor living conditions. Because the West Bottoms was the city's industrial center, its tenements primarily housed newly arrived European immigrant packinghouse workers along with most of the city's African American populations…The city's other principle working-class neighborhood, known as the North End, was located just north and east of the West Bottoms. Called the "dingy North End," the neighborhood was the center of Kansas City's red-light district. What the North End lacked in industry, it made up for in gambling halls and brothels. Most red-light activity took place in the North End's Knob Hill section, where one-third of Kansas City's police force was concentrated from 1870 to 1875.[228]

This stratified city structure separated the red light district from other neighborhoods but kept it "near the levee" and "railroad tracks."[229] Clifford names several popular brothels: Clara's Crib at 1801 Main, Hotel Ester at 2035 Broadway, "the Irish Village" at 1711 Walnut, and the three most famous brothels "in the 200 block of west Third and Fourth streets" run by Annie Chambers, Madam Lovejoy, and Eva Prince.[230] This stratification is key because it reveals the location of the red light district, alongside the riverfront and levees, like in Memphis and St. Louis. Early sex work industries of river towns appeared to rely on the river traffic for workers and clientele, resulting in the establishment of the sex industry in similar locations in Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City.

By 1870, Kansas City's sex industry appeared deceptively small. Census records only identify six brothels in 1870.[231] Yet, this small size does not correspond with a small number

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[228] Amber Clifford, "Prostitution and Reform in Kansas City," in *The Other Missouri History: Populists, Prostitutes and Regular Folk,* edited by Thomas M. Spencer (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004) 223-224.
[229] Clifford, "Prostitution and Reform in Kansas City," 225.
[230] Clifford, "Prostitution and Reform in Kansas City," 226-227.
[231] These brothels are not identified as brothels but as boarding houses or saloons. However, comparing these "boarding houses" to other boarding houses in the 1870 Kansas City census records show a marked difference. Most boarding houses include workers from a variety of occupations. However, these "boarding houses" only

of workers. Rather, each brothel identified in the 1870 census records employed a large number of workers, between seven and 18 depending on the business. The absence of smaller brothels indicates that madams had established strong businesses in the red light district, weeding out competition from new upstarts.

A snapshot of Kansas City's smallest and largest brothels of the 1870s reveals the race, age range, and origin of the workers. Walter and Mollie Hipp ran the smallest brothel, employing seven workers in their saloon. Their workers were all white and ranged in age from 19 to 24. The workers were also from diverse locations including New York, Indiana, Michigan, Canada, and Pennsylvania. Although the smallest brothel, Mollie Hipp reported a large personal estate of 4,000 dollars. And the brothel itself was worth 20,000 dollars.[232] Interestingly, despite running the largest brothel, Alice Wilson reported a personal estate value of only 2,000 dollars. She ran a brothel with 18 workers, ranging in age from 17 to 25. Unlike Madam Hipp, Alice Wilson also employed two African American servants, indicating the size and wealth of her establishment. All of her employed sex workers were white, as was she. In fact, there was only one reported African American sex worker in the 1870 census records, named Susan Williams.[233] Like in Mollie Hipp's establishment, Madam Wilson's workers came from multiple states and even foreign countries, including Missouri, Iowa, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, Indiana, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Ireland.[234]

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include young women who do not have listed occupations. Like in other cities, this invisibility is indicative of a brothel.

[232] "1870 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll M593-782, Kansas City Ward 4, found in Family History Library Film.

[233] "1870 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll M593-782, Kansas City Ward 4, found in Family History Library Film.

[234] "1870 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll M593-782, Kansas City Ward 4, found in Family History Library Film.

This snapshot indicates that Kansas City's sex industry included a seemingly small number of brothels but a large number of workers. These workers appeared homogenous in race and age, with the vast majority being white. Both madams, even with different sized brothels, earned a good living from the industry. Most importantly, however, this snapshot indicates that Kansas City had a fluid, migrant population from around the United States, as workers came from all over the country. Thus, even through only a small number of madams worked in 1870s Kansas City sex industry, these madams employed a substantial number of workers and which became even larger by the 1880s, due largely to the success of a famous madam named Annie Chambers.

Kansas City in the 1880s: Annie Chambers and the Growth of an Industry

By the 1880s, Kansas City's red light district had grown exponentially, in part because of the success of Annie Chambers. Annie Chambers came to Kansas City in 1869. Upon her arrival, she began working as a madam and gained immediate success. She purchased her first "resort" in 1872, "on the southwest corner of 3rd and Wyandotte."[235] Madam Chambers became a fixture of the red light district in Kansas City. By 1880, Annie Chambers was surrounded by other brothels and a far larger red light district than in 1870. The 1880 census records indicate around 16 brothels in Kansas City, more than double the number in 1870.[236]

The make-up of Annie Chambers' brothel was indicative of the 1880 Kansas City sex industry. Specifically, the age, social status, diversity of originating cities of Annie Chambers' workers, brothel size, and racial segregation reflect larger trends in the 1880

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[235] Daniel Coleman, "Annie Chambers: Madam, 1843 to 1935," The Kansas City Public Library, Missouri Valley Special Collections.
[236] "1880 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, found in Family History Library Film.

Kansas City sex industry. Annie Chambers employed ten workers total.[237] Census takers identified seven workers as "boarders," which was used as code for sex worker. These workers were Georgie Chambers (relation unknown), Belle Waterman, Jessie Milburn, Mollie Pats, Hattie Coy, Ada Bowen, and Ada Ayers. Annie Chambers' workers ranged in age from 18 to 28—an average range for brothels in 1880 Kansas City.[238]

However, there were outliers employed in the sex industry. At 13, Barbara Ernest was the youngest sex worker working in 1880 Kansas City. She was white and born in Missouri but the child of two immigrants from Prussia.[239] At age 37, Jessie Kane was the oldest sex worker in 1880 Kansas City. She was white, widowed, and from Florida.[240] The average age of a sex worker in 1880 Kansas City was 20 years old. One hundred and nineteen of the 123 workers recorded in the 1880 census records were 30 years old and younger, with the vast majority being between 17 and 28. This relatively young age range indicates the type of worker typically pulled into the industry and also the type of worker madams and clients sought, desiring younger rather than older women.

Like in other cities, 1880 Kansas City sex workers' social statuses ranged extensively. In Annie Chambers' brothel, four of her sex workers were single, two were widowed, and one divorced.[241] Similarly, although majority of the sex industry workers were single, several women were married, widowed, or divorced. Importantly, this social status indicates that sex workers did engage in heteronormative relationships of the period. Their relationship

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[237] Significantly, Chambers was identified as running a boarding house by census takers that housed only unemployed boarders.
[238] "1880 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll 693, Enumeration District 15, found in Family History Library Film.
[239] "1880 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll 692, Enumeration District 2, found in Family History Library Film.
[240] "1880 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll 692, Enumeration District 2 found in Family History Library Film.
[241] "1880 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll 693, Enumeration District 15, found in Family History Library Film.

status—whether currently married or not—reflects a larger social and economic situation in which divorced or widowed women needed to enter the sex industry for economic survival. For example, the oldest women in the industry tended to be divorced or widowed, indicating that a change in social circumstances might have influenced their move into the sex industry.[242]

Moreover, married sex workers indicate a challenge to the sexual ownership of women's bodies and the use of those bodies for economic survival. This challenge sometimes resulted in danger for these workers. For example, Ada Thorne was murdered by her former husband for her involvement in the industry. He visited his wife's place of employment, a brothel, several times on the same day. On his last visit, he pulled out a pistol, shot her several times, and unsuccessfully tried to shoot other workers in the house. He was "drunk" and in his own words, "crazy" when he drank. Ada, known to him as Annie Anderson, had refused to come back to him and he was in "love" with her. Police believed his love for Ada and the realization "that she had passed beyond all hope of redemption" caused him to commit the murder.[243] Ada Thorne's murder is one example of the dangers sex workers faced, as their challenge to the heteronormative structure threatened the ownership of women's bodies and the structure of marriage, occasionally resulting in violence.

Belle Waterman, a sex worker in Annie Chambers' brothel, also reveals the social threat that sex workers appeared to have for those in high society of Kansas City. She was a famous young woman in Kansas City—formerly of the upper class. In a highly publicized event, she married young but divorced quickly. The shame of her divorce led her family to

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[242] "1880 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, found in Family History Library Film.
[243] "Through the Heart: A Divorced Wife Killed by Her Former Husband at Kansas City," *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 26m June 16, 1883."

disinherit her and subsequently, she entered the sex industry in Annie Chambers' brothel. Despite the circumstances wherein she entered the sex industry, she maintained that she had no "regret" and that she made a "deliberate" choice based on her "circumstances."[244] Her story, however, caused a scandal. She died quite young, and following her death, many sought to reclaim her life story. The *Kansas City Times* described the scene of her funeral:

> It was the last sad rites performed over the remains of Belle Waterman, a social outcast, by some of the best and most charitable women in Kansas City, out of respect for the member they hold of her when she was Belle Steen, wealthy accomplished, and beloved. The tall marble shaft just south of the new grave was erected to the memory of Belle Waterman's father. Its inscription reads: 'Lieutenant Colonial…Steen, born 1800, Died 1880." A Broken heart had dragged the gray hairs of that old soldier to his grave; a broken heart on account of the erring life of his daughter. But there they laid her, by his side, the sins of her wanton life washed away. It was a reconciliation of dust to dust.[245]

In this brief synopsis, the *Kansas City Times* suggests that Belle caused the death of her father because of her fallen ways. But, through the kindness of her former high society compatriots, she was washed of those sins and thus, granted immunity for her actions in her death. This characterization of Belle and retelling of her life story greatly contrasts with her own insistence that she did not regret her life choices and instead, lived as she wanted to live. The disparity demonstrates disconnect between high society women—often those involved in sex work reform during this period—and their targets like Belle Waterman. Moreover, her story and this remembrance published in the *Kansas City Times* indicates the societal response to upper class women entering the sex industry and traversing the heteronormative social structure.

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[244] "The End of a Sad Career: Death of Mrs. Belle Waterman at the German Hospital," *The Kansas City Times*, December 2nd, 1888.
[245] "United in Death. Belle Waterman Laid to Rest by Her Father's Side. The Sad Rites," *The Kansas City Times*, December 4, 1888.

Importantly, Chambers' brothel also reflects the interconnections of madams and sex workers beyond Kansas City, as she and her compatriots employed sex workers from many different states. In 1880, her sex workers hailed from Indiana, Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, New York, and Arkansas.[246] Importantly, sex workers in 1880 Kansas City came from all over the country, representing diverse experiences and the migration of the period. Another key example is Annie Lee's brothel. A large "house," Annie Lee employed ten sex workers and three support staff. Her workers hailed from New York, Wisconsin, Illinois, Virginia, Massachusetts, Kentucky, Missouri, Canada, and Indiana.[247] Annie Lee was a well-known madam and stories of her brothel reached beyond Kansas City. One story, run in the *St. Louis Globe Democrat* in 1881, detailed a robbery scheme allegedly run by Annie Lee and her workers. A wealthy man named T. Hosmer was robbed in Annie Lee's establishment of 3,500 dollars. The thief, Belle Byrd, was a sex worker employed by Annie Lee. She escaped with the money on a train but was stopped by two men claiming to be U.S. Marshals. Next, the men escorted Byrd off the train and stole the money from her. All those involved, including Madam Lee, were arrested. Police alleged that all parties conspired to steal from Hosmer and split the takings.[248] Importantly, this scheme required that Lee have friends all across Missouri, as the paper noted. As such, the diversity of hometowns that Lee's brothel included is not surprising—as she was well connected and well known throughout the state and beyond.

Chambers' brothel was average in size for the 1880 sex industry. On average, brothels in 1880 Kansas City employed around six to seven workers; the largest brothel

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[246] "1880 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll 693, Enumeration District 15, found in Family History Library Film.
[247] "1880 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll 693, Enumeration District 15, found in Family History Library Film.
[248] "A Sensational Robbery," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 33, June 22nd, 1881.

employed 12 workers and the smallest, only two.[249] Chambers employed seven sex workers. Emma Williams ran the largest brothel on Oak Street in 1880. She employed a total of 16 workers, 12 of which were identified as "prostitutes" by census takers. Emma Williams was a 31-year-old, white, widowed madam from Canada. She employed 12 white sex workers, ranging in age from 17 to 31. Her workers hailed from many different states, including Tennessee, Ohio, Maryland, Illinois, Missouri, and Iowa. Like in Chambers' brothels, the social status of her workers also varied, including five widowed workers and seven single workers. The sex workers in Emma Williams' brothel were Belle Parsons, Mollie Ricketts, Clara Purcell, Daisy Starr, Hattie Siddell, Alice McCall, Ada Stewart, Nellie Ames, Susan Sauer, Kittie Reed, Lillie Connors, and Gracia Day. By 1881, Emma Williams had earned so much money that she built a new mansion. Both Madam "Em" and Madam Nellie Scott purchased land and built new homes on Fourth and Wyandotte—near Annie Chambers' infamous resort. Nellie Scott spent around 20,000 dollars to make her house competitive. However, neighbors to these new houses signed a petition to prevent the women from occupying their new homes. Nellie Scott asserted that the neighborhood would need to pay her back if they would not let her run her business in peace. "Em," however, took another tactic, threatening to "swear to a list of each of their names as have made her house a place of resort for years."[250] Essentially, Madam Em threatened to expose the men who frequented her brothel. Madam Em's threat was powerful and eventually, both madams opened their new homes.

Finally, both Emma Williams' and Annie Chambers' businesses reflect another key trend in the Kansas City sex industry in the 1880s: the employment of white sex workers

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[249] "1880 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll 693, Enumeration District 15, found in Family History Library Film.

[250] "The Gilded Mansions," *Kansas City Evening Star*, Vol. 1, Issue 303, September 6, 1881.

and African American support staff. Emma Williams not only employed sex workers but three cooks and a servant. All of her support staff were African American, indicating an important trend in the Kansas City sex industry: white sex workers and African American support staff.[251] This racial segregation was also apparent in Annie Chambers' brothel. Along with her employed sex workers, Annie Chambers employed a servant, cook, and chambermaid. Importantly, all of Chambers' sex workers were white whereas her other employees were black. In fact, every identified sex worker in the 1880 Kansas City census record was white. Conversely, nearly all the brothel support staff—from cooks to servants to chambermaids—were persons of color. This evidence could indicate that African American sex workers did not exist in Kansas City in 1880 but like in Memphis and St. Louis, it is unlikely that people of color did not work in the sex industry. Rather, it is more likely that racial and economic pressures rendered these workers invisible in the census record.

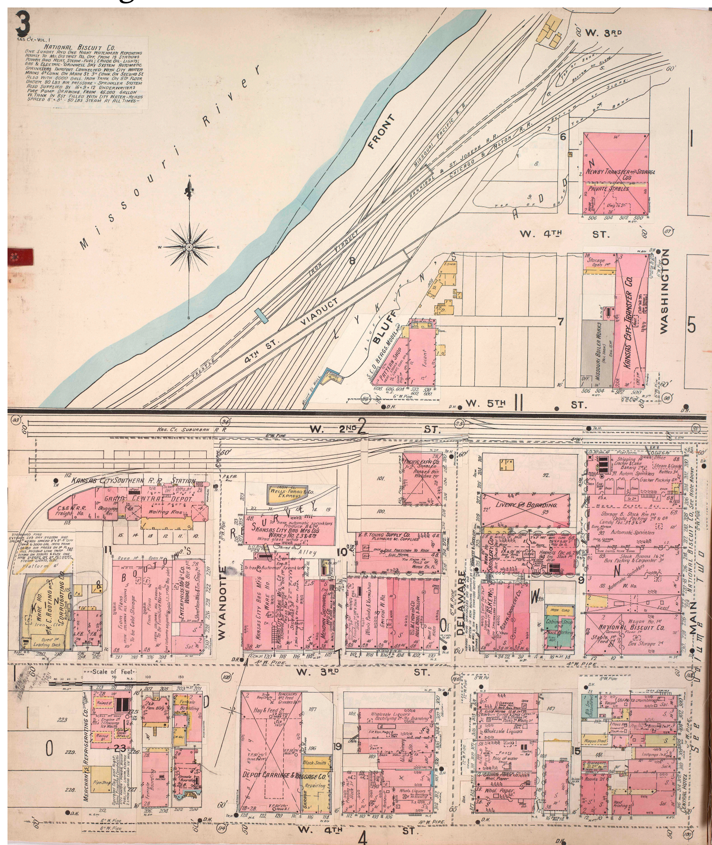
Ultimately, the 1880s sex industry in Kansas City was marked by extreme growth, of which Annie Chambers' brothel is highly representative. The workers ranged in age but were largely young. They hailed from several states, reflecting a migratory pattern and interconnections in the industry. Moreover, the vast majority of the workers were single and of those that were married, their engagement in the industry threatened heteronormative social structures. Finally, the sex industry employed a large number of workers, the vast majority of which were white. Although there were some visible African American sex workers, most madams only employed African Americans as support staff, reflecting the racial segregation of the period. Still, this racial division would not last, and as Kansas City

[251] "1880 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll 693, Enumeration District 2, found in Family History Library Film.

grew, so did the number of madams openly dealing in the selling of racialized desire through the employ of women of color as sex workers.

Kansas City in the 1890s: Women of Color and the Diversification of the Sex Industry

As Kansas City grew, so did the sex industry. Although not much information is available regarding the sex industry in the 1890s, it is clear that several of the same madams remained and their businesses grew—including Annie Chambers and Emma Williams.[252] Furthermore, other famous madams came to Kansas City to expand their businesses, including Fannie Wilson and Mollie Allen.[253] The Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of 1896 indicates at least six female boarding houses—code for brothels—on West 3rd Street and Wyandotte, as more famous madams joined the ranks of Chambers like Madam Lovejoy and Eva Prince.[254] Reports indicate that around 20 brothels operated in Kansas City in the late 1880s and 1890s at any given time.[255] The industry expanded in other ways as well, including more women of color and diversifying the kind of sex work practiced in Kansas City.



252 "City Summary," *Kansas City Times*, July 26, 1889.
253 "City Summary," *Kansas City Times*, July 26, 1889.
254 "Sanborn Map, Kansas City," Vol. 1, 1895-1907, pg. 003, Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City, Mo.
255 "The Police Matron's Work," *Kansas City Times*, January 2, 1890.

Several women of color were reported to work as both madams and sex workers in the late 1880s and 1890s in Kansas City. The *Kansas City Star* reporters documented several cases in police court. One such case, in 1885, was the arrest of about six women of color "from 'the acre.'" All of these workers were arrested and charged $26.50 for engaging in "prostitution."[256] The *Kansas City Evening Star* also reported a famed madam, named Laura Warwick, who was also a woman of color. In 1885, Madam Warwick was accused of luring a young white girl named Ada Schaffer into her brothel. Ada denied that she worked as a sex worker, but instead asserted she was support staff for the brothel. Still, Madam Warwick was charged with "keeping a bawdy house" and "for allowing a girl under 17 years of age to become an inmate" of her brothel.[257] Other examples include George Hicks, who ran a brothel on North Grand Avenue. He employed six women of color and one white woman as sex workers. Like in Memphis and St. Louis, the majority of his clients were white and at the time of a police raid in 1886, five of his white male clients were arrested.[258] These arrest records, published in local newspapers, reveal an increasingly diverse sex industry in the late 1880s and 1890s, where more women of color were employed as madams and sex workers.

Madams of color, such as Carrie Tate, were quite successful in their businesses. Madam Tate ran a brothel at 309 Broadway Street. In 1886, a fire engulfed the brothel. She and her workers escaped with minimal injury. She employed eight workers and one servant. Only Dora Hudson was injured in the fire because she jumped from the second story to escape it. However, Carrie Tate "sustained" a large loss in furniture—around 1,000 dollars.

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[256] "Police Court," *Kansas City Star*, January 29, 1885.
[257] "Among Vile Associates," *Kansas City Evening Star*, April 4, 1885.
[258] "To Mother Hubbard Addition," *Kansas City Times,* July 8, 1886.

This report indicates Tate's success. Although she rented the building, she was able to lavishly furnish it, as the loss indicates.[259]

Despite the growth in women of color working as madams and sex workers, the racial divide between sex workers and support staff remained in some brothels. For example, Madam Kittie Brown employed William Stone—an African American man in her house as support staff.[260] This division reflects a larger racial segregation in Kansas City, wherein African Americans typically occupied the lowest tier of the economic structure as domestic and support staff.

Beyond women of color working in the business, newspapers also reported a diversification in the kind of sex work practiced in Kansas City. For example, a robbery at a saloon run by Tom Moore and W.M. Shaffer brought to light hidden sex work in that same saloon. As the *Kansas City Evening Star* reported, "outwardly it bears the appearance of being an ordinary saloon, but its real character was revealed by the parties arrested when the raid was made." Moore had "divided" a back room into several "small compartments" for women to work in. As a result of the raid, seven sex workers were arrested, as well as five male clients. Moreover, the raid revealed this type of prostitution, resulting in raids on other saloons in the area. Across the river, police raided the Crystal Saloon, which boasted a similar set up as Tom Moore's place.[261] In fact, based on the reports from newspapers, several men ran saloons that doubled as brothels. John F. Painter legally ran a saloon on 5th and Bluff streets but after a raid, was charged and fined "for renting rooms for the purposes

[259] "A Bagnio Burned," *Kansas City Times*, March 28, 1886.
[260] "Cut with a Knife," *Kansas City Evening Star*, July 23, 1885.
[261] "Saloon Raided," *Kansas City Evening Star*, March 7, 1885.

of prostitution."[262] These saloons were located in similar areas as Annie Chamber's brothel, near the river. However, by 1886, more had opened on East 15th Street, as the business of both saloon and brothel boomed in Kansas City.[263]

Importantly, it was not only men who ran rooms in the backs of saloons. Sex workers also went into business for themselves, renting out their own rooms. For example, Hattie Henderson and Emma Weston each kept rooms as their places of business, resulting in fines of $27.00 each.[264] Similarly, Fannie Daly and Lulu Davis were also charged with "occupying rooms for the purposes of prostitution," indicating that sex workers not connected to brothels had grown.[265] Madams even entered the room renting business. The *Kansas City Times* reported that a Mrs. Kemple rented the top of a stable from John F. Waters and Mr. Clay. She then rented the rooms to sex workers. The three split the profits of the business, attempting to escape the legal ramifications of running a brothel by simply renting to independent sex workers. However, Waters and Mrs. Kemple argued and Waters attempted to turn Mrs. Kemple in for running a "house of prostitution." The confusion resulted in the Courts levying minimal fines against all three.[266] However, their business arrangement demonstrates the growth in the room renting business of the Kansas City sex industry.

Thus, the 1890s witnessed an expansion and diversification of the sex industry in Kansas City. Unlike Memphis and St. Louis, Kansas City did not have a powerful reform movement or other outside forces to force the industry to centralize or shore up one type of

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[262] "The City Threatened with Another Suit- A Bawdy House Keeper's Light Fine," *Kansas City Evening Star*, May 5, 1885.; "City Summary," *Kansas City Times*, May 6, 1885.
[263] "Vile Places," *Kansas City Star*, August 18, 1886.
[264] "Police Court News," *Kansas City Evening Star*, September 4, 1885.
[265] "City Summary," *Kansas City Times*, November 15, 1886.
[266] "They Fell Out," *Kansas City Times,* October 5, 1886.

sex work. Rather, Kansas City's sex industry in the 1890s reflected an expansion in the location of sex work and the type of sex work practiced, indicating greater possibilities for madams and sex workers in the industry that continued to develop through the 1900s.

Kansas City in the 1900s: A Diverse Sex Industry

The expansion in the sex industry in Kansas City in the late 1880s and 1890s is quite apparent in the 1900 Kansas City Census records. Moreover, the diversity of both race and type of work is still apparent in the 1900 census records. In fact, in 1900, 55 brothels are apparent in the Kansas City census records. This number is a remarkable shift in the number of brothels in Kansas City—from 16 in 1880, to around 20 in 1890, to 55 in 1900. As noted, the Kansas City sex industry in 1900 reflected far more diversity than in earlier years.

Although majority of the sex workers in 1900 were white, some brothels housed only women of color. For example, Anna Jouer ran a brothel on West 4th Street that employed seven workers. Madam Jouer was a 36-year-old, African American, single woman from Kentucky. Her workers ranged in age from 12 to 25. They were all African American. Three of her workers were married. They hailed from several locations including Ohio, Tennessee, and Missouri.[267] Similarly, Edna McCall ran a brothel that only employed women of color. At 35, she was married and from Kentucky. She employed five workers: Fannie Allen, Maggie Stephenson, Rose Allen, Lillis Clark, and Kit McGee. Her workers ranged in age from 19 to 29. They hailed from Kentucky, Missouri, Illinois, Kansas, and Ohio.[268] Importantly, in the year 1900, no brothels employed both women of color and white

[267] "1900 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll 861, Enumeration District 17, found in Family History Library Film.
[268] "1900 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll 861, Enumeration District 17, found in Family History Library Film.

women. Rather, the racial divisions remained in which madams tended to run houses that employed women of their same race.

Moreover, a racial divide remained in the support staff of brothels in Kansas City. For example, Dixie and Dallie Lee ran a brothel near Madam Jouer on West 3rd Street. Formerly known as Ruth Z. Oppenheimer, Dixie Lee was a famous madam in both Kansas City and Wichita.[269] Originally from Nebraska, Dixie Lee made a name for herself in Wichita and also married a man named Charles Oppenheimer. Together, they tried to make a life, even attempting to adopt a child in Kansas City.[270] However, Madam Lee grew tired of supporting her husband. He left Lee but upon his return to this city, continually relied on her good will to provide funds for him. She did so for a long time but eventually decided to cut him off. He attempted to kill her in response.[271] By 1900, it appears as though Oppenheimer had died. In the 1900 census, Dixie Lee lists herself as a widow. In 1901, Dixie Lee died and her will demonstrated her success in the sex industry. She left her government bonds and jewelry to her daughter, Ruth. She left other real estate holdings to her brothers and other relatives. She also gave all the furniture in her brothels to Alderman John P. O'Neill. At the time of her death, she ran two brothels, one at 700 Wyandotte Street and the other on West 3rd Street.[272] She employed ten sex workers and all were white. She also employed an African American servant named Sallie Ban and a porter named William A. Patton.[273] The racial divide of her brothel reflects the historical racial divide of the

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[269] "Dixie Lee's Will Filed," *Kansas City Star*, February 23, 1901.; "The Child Recovered," *Kansas City Star,* January 4, 1888.
[270] "The Child Recovered," *Kansas City Star*, January 4, 1888.
[271] "A Divorced Man After Gorf," *Kansas City Star*, December 14, 1896.
[272] "Dixie Lee's Will Filed," *Kansas City Star*, February 23, 1901.;
[273] "1900 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll 861, Enumeration District 17, found in Family History Library Film.

Kansas City sex industry in which African Americans tended to act as support staff, rather than sex workers, in brothels.

Annie Chambers worked next door to Dixie Lee, as many madams consolidated their businesses around Chambers' brothel to capitalize on her success. In 1900, Chambers employed eight sex workers: Bell Burroughs, Jane Brown, Bel Hayden, Grace Nelson, Minnie Michael, Nelly Hays, and Myrtle Shook. They ranged in age from 18 to 30. At 58, Annie Chambers was one of the oldest madams in Kansas City. She appeared to lie about her origins in the census record, asserting that she was from New York when she was actually from Kentucky. Chambers' workers originated from Missouri, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Kentucky, and Kansas. As indicated, some of the most famous madams of Kansas City lived and worked around Annie Chambers' house. Dixie Lee set up on one side of Chambers' brothel and Madam Cora Totty on the other. In 1900, Cora Totty employed five workers: Cora Mason, Willie Clark, Bertha De Woolf, Marie Certberth, and Fay Stanly. She was white, as were all her workers. They ranged in age from 19 to 23. Cora Mason was widowed but her fellow workers were all single. They came from Missouri, Ohio, and New York. Cora Totty also came from New York. Like her counterparts, Cora Totty became quite wealthy from her work as a madam. Her home was lavishly decorated, with Chinese-inspired décor.[274]

The success of Dixie Lee, Annie Chambers, and Cora Totty reflects the major growth of the Kansas City sex industry by 1900. However, between the 1890s and 1900s, the sex industry did not change extensively in Kansas City. Rather, similar trends are apparent in the historical records including a more diverse racial-makeup of the industry

[274] Byron C. Shutz, "A Lady Revealed," *Kansas City Genealogist* Vol. 39, #2 (Fall, 1998) 60-70.

and a vibrant migration of workers from all over the country. These trends indicate that the Kansas City sex industry was existed without much interference from outside forces. However, by the 1910s, certain Kansas Citians became increasingly frustrated with the sex work industry, attempting to stem the power of vice in Kansas City and particularly, the power of Boss Tom Pendergast.

Kansas City in the 1910s: Growing Reform Efforts

In the 1910s, Kansas City's sex industry faced one of its first major roadblocks: reformers. As indicated, in previous decades, Kansas City's sex industry appeared to grow and diversify unchecked. However, by the 1910s, a growing national reform effort had begun that influenced Kansas Citians to engage in sex work reform. As a result, in 1910, the Kansas City sex industry appears much the same as it had in previous decades—with some exceptions regarding how visible the industry is within the historical records. However, by the mid-1910s, reformers had attempted to at least halt some of the growth and diversification of the industry.

A combination of both the 1910 Kansas City census records and other materials—specifically the vice commission reports—indicate a major growth in the Kansas City sex industry in the 1910s. The census records indicate about 41 visible brothels in Kansas City in 1910. Blanch Killman ran the largest brothel, employing 11 workers. Her workers were Clara Best, Alice Schulz, Edna Hall, Jennie Gettman, Florence Spring, Jessie Kelley, Mary Carson, Dora Bion, Adsen Miller, Ora Steel, and Leona Conway. They were all white and ranged in age from 19 to 42. Located on Broadway and West 3rd Street, Madam Killman's brothel was in the prime red light district of the turn of the century. Her workers hailed from a variety of locations including Nebraska, Wisconsin, Missouri, Iowa, New York, Kansas,

Sweden, and Arkansas—indicating the migratory patterns of the period and the place of Kansas City as a key site for this migration.[275]

Moreover, the census records do indicate some racial diversity in the Kansas City sex industry in 1910. Four of the 41 brothels were run by African American madams and employed only women of color. The largest of this four was run by Violate Slathus, a 24-year-old African American woman from Mississippi. She employed five workers: Addie Jerden, Edith Ban, Gilliano Wallace, Camie Sinnett, and Abethe Mums. They ranged in age from 19 to 36 and hailed from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Arkansas.[276] This brothel was located down the road from Madam Killman's house, on West 3rd and Broadway, indicating that racial segregation occurred within brothels but not necessarily within the larger industry. Madam Killman's and Slathus' brothels represent the range in the Kansas City sex industry in 1910: a racially diverse industry with workers of various ages and coming from a variety of locations.

Importantly, however, the census records did not identify any of these houses as brothels; rather, as in Memphis, the growth of local and national reform efforts resulted in a sanitization of the census records. In fact, the brothels in the 1910 census records were identified as boarding houses, with all female boarders who had no occupations.[277] This pattern often renders brothels and the sex industry invisible in the census records. In 1910, census takers never outright identified prostitutes. If a census taker ever did identify sex

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[275] "1910 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll T624_785, Enumeration District 18, found in Family History Library Film.
[276] "1910 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll T624_785, Enumeration District 18, found in Family History Library Film.
[277] "1910 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll T624_785, Enumeration District 18, found in Family History Library Film.

workers, the identification was edited and removed. See, for example, the census record of 1910:

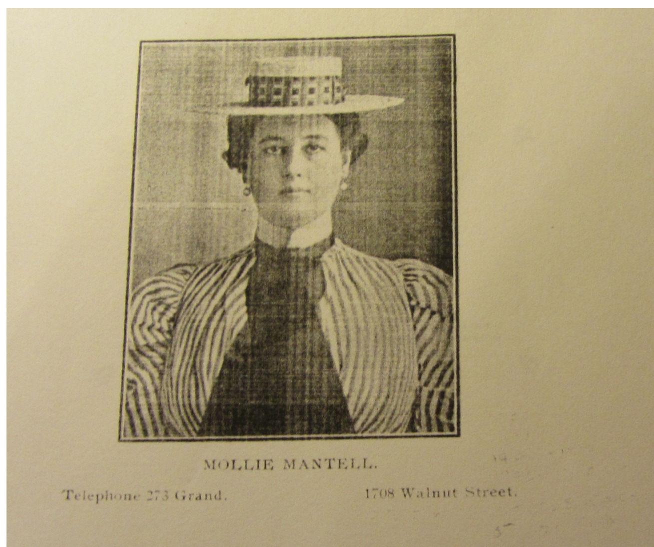
1910 Census Records: Red Light District in Kansas City[278]

In this record, census takers initially identified five brothels as "sporting houses." However, the census taker returned to the record and crossed out "sporting," replacing it with "boarding houses." Such an edit signifies a national concern with the regulation of sex work, editing federal documents to maintain the appearance of a city separate from a sex industry. This discursive production of heteronormative social structures and a specific moral order occurred in both Kansas City and Memphis. Census takers and local authorities wanted the sex industry to be rendered invisible (even if reform efforts in Kansas City were not taking root due to Boss Tom Pendergast).

As a result, the census records appear to obscure much about the Kansas City sex industry in 1910. For example, famed madams and their brothels are not identified in the

[278] "1910 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll T624_785, Enumeration District 30, found in Family History Library Film.

records at all. Census takers did not identify Annie Chambers, Cora Totty, Madam Lovejoy, and Eva Prince by name in the records. As such, their brothels and workers were rendered invisible within the census. Similarly, census takers also only identified madams within the records—not their workers. For example, Madam Mollie Mantell is identified as a hotelkeeper on Walnut Street in 1910. However, other evidence indicates that Mollie Mantell was actually a madam. In fact, her name and image were in a "photographic album" that included multiple business cards of madams.[279] The census record and this business card match, both indicating that Mollie Mantell lived at 1708 Walnut Street. In 1910, she was a 42 year old, married woman from Missouri. If historians only used census records, Mollie Mantell's part in the sex industry would be obfuscated. However, the addition of sources like the photographic album kept at the Missouri Valley Special Collections reveals Mollie Mantell's actual occupation. Arguably, madams were often not visible in the census records because by the 1910s, reformers were gaining ground in Kansas City—attempting to root out vice and other recreations, resulting in a different type of source to reveal more about the Kansas City sex industry: vice commission reports.



In 1913, The Society for the Suppression of Commercialized Vice formed in Kansas City. This organization asserted that sex work and all accompanying vices needed to be

[279] "Prostitution in Kansas City," Photograph Album and Directory, Kansas City Missouri, MVSC 099.1 P57, 5.

entirely suppressed. They responded to a growing movement in the United States to segregate sex work into separate red light districts. But this organization rejected this notion, arguing instead that suppression would be the only means of removing sex work from Kansas City and the moral blights it caused. Upon its inception, the organization published a list of known offenders, specifically targeting the immoral rooming houses. As the 1910 census records indicated, many madams had begun to use boarding houses as the front for their businesses. Subsequently, the vice commission began to target such places. They asserted that around 500 sex workers were in Kansas City as of 1913. Furthermore, they published the names of madams, whether they owned their homes, and the owners of the houses from whom they rented. This method, intended to bring the sex industry out of the shadows, revealed who exactly was involved in the sex industry in the early 1910s—not just sex workers and madams but those who were tacitly involved by renting their properties to madams. The report published the names of 25 madams, the addresses of their homes, and from whom they rented. Importantly, this information indicates a widespread vice district, as brothels were in locations throughout the city.[280]

Moreover, the Society for Suppression of Commercialized Vice produced annual reports. These reports named known brothels in Kansas City, indicating a widespread and diverse vice district that remained in Kansas City into the 1920s. In 1920, the Society reported on 77 different brothels, run by both African American and white madams. These brothels existed throughout the city, including in the previously centralized red light district surrounding Annie Chamber's house.[281] By 1922, the number had decreased but was still significant, reporting between 18 and 35 vice-related businesses in Kansas City.

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[280] Social Improvement League, *Report of the Secretary,* Kansas City MO: The League, 1913-1942.
[281] Society for Suppression of Commercialized Vice, "Secretary's Annual Report," October 15, 1920, 4-5, Missouri Valley Room, Kansas City Public Library.

Significantly, this report only includes those businesses that had been deemed illegal by certain actions and thus, likely does not encompass the entirety of the sex industry.[282] By 1926, the Society had managed to shut down 27 brothels run by white women, who employed around 79 workers. They had also closed 12 African American brothels, employing a total of 30 workers. Moreover, the Society had suppressed sex work at eight hotels, preventing 29 workers from using those businesses for their trade. Significantly, both African American and white madams ran brothels in more temporary locations by 1926, often in apartments or basements rather than entire houses as the previous sex industry had boasted.[283] The reports continue through 1932, indicating that despite the Society for Suppression of Commercialized Vice, the sex industry persisted in Kansas City.

Why might a vice district remain in Kansas City after the passage of prohibition in 1918 and not in Memphis and St. Louis? In part, Kansas City can be seen as unique because of the Pendergast family and their political influence in the city. The Society mentioned the influence of prohibition, noting that it had a "beneficial effect on the morals of the city."[284] However, as their reports indicate, it did not close down the sex industry. In fact, the sex industry continued to expand, even creating different types of venues. As the Vice reports indicate, the commission was particularly upset over a new show in the North Side theatre, known as "The Midnight Show." The Reports noted that the theatre put on "vile productions" that had "no limit to the portrayal of sensuality or indecency."[285] Similarly, the sex industry became more conducive for sex workers not working in brothels. From hotels

[282] Society for Suppression of Commercialized Vice, "Secretary's Annual Report," 1922, 2-4, Missouri Valley Room, Kansas City Public Library.
[283] Society for Suppression of Commercialized Vice, "13th Annual Report," 1926, 2-4, Missouri Valley Room, Kansas City Public Library.
[284] Society for Suppression of Commercialized Vice, "Secretary's Annual Report," 1920, 3, Missouri Valley Room, Kansas City Public Library.
[285] Society for Suppression of Commercialized Vice, "Secretary's Annual Report," 1920, 3, Missouri Valley Room, Kansas City Public Library.

to streetwalking, sex workers had more access to a clientele in Kansas City. For example, the "Coney Island Café" allowed "women of the street" to work with clients upstairs. Majority of the girls working this area were between 16 and 18 years old.[286] Moreover, although bars and other venues were closed due to selling alcohol after prohibition, brothels were not as targeted. Rather, it seemed as though brothels could still sell liquor without being shut down.[287] Thus, the sex industry continued to evolve and was supported by Boss Tom Pendergast.

Kansas City After Prohibition: The Pendergast Political Machine and the Expansion of Vice

The Pendergast political machine of Kansas City was most influential from the 1910s through 1939 when Boss Tom Pendergast was arrested for "income tax evasion."[288] Pendergast left his mark on Kansas City as he refused challenges from prohibitionists both before and after the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment. Such a move allowed for vice districts to flourish in Kansas City, resulting in a thriving sex work industry, other leisure pursuits, and a well-known jazz music scene.[289]

Often, the history of jazz music is relegated to New Orleans—where scholars argue jazz originated in the brothels of Storyville. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, madams of Storyville employed a musician to play in the ballroom or parlor, where the sex workers entertained their clients before moving to private rooms. These musicians

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[286] Society for Suppression of Commercialized Vice, "Secretary's Annual Report," 1920, 6, Missouri Valley Room, Kansas City Public Library.
[287] Society for Suppression of Commercialized Vice, "Secretary's Annual Report," 1920, 5, Missouri Valley Room, Kansas City Public Library.
[288] Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop – A History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005) 6.
[289] Driggs, *Kansas City Jazz,* 8-9.

were called "professors."[290] As some scholars argue, these musicians were given certain musical freedom and were allowed to experiment. Consequently, music pouring from the doors of these houses of ill repute was often the most innovative and risk-taking music of this period. In fact, Louis Armstrong started his career shadowing a "professor" in Storyville as a young boy.[291]

Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix in *Kansas City Jazz* have recently told the story of Kansas City Jazz and the surrounding culture. These scholars demonstrate that the Pendergast political machine made Kansas City into the "Paris of the Plains" because of their investment in Kansas City vice. Essentially, this political machine extends the narrative of sex work beyond 1919 and the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment. As I indicated in earlier chapters, in other cities like Memphis and St. Louis, sex work and brothel culture moved largely underground by 1920. This move resulted from a combination of prohibition, reform efforts, societal changes, and subsequent changes to relationships with law enforcement, government officials, and even the national government.[292] However, as the Society for the Suppression of Commercialized Vice reports indicate, the sex industry still flourished in Kansas City after the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment and other federal legislation intended to reduce commercialized vice in the United States. In fact, the red light district remained widespread, stretching from "blocks east from downtown on 14th Street." The red light district was so accepted that workers simply stood in the windows, advertising their bodies as indicators of the business. Although other cities had largely driven sex worker underground by the 1920s, authorities in Kansas City did not want to

[290] Anonymous, *Madeleine: An Autobiography* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 1918) 92.
[291] *Storyville: The Naked Dance*, documentary, directed by Anne O. Craig and Maia Harris (Shanachie Studios, 9/12/ 2000).
[292] Alexandra M. Lord, "'Naturally Clean and Wholesome': Women, Sex Education, and the United States Public Health Services, 1918-1928" in *Social History of Medicine* 17, 3 (2004): 427.

drive sex work into the shadows. Rather, they maintained a symbiotic relationship with the industry. When asked by a journalist why the police rarely sanctioned the workers, Police Chief Otto Higgins noted: "Why, if you bother the girls you just push them into the back room. Then you don't know what's going on. This way we can maintain control over them."[293] Ultimately, the existence of Kansas City sex industry into the 1930s indicates how local politicians and culture can influence this field of work. Unlike Memphis and St. Louis, a confluence of political support and economic need allowed the sex industry to remain in Kansas City after the 1920s.

Overall, Kansas City demonstrates core aspects of river town brothel culture. First, the sex industry in Kansas City was positioned on or near the Missouri River. Like in Memphis and St. Louis, this positioning was strategic to capitalize on a migrating working class utilizing the river as their main thoroughfare. As I discuss in Chapter Four, this same river and access to transportation shaped sex worker lives in river towns, allowing for enhanced mobility between and beyond the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Kansas City also demonstrates the role of African American entertainment districts and growing vice districts in the maintenance of the sex industry, like in Memphis and St. Louis. However, unlike Memphis and St. Louis, Kansas City maintained a unique sex industry because of the Pendergast political machine. Vested interests in the sale of liquor and gambling allowed the sex industry to thrive in Kansas City far longer than it had thrived in Memphis and St. Louis. Although national reforms drove the industry underground in other cities, Kansas City's sex industry continued to expand and diversify, rather than coalesce on one particular street and eventually move underground. As I will discuss in Chapter Six, these unique

[293] Driggs, *Kansas City Jazz,* 8-9.

factors posed particular problems for the reformers in Kansas City, revealing various types of reforms but ultimately, showing how certain sex workers could carve a space of belonging for themselves within these unique parameters.

Chapter 4

Sex Work as Work: Shared Lives and the Cultural Impact of Sex Workers in Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City

> *I saw them all, the lost sisterhood of the nations. I met them in Europe and in the Orient; in Canada and in Mexico. And I met more American women than those of another nation, for they were in every city and every land that I visited. I met the public prostitute, the clandestine prostitute, and the occasional prostitute. I met the trusting girl who had been betrayed, and the unfaithful wife. I met the college woman, and the illiterate child of the slums. I met the deserted wife and the wife of the profligate; the girl from the sheltered home and the girl who had been allowed to run wild; the girl who had sold her honor for bread, and the girl who had sold it for luxury and fine clothes. I met the girl who should have been a nun, and those others who were "predestined by ancient conditions" for the life of the harlot. But the one girl I never met in all these years and in all the cities and the countries that I visited was the pure girl who had been trapped and violated and sold into slavery, and held a prisoner unable to effect her escape—the so-called "white slave."*[294]

Madeleine

Published in 1919, *Madeleine: An Autobiography* provides a challenge to the construction and understanding of sex work by Progressive Era reformers. As the author, Madeleine indicates in the above quotation that all types of workers entered the sex industry from all over the world but in her experience, never the "white slave."[295] Madeleine's recounting of the diverse reasons for entering the sex industry challenged reformers to recognize the mediating factors governing sex worker life—factors such as economic need, educational pitfalls, and desire for consumption but never the forced and innocent sexual slave. Madeleine recasts the historical debate about sex work, moving beyond a discussion of choice and enslavement and into a discussion of contextual causation and mediation of the agency of workers in the industry. Moreover, Madeleine's memoir displays core

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[294] Anonymous, *Madeleine: An Autobiography* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 1918) 145-146.
[295] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 145-146.

agentive power, in which she challenges the representation of sex workers by reformers and complicates sex worker lives, choices, and engagement with the social order.

Her political voice shaped my research questions on sex worker life. Specifically, I ask: how did sex workers contest a reduction of their work and personal lives by outsiders? Beyond alleged enslavement, what factors mediated sex worker entrance into the industry? What kind of economic freedom did the industry afford these workers? What kind of upward and physical mobility did these workers enjoy despite mediation from outside forces? How did the labor of the industry serve to both mediate the agentive power of sex workers and reflect their cultural contestation?

Ultimately, I argue that the analytical step of recognizing sex workers as workers requires analysis of the mediation of their labor itself, the fruits of their labor, and the way their labor reflects and reinscribes the gender and sexual order of their respective cities. In their response to construction by outsiders, sex workers often challenged stereotypes of their occupation, showing the mediation of their labor and choices but also how the construction by outside forces—such as reformers—were inherently incorrect, reflecting presumptions about gender, sexuality, race, and class that reductively constructed the labor of sex work. Moreover, in their chosen names, appearance, and performance of their work, sex workers reveal both the normative and exotic constructions of femininity, race, and class. Beyond performance, sex workers reveal alternative social orders, challenging the relegation of their bodies and sexual power to the confines of heteronormative marriage and instead, capitalizing on that power to advance their economic and social mobility. These performances greatly challenge outside construction of sex workers, particularly by

reformers, providing a far more nuanced picture of shared sex worker life, choices, and engagement and production of river town brothel culture.

Challenging Reformers: Sex Worker Self-Construction and the Choice of Sex Work

As Madeleine indicates in the opening quotation of this chapter, sex workers grated against the presumption that they were coerced into entering the sex industry. However, reformers believed that a sinister trade in women existed, which they termed white slavery. White slavery, or the sex trafficking in white women, was a powerful discourse in turn-of-the-century river towns. For example, in St. Louis newspapers published daily stories about trafficking, presuming that young or naïve young women were forced into sex work, usually by nefarious people of color.[296] These types of stories constructed certain sex workers as victims, in need of rescuing and subsequently shaped the missions of many Progressive Era reformers. I argue that sex workers presented their entrance into sex industry with more nuance, showing how economic hardship, family struggles, desire for consumption, and possibilities of mobility all shaped workers' choice of entering the industry. In challenging the reductive construction of sex work by reformers, sex workers revealed the pulls of sex work as an alternative occupation that could advance workers' opportunities, particularly in the turn-of-the-twentieth-century United States.

Memoirs are fascinating historical sources for the retelling of the history of sex work; however, the origins of these memoirs are often dubious. Usually, sex worker memoirs are billed as having been written by reformers rather than sex workers, in an effort to retell stories of prostitutes in a manner that aligned with and reinforced their views of sex work, allowing them to shore up their arguments against the industry. As Ruth Rosen notes, in

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[296] Some examples include: "A Sorrowful Story-Sad Experience of a Young Country Girl in Chicago," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 88, August 16, 1876,; "Alleged Seduction," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 237, January 11, 1876.; "Sad Case," *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 77, August 4, 1875.

The Lost Sisterhood, several of these "so-called memoirs of prostitutes" were written by reformers, causing Rosen to discount several of these work's validity. These "memoirs" were part of the larger white slavery discourse. Several famous tracts were published in this genre, often telling the same story of "the young country girl (symbol of innocence) who was lured to the city" and "fell victim" to "white slavers."[297] However, not all memoirs attributed to sex workers during this period can be reduced to such a simple message. *Madeleine* was published toward the end of the "white slave" scare in September of 1919. Rosen asserts that *Madeleine: An Autobiography* is an "authentic and plausible narrative." Citing the efficacy of Judge Ben Lindsay, the author of the 1919 introduction to *Madeleine*, Rosen argues that this memoir is "congruent with other statistical and survey material of the period," and thus, could be "representative of many young women's lives as prostitutes."[298] Although I take issue with the presumption that Madeleine could be "representative" of other sex workers because that presumption is reductive, Madeleine's autobiography does provide an interesting challenge to reformers' construction of sex workers in that she challenges several presumptions about white slavery. When initially published, *Madeleine* "did not alarm censors" but did offend readers because of the author's "critical attitude toward Christian reformers."[299] The author's identity has consistently remained secret—with Harper and Brothers refusing to reveal it.

Madeleine's story provides insight into the many factors that govern a worker's reason for entering the industry, reconstructing the sex worker as a laborer in search of economic mobility rather than the victim of white slavery. Madeleine was born into a

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[297] Anonymous, *Madeleine,* xxii.
[298] Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1982) Notes 194. Nell Kimball, *My Life as a Madam: An American Fanny Hill* (New York, NY: Granada Publishing, 1981).
[299] Anonymous, *Madeleine,* v.

middle class white family in the Midwest. Her childhood was marked by tragedy, which ultimately affected her decision to enter into the sex work industry. She was a part of a large family and, at first, she claimed that “no [child] could have begun life under more auspicious conditions.”[300] She was educated, learned to read, write, and appreciate great bodies of literature, art, and religious texts. This all changed when her father was labeled the town drunk. Madeleine’s family went from respectable to abominable in the matter of a year. Madeleine experienced this pain acutely because her father chose her as his outlet when he was inebriated. She claimed that “if anyone crossed him when he was drunk [she] made vicarious atonement.”[301] As her father was the sole breadwinner for the family, his alcoholism drove the family into poverty, forcing them to leave the family farm and move to a small house in a poor neighborhood.[302] Madeleine and her siblings were taken out of school when she was 13 and she was forced to remain home, helping out with the family as much as she could.

Soon, Madeleine became exposed to the world of sex work, although she did not enter into it right away. She had a violent, alcoholic father, an over-burdened mother, and no friends. Subsequently, as Madeleine puts it, she became “fair game for any predacious male who might be attracted by [her] youthful face or [her] well-developed figure.”[303] Many of Madeleine’s father’s former friends began to make advances toward her. She recounts how she tried desperately to avoid falling prey to their advances but because of her “environment and social isolation,” she “lost the battle.”[304]

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[300] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 6.
[301] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 7.
[302] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 8.
[303] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 10.
[304] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 11.

Eventually, the economic hardships of her family became too great for her mother to bear alone and at 17 Madeleine was sent to live with a former servant in St. Louis to get a factory job and help support her family. Madeleine was given the job of "check-girl," which consisted of "checking out bundles of work to the machine-workers and in checking in the finished product."[305] The hours were extremely long and the pay was only five dollars a week, two dollars of which went to board and the rest to her family at home. Soon, after months of poor health, Madeleine discovered she was pregnant.[306] Not wanting her mother to know and attempting to keep her family's reputation from further damage, Madeleine left the family friend with whom she had boarded. She had twelve dollars saved after three months in St. Louis and not a single friend to turn to. Because she did not want to be found, Madeleine could not take another factory job and she could not get a job in a department store because she did not have the clothes to be a sales girl, rendering her homeless and poor. She did not immediately enter into the sex work industry but at first became a "kept woman."

After a day of being solicited by men on the street, whom she refused, a benevolent man whom she never names eventually took Madeleine in as his "kept woman." He provided food, shelter, and even bought her clothing. In return, Madeleine became his personal prostitute. Madeleine contracted a venereal disease from her host and was forced to enter a treatment facility in Kansas City for three weeks. After she was released, Madeleine did not return to her host because she could not hide her pregnancy from him any longer. She decided to remain in Kansas City and become a member of a local brothel run by a madam she calls Miss Laura. She claimed that she "knew this monster which is

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[305] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 14.
[306] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 16-17.

called poverty, in all its soul-destroying aspects" and although she "felt sure that human degradation could go no farther" than sex-work, she believed it was her only option.[307] This was Madeleine's entry into sex work. She did not enter into the industry because she was morally corrupt or because she was forced to as a "white slave." Rather, Madeleine was forced to enter sex work for economic survival. Her story speaks to the few choices women of this period had. If a woman was not of the upper classes, her choices were limited and, as Madeleine demonstrates, they barely allowed for survival.

The manner in which she told her story is also quite telling. Madeline wrote this memoir in an attempt to counteract reformers' narratives of sex work. As such, she simultaneously contradicts reformers' assumptions—which I will discuss in detail in Chapter six—and attempts to pander to their expectations. For example, Madeleine constructs herself as both a victim and willing participant. Her movement into sex work was a mediated choice; however, becoming sexually active was not. Thus, Madeleine's memoir indicates that reformers should focus less on sex work and more on the surrounding ills of society, from alcoholism to dangerous and unchecked male sexual desire. She maintains this particular perspective throughout her memoir, demonstrating her intended audience and some of the powers mediating her work.

Still, Madeleine's story was not necessarily the norm even while the challenge of reductive constructions of sex workers is apparent in other sex workers' lives. In fact, Norma Wallace, an African American sex worker from Louisiana, tells a much different story about her entrance into prostitution than Madeleine. In *The Last Madam*, author Christine Wiltz uses her own research on Wallace, combined with memoirs, to create a

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[307] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 53-54.

narrative biography of the infamous madam.[308] Significantly, Wiltz's biography of Wallace challenges a second presumption of Progressive Era reformers—the assumption that women of color engaged in sex work were hypersexual, predatory, and predisposed to the industry. As already discussed, the white slavery discourse reflected racial structures far more than sex trafficking, revealing how reformers were far more interested in preserving white, middle to upper class social norms than actually reforming the sex industry.[309]

Importantly, sex workers like Norma Wallace challenged these assumptions, revealing the nuanced reasons someone might enter the sex industry in the turn-of-the-century U.S. Like Madeleine, Wallace had a troubled upbringing. Living in New Orleans, her mother enjoyed partying and often left Norma alone for several weeks with her younger brother Elmo. Norma changed her story several times but at one point, she claimed that her mother actually put her onto the streets to become a prostitute but this story cannot be confirmed.[310] Norma only went to school for two years and like Madeleine, she physically developed early, making her subject to the gaze of older men. Arguably, Norma's "parents' actions had set her on a life course from which there would be no return." They divorced when she was 12, and by 14, she had her first experience as a sex worker.[311]

After Norma's parents divorced, her mother sent her to Memphis and this is where Norma Wallace claims that she had "her first experience as a streetwalker."[312] When she first moved to Memphis, her cousins took her site seeing and walked her "past the ritzy Gayoso Hotel" and it was here that "Norma saw her first hustling girls ('spectacular ladies'

[308] Christine Wiltz, *The Last Madam: A Life in the New Orleans Underworld* (Boston, MA: DiCappo Press, 2000).
[309] Laura Hapke, "The Late Nineteenth-Century American Streetwalker: Images and Realities," *Mid-America* 65, no. 3 (1983): 155-156.; Mumford, *Interzones,* 20, 14, 16-17, 38.
[310] Wiltz, *Last Madam*, 6.
[311] Wiltz, *Last Madam*, 7.
[312] Wiltz, *Last Madam*, 7.

she called them)" and she was immediately "fascinated." Realizing that she had something men wanted, Norma decided to capitalize on her well-developed body and utilize her "irrepressible personality" to her advantage. Thus, she utilized men's attraction to her for economic support. Norma's first client was a man named Dr. Silvester. He was around 60 years old and was a veterinarian. When she picked up Dr. Silvester, she asked him to take her to the Gayoso Hotel for dinner. She told him she was 17, but she was actually only 14 years old. She was a virgin and decided to trick Dr. Silvester into thinking she would sleep with him. He "kept" her for a few weeks, waiting for her to give in to his advances but she never did. Eventually, Dr. Silvester left Norma and she met a new man: Andy Wallace. She fell in love with Wallace and even took his last name. Wallace was known for being a womanizer and the two fought incessantly culminating in Norma being shot by Wallace. Yet, as she puts it, she "also got a seven-carat diamond ring."[313] After relationship with Wallace ended, Norma became a sex worker full time.

Norma Wallace's story represents a different type of entrance into prostitution than Madeleine. Although she had a troubled childhood, Wallace never attributed her entrance into prostitution on those experiences. Rather, she presents her occupation more like a conscious choice. She was drawn to the glamour of the Gayoso Hotel, the liquor, the gambling, and frivolity and she knew she had a commodity that would make her money: her body and personality. Norma Wallace's entrance into prostitution was not because of a hyper-sexualized or predatory nature. Rather, it was the result of her choosing to capitalize on her body as an economic resource. Given her economic and social positioning, she did not have many options to make money. She knew that men, including white men, would

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[313] Wiltz, *Last Madam*, 8-9.

desire her, and she traded on that. As she made clear, she never went after men. Instead, they came to her. Thus, Norma Wallace defined an alternative morality that sanctioned women's use of their own bodies for commerce.

Significantly, Norma Wallace's story also reflects a larger discursive conversation about women's entrance into sex work, particularly the attractiveness of both the economic opportunities sex work could provide and the possibility of becoming a consumer of beauty culture. In fact, in her dissertation "Fashion and Fallen Women: The Apparel Industry, the Retail Trade, Fashion, and Prostitution in Late 19th century St. Louis," Jennifer Schulle discusses the possibility that fashion and consumption of beauty culture enticed certain women into the industry.[314] Schulle found a powerful discourse shaping many reformers' assumptions about sex workers that a love of clothing, jewelry, and makeup would influence a young woman to choose sex work. She cites J.A. Dacus and James W. Buel, who wrote *A Tour of St. Louis* in 1878. Dacus and Buel claimed that "vanity is a fatal disease" for young women and that many of the newly minted sex workers were "young girls, fresh from the country, allured by the splendor of an idle life, with plenty of fine clothes and flashy jewelry, undreaming of the dreariness and horror of the end."[315] Importantly, Dacus and Buel's story reflects the assumptions made by several reformers—that the sex industry lured innocent and inexperienced young women from the country into a brothel with the promise of a glamorous life. For Dacus and Buel, as well as the reformers of the period, that glamorous life was one of depravity. However, Schulle asks whether it could have been a possibility that consumption became a motivating factor for some

[314] Jennifer Marie Schulle, "Fashion and Fallen Women: The Apparel Industry, Retail Trade, Fashion, and Prostitution in Late 19th Century St. Louis" (PhD Diss., Iowa State University, 2005)

[315] Schuller, "Fashion and Fallen Women," 108-109.; J. A. Dacus and James Buel, *Tour of St. Louis: The Inside Life of a Great City* (St. Louis, MO: Western Publishing Company, 1878) 445-446.

workers entering the industry. Schulle does not include any source material from sex workers themselves to prove her thesis. However, examining Norma Wallace's narrative reveals that Schulle's argument holds merit, as one lure of sex work for Wallace was the possibility of being a "spectacular" lady.[316]

Conversely, in keeping with her attempt to both challenge and pander to reformers' expectations, Madeline eschewed such notions of consumption for herself. However, her repugnance of the pull of makeup, gowns, and jewelry indicates that other workers did find such aspects of the industry attractive. Madeleine never viewed herself as being absolutely depraved. Whenever she first entered sex work, she was known for her "holier-than thou attitude" because she never considered herself to be as "fallen" as the other girls.[317] She refused to allow the industry to corrupt her and thus set certain rules for herself that she rarely broke. Madeleine even judged some women for their supposed licentious lifestyle. Throughout most of her career as a sex worker, Madeleine refused to drink, become involved with drugs, or wear makeup and brightly colored clothing in public. Madeleine understood that she could maintain her outward respectability if she maintained certain physical and cultural standards. She believed that those women who chose to flaunt their lifestyles (make-up and brightly colored and gaudy dresses were marks of prostitution in public) were deplorable. In describing women in the same brothel as herself, she critiques their flashy ways:

> In becoming the inmate of a luxuriously appointed, high-priced house of ill fame they had been promoted in the social scale. They had always known vice, but they had not always known luxury, and they assumed the garb and the air of grandes dames without making the least effort to fit themselves for the role they placed. I do not recall having ever seen a book or magazine in the hands of one of these women. They read the daily papers, or at least such

[316] Wiltz, *Last Madam*, 8-9.
[317] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 69.

> parts of the papers as appealed to them, and they attended the theatres, garbed in costly garments and painted up like circus-riders. Their interest however was not in the play, but in the clothes of the women players and in the personality of the men of the sage. The discussion which followed their visits to the theater were always upon these topics; or they would talk of their men acquaintances whom they had seen escorting other women; they might offer a shrewd guess that the men would be down to the house later that night.[318]

When she kept her own brothel in Canada, she forbade her girls from acting in such a fashion and punished them for doing so.[319]

The association between sex workers and fashionable attire is apparent in the historical record. Newspapers often indicate that sex workers were often known to be well appointed in their appearance. For example, in 1878, the *Memphis Daily Appeal* reported an arrest of a "soiled dove," who despite her belligerent state was described as "fashionable."[320] Whether this association was a strong pull for sex workers, it is unclear. Reformers assumed sex workers were either misled or debaucherous and seeking methods of preventing young women from entering into sex work, targeted obsession with clothing as a possible indicator of a young girl's downfall. Yet, evidence of whether sex workers actively considered fashion and consumption as a key reason for entering the industry is less clear and arguably, it is more likely that other factors, particularly the possibility of economic freedom, shaped most workers' decisions to become part of the sex industry.

Ultimately, the reasons for entering the sex industry were varied and personal for sex workers in river town communities. Challenging reformers' reductive construction of sex work, Madeleine undermines the white slavery discourse and Wallace refutes the construction of African American women as naturally predisposed to the industry, replacing those assumptions with a nuanced retelling of her choice to become a sex worker. These

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[318] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 115.
[319] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 172.
[320] "Local Paragraphs," *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 19, 1878.

sources demonstrate that economic need was a chief motivating factor, but other pulls were present, including the desire to engage with beauty culture and consumption and/or to live a life of frivolity and pleasure. With these reasons for entering the industry and challenges to reformers' construction of sex workers, Madeleine, Norma Wallace, and other sex workers demonstrate their agentive power to speak for themselves, providing alternative understandings of the economic and social order of river towns.

Achieving Financial Stability: A Draw of the Sex Industry

Sex workers could achieve financial stability or even extreme wealth through the sex industry. Both Madeleine and Norma Wallace, in the course of their lives as sex workers and then madams, amassed a large amount of personal wealth, allowing them the possibility of economic mobility and of owning their own brothels. Evidence of other sex workers' wealth typically emerges from criminal complaints and advertisements for lost or stolen property. This evidence suggests that sex workers often earned a significant amount of money in this occupation, allowing more economic freedom than some of the other choices of labor women had in turn-of-the-century river towns. Beyond even earning high amounts of money, sex work offered the possibility of economic mobility, allowing these workers to work their way up in the sex industry from sex workers to madams.

Madeleine discusses the process of earning money as a sex worker. While working in Kansas City, she noticed a consistent trend of madams requiring that girls pay about half of what they earn in a week. At Miss Laura's—Madeleine's first employer—she charged five dollars a week for "table-board" rent. As such, Madeleine aimed to earn at least ten dollars a week or more. Workers could easily earn more if their clients paid higher prices than the

standards of the house. Gaining a following of clients that gifted money to the workers beyond the standard prices of the houses allowed sex workers to maintain a savings.[321]

As I discuss in Chapter Five, the wealth of madams is far easier to ascertain than that of sex workers, as madams tended to leave a record of their wealth after their death in their wills. However, one window into the wealth of sex workers was the criminal complaints of the period. Whether fighting a madam's claim to a worker's money or seeking a stolen item, newspapers provide a brief window into the possible wealth of sex workers. For example, one madam of St. Louis—Madam Vic Debar—and her workers appeared to be quite wealthy. Madam Debar provided clothing for her workers, along with room and board. In 1887, a former worker named Mattie Wells sued Vic DeBar for keeping her personal property. Mattie Wells claimed Madam DeBar kept $200.00 worth of her belongings but Madam DeBar countersued, claiming she furnished Wells' wardrobe and was owed room and board. The Judge found for both claims, ordering Madam DeBar to pay Mattie Wells $89.75 and keep the rest of the property as payment for the dresses and board.[322] The resulting judgment indicates that Wells did well in the industry, amassing both personal property and a small amount of money to furnish economic independence.

Another key source for understanding sex worker wealth is advertisements to have lost items returned or reports of thefts from sex workers. Again, I turn to the workers of Madam Vic Debar's brothel. In 1881, Mollie Richards placed a classified ad for her lost bracelet, calling for its return to her home at 610 Elm Street (Madam DeBar's brothel). Her ad noted that the finder would receive 50 dollars upon return of the "seven-stone diamond

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[321] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 41.
[322] "Justices' Cases," *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 95, August 28, 1887.

bracelet."[323] The fact that Mollie Richards both owned the bracelet and offered such a high reward for its return indicates her financial solvency. Similarly, in Memphis, sex workers often called upon police to retrieve their stolen items and punish the thieves. For example, S. Pepper stole from a "soiled dove" in a brothel on Causey Street, adjacent to Beale Street. He took her necklace and attempted to pawn it. Police apprehended the man and the necklace, returning the property to the sex worker and setting a 1,000 dollar bond for Pepper, reflective of the price of the necklace he stole.[324] Similarly, a thief entered Madam Belle De Witt's brothel on Chestnut Street in St. Louis in 1887. He stole from Alice Sippy a gold watch and 80 dollars and from May Stanley, a 550 dollar diamond bracelet off of her wrist.[325] All in all, these stories of stolen property are key evidence in understanding sex worker wealth and appear to be relatively common.

For many of these workers, police involvement in these stories reveal that sex workers often paid for this police protection, as did their madams. In Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City, sex workers were often arrested and required to secure their freedom by paying fines. These fines ranged from 10 to 20 dollars and could occur as often as once or twice a month.[326] Ultimately, the fact that sex workers owned this amount of property, could afford to pay their madams 50 percent of their earnings to work in a brothel, and often paid off police, indicates that sex work could result in financial solvency.

Significantly, sex work offered young women not only the possibility of financial solvency but also the prospect of upward mobility within the industry. In each city, stories

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[323] Multiple Classified Advertisements, St. Louis Globe Democrat (ST. Louis, Missouri, Sunday, September 25, 1881, pg. 14, Issue 128.
[324] "Local Paragraphs," *Memphis Daily* September 30, 1880, 6.
[325] "The Robbery record," *St. Louis-Globe Democrat*, Issue 104, September 6, 1887.
[326] See, for example, "News of Bygone Days 100 Years Ago: August 25, 1875," *Commercial Appeal*, August 25, 1975, The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.; "A Raid," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 9th, 1880, 5.; "The Tables Turned," *Kansas City Star*, February 22, 1886, 1.

of sex workers moving up in the industry to open their own brothels are common. In fact, a pattern appears within the historical record in which sex workers moved up in the business to become madams. Both Madeleine and Norma Wallace followed similar trajectories, moving between cities as sex workers and making a stable home in their chosen city. Similarly, Mollie Brown of St. Louis, one of the original "inmates" of Priscilla Henry's brothel in 1880, also became a madam by the 1890s. She opened a brothel at 310 South Sixth Street—not far from her former madam's place. Unfortunately, Madam Brown got into trouble because she opened a brothel within 100 yards of a church. Brown argued against 100-yard rule, claiming that many "preachers" established "churches in tents or anywhere else for the purpose of harassing these women."[327] Brown was ordered to move her brothel and she moved to Number 710 North 8th Street. However, that location was within 100 yard of Mt. Olive Baptist Church, requiring her to move again.[328] Despite her legal troubles, Mollie Brown's story indicates that workers in the sex industry could and did move up the economic ladder. Brown moved from being a sex worker in 1880 under Madam Henry to running her own brothel in 1886 (it could have been earlier but the earliest report of her as a madam was 1886). This move suggests rapid upward mobility, particularly for workers in famous brothels like Priscilla Henry's mansion. Importantly, upward mobility was not the only draw to sex work for some workers. Rather, physical mobility was also a possibility for sex workers, shaping not only their freedom but also a shared culture between river town sex industries. Moreover, physical mobility, at times, begot upward mobility—allowing for increased success for workers in the industry.

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[327] "The Hundred Yard Law: Judge Noonan Decides Against the Spruce Street Women," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 26, 1886.
[328] "Judge Noonan Sick Again: Acting Judge Paxson Disposes of a Small Docket To-day," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 15, 1887.

Mobility: Traveling Between Cities

Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City share a similar sex industry in which workers enjoyed some aspects of mobility. Workers gained mobility due to economic freedoms the occupation allowed. As a result, river towns like Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City demonstrate a shared sex worker culture, in which workers moved between and beyond these cities, leaving traces of this movement in the historical record. Mobility for these workers is indicated through several different source bases: memoirs, newspapers, and census records.

Rather than replicate the presumptions of turn-of-the-twentieth century reformers, sex workers such as Madeleine constructed their mobility as evidence of economic success and freedom, rather than sex trafficking.[329] As such, I posit that this mobility was not simply evidence of oppression as many reformers believed it to be but a reflection of the mediated agency of sex workers in river town brothels. Several memoirs explore the mobile life and connections of sex workers but to explore this history, I will focus on one key memoir: *Madeleine: An Autobiography.*[330] This text reveals the mobility of sex worker lives such as Madeleine, who worked in brothels in St. Louis, Kansas City, and Chicago and eventually became a madam in Canada.

Importantly, Madeleine's story speaks to the mobility of sex workers between different cities in Missouri, Kansas, and Texas. She notes that "besides the local product of the city itself, many of the small towns of Missouri, Kansas, and Texas sent their quota of

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[329] Some works on white slavery include: Laura Hapke, "The Late Nineteenth-Century American Streetwalker: Images and Realities," *Mid-America* 65, no. 3 (1983).; Laura Hapke, *Girls Who Went Wrong: Prostitutes in American Fiction, 1885-1917* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Popular Press, 1989).; Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918 (*Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1982).
[330] Other memoirs include: Christine Wiltz, *The Last Madam: A Life in the New Orleans Underworld* (New York, NY: De Capo Press, 2001).; Lide Meriwether, *Soundings* (Memphis, TN: Boyle and Chapman Publishers, 1872).

the raw material of prostitution into Kansas City; and Kansas City, not to be outdone in courtesy, returned a finished product to the houses of the smaller cities in these states."[331] Madeleine's own story speaks of mobility aided by the community she gained while working brothels. Madeleine led an itinerate life, aided by her own connections, as well as informal networks created by sex workers. For example, Madeleine discusses her decision to move to Winnipeg from Chicago. A fellow worker had spent the previous summer in Winnipeg and returned "filled with the stories of the Northwest—the wonderful ozone-laden air of the prairies; the gentility and liberality of the men one met; the opportunity of out-of-door life; and the advantage of making and saving money." In fact, "she had returned from there previous summer with a fat bank account." Thereafter, Madeleine decided to move to Winnipeg but first she "wrote to the woman who kept the leading house at that place." Madam von Levin responded quickly, having Madeleine meet her in St. Paul to travel together to Winnipeg.[332] These connections speak to a sex worker community defined by relationships between workers, familial networks, and mobility—a characterization often disguised by the loud and often false narratives of white slavery, forced sex work, and exploitation in historical documents produced by reformers.

Fears over white slavery and other transient scourges—like disease—resulted in heightened policing of sex workers. Many female moral reformers believed in the idea of "white slavery." As noted earlier, this term was developed by a particular type of moral reformer who argued that single, white women from rural areas were in grave danger of being tricked into prostitution by predatory men if they moved to urban centers. Moral reformers instilled fear in white society and fostered a passion to save the pure innocence of

[331] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 63.
[332] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 175-176.

white women susceptible to sex work, resulting in racialized reform. The term "white slavery" allowed reformers to believe that white women were not voluntarily prostitutes.[333] Yet, Madeleine holds complete disdain for these reformers and their alleged quest to save white slaves. As I indicated with the opening quotation of this chapter, the reformers' crusade—the so-called eradication of white slavery—was unnecessary because white slavery as the reformers painted it did not exist. Still, as will be discussed in Chapter Six, the non-existence of the white slave did not trouble reformers—as the quest to eradicate this fictional victim bolstered reformers' social positioning and further undermined the experiences and historical truths of sex workers like Madeleine.

The Progressive Era focus on "white slavery" by reformers resulted in federal mandates intended to limit the mobility of sex workers, such as the Mann Act. Passed in 1910, this Act "aimed at preventing the transportation of women across state lines for 'immoral purposes.'"[334] Importantly, federal limits on sex worker mobility like the Mann Act compounded state-level limits on the movement of persons between cities, demonstrating the mediated agency of sex workers in interconnected river towns like Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City.

Newspaper reporters indicate this mobility and how these freedoms allowed sex workers the possibility of escaping certain social norms. For example, in 1877, the *Memphis Daily Appeal* reported that an infamous sex worker and her sister came into the city. Famous along the Mississippi River, Emma Stanley had been working in St. Louis but was also well known as a "door keeper" or greeter in a brothel on Memphis' Poplar Street. While in St.

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[333] For more information on "white slavery," see Mara L. Keire, "The Vice Trust: A Reinterpretation of the White Slavery Scare in the United States, 1907-1917" *Journal of Social History* 35:1 (2001): 5-41.; Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1982).
[334] Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 19.

Louis, the white Emma Stanley and her sister—another sex worker—married two African American men. When they returned to Memphis, police heard of their arrival. Rather than arrest the "quartette," the police asked the four to leave the city and they obliged, traveling by train to Louisville. However, Stanley jumped off the train with much of the money—presumed stolen by the police—and her African American husband returned to Memphis in search of her. The reporter indicated that the police hoped to arrest all four soon.[335] Significantly, this story indicates that as a sex worker, Emma Stanley enjoyed social freedoms not often experienced by her counterparts in these river towns. First, Stanley clearly maintained a strong work reputation in both St. Louis and Memphis and by indication, other cities along the Mississippi river system. She maintained this reputation through her ability to travel between these cities, indicating their connection as river towns and her freedoms as a sex worker. Second, she also flouted her interracial marriage. Although this marriage resulted in her increased scrutiny by police, it is important to recognize that (1) she was legally married and (2) she did not allow this marriage to limit her movements throughout the Mississippi River system.

For some sex workers in the industry, mobility allowed them to start fresh in a new city, escaping a range of factors, including violence and policing. A former sex worker and famed madam of Kansas City, Annie Bogines, traveled between Kansas City and St. Louis to escape her growing notoriety. She ran a brothel in Kansas City, but in 1888 she reported to the local police that she had witnessed a murder. However, the man she allegedly saw murdered turned out to be alive and the police accused her of perjury. As the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported, "the case created such a feeling against the woman in Kansas City that

[335] "Local Paragraphs," *Memphis Daily Appeal,* May 19, 1877.

she left there and came to St. Louis." In St. Louis, she opened a new brothel on North 8th Street. However, in 1893, Annie Bogines became another witness in a high profile crime, reporting that she had witnessed a robbery near her brothel. In fact, she became a frequent caller of the Four Courts, often seeking "to get some of the reward which was offered" for information on other crimes. In the 1893 robbery case, she was again found to be lying and became notorious for giving false testimony.[336] Yet, her story appears remarkable not because of her attempts to fraud the courts in both Kansas City and St. Louis but her movement between the cities. She moved to escape notoriety, demonstrating the mobility of a madam in the industry and also the connections between these two cities.

Stories of sex worker mobility indicate that sex workers used that mobility to escape the law, revealing connections between and beyond Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City. For example, one sex worker named Ethel Ashleigh was accused of "embezzling $600" from a madam on 11th Street in St. Louis. She escaped St. Louis, traveling downriver to New Orleans. While there, she sought shelter with other social outcasts and hid from the police. An officer from St. Louis followed her to New Orleans. However, Ashleigh used her local contacts to escape once again into Mississippi.[337] Although eventually caught, Ashleigh's story indicates that she both had a fair amount of connections in New Orleans and also familiarity with travel. Her mobility allowed her to escape law enforcement for a short period of time and reveals how sex workers in these river towns had possible connections between and beyond the Mississippi and Missouri River systems.

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[336] "Annie Bogine's Victims Released: Four Men Convicted on Perjured Testimony Pardoned," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, December 20, 1895.
[337] "Ethel's Escape: How a St. Louis Officer was Balked in His effort to Bring Her Back" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* March 31st, 1884.

Mobility came in other forms for sex workers as well. Scattered stories of floating brothels, using the rivers connecting many cities demonstrate that some sex workers and madams deployed mobility as a tool to ensure their safety in the industry—although that method was not always successful. For example, in Vincennes, Indiana, Jennie Stanley ran a floating brothel on the Wabash, traveling through Illinois and Indiana. She employed five workers. Her brothel became part of the public record when "a mob attacked" it in Indiana. One of her workers, Ida Fox, "was shot over the eye." Importantly, the workers were all captured by the mob but set free upon the condition that Madam Stanley take her workers away from Vincennes.[338] Despite facing danger upon docking their floating brothel, the sex workers gained safety due to their mobility. Rather than face criminal charges, the town asked that the workers leave, using their mobility to escape prosecution.

Although evidence of floating brothels appears thin, floating brothels are mentioned in relation to several of the river systems in the United States. Since the Louisiana Purchase, "floating brothels and gambling dens" were well known on the Mississippi River.[339] In fact, local newspapers advertised rides on "pleasure boats," such as the "Little May."[340] On the East Coast, newspapers mention floating brothels and their madams offering pleasure river cruises between major cities in Pennsylvania.[341] The Ohio River also housed these mobile brothels and in Cincinnati, officers arrested the workers once they stepped off the boat.[342] Illinois developed hostile approaches to floating brothels, arresting the workers when found

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[338] "Naughty Nell," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 193, December 9, 1880.
[339] Samantha Cook, *A Rough Guide to New Orleans* (London: Penguin Group, 2001).
[340] "Floating brothel in Baton Rouge, LA," Newspaper Unknown.
[341] "A Floating Brothel: The Excursion on the Andes from Pittsburgh was That," *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer,* April 24, 1893.
[342] "Bouncing a Brothel," *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer,* April 13, 1878.

and passed state legislation to prevent the brothels from operating in the state.[343] The bill, passed in 1881, stated "that any person who shall keep a boat, or other water-craft, for the purpose of prostitution on any of the navigable waters of this State…shall be deemed guilty of a felony" to be jailed and fined.[344] Ultimately, these scattered stories of floating brothels and the governmental response to them indicate a key aspect of sex worker safety: mobility. When sex workers could maintain mobility, they could also ensure some sense of safety for themselves and the possibility of earning more money as they moved from place to place. I argue that this mobility made possible a shared sense of sex worker culture in each of these cities, as several of the workers traveled between and beyond these cities to make a living.

Tracing the mobility between cities can be difficult. Several systems of power govern the archives, including the general silencing of sex workers and the reality that many sex workers changed their names, resulting in repetitious names in each city, as I will discuss later in this chapter. However, it is possible to locate certain sex workers who appeared to travel between river towns. For example, a sex worker named Belle Johnson first appears in the historical record in Kansas City in 1870 but became a notorious sex worker in St. Louis by 1875. At 17, Belle Johnson is identified as a sex worker in the 1870 Kansas City census record. She worked in a large brothel, identified as a boarding house in the census. Ran by Alice Wilson, this brothel employed 18 sex workers, two African American servants, and two male barkeepers.[345] By 1875, however, Belle Johnson and another worker from Madam Wilson's brothel, Jennie Martin, appear in newspaper stories about sex workers in St Louis.

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343 "Entire Pack in Jail," *The Argus* September 22nd, 1897.
344 "Aid for Anna," *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 306, April 23, 1881.
345 "1870 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, Roll M593-782, Kansas City Ward 4, found in Family History Library Film.

In St. Louis, several Belle Johnsons appear in the historical record, starting in 1875. In September of that year, another Belle Johnson was the victim of a random stabbing attack by Harvey Bellyen. Cavorting with other sex workers and clients at a "saloon and dance house" on 6th and Almond Streets (the center of the red light district during this period in St. Louis), Johnson suffered a "gash" to her right shoulder.[346] In October of 1875, a Belle Johnson was identified as a sex worker by the *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, having been charged a fine of 10 dollars for being an "inmate" of a "house of ill fame."[347] By 1877, another Belle Johnson was identified by the *Globe Democrat* as a thief, stealing from her client in a brothel at 116 Poplar Street.[348] In August of that same year, a Belle Johnson was once again fined for being a sex worker and again in 1878 for stealing from a client.[349] One Belle Johnson was "pardoned by the Governor" in July of 1878 because she was an important witness in a murder trial.[350] Obviously, this was likely a different Belle Johnson than the thief mentioned in 1878 because the pardon was issued prior to the aforementioned thievery. The last mention of a Belle Johnson in St. Louis is in 1882, where she was once again fined for being an "inmate" of Madam Emma Scott's house.[351]

It is more than possible that Belle Johnson was simply a popular name of sex workers in Kansas City and St. Louis during this time period. In fact, just four days after one Belle Johnson was stabbed in shoulder in 1875, another identified sex worker named Belle Johnson was charged with attempted murder of a fellow worker—a case that had

[346] "Promiscuous Slashing," *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 125, September 21, 1875.
[347] "Social Evils in Court," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 136, October 2, 1875.
[348] "He Came from Alton," *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 278, February 22, 1877.
[349] "The Courts, " *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 90, August 18, 1877.
[350] "Multiple News Items," *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 50, July 10, 1878, Pg. 7.
[351] "The Criminal Courts, " *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 156, October 24, 1882.

begun in February.[352] Unfortunately, it is unclear whether this was the same Belle Johnson as the one in Kansas City or the one who had been stabbed or a different sex worker all together. Speculation would suggest at least two Belle Johnsons working in the sex industries of these corresponding river towns. Moreover, if anything can be gleaned from this historical puzzle, as I will discuss later in this chapter, it is clear that sex workers shared similar cultures in these corresponding cities, as the repetitive names indicate.

However, Belle Johnson was not the only sex worker from Madam Wilson's brothel to make her way to St. Louis, lending credence to the possibility that these workers knew each other, communicated, and encouraged movement between the cities into new sex industries. Jennie Martin was first mentioned in St. Louis in 1881. In December of that year, Martin was fined twice for keeping a "bagnio" or a brothel.[353] Significantly, this evidence indicates that Martin traveled between cities not only to find a new market but to also become a madam. However, like Belle Johnson, it appears that Jennie Martin was a popular name in the industry, as another Martin was identified as a sex worker in 1887 in St. Louis.[354]

As I will discuss, sex workers often chose names of successful former sex workers to imbue luck in their career. Thus, it is likely that this aforementioned Jennie Martin chose the name because of Madam Martin's success. However, the historical record cannot confirm this speculation. Linking back, however, to an earlier discussion of upward mobility, Jennie Martin's story indicates that physical mobility also allowed for upward mobility. In her move from Kansas City to St. Louis, Jennie Martin transitioned from sex

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[352] "The Courts, " *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 129, September 25, 1875.; "The Courts, " *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 119, September 17, 1878.
[353] "Criminal Courts," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 195, December 1, 1881.; "Grand Jury Report," *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 218, December 24, 1881.
[354] "Running Amuck," *St. Louis Globe Democrat* Issue 68, August 1, 1887.

worker to madam, creating more financial stability for herself. Ultimately, the quest to locate sex workers traveling between these river towns indicates that the river towns shared a similar sex industry. Starting with the intriguing but frustrating trend of similar names of sex workers in these river towns, the mobility of sex workers between these cities begets a similar culture and provides more insight into the lives of river town sex workers.

Culture of River Town Sex Industries: Shared Names

As my discussion of mobility indicates, a consistent theme that arose when researching river town sex workers was similar names of sex workers in Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City. As Madeleine's autobiography demonstrates, sex workers often chosen new names upon entering the sex industry and these names are telling sources of sex worker culture and river town interconnection. In the early years of the sex industry in each city, sex workers assumed similar chosen names that reflected popular names of the period. These chosen names constructed the workers as normative, selling beauty and femininity. Conversely, as the industry became more established in each of these river towns, a consistent theme of more unusual chosen names emerged, indicating the need to diverge from normative constructions and to become more exotic. As each river town displayed this trend and similar names arose in each river town, it is apparent that the interconnections between Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City gave rise to a shared sex worker culture that varied according to the established nature of the industry in each city. Unfortunately, the practice of chosen names placed several roadblocks in the study of this sex industry.

Sex workers chose new names for several reasons including anonymity and increasing desirability. The first concern, anonymity, reflects problems historians face when researching sex work. Because sex workers often assumed new identities, it is nearly

impossible to trace sex workers from the period before they entered sex work. A useful example is infamous St. Louis madam Kate Clark. Historians Virgil D. Hoftiezer and Vicki P. Beck attempted to trace the many mysteries of her life in *Kate: In Fact and Fiction*.[355] Kate Clark went by several first names during her life including: Sarah, Catherine, and Kate. Her last names included King, Quantrill, Evans, Batson, and Head.[356] To trace her life, these scholars had to track down any remaining information on each of these names, revealing different eras of Madam Kate Clark's life and work. Kate Clark, however, is an exceptional historical character. Like other famous madams, she is well remembered, despite her diverse monikers. In comparison, the average sex worker with a "chosen" name is far less traceable. It is rare for sex workers to admit they had an assumed name but at times, sources reveal this practice.

Starting with Madeleine, the practice of choosing a new name reveals that workers chose the name to remain anonymous, enhance desirability, and imbue their career with luck. Madeleine was considered "nameless" when she first started work and needed to immediately choose a new name. Her fellow workers suggested several monikers but Madeleine could not settle on one name. As such, Madam Laura suggested that she take a "lucky" name—a name that other workers had "borne" and successfully traversed the industry. She suggested "Miriam" but several of the workers knew of "unfortunate" workers who had donned that name. Thus, Madeleine decided on Madeleine and no one knew of another Madeleine in the industry, deeming it lucky because it was new. Madeleine also gained a new surname: Blair.[357]

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[355] Virgil D. Hofteizer and Vicki P. Beck, *Kate in Fact and Fiction*, (United States: The Orderly Pack Rat, 2014).
[356] Hofteizer and Beck, *Kate in Fact and Fiction,* 7-12.
[357] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 40.

River town newspapers also reveal the practice of choosing new names, typically when a sex worker was in personal distress or criminal trouble. For example, in 1895, a young sex worker attempted suicide. On her deathbed, she admitted to her physician that her name—Minnie Moore—was "assumed" and gave the doctor her real name so he could contact her family.[358] Still, Moore's admittance of her assumed name was rare, and often, sex workers died under their assumed name, leaving the possibility of being connected back to a biological family nearly impossible. In fact, when sex workers' names are identified as aliases, the workers in question were typically in criminal trouble. For example, in 1878, Lottie Wilson—alias Lottie Lee—was arrested for robbing an elderly man in Memphis. The couple met at a restaurant on 2nd Street and he returned to her place of employment, Madam Flynn's, to enjoy the evening. Upon waking, the elderly man found that Lee had stolen 75 dollars from him. He claimed that Madam Flynn refused to aid him and upon exiting the brothel, he ran into the police and reported the theft. Lottie was arrested and her trial date set. As the reporter indicated, Lottie Lee was a famous sex worker in her early years.[359] However, historians would not know her legal name if it were not for this arrest and subsequent report. Thus, these types of roadblocks, which were put into place to protect the workers, can stunt research on ordinary sex workers.

Still, the second main reason for choosing a new name—desirability—reveals much about the assumptions and understandings that sex workers had regarding mainstream sexual culture and the shared sex worker culture that resulted. In 1870, several names appear consistently in the census records of Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City. The most popular sex worker name—whether chosen or not—was "Mollie" in the year 1870. As a

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[358] "She took Morphine: And now her father is hastening to his erring daughter," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 12th, 1895.
[359] "Local Paragraphs," *Memphis Daily Appeal*, March 20, 1878.

nickname for several more traditional names, including Mary and Margaret, it is possible workers chose this name because of its possible connection to their given names. However, its popularity also reflects a larger popularity in society. Other top names included Louisa, Belle, and Jennie. All of these names suggest familiarity.[360] Although social security records are not available for the year 1870, it is important to note that several sex worker names appear similar to popular women's names of the period. Although some, like Belle, suggest beauty, most of these names suggest the workers are like other ordinary women of their period. Arguably, this could have a strategic method to entice clients. That is, although engaging in forbidden sexual activities, these workers could act the part of the ordinary woman in Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City, using their names as a start in this performance.

By 1880, variations of Mollie remain a top chosen name for sex workers. However, other names also make regular appearances including Cora, Alice, and Mary.[361] According to the Social Security Administration, all of these popular chosen names appear in the top 100 names chosen for baby girls in the year 1880.[362] Importantly, some cities have some variations on popular names that reflect the local sex work industry. For example, although variations of Annie are popular in all three cities, Annie is most popular in Kansas City. Eleven of the 149 workers recorded in the census records had variations of the name "Annie." Arguably, this choice could reflect the luck of the name, as Madeleine's story

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[360] "1870 United States Census Records," Shelby Country, Tennessee, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.; "1870 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, found in History Library Film.; "1870 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, found in Family History Library Film.

[361] "1880 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.; "1880 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, found in History Library Film.; "1880 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, found in Family History Library Film.

[362] Social Security Administration, "Top Names of the 1880s," https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/decades/names1880s.html (Accessed September 15, 2015).

suggests. Kansas City boasted one of the most infamous madams—Annie Chambers—who also chose that name in the year 1870, changing it from her given name of Leannah. Similar to 1870, the list of first names of recorded sex workers reflects the popular names of the period. As such, the workers appeared to maintain a culture of choosing names that reflected familiarity for their clientele.

1890 census records are unavailable; however, by 1900, a shift in the chosen name trends appears in each city. By 1900, each city boasted a more established sex industry and as the districts became more established, the names of the workers became more fantastical. Names like Gypsy, Toutsie, Trixie, and Lussie appear in each city.[363] Although popular and familiar names remain at the top of the lists for sex workers in the year 1900, it is interesting to note the development of more unusual names that have alternative associations beyond familiarity. Arguably, these chosen names—if they were in fact chosen—indicate that certain sex workers set out to make distinct names for themselves in an established market. Still, the familiar names remain, as does an uptick in names suggesting femininity and beauty, including Pearl, Grace, Flora, and variations of Belle.

Ultimately, the practice of assuming new names by sex workers led to some key trends, including a wide variety of names that reflect the popular and familiar names of young girls during the period in question and the choosing of names that reflect beauty and femininity. Moreover, as a result of this practice, certain names—including surnames—are repeated over the decades. For example, Minnie Moore and Jennie Jones were assumed names of sex workers identified in newspapers in the 1880s, 1890s, and 1900s. As records of

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[363] "1900 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.; "1900 United States Census Records," St. Louis, MO, Roll 895, Enumeration District 215, found in History Library Film.; "1900 United States Census Records," Kansas City, MO, found in Family History Library Film.

these workers' deaths indicate, these could not have all been the same worker but instead were assumed names recycled through the years by different sex workers.[364] Although this practice makes researching sex workers difficult, the culture of assumed names reveals much about the assumptions sex workers and their madams made about their clientele. In the early and less-established years of the industry, sex workers tended to choose popular and ordinary names for their period. However, as the industry became more established in 1900, a rise in unusual chosen names followed, reflecting the growing industry, the need to stand out, and the use of the names to sell more than just familiarity but also, exoticism. Importantly, however, exoticism and other client-driven fantasies were not just created through a chosen name but also a rigidly disciplined attitude and appearance.

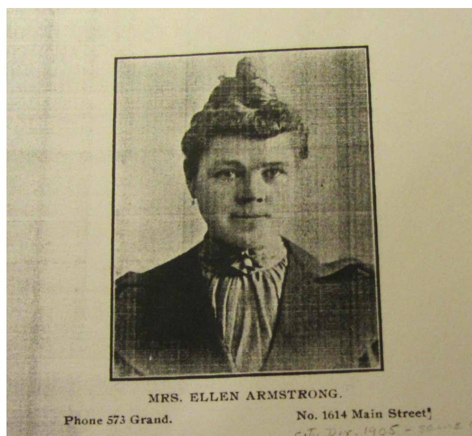
Culture of the Sex Industry: Appearance

Beyond sharing names, sex workers in river towns also shared similar practices of conducting their labor and self-presentation. Often these roles were performative in nature, with sex workers putting on a particular show for their clients. Tellingly, the type of performance a sex worker sold varied greatly according to the worker. As a result, historical evidence suggests sex workers not only dealt in the selling of normative gender and sexual behaviors but also in the selling of the flamboyant and exotic. This range reveals both the business acumen of these workers and diversity of the industry. As indicated, sex workers often chafed against reductive constructions of the sex industry and evidence of their varied gendered and sexual performances indicates that narrowing sex worker performance to one

[364] See, for example, "She Took Morphine: And now her Father is Hastening to His Erring Daughter," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* August 12, 1895.; "Telegraphic Brevities," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* April 6, 1889.; "A Search for Missing Heir, Queer Story of the Double Life of a St. Louis Judge," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* December 2, 1899.; "First District Police Court," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* May 1, 1880.

stereotype—such as hypersexualization—falsely depicts their occupation and the desires of their clientele.

Significantly, the appearance of a sex worker appeared to range from familiar to exotic, depending on the worker in question. Although photographic evidence of sex workers in turn of the century river towns is rare, local archives in Kansas City include a photographic album of sex worker business cards, many of which include images. From approximately 1905, this album includes a collection of calling cards of sex workers and madams. Importantly, the images included are diverse and reflect the range of sex worker performance from ornamental and flamboyant dress to conservative attire. Compare, for example, the business cards of Flo Beach and Ellen Armstrong. Flo Beach wears a low cut dress, tight necklace, ornamental sleeves, a decorated bodice, and a feather in her hair. Her attire suggests frivolity and excess decoration often attached to the sex industry and sex worker dress. She appears as though she is in costume, playing the part of a client's fantasy.[365] Conversely, Ellen Armstrong wears a high cut gown, with a collar reaching the top of her neck, long sleeves, and a hat. Unlike Flo Beach's attire, Ellen Armstrong appears conservative in dress, suggesting familiarity to a client rather than fantasy. She does not



[365] "Prostitution in Kansas City," Photograph Album and Directory, Kansas City Missouri, MVSC 099.1 P57, 2.

overtly display her body nor does she stand out in her appearance.[366] Rather, Armstrong appears normative and conservative in her performance. Arguably, the latter example demonstrates how some sex workers did not engage the alleged flamboyant performance of sex work. Like with chosen names, some sex workers worked to blend with the local society, selling familiarity and comfort as opposed to exoticism and performance. Although little information is known about either of these workers, one core difference between the two could be where they worked. On her business card, Flo Beach indicates that she works on the corner of 6th and May—likely in a hotel or a saloon. This employment situation suggests less stability than Ellen Armstrong, who provided the address of her work place, likely a brothel, at 1614 Main Street.

However, this argument cannot be fully supported by other sex worker business cards. Although workers like Marie Anderson correlate to the theory that a stable workplace shaped dress, others like Mary Hunter do not. In their business cards, both workers appear more flamboyantly dressed, with ornamental clothing, lower cut gowns, and decorated hair. However, Marie Anderson works out of hotel; whereas, Mary Hunter works from an address on Grand Avenue, suggesting a house or brothel.[367]

[366] "Prostitution in Kansas City," Photograph Album and Directory, Kansas City Missouri, MVSC 099.1 P57, 9.
[367] "Prostitution in Kansas City," Photograph Album and Directory, Kansas City Missouri, MVSC 099.1 P57, 8 and 19.

Ultimately, what can be gleaned from these images is a diverse performance of sex worker appearance. Like with the chosen names of sex workers, a sex worker's appearance ranged from conservative and familiar to flamboyant and costume-like. This range indicates that sex workers had some choice in their self-presentation and indeed chose to present themselves in a manner that they believed would attract the most clients or in a manner that they felt most comfortable with. Importantly, this evidence challenges preconceived notions of reformers of sex workers, who often assumed that all sex workers fit in the flamboyant category, as I will discuss in Chapter Six.

Significantly, the aforementioned business cards not only signify sex worker appearance and self-presentation but also the entrepreneurial spirit of these workers. For workers to successfully traverse the sex industry, they needed more than just beauty or desirability. Rather, these workers needed a business-minded approach to the industry. These business cards indicate the business mindset of the workers and subsequently, demonstrate how this industry was a form of labor. As I discuss in Chapter Five, these business cards were forms of self-advertisement used by both sex workers and madams. Notably, sex workers tended to include images with their business cards, presumably to attract more business. It is unclear, however, whether all of the sex workers with business cards were self-employed or working in brothels. Although most appear to be associated with either hotels or addresses not historically associated with brothels, the evidence is inconclusive as to whether these workers worked alone or in conjunction with madams. Either way, the business cards are a rare historical find, demonstrating the labor of the sex industry and the methods sex workers used to promote themselves.

The Labor of the Sex Industry: Selling More Than Sex

The sex industry sold far more than just sex. Rather, the performance of sex workers indicates that clients desired a range of gender and sexual orders, from normative to exotic. The unique labor of this industry suggests a similar variety. River town brothels became key sites of entertainment, often staffing social outcasts and providing escape to locals and itinerants of the region. From the normative to the exotic, sex workers and madams engaged in the selling of desire, revealing historic social constructions of gender, sexuality, race, and class in the process. Importantly, however, evidence of the actual labor of sex work and sex worker self-performance is rare. Rather, the labor of madams and the construction of brothels by madams reveal more about the fantasies that sex workers dealt in. Still, the evidence that remains indicates a diverse performance from sex workers, showing the escapism that sex workers often provided for their clients.

To gain a clearer look at what a consolidated red light district looked like at the turn of the century, New Orleans' famed Storyville provides an example. Storyville was the location to which New Orleans authorities relegated prostitution and subsequently, regulated its growth.[368] First, Storyville had several houses, each boasting a different attraction, ranging from sexual circus acts to certain types of prostitutes, such as a house featuring all mulatto women. Second, as I mentioned in Chapter Three, Storyville also boasted popular forms of entertainment, including lots of music, resulting in some scholars claiming Jazz music originated in New Orleans' red light district.[369]

[368] *Storyville: The Naked Dance*, documentary, directed by Anne O. Craig and Maia Harris (Shanachie Studios, 9/12/ 2000).
[369] *Storyville: The Naked Dance*, documentary, directed by Anne O. Craig and Maia Harris (Shanachie Studios, 9/12/ 2000).

Similarly, brothels in Memphis also boasted certain characters to bring patrons to their establishments. One woman, a sex worker from a brothel run by Anita Blanco, who went only by the name "Sapho" (likely referencing the sexually expressive Greek female poet) and was known by "her ability to relieve her gentleman callers of large sums of money."[370] Another prostitute, Eva Furgerson, was known for her "varied life as an actress and a medical freak." She was born in the West Indies and "her specialty was to run a hatpin through her cheeks and tongue without showing any signs of pain."[371] These individuals added to the character of Gayoso Avenue, providing an escape for visitors into a world of alternative social order.

Examining the spaces these workers were employed also reveals much about the type of labor they did beyond selling sex. As I discuss in Chapter Five, madams engaged in creating spaces of escape for their clients, through advertisements and decorations. Similarly, the workers learned how to sell more than just sex. Annie Chambers' brothel was well known for her opulence. Like Babe Connors', she constructed the brothel to allow for frivolity beyond sexual pleasure. In fact, the first floor housed an elaborate dance hall with "French plate glass mirrors" and chandeliers. She also created a parlor, dining room, and drinking salon—where she sold expensive wine.[372] These spaces indicate that sex workers engaged in far more than just selling sex—they sold escapism through many different forms of entertainment. Whether dancing with prospective clients, enjoying a quiet dinner, or peddling fine wines, sex workers earned more money and more notoriety if they diversified their selling skills. As I discuss more in Chapter 5, one of the top recruitment points of sex

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[370] William D. Miller, *Memphis during the Progressive Era, 1900-1917* (Memphis, TN: Memphis State University Press, 1957) 90.
[371] Miller, *Memphis during the Progressive Era*, 90.
[372] Author Unclear, "Sporting House History: Opulence to Backroom," Vertical File: Annie Chambers, Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library.

work was the ability to earn more money than other occupations for women of this period. Chambers, as I indicate in the next chapter, detailed the high earnings of her workers, noting that it was the workers who sold alcohol that earned the most money.[373] And in the process of selling sex, fantasy, and escapism, these workers developed an alternative social world.

The River Town Sex Industry: An Alternative Social World

Depending on the historical source, the sex industry has been described as an enticing occupation filled with frivolity and opulence or a degrading field of work, where women experience their lowest point in life. Significantly, this dichotomy exists in the historical record, typically represented by sex workers and reformers, respectively. Despite this dichotomy, however, it is clear that not all sex workers desired to leave this industry and live heteronormative lives. In fact, the evidence suggests that certain workers developed an alternative social world in the red light districts of river towns, intentionally eschewing opportunities for traditional gender and sexual arrangements.

Take, for example, this story from Memphis, titled "Another Sensation." Published in the 1870s, this story details the ill-fated love of W.B. Hardwick and a sex worker named Josephine Edwards. The couple met at Annie Cook's brothel on Gayoso Street. They "took a buggy ride" together, drank heavily, and Hardwick decided to propose. Edwards "readily accepted the offer" and they were married by a Methodist minister. However, the union would not end in a typical "happily ever after." After retiring to the Peabody Hotel, Edwards quickly left her new husband, taking with her 35 dollars and his gold watch. Hardwick, still smitten with his new bride, searched frantically for her, even involving the

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[373] Dory DeAngelo, "Life in the Good Old Days: Colorful Character Left Impression on KC," *KC Life Downtown*, June 24th, 1987, 4.

police. However, Edwards could not be enticed to return to her husband. Rather, she preferred to return to work in Annie Cook's brothel on Gayoso Street.[374] Intended to serve as a warning to young men engaging in frivolity with sex workers, this story villainizes Josephine Edwards. She is characterized as a trollop, who intentionally married Hardwick, flouting the religious sacredness of her vows, and swindling him of his money. Yet, this story could also signify the choice of sex work. Edwards was not swayed by the possibility of a traditional marriage with Hardwick. She did not desire the safety of heteronormativity or the possibilities of a gender and sexual arrangement that allowed her to belong to mainstream society. Rather, she chose sex work. Although the story does not indicate why she made this choice, likely because the reader was supposed to assume Edward's total moral degradation, the open-ended choice reveals that not all women of this period sought a heteronormative life.

Significantly, Edward's story was rarely told by newspapers of this period; rather, stories of love and men saving women from brothels were far more common. For example, in *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, a story of star-crossed lovers was published on September 24, 1870. In this story, a couple engaged prior to the Civil War was torn apart by the Confederate's loss. The young man, ruined by the war, became a heavy gambler and abandoned his soon-to-be bride. The young woman, left to a cruel guardian, ran away from home and became a "victim to persecution" or a sex worker in Memphis. The young man, visiting the brothel to gamble, found his former fiancé there. The two immediately fell back in love and finding a benevolent minister to marry them, escaped the desperate dredges of Memphis' underworld together. The writer leaves the reader with an inspiring lesson: "This

[374] "Another Sensation: In which a Methodist Minister Unites a Wild Young Man to a Strumpet," Publication Unknown.

is a true history, strange and romantic, proving again that it is never too late to retrace our steps, and that no human being ever lost while life exists. We have no doubt that this strange and accidental meeting will work a reformation as to both parties, for our philosophy teaches us 'that from the nettle of danger we often pluck the flower of safety.'"[375] But, perhaps, all did not desire the safety of the heteronormative world. Rather, as the shared lives, culture, and labor of these sex workers indicate, the draw of the sex industry was far more than immorality. The industry offered economic opportunity, consumption of beauty culture, mobility, and agency to certain workers in these river towns, creating an alternative social world, populated by more than just these workers and as the next chapter indicates, dominated by madams.

[375] "Men's Wives: A Tale of Two Cities- Truth Stranger than Fiction," *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, September 24, 1870.

Chapter 5

Selling Desire: Commercializing and Managing Brothels in Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City

"I made them attractive. I bought them fine clothes, showed them how to do their hair and taught them manners. It wasn't always the most naturally beautiful girls who were the most popular. Manners and personality count more than looks. The men who patronized my house demanded that. They wanted the girls to be feminine at all times."[376]

Annie Chambers

In an interview given to the *Kansas City Journal Post* in 1932, infamous madam Annie Chambers described the transformation of her "girls" into successful sex workers. Her description indicated that the performance of her workers was far more important than their physical attributes. Despite working in an occupation that required physical attractiveness, Chambers exposed the constructed nature of beauty in the sex industry. She revealed that a woman's beauty would not bring her success; rather, it was her performance and production of gender norms and femininity that would gain her more clients. As a madam, Chambers' occupation required that she socially discipline her workers, making them more desirable in accord with her clients' fantasies. In order to fully cater to these fantasies, Chambers not only shaped her workers' appearances and social graces but also the space of her brothel and, ultimately, her own and her workers' reputations.

In turn-of-the-century river towns, industrialization brought changes to the economic structure and, in turn, to the daily lives of sex workers and their clients. Madams capitalized on these shifts, recruiting marginalized workers from department stores and factories. They offered an occupation that allowed women to escape the backbreaking work of this newly

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[376] Dory DeAngelo, "Life in the Good Old Days: Colorful Character Left Impression on KC," *KC Life Downtown*, June 24th, 1987, 4.

industrialized era. Similarly, madams offered a means of escape for their clients, structuring brothel hours around the changing workday of the industrial period and creating an atmosphere distinct from their work and home lives. Thus, in running their businesses, madams produced and reinforced constructions of gender, sexuality, race, and class through the disciplining of their workers' social performances and the spaces they created to cater to their clients' desires. And madams did this labor largely in secret—negotiating social norms, law enforcement, reformers, and their clients' privacy while precariously straddling the public and private domains of the economic and social worlds of Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City.

Recruitment

The chief job of a madam was recruiting both workers and clients. Given the nature of the work, as well as prevailing social norms, it could be assumed that madams would not have a ready population from which to recruit workers. However, that presumption fails to recognize the changes each of these cities underwent at the turn of the century. It also ignores the draws of sex work over other working class occupations. Following the industrialization of Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City, women had particularly limited choices when it came to earning money. The work they found was limited and rarely offered a living wage. As I discussed in Chapter Four, Madeleine, the anonymous author of *Madeleine: An Autobiography*, is a key example. Economic hardships became too great for her mother to bear alone. At 17, Madeleine was sent to live with a former servant in St. Louis to get a factory job and help support her family. Madeleine was given the job of "check-girl," which consisted of "checking out bundles of work to the machine-workers and checking in

the finished product."[377] The hours were long and the pay was low—only five dollars a week, two dollars of which went to board and the rest went to her family at home. She eventually turned to sex work after she got pregnant, finding it was the only occupation available to her that would allow her to support herself, her child, and her family back home.[378]

Sex work provided a larger income than the average job available to women at that time.[379] For example, in the 1890s in St. Louis, a hierarchy of wages developed: domestic service workers earned the least while tobacco and shoe factory workers earned the most. But even "the average wage of a tobacco workers was slightly less than the basic weekly expenses of a self-supporting single person."[380] As such, many women lived at home or with other workers in small, two-bedroom apartments. However, for those women labeled "fallen"—meaning they had transgressed the social norms of the period by engaging in sexual relations outside of marriage—living at home or with another worker was rarely an option.[381] Moreover, for these same "fallen" women who had to support more than themselves, the wages from domestic or factory labor were far too low for survival. Women often found that sex work offered more stability, money, and better living conditions than factory jobs.

Prior to her death, Annie Chambers conducted lectures and tours of her home. Although in her late 80s, Chambers advertised in Kansas City in the 1930s that she would

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[377] Anonymous, *Madeleine: An Autobiography* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing) 14. (Publishing year is unavailable).
[378] Anonymous, *Madeleine: An Autobiography*, 14.
[379] Evidence for the amount of money sex-workers received can be seen throughout Madeleine. In the beginning, Madeleine made less money (around 10 dollars a week) but eventually began earning 500 dollars a week. Anonymous, *Madeleine,* 64 and 204-205.
[380] Katharine T. Corbett, *In Her Place: A Guide to St. Louis Women's History* (St. Louis, MO: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1999) 103-104.
[381] Corbett, *In Her Place: A Guide to St. Louis Women's History,* 103-104.

host story telling evenings in her home. Some of these stories were reprinted in the local newspaper.[382] In one, Chambers recounted how some her girls made about 200 dollars a week. As madam, she kept about half of that, though she also paid her workers commission for selling alcohol and wine.[383] Thus, the women who worked for Chambers made a good living. Though Chambers' story is an exceptional example from a famous brothel, it is nonetheless indicative of women choosing to enter sex work because they were able to earn more money than in other working class jobs.

Further evidence of the economic opportunities afforded by sex work is found in the records from interviews of sex workers conducted during the brief period of legalization in St. Louis between 1870 and 1874. When sex workers registered to work legally, reformers conducted interviews as part of that process. One question asked what the sex workers had done prior to entering sex work. The interviewers found that "before entering the trade, one third of respondents were unemployed, another third were servants, 14 percent were married, and the rest worked as teachers, clerks, saleswomen, milliners, dressmakers, and actresses."[384] This evidence indicates that for many of these women, prostitution was an "antidote to poverty, not a willful descent into immorality."[385] Because sex work promised food, money, and a safe place to live—things domestic or factory work could not promise—madams had a ready population from which to recruit.

However, despite having a ready population from which to recruit, the need to recruit was constant. As Madeleine notes, recruitment was an endless process for madams. She argues that no matter a woman's age, her "shelf life" in a brothel was rarely longer than

[382] W.G. Secrest, "South-Siders Getting Thrill from Sight-Seeing: Colorful Figure in Red Light district for Half Century Relates her Story Nightly." *Kansas City Journal Post* May 15, 1934.
[383] DeAngelo, *Life in the Good Old Days,* 4.
[384] Corbett, *In Her Place*, 128.
[385] Corbett, *In Her Place*, 128.

two years. Because the same patrons often solicited the same houses, girls that lived in a house for longer than two years were considered to be old, even if they were only in their early twenties. Madams needed a variety of women to work in their establishments—usually having a high turnover rate. As Madeleine's memoir indicates, madams set up a countrywide network, which they used to exchange sex workers in order to get new workers for their establishments.[386] As a result, many brothels included workers from a wide variety of states, which is evidenced by the census records. For example, as I discussed in Chapter One, Kate Cessna was a madam of a brothel in Memphis, located at Auction and Gayoso Streets, in 1880. In this house, she employed eight workers. The inhabitants came from eight different states: Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia, Kentucky, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and Georgia.[387] Cessna's brothel reflected a trend in the census records in which brothels often included workers from a large variety of states.

Madams also often recruited workers from different states to bring workers new to the city into their workforce, circumventing familial and social uproar. The more anonymous a worker was, the fewer outcries from the local community. Historic newspaper articles tell stories of young women traveling alone being targeted by madams. For example, the *St. Louis Globe Democrat* reported that in 1878, three young girls were almost "ruin[ed]" by two young men who sought to lure the girls into sex work. The girls came from a small town in Missouri and were in Kansas City to meet their uncle. However, their uncle never arrived and while waiting at the train station, they were offered shelter by two young men. Police intervened, believing the young men's intentions were indecent.[388] This common tale

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[386] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 42.
[387] "1880 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 79-1279, Enumeration District 141, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.
[388] Author Unknown, "In a Perilous Position," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 84: August 13, 1878, 5.

of woe served to warn young girls of the dangers of traveling alone and conducting business away from the domestic sphere when not protected by family. Similarly, the *Globe Democrat* reported on the "plot to ruin" 17-year-old Minnie Larock. In 1880, Larock ran away from her home in Liberty, arriving alone in Kansas City. She met a handsome young man and the "villain" seduced her. After the two were discovered, this same young man left Larock. Not knowing where to turn, she arrived on the doorstops of a brothel, where a madam promptly employed the "blonde" with a "wondrously voluptuous figure" and "lovely" face. Eventually, police discovered that the madam had employed an underage girl in her brothel and arrested the madam and the young man who had seduced Larock. Larock's father agreed to take her home but her reputation was lost and she eventually she returned to Kansas City to work in the sex industry. With a tone of sadness, the *St. Louis Globe Democrat* reported that she would likely have an "extraordinary" "career."[389]

Stories like these consistently appeared in newspapers in Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City. Often, newspapers constructed madams as pariahs, preying on young and vulnerable women. Although it is clear that madams recruited workers across state lines, the evidence of coercion is less clear. Deconstructing newspaper stories such as this one reveals some motivating factors behind the portrayal of madams as coercive, specifically that such stories served to limit women's movement in the public sphere and marginalize those who were "public."[390] However, these stories cannot be used as definitive evidence of madams' involvement in white slave trafficking. Although possible, the remaining evidence does not clearly indicate coercion. Rather, economic and social circumstances resulted in madams

[389] Author Unknown, "Traveling the Downward Path," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 279: February 24, 1880.
[390] Judith Walkowitz deconstructs a similar discourse in Victorian London. See Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

gaining new workers—whether a young woman was "ruined" and was not welcome in mainstream society, or needed an economic means to survive, or both. Thus, madams essentially created opportunity out of the constraints of women's social positioning of this period—capitalizing on the social oppression of women, specifically the legal and social pressure to marry and remain in the private sphere, to recruit more workers.

A madam's means of recruitment often depended on the social acceptance of sex work in the city. Both Memphis and St. Louis displayed means of recruitment that were intended to be more invisible to law enforcement and reformers, in which madams were less apparent in the recruitment process. In contrast, the Kansas City sex industry deployed more publicly visible means of recruitment, including advertisements and business cards. Invisible means of recruitment, such as word of mouth recruitment between sex workers, often occurred at sites of reform, where there were large populations of "wayward" girls and sex workers. Madams did not frequent such places for fear of being accused of trafficking. However, sex workers were often found in reform houses and public hospitals—usually because of a health problem or a pregnancy. As such, sex workers could help madams recruit new girls into the sex industry in the very governmental and social agencies meant to reform them.

A useful example of word of mouth recruitment in a reform house is Madeleine's transition into sex work, in which Madeleine entered the industry because she understood the dangers of poverty and was told of the occupation by a fellow inmate. Madeleine had done several jobs—like being a check girl—but found that she had difficulty making ends meet. She traveled to Kansas City with a suitor. While there, Madeleine contracted a venereal disease from her host and was forced to enter a treatment facility for three weeks.

At this facility, Madeleine's roommate, Mamie, was "from a house of ill fame on Fourth Street."[391] During their stay in the hospital, Madeleine and Mamie discussed life in a brothel. Mamie advised Madeleine to go into a "house." In her pitch, "she said that a girl who got into the right kind of house had good food, a beautiful room, and was cared for if she got sick; she was not preyed upon by a class of men who wanted something for which they were not willing to pay. She was protected by the police, and, what was still more important, she was protected from the police."[392] After days of moral debate with herself, Madeleine decided to work alongside Mamie at a local brothel run by a madam she called Miss Laura. She claimed that she "knew this monster which is called poverty, in all its soul-destroying aspects" and although she "felt sure that human degradation could go no farther" than sex-work, she believed it was her only option.[393] Thus, Madeleine's decision to enter into sex work was based on her need to survive. It was not a reflection of her moral corruption nor was it because she was forced into it. In this recruitment process, madams did not loom large; rather, sex workers acted as intermediaries, introducing new workers to madams after stints in reform houses and public hospitals.

Evidence from the archives shows that in Kansas City, however, there were two other more overt methods of recruitment—advertisements and business cards. These highly visible forms of recruitment served to recruit both workers and clientele, revealing much about the sex industry in Kansas City. As Madeleine notes, reputation of a brothel served as the best form of advertisement and often, the only form open to the sex industry. She claims, "the elements of success in this business do not differ from the elements of success in any other." In fact, "competition is keen and bitter" and "advertising is as large an element

[391] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 53.
[392] Anonymous, *Madeleine,* 35.
[393] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 53-54.

as in any other business, and since the usual avenues of successful exploitation are closed to the profession, the adage that the best advertisement is a pleased customer is doubly true" in the sex industry.[394] However, as sex work became more prominent and respected in places like Kansas City, traditional advertising became a tool of recruitment of workers and clientele.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Blue Books were relatively common—particularly in places like New Orleans and the infamous Storyville. In these books, madams advertised their businesses, describing the businesses, sometimes including

pictures, and, in the case of New Orleans, identifying the race of the sex worker. Kansas City also had a "Little Black Book." The book included advertisements for brothels, typically with a short description of the accommodations and workers. For example, as this advertisement indicates, Fannie Wilson's brothel included 29 rooms, bathrooms on each floor, and four large parlors for entertainment. She also noted that she was an "amiable hostess" who employed "ladies congenial to all minds."[395] These advertisements provided key information about the house's furnishings, the madams, and

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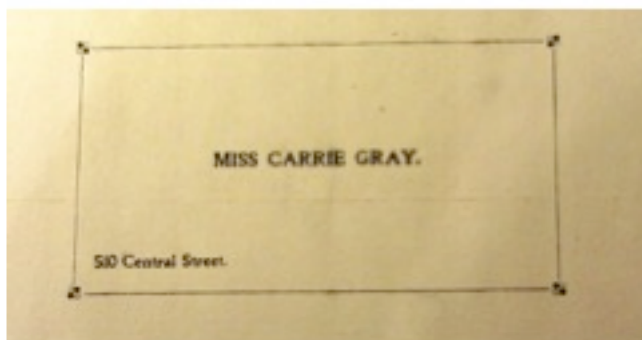
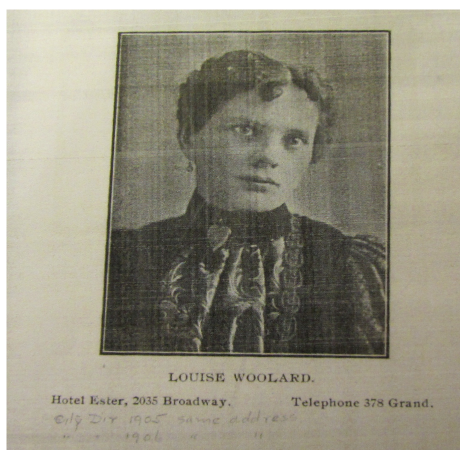
[394] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 72.
[395] Author Unknown, *Kansas City Missouri "Little Black Book,"* Toronto, ON: Knapp Publishing Company (2009) 4. Located in Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library.

workers. As I will discuss later, this description also reflected what the madams were selling, usually revealing constructions of race and class in particular. But for now, these advertisements are key because they were tools of recruitment—both for recruitment of workers and for recruitment of clientele, and the descriptions helped both the workers and clients know what kind of house and services each madam offered.

Importantly, Kansas City also had a unique method of recruitment: business cards.



Both madams and sex workers used these business cards to drum up business. The cards ranged from having only the name and address of the worker or madam to including images. For example, Carrie Gray's card included only her name and address.[396] Other business cards, however, included images, like Louise Woolard's. Her business card included her picture, the location where



she conducted her business, and her phone number.[397] When crosschecking these sources with census records and newspapers, the business cards with images and business cards with names belonged to both madams and sex workers.[398] Arguably, a worker might choose a business card with an image if they needed more

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[396] "Prostitution in Kansas City," Circa 1905, MVSC 099.1 P57, Missouri Valley Special Collections, The Kansas City Public Library.

[397] "Prostitution in Kansas City," Circa 1905, MVSC 099.1 P57, Missouri Valley Special Collections, The Kansas City Public Library.

[398] Carry Gray is present in the 1900 census, see "1900 United States Census Records," Jackson County, Kansas City, Missouri, Supervisor District 5, Enumeration District 18, found in the Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library.; Louise Woolard is present in the 1910 census, see "1910 United States Census Records," Jackson County, Kansas City, Missouri, Roll 785, Enumeration District 18, found in the Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library.

exposure; whereas, well-known workers likely only needed their names on the cards to self-promote.

As previously noted, these methods of recruitment served to not only recruit workers but clients as well. Of course, madams needed a constant clientele to maintain their business. However, every method of attracting clients was also governed by the need to maintain the secrecy of a client's patronization of the brothel. This silence reveals the positioning of madams and their businesses in the larger public and private divisions of the social and economic worlds of Memphis, St. Louis and Kansas City.

In one of her many lectures and tours reproduced by the *Kansas City Journal Post* in the early 1930s, Annie Chambers discussed the "code of silence" surrounding her profession. Upon first moving to Kansas City and opening her new brothel, another madam invited Chambers to a party at her business—an open house of sorts for fellow workers in the sex industry as well as clients. The party also served as a way for this new madam to make more money, as clients and fellow workers purchased alcohol. Chambers attended and purchased a bottle of wine. However, she noticed that only about nine clients attended the party. The low attendance was a result of the madam not knowing how to advertise the party to her clients without their families discovering it. Chambers decided to throw a party of her own and circumvented discovery by sending invitations to her party to her client's workplace rather than their homes.[399] Chambers' party was a huge success, netting the attendance of nearly 100 clients. Chambers' ingenuity in discretely inviting patrons, as well as her success as the hostess of a large party, contributed to her reputation as a shrewd businesswoman.

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[399] DeAngelo, *Life in the Good Old Days*, 4.

Significantly, Chambers' party and hidden invitations reveal how madams negotiated the public and private domains of the economic and social worlds of Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City. Chambers navigated the complex privacy issues by only advertising her party and business in work places. Thus, the domestic domain—inhabited by many of her clients' wives—remained unaware of their husband's engagement with the sex industry. By sending the invitations to her clients' places of business, Chambers upheld the public and private divisions of river town social worlds. Complicating this further, Chambers then commercialized and commodified the private, creating a space of escape that dealt in the selling of sex—a product typically only found within the confines of heteronormative marriage.

Negotiating with Police

Despite having to maintain their clients' privacy, madams often capitalized on visibility with police forces to keep their businesses afloat, again negotiating the public/private divide of river town society. In fact, a madam's relationship with the police was key during times of heightened scrutiny, such as when sex work had been deemed illegal or a new reform effort was underfoot. As such, negotiating with the police was a necessity. In all three cities, I found evidence of an informal pay-off system. Madams developed business-like relationships with the police, paying a monthly fee to the police to allow them to conduct business freely. In some cases, this fee was directly paid to the police, though under the table. More commonly, however, madams would call upon the police when trouble arose in their businesses. Police officers would arrest the madams with their troublesome clients. To gain release, madams would pay a small fee. Although charged with a crime of running immoral houses, they would not be jailed or, at least, only jailed until

they paid their fee. Obviously, this system was fraught with issues—resulting in the exploitation of the sex industry by the policing forces. However, as I will show, madams who successfully negotiated this system were able to become impressive business owners in these cities.

Each city revealed a different level of the police payoff system. Memphis' system was less visible. The *Commercial Appeal* reported on the police involvement in prostitution in Memphis during the late 1870s to the 1880s. As I discussed in Chapter one, a dispute at Frank Gordon's brothel in 1875 prompted a small reform movement.[400] The dispute signaled an ongoing relationship between the police and Madam Gordon, inciting anger from many of the middle and upper class residents of Memphis. In response, residents worked with the county government to try to eradicate sex work and to sever its relationship with local law enforcement.[401] This short story indicates that madams in Memphis' sex industry could rely on some police protection when endangered, allowing their businesses to flourish rather than suffering from oppressive police scrutiny.

In St. Louis, the sex industry's informal pay off system with the police was one reason behind the legalization of sex work in the 1870s. Prior to 1870, sex workers experienced brief periods of tolerance followed by intense suppression. For example, one madam, Mary Ann Frost, was arrested and convicted of "keeping a bawdy house" in 1870. She was jailed and her eight year old was taken from her and placed in the city's House of Refuge. The *Missouri Democrat* praised her conviction, claiming the courts had put "a stop to

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[400] "News of Bygone Days 100 Years Ago: August 25, 1875," *Commercial Appeal*, August 25, 1975, The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.
[401] "News of Bygone Days 100 Years Ago: August 25, 1875," *Commercial Appeal*, August 25, 1975, The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

the doings of this most persistent evil doer."[402] However, later that year, St. Louis decided to legalize sex work in an attempt to regulate it. Informing their argument for legalization and regulation was the already reciprocal relationship between sex workers and the St. Louis police. Since the police were already being paid off, it seemed logical to codify this system. Subsequently, this city was able to regulate sex workers' health and, in turn, the health of the city.[403] In fact, even after St. Louis had criminalized sex work again in 1874, the payoff system remained. Stories appear in the local newspapers about constant raids on brothels. For example, on April 9, 1880, police raided the red light district in St. Louis. They arrested several madams including Alice Kelly, Lizzie Lewis, Julia North, Mary Williams, Jennie Thorton, and Eliza Stubblefield. Each of these madams paid a fine of 50 dollars and was then released.[404] The quick release of these madams reveals the informal payoff system. If police had intended to eradicate vice in St. Louis, they would have not allowed madams to pay a substantial but attainable fee to be released. Thus, it seems that the purpose of this raid and the quick release of these madams was to force the madams to pay off the police so they could run their businesses without further harassment. The arrangement was mutually beneficial: madams paid the police to be left alone and the police force gave the appearance of cracking down on sex work and brothels.

Similar to the highly visible methods of recruitment in Kansas City, the pay off system with police in Kansas City was also highly apparent. The symbiotic relationship between the sex industry and the police force was so integral that it was common for madams to call upon the police for help. For example, *The Kansas City Star* reported on an

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[402] Duane R. Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice: Prostitution and the St. Louis Social Evil Ordinance, 1870-1874" in *Gateway Heritage: Quarterly Journal of the Missouri Historical Society* 11 (Fall, 1990): 20.
[403] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 23.
[404] "A Raid," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 9th, 1880, 5.

incident at Annie Chambers' brothel in February of 1886. One evening, two drunken patrons tried to solicit Chambers' brothel. She "refused" them entry but they persisted, even threatening violence. In response, Chambers sent one of her servants "to the central station for an officer." The officer came and an altercation occurred, resulting in a shooting.[405] Though Chambers was not arrested as a result of this particular incident, Kansas City newspapers reported several instances where she was arrested and immediately released upon paying her fine.[406]

This system became more entrenched through the Pendergast political machine. Kansas City had a particularly unique pay off system. Sex work in Kansas City thrived for far longer than other cities. Most historians mark the end of sex work—as an overt and open occupation—after 1918.[407] However, in Kansas City, sex work continued to flourish despite federal laws attempting to eradicate it. This was because of the tenure of the political machine run by the Pendergast family in Kansas City, who I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 1. In fact, Boss Tom Pendergast was so closely involved with the "pay off system" and the maintenance of brothels in Kansas City that the red light district eventually shifted to be in his neighborhood.[408]

Ultimately, as these three examples of the informal pay off system indicate, Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City all displayed evidence of a relationship between police and the sex industry. The arrests of madams served as catch and release system in which madams would essentially pay for protection. Moreover, the arrests made it appear as

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[405] "The Tables Turned," *Kansas City Star*, February 22, 1886, 1.
[406] See, for example, "Annie Chambers Arrested," *Kansas City Times*, May 11th, 1895, 7. Or "The Officer Made Arrests," *Kansas City Times*, September 18th, 1915, 1.
[407] See, for example, Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex 1790-1920,* (New York City, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992).
[408] Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop – A History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005) 170.

though police forces were serious about criminalizing vice. However, in reality, the arrests served as supplemental income for police departments. Madams could achieve some degree of success and safety by negotiating with the local police force.[409] Finally, the informal relationship with the police helped maintain social norms, forcing madams to negotiate the sale of sex by maintaining the public/private division of Kansas City society. Arguably, this type of division allowed the white, middle to upper class men and women of Kansas City to remain distinct from this low-class debauchery and thus, uphold distinct constructions of white, middle to upper class, gender and sexual norms.[410]

Creating a Space: Renting, Owning, and Decorating

Madams also had to find a physical space to continue to build their businesses. This required locating a house in the designated red light district, renting or buying that house, and decorating it. However, a madams' ability to rent or own a home greatly depended on the stability of the sex industry in their city. Arguably, the number of madams who rented their establishments versus owning them reveals the tenuousness of the spaces within which madams worked. Moreover, it reveals that the sex industry did not just include madams and sex workers but also unknown landlords.

For example, madams in Memphis almost always rented their establishments, particularly white madams. Arguably, this phenomenon was due to reform efforts. When white madams ran brothels in Memphis, they often lost their workers to reform houses,

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[409] However, although there is not evidence of coercion, this informal pay off system could and likely was used to exploit the sex industry. Thus, for madams to be successful, they had to negotiate with the police but these negotiations were likely also a site of exploitation.
[410] In *Same-Sex Affairs*, Peter Boag provides similar analysis of the public/private division of homosexual activity and the working-class. As he indicates, when the mainstream public learned of the white, middle class men's involvement in these activities, the divisions of the public/private invisibility of homosexuality broke down. Subsequently, a huge scandal emerged in which homosexuality became associated with more than just the working class and thus, became recast as something new. Peter Boag, *Same Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003) 152-153.

constantly destabilizing their businesses. Between 1880 and 1910, this did not change.[411] However, African American madams, such as Grace Stanley, did not navigate the same reform pressures. In fact, Grace Stanley was the only madam who owned her establishment and did not rent it.[412] As I indicate in Chapter Six, Memphis reformers and police did not often target African Americans for reform, indicating that reformers were more concerned with maintaining white, middle to upper class social norms than actually eradicating sex work. Thus, because reformers did not target Stanley's workers, she could achieve economic stability and purchase her brothel.[413] I found that African American madams like Grace Stanley could own their businesses and continue to sell sex—unlike their white counterparts in Memphis—because they were less likely to be targeted for reform.

Unlike Memphis, Kansas City boasted several madams who owned their establishments and for long periods of time. Annie Chambers commissioned the building of her brothel in 1871 and owned it to her death in 1937.[414] Her competitor, Eva Prince, built hers and ran it until the 1920s.[415] As did another famous madam, Cora Totty.[416] The differences in the physical establishment of the red light district in these two cities reflects the relationship madams had with the forces that policed them. In Memphis, the reform efforts to eradicate prostitution eventually gained ground, resulting in its almost full

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[411] Census records identified whether madams rented or owned their homes. See, for example, "1880 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 79-1279, Enumeration District 141, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.
[412] William D. Miller, *Memphis During the Progressive Era* (Memphis, TN: Memphis State University Press, 1957) 90.
[413] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," *American Quarterly* Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer, 1966): 152.; Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century,* (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997) 20, 14, 16-17, 38.
[414] Daniel Coleman, "Annie Chambers: Madam, 1843 to 1935," The Kansas City Public Library, Missouri Valley Special Collections.
[415] Rudolf Umland, "Gambling Houses, Saloons, and Bawdy Houses," July 1972, Pg. 7, The Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library.
[416] Byon C. Shutz, "A Lady Revealed," *Kansas City Genealogist*, Vol. 39, No. 2 [Fall, 1998]: 61.

eradication by the 1920s. Conversely, Kansas City madams were able to work openly and proudly and established themselves as key members of the social and economic worlds of Kansas City due to Boss Tom Pendergast's hold on the government there.

Once madams found their spaces, they had the task of decorating and creating an environment that would reflect their business. There is not much evidence remaining on the decorations of brothels and even fewer pictures. However, due to the infamy of her home, images of Annie Chambers' brothel still exist. The brothel was a 24-room brick mansion, which she commissioned in 1872. She often kept around 15 girls working for her at any given time. The bordello boasted marble floors inlaid with her surname, as indicated by the entrance picture, and velvet curtains in every room.[417] A very famous portrait—allegedly of Chambers when she was younger—hung in the main parlor.[418] Her competitors in Kansas City, however, considered Chambers' brothel modest. Eva Prince, Chambers' next-door neighbor, ran a brothel that was adorned with costly mirrors in every room and crystal chandeliers. Her brothel had the nickname "the gilded palace of sin."[419] The opulence of these Kansas City establishments indicates the permanence with which the red light district existed there. Kansas City was unique in that it allowed, and even celebrated, prostitution in the city limits, largely because of the Pendergast political machine, which controlled the liquor of the city and thus greatly benefited from the brothels and saloons along the Missouri River.

[417] DeAngelo, *Life in the Good Old Days*, 6.
[418] Rudolph Umland, "The Enigma of a Painting," *City Window* (June/July, 1973): 14-15 and 38-41.
[419] Umland, "Gambling Houses, Saloons, and Bawdy Houses," 7.

Many of the madams engaged in aesthetics of orientalism. As the image of Annie Chambers' brothel indicates, the outside of her business was modeled after a Pagoda. Although evidence of the décor and spaces of brothels are rare, some objects still remain, such as this image. Other pieces include an armoire from Cora Totty's brothel. Byron Shutz inherited the armoire from his father, who was Cora Totty's financial advisor. The acquisition of this large piece of furniture pushed him to research Totty further and explore her life after she left the sex industry. He described the armoire as follows:

> It is an elegant Oriental cabinet standing seven feet high, of rare wood intricately carved and stained a polished black. Crowning the top of the cabinet is a large bird in flight, perhaps the mythical phoenix, against a background of twisted vines and leaves, as in a grape arbor. Wings spread, its beak is long and sharp, the eyes fierce. Beveled glass panels in the cabinet provide clear views on three sides of *objects d'art* displayed on carved shelves gracefully stair-stepped like waterfalls. Carved pillars of interwoven stems or vines at the corners of the cabinet exhibit peony leaves dangling from their stems, the points curving delicately outward.[420]

Totty used the cabinet to display her china in her brothel.[421] Like the outside of Chambers' brothel, this décor reflected an orientalist aesthetic.

Arguably, such an obsession with orientalism logically followed the need to create an escapist space for clients. And during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as the United States became an imperial power, "material Orientalism" became a common hallmark of American culture.[422] As a form of décor, it created a space of "cultural

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[420] Shutz, "A Lady Revealed," 60.
[421] Shutz, "A Lady Revealed," 60.
[422] Naomi Rosenblatt, "Orientalism in American Popular Culture," *Penn History Review* Vol. 16, Issue 2 [Spring, 2009]: 53.

superiority," while simultaneously producing a space that was distinct from a client's daily life. Culturally constructed as exotic, "material Orientalism" displayed in both the Pagoda and armoire gave clients the opportunity to escape into a new space of desire.[423] For madams to successfully create that space of escape for their clients, they needed to create the perfect performance, requiring workforce control and a keen eye for décor. Successful madams constructed their brothels around the tastes of the period, reflecting larger social norms of interior decoration and even the racialization of these aesthetics.

Disciplining Workers

As I already indicated, industrialization and theories of workforce control influenced madams to control their workers and maximize their profit. They did this through multiple methods, from controlling time to controlling the bodies of their workers. Sources on this information are a bit more difficult to find, as this information should come from sex workers and madams. However, using the method of "reading across sources," I found that source material from reform houses also provides key information on the disciplining of sex workers by madams. In this section I compare Madeleine's description of brothel culture to the work of reformers—particularly refuges in Memphis—and the tools they used to discipline sex workers and make them "fit" for society.

When sex workers in Memphis were forced into the reform home, called the Ella Oliver Refuge, the matrons' chief goals including teaching them skills and how to live in a way that meshed with the industrialized world, including keeping "proper" hours. This fit into the matrons' goal of teaching the workers discipline. In the Refuge, women were taught a variety of skills that would make them either (1) fit to become wives or (2) fit to work as

[423] Rosenblatt, "Orientalism in American Popular Culture," 53.

laborers. The matrons of the Refuge house wrote extensively about reshaping workers' daily lives to respect the time of a workday.[424] This was of particular concern for those inmates who were deemed too far-gone to have hope of marriage and thus needed to learn how to be industrious, working-class women.

Another major form of control that madams exerted over their workers was their appearance. As already noted, madams were involved in creating a fantasy, which included not only decorating their brothels but also their workers.[425] Sex workers did have to perform particular roles—fantasies that reflected the tone of the brothel. Arguably, this attention to beauty, dress, and performance was another large draw for sex work. Many workers asserted that they desired to have beautiful clothing and have the opportunity to be consumers of beauty culture.[426] As I indicated in Chapter Four, the draw of sex work was not only the possibility of economic freedom but also the ability to take part in consumption, an opportunity not afforded by other working class positions.

In particular, Madeleine discusses in detail the process of buying all new clothing to wear inside the brothel but not necessarily on the street, unless one wants to be recognized as a sex worker. She describes the women who work with her in Madam C's home as "American born children" who had "always known vice" but not "luxury." As a result, they dressed in "costly garments" and went out on the town, luring new customers while

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[424] Marsha Wedell, *Elite Women and the Reform Impulse in Memphis, 1875-1915* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991) 39.; Mrs. J.C. Ottinger, "Report of Recording Secretary," in "27th Year Book of the Woman's and Young Woman's Christian Association: 1900-1901," 23.
[425] It is from this process that the concept of the "painted lady" emerges. Kathy Peiss in *Hope in a Jar* discusses how African American female entrepreneurs had to battle the association of sex work with make-up to sell their products. Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York City, NY: Metropolitan Books, 1998) 3-8.
[426] Jennifer Marie Schulle, "Fashion and Fallen Women: The Apparel Industry, the Retail Trade, Fashion, and Prostitution in Late 19th Century St. Louis," PhD Dissertation, Iowa State University, 2005, 105-121.

enjoying a show at the theatre.[427] In order to fit into this work environment, Madeleine also had to have garments made but she never wore them in public like her fellow co-workers, as she had a difference sense of respectability than some others. She describes the process of buying such clothes after she enters Miss Allen's Brothel, having to "wear a brocade of somber hue, trimmed in costly lace" until she had made enough money at the house to pay for her own garments. Such clothing marked her as a sex worker and as a result, would be unacceptable within the Refuge home.[428]

The performative roles of sex workers were also apparent through analyzing reform efforts of refuge houses. For example, as I discuss further in Chapter Six, the Ella Oliver Refuge of Memphis spent a great deal of money on clothing. A majority of the spending went into groceries for the home, followed by rent, and then the matron's salary. However, the next greatest expense was clothing and shoes. The breakdown of spending for the home provides some insight into what went on within. In particular, the need to spend 5% of the budget on house furnishings, shoes, and clothing gives some indication that most of the women entering into this home did not have many personal possessions.[429] Even if they had personal possessions, they were likely not acceptable for the life of women outside the sex industry. Thus, refuge houses designated a significant portion of their budgets to dressing their charges.

Reformers argued that their regulation of their charges' appearances was saving these women and teaching them "habits of righteousness." Jesse Brown, a house matron

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[427] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 115.
[428] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 126.
[429] Mrs. J.C. Ottinger, "Report of Recording Secretary," in "27th Year Book of the Woman's and Young Woman's Christian Association: 1900-1901," 23.

Memphis' Women's Christian Association, also known as the Women's and Young Women's Christian Association (WYWCA), asserted:

> Could the Christian women of our city realize how what might have been an irrevocably ruined life can be redeemed by timely assistance from the effects of a first transgression, a sin possibly not of settled principle, and be made a source of power in the salvation of others…what can present to women a more pressing our greater field of work for our dear Lord than the building up of poor, weak bodies in broken lives, establishing habits of righteousness in those of her own sex who, having lost their moorings, are seemingly inevitably drifting into eternal ruin but for the timely assistance of a helping hand.[430]

For these reformers, respectable womanhood was about purity and industriousness. As I discuss further in Chapter Six, success stories, published in their annual committee reports, reflect the image they hoped to cultivate in their reformed girls.

Ultimately, then, both madams and reformers controlled sex workers' bodies through dress. When a sex worker entered the brothel, she needed to change her appearance to fit the model of desirability for that particular brothel. When "rescued," she was also required to change her dress to appear respectable. Both sites of control reveal the performative aspects of gender and sexuality, as madams and reformers forced sex workers to articulate competing notions of womanhood, ranging from desirability to purity. Moreover, race relations further complicate these notions. As I discuss further in Chapter Six, women like those of the WYWCA solely targeted white women, indicating they only wished to shore up constructions of white, middle to upper class, womanhood with their disciplining of their charges.

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[430] Ellen M. Watson, "History of the Women's and Young Women's Christian Association of Memphis, TN," in "Women's Christian Association Annual Report, 1901," 7.

Selling Fantasy: Race and Class Constructions in Brothel Culture

Ultimately, the methods of control madams exerted over their spaces and workforce allowed them to successfully run their businesses and their business was selling desire and fantasy. As such, it is highly useful to further explore what kinds of fantasies these madams were selling, particularly the racial, class, and sexual fantasies that reveal and constitute social structures of these river towns. First, during this period, selling desire often had a racialized tone. The most famous stories of selling racialized desire come from Storyville in New Orleans. Due to its advertisements and celebrated position in New Orleans' history, there is ample evidence from Storyville as to the type of desire being sold. A useful example

Victoria Hall.

A member of Miss White's Club, as accomplished as she is beautiful, a form equal to Venus, a voice not unlike Patti. How could a more accurate description be printed, and what more could be said.

The beautiful
Estelle Russell,

now a member of high standing in Miss White's famous Octoroon Club. a few years ago one of the leading stars in Sam T. Jack's Créole Show. which assertion alone should test the capacity of Miss Lulu's commodious quarters every night.

Gentlemen, don't fail, when visiting Miss White's, to ask for Miss Estelle, for you miss a treat if you do not.

Sadie Levy.

Miss White's Octoroon Club would certainly be incomplete without Sadie. Accomplished, beautiful, and charming. We are not given to flattery, so invite you to call and convince yourself that, while there are others there is only one Sadie Levy. Born and bred right here in this city and a girl which any city should feel proud of.

Clara Miller.

Demure
everybody's friend, can sit up all
night if necessary, and handicap to
put a friend on to a good thing.
Why? Because it is her disposition.
and who don't want to meet such a
young lady? Not one with real
blood in his veins. She has been in
the principal cities of Europe and
the Continent, and can certainly interest you as she has a host of others. When we add that the famous
octoroon was born near Baton
Rouge we trust you will call on her.

Emma Sears.

This clever girl has been justly
termed the colored Carmencita, and
the name has certainly not been misplaced. As a tamborine dancer she
has no superior and very few equals.
Tall, graceful, winning. What
more can be said? Let me add: Gentlemen, a visit to New Orleans is
incomplete if you fail to visit Lulu
White's and ask to see Miss Sears
dance, sing or play some of her own
compositions on a Steinway Grand.

"Prettie Sadie Reed."

Such is the soubriquet Miss Sadie has gained, and properly—as pretty a form and as accomplished as could be asked for. We cannot possibly do the lady justice by the writing of her accomplishments, so gently request you to personally attend to her by a call at the famous Octoroon Club, presided over by Miss Lulu White.

is Madam Lulu White's brochure advertising her famous brothel, Mahogany Hall. She highlights six girls, each of whom have something different to sell. Her descriptions detail the beautiful voice of Victoria, the high class Clara, and the unique coloring of Emma Sears, called "Carmencita." Storyville was overt about selling particular kinds of racialized desire, particularly Lulu White. She created what was known as the "octoroon" club where she advertised and played upon constructions of race and dealt in women with light skin. This overt use of racialized desire to sell sex was key to White's infamy.[431] These methods were not restricted to the famous brothels of Storyville in New Orleans. Indeed, I argue that the madams in Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City also used the methods with which New Orleans madams sold sex.

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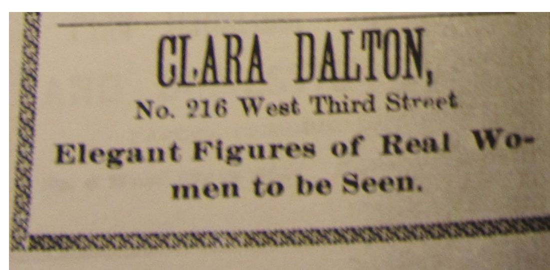
[431] Al Rose, *Storyville, New Orleans* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1974) 80 and 126.

Brothels in Memphis boasted certain characters to bring patrons to their establishments. As I discussed in earlier chapters, one of the most famous establishments in Memphis in 1900 was the Stanley Club at 121 Gayoso Street, run by Grace Stanley. She and her entire house were African American and between ages 17 and 23. The club was known for its "expensive furnishings and a proper regard for amenities." Stanley further enhanced the fantasy by creating a full-service establishment. She employed hotel waiters and porters. Thus, her establishment catered to men desiring a hotel-like experience.[432] She was a successful entrepreneur and was famous for bringing men into a high-class environment to live out their fantasies with women of color.

Another key aspect of the selling of racialized desire is apparent in the wording madams used to describe their brothels. A pattern emerges in which certain terminology indicates whether a brothel included one race or a mix of races. Madam Lou Martin's advertisement and madam Clara Dalton's advertisement reflect this larger trend. Martin advertises her brothel as being full of "fun and humor."[433] Comparing this to the census records, she employed a variety of women of a variety of ages and races.[434] Annie Chambers also advertised a brothel "devoted to fun and



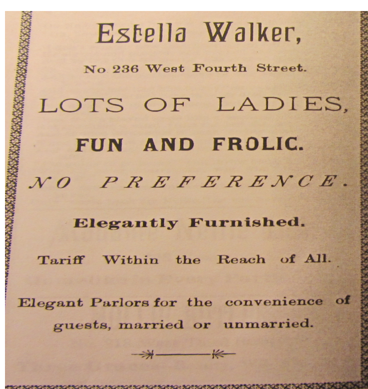
[432] As a key side note, Stanley made brothel running a family affair. She employed her mother, two half brothers, nephew and niece. Her niece, 15-year-old Effie Linton, even attended school while she lived at the brothel in 1900.

[433] "Author Unknown, *Kansas City Missouri "Little Black Book,"* 4.; "1880 United States Census Records," Jackson County, Kansas City, Missouri, Supervisor District 6, Enumeration District 15, found in the Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library.

[434] "1900 United States Census Records," Jackson County, Kansas City, Missouri, Supervisor District 5, Enumeration District 17, found in the Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library.

humor."[435] Like Martin's establishment, she also employed a variety of ages and races in her brothel.[436] Clara Dalton, conversely, advertised in 1900 that she had a house full of "elegant figures of Real Women" and her house was populated entirely by white women.[437] Ultimately, what these differing advertisements reveal is that madams used certain terminology to indicate the racial make-up of their brothels—capitalizing on constructions of racial difference to sell sex.

Other advertisements even ensured that they would take any client of class or race. For example, Estella Walker advertised that they had "no preference," indicating men of all races could frequent her establishment, and she stated that "tariff within the reach of all," indicating that whether a client had a little or a lot of money, they could come purchase sex at her brothel.[438] Taken collectively, these key words and terminology indicate racial difference and reflect racial constructions. Madams capitalized on the racialization of desire, constructing (and then describing) their brothels to cater to either particular or varying clientele.


Estella Walker,
No 236 West Fourth Street.
LOTS OF LADIES,
FUN AND FROLIC.
NO PREFERENCE.
Elegantly Furnished.
Tariff Within the Reach of All.
Elegant Parlors for the convenience of guests, married or unmarried.

Moreover, it was not just racialized desire madams sold but also fantasies of upward mobility. Importantly, several of these advertisements also indicate the furnishings and beauty of a brothel. Grace Stanley's club was well known for its high-end furnishings, as was Eva Prince's brothel in Kansas City. Thus, it was not just racialized desire these

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[435] Author Unknown, *Kansas City Missouri "Little Black Book,"* 12.
[436] "1880 United States Census Records," Jackson County, Kansas City, Missouri, Supervisor District 6, Enumeration District 15, found in the Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library.
[437] Author Unknown, *Kansas City Missouri "Little Black Book,"* 13.; "1900 United States Census Records," Jackson County, Kansas City, Missouri, Supervisor District 5, Enumeration District 17, found in the Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library.
[438] Author Unknown, *Kansas City Missouri "Little Black Book,"* 5.

madams sold but images of upward mobility and class status. The Kansas City Little Black Book similarly advertised such upward mobility. I already noted Fannie Wilson's advertisement. In it, she provides a detailed description of the decorations in the brothel and accommodations.[439] Such descriptions served two purposes: (1) to assure the client that they were in a safe, clean, and comfortable space and (2) to deal in the fantasy of upward mobility. Creating a space and advertising it as a high end hotel allowed madams to capitalize on desires of clients to experience—even if just for a night—the life of the upper class.

Madams and Economic Success

Ultimately, the running brothels allowed women during this time period to have economic success compared to their counterparts. When a madam successfully negotiated the public/private divisions of her city, navigated the police, and capitalized on both women's social circumstances and men's varied desires, she could earn a significant amount of money. Her labor required an extensive and telling knowledge of the city she worked within and ultimately, constituted constructions of gender, sexuality, race, and class. For the madam, this labor was highly lucrative.

For example, Eliza Haycraft of St. Louis was one of the wealthiest women of her time. She owned not only five brothels but also rented to other madams. Prior to the Civil War, her estate was valued at 100,000 dollars. After the war, Haycraft capitalized on the expansion of the red light district in St. Louis, amassing about 30 million dollars, converted to today's standards.[440]

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[439] Author Unknown, *Kansas City Missouri "Little Black Book,"* 3.
[440] "This Morning's Dispatches." *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* [Milwaukee, Wisconsin] July 10, 1869.

In Kansas City, two madams stand out: Annie Chambers and Cora Totty. Chambers established her business in 1872 and kept it running through the 1920s. Upon her death, she willed her home and considerable estate to the city's Union Mission.[441] Cora Totty is another fascinating example because she shows how madams' wealth and entrepreneurial spirit went beyond the red light district. She operated in Kansas City between the 1890s and 1920s. When she closed her doors, she disappeared. Although a famous madam, no one knew where she went. Simultaneously, a wealthy single woman by the name of Louise Heorath—also known as Cora Totty—moved into the upper class neighborhood on Linwood Boulevard in Kansas City. She became a quiet but powerful real estate entrepreneur, hiring a broker to conduct her business dealings. By 1937, tax records indicate that her estate was valued around 142,000 dollars. According to inflation data, this is about 2.3 million dollars in current value.[442]

In Memphis, Grace Stanley of the Stanley Club was one of the only African American female entrepreneurs of her time. She was well known for wealth and influence in Memphis.[443] The timing of her success is also quite telling. She was at the height of her influence in the early 1900s through the 1910s. This was only about seven years after Ida B. Wells' international revelation of the racial violence in Memphis—violence that targeted African American men who allegedly raped white women. The discourse of interracial sexual relations was fraught with danger, yet Stanley made a profitable living off of the selling of African American women's sexuality and racial construction to white men.[444] Stanley profited off of constructions of African American women as hypersexual—a

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[441] Jim Lapham, "The Conversion of Annie Chambers," *KC Star Magazine* November 17, 1974, 28-29.
[442] Byon C. Shutz, "A Lady Revealed," *Kansas City Genealogist*, Vol. 39, No. 2 [Fall, 1998]: 64-65.
[443] Miller, *Memphis during the Progressive Era*, 90.
[444] Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work: A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the United States* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1996) 163.

discourse that finds its roots in slavery.[445] Thus, this success indicates that running brothels offered alternatives for entrepreneurially minded women to succeed in a time where they did not have many choices. Moreover, the success of these brothels, particularly examples like Grace Stanley, reveal how madams capitalized on racialized desire and class aspirations to become successful.

Conclusions

Ultimately, this history of the labor of madams in Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City reveals three key historical points. First, the ability of madams to recruit en-masse sex workers to work in their brothels shows the state of the economy in this period of uncertain economic times and industrialization. Women had limited choices, and it is important to recognize that one of those choices was sex work. Historically, the move of women into sex work has been coded as sex trafficking and part of the white slavery discourse. Often, it is not viewed as a choice. By contextualizing the limited choices that female workers had, I show why they might have chosen sex work. The evidence—from reform efforts and memoirs—reveals that women often went into sex work because it was a more sound economic choice for them during this period. Madams capitalized on those limited choices, offering a type of stability and home environment that other forms of work, like factories or department stores, did not.

Second, the manner in which these madams conducted business reveals their entrepreneurial mindset. Madams did not haphazardly engage in the selling of sex. Rather, these madams had clear methods of selling sex that crossed cities and time. Madams all engaged in finding the perfect space, decorating it, advertising it, and populating it with

[445] Mumford, *Interzones*, 4-5.

workers. Madams also clearly hired workers to fit a particular fantasy and image of the brothel. Importantly, these methods of selling sex were key to madams' entrepreneurial success.

Finally, madams did not just sell sex. Rather, they sold desire and fantasy. From the way they decorated their businesses to the girls they employed to the advertisements they used to draw business, it is clear that madams carefully and intentionally sold fantasies. These fantasies are extremely revealing in that they demonstrate racial and class constructions. In fact, as I have argued, brothels and red light districts more generally in these river towns are "interzones."[446] Madams constituted and reproduced constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality through the selling of sex. Madams capitalized on problematic constructions of these categories to sell sex. And they did so successfully. However, beyond simply reproducing oppressive discourses, river town brothels also offered marginalized workers in these cities economic and social opportunities not available to them in other parts of "mainstream" society. Thus, recognizing and analyzing madams as the managers of the sex industry and deconstructing their labor is incredibly fruitful, yielding both provocative constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality but also alternative worlds of belonging—worlds that challenge "heteronormativity" through the selling of sex while simultaneously maintaining the public/private divisions of river town society and bolstering constructions of white, middle to upper class, social norms.

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[446] Mumford, *Interzones,* xii-xix.

Chapter 6

Reform and Contestation: The Many Methods of Reform in Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City

"The reformer of the present day, by every cheering, hopeful word, by every gentle, loving deed of his life, unhesitatingly answers this question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" "Yea verily!" But there is another class of earth's lost and ruined children far more to be pitied than he who has "tarried long at the wine." For him there is always hope…But for her there is no look of love, no word of hope, no hand of friendship, no quiet home, no strong, true heart to lean upon, no light, pattering feet to meet her, no prattling tongue to lisp her name. Deserted, branded, and accursed- a plague-spot and a leper, for whom it is almost deemed a crime to pray." [447]

Lide Meriwether

Lide Meriwether, a female reformer and women's rights activist in Memphis, from the 1850s to the 1880s, wrote *Soundings* to raise the consciousness of women in Memphis about the "double standard and hypocrisy" that "genteel society" held towards sex work and the women involved in it.[448] Describing sex workers in Memphis as the "accursed," Meriwether employs the tone of a preacher, informing her congregation of a great wrong against humanity that they must right. *Soundings*, published in 1872, instigated the first round of sex work reform in Memphis. Rather than blame the sex worker, who in Meriwether's eyes does not have the individual ability to lift herself out of despair, Meriwether places blame for the plight of the Memphis sex worker on the city's elite class for shunning and ignoring this "accursed" class of women.

Significantly, Meriwether's viewpoint did not seem to be shared by most of Memphis' elite and the subsequent reformers. Rather, Memphis female reformers saw sex work reform in moral terms, as sin in need of redemption. As a result, women's reform

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[447] Lide Meriwether, *Soundings* (Memphis, TN: Boyle and Chapman Publishers, 1872) 10-12.
[448] Marsha Wedell, *Elite Women and the Reform Impulse in Memphis, 1875-1915* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 27.

groups such as the Women's Christian Association instigated reforms that made the female body a site of social control, causing their understanding of sex work, the female body, and the definition of a woman to clash with those of the sex workers they were attempting to help. In fact, Memphis' history of reform reflects a clear religious tone, signifying the moral positioning of the reformers and their specific understanding of a proper gender, sexual, and racial order. Importantly, however, river town sex industries did not engage only in religious reform.

Rather, examining the collective reform history of Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City demonstrates three different approaches to reform during the Progressive Era: religious reformation efforts, legalization and control of women's health, and controlling the spatial layout of a city's underground industries. Yet, in all three of these reform efforts, the advocates for the control over and/or removal of sex work from river towns often failed to understand the workers they were reforming, espousing their own understandings of a proper social order and failing to recognize the alternative social worlds that these workers lived within, advocated for, and built from the ground up. In Memphis, for example, reformers deployed a racist system of reform, only deeming white sex workers worthy of their focus. Subsequently, African American sex workers could maintain their businesses without much interference, capitalizing on the racism of these reformers who were attempting to bolster white, middle to upper class social norms. In St. Louis, reformers dealt with an increasingly savvy sex worker population, who used both their transience and political voices to challenge any control of their occupations. Finally, in Kansas City, sex workers took advantage of the Pendergast political machine's control of the city's government, consistently challenging any efforts by reformers or police to undermine the

industry. As a result, these reform efforts also demonstrate the power of sex workers to challenge these efforts, articulate alternative worlds of social belonging, and maintain their businesses despite persistent confrontations with reformers. Although the sex industry was eventually moved underground in all three cities by the 1940s, the lasting legacy of the contestation of sex workers indicates their agency, economic power, and social positioning in river town societies.

Memphis: The Women's Christian Association and Reform

In Memphis, between 1875 and 1910, a reform movement spearheaded by the Women's Christian Association (WCA) attempted to eradicate sex work from the city. The WCA claimed that sex work was dirge on the social order of Memphis, particularly problematic for young women in the city. As such, reformers created two houses, intentionally set apart from the red light district downtown, to both prevent young women from entering sex work and to reform those women already fallen into this path: the Anne Brinkley Home and the Ella Oliver Refuge. Examining the mission and implementation of these homes indicates that Memphis reformers espoused their own understanding of the proper gender, sexual, racial, and class order—ignoring alternatives posed by sex workers and reinforcing the racist, classist, and sexist social structure of turn-of-the-century Memphis.

Elizabeth Fisher Johnson founded the Women's Christian Association (WCA) in April of 1875, drawing up the bylaws and constitution in that first year.[449] The constitution states that "any woman of good moral character, desiring to engage in Christian work, or contribute to the same, may become a member of the Women's and Young Women's

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[449] Wedell, *Elite Women*, 31.

Christian Association of Memphis, Tennessee."[450] As the "brainchild" of Elizabeth Fisher Johnson, the WCA reflected Johnson's personal philosophies. Elizabeth Fisher Johnson attended a boarding school in Macon, Georgia "that was run by teachers trained at Emma Willard's schools in New York and South Hadley, Massachusetts." Lide Meriwether claimed that this type of training allowed Johnson to follow Willard's example by "taking charge of the world when it was off track and attempting to set it straight again." Johnson was also Presbyterian. In her book *Elite Women and the Reform Impulse in Memphis, 1875-1915*, Marsha Wedell argues that "evangelical theological tenets, which stressed personal experience and individual worth, had potentially liberating implications for women, easing their movement out of the home and into the public sphere."[451] The WCA represented the start of the women's movement in Memphis, drawing women out of the private sphere and into the public for the sake of maintaining morality and cleansing the sins of the city. The name was changed from the Women's Christian Association to the Women's and Young Women's Christian Association (WYWCA) in 1898.[452]

The women of the organization set up their bureaucracy in a systematic fashion that reinforced their identity as moral guardians. First, in establishing their title, the women refused to allow it to go forward without including the word Christian. The national organization from which the WCA stemmed from held the motto: "everything we do is religious." The board members of the WCA were members of several different Christian denominations throughout Memphis including Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and

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[450] Constitution and By Laws of the Women's Christian Association, "Women's Christian Association Annual Report, 1901," 44.
[451] Wedell, *Elite Women*, 32.
[452] Ellen M. Watson, "History of the Women's and Young Women's Christian Association of Memphis, TN," in "Women's Christian Association Annual Report, 1901," 7.

Episcopalian.[453] The women believed that this interdenominational membership "was considered…to be one of their greatest strengths." Next, the WCA divided the city into districts that each had a chairman and a committee to serve the people within each section of the city. They wanted to acquaint themselves with the particular conditions of each section of the city, particularly focusing on the plight of the poor. They also immediately opened an "Intelligence Office," which served as a referral location for less fortunate women in need of housing or jobs.[454]

The Women's and Young Women's Christian Association (WYWCA) in published yearbooks describing their yearly activity. In the 1901 publication, Ellen M. Watson included a history of the organization, reflecting both their purpose and their bias. She states that as a Christian organization, the WYWCA "can have no higher aim than the spiritual benefit of those for whom it cares."[455] The second aim of the organization was to be "a service for the good of women, and it is carried on wholly by women." She describes the scope of the service the WYWCA engaged in as bettering anything that "affects the physical, moral, mental, or spiritual well-being of" women.[456]

After being founded in 1875, the WYWCA narrowed the scope that Watson describes to specific endeavors. First, the group worked to provide "relief" for "the poor and destitute." They did this through getting to know the poor "personally," inviting them to Church, giving them "material aid," and inviting "the children to the Sabbath schools." Taking the "idea of our Saviour's, "I was a stranger and ye took me in," the WYWCA established "the Intelligence Office and temporary lodging rooms." The office served to

[453] Wedell, *Elite Women*, 35.
[454] Wedell, *Elite Women*, 36.
[455] Watson, "History," 7.
[456] Watson, "History," 7.

organize a search for employment and homes for women and children. The lodging house was meant to be a temporary "refuge for homeless women and children." Watson proudly asserts that they were among the first to provide aid through a civilian group to this "class" of people. Then the WYWCA opened a lunchroom, which in Watson's words, was "where hungry waifs were fed." Finally, the WYWCA boldly opened a "Reformatory Mission," called the "Commandment's house" in December of 1876. The Home was meant "for the moral and social regeneration of "erring women" and "it was commonly referred to as the "Navy Yard Mission."[457] This house expanded into a permanent location on Alabama Street and took a new name in 1880: The Mission House.[458] This mission, according to Watson, received much "prejudice" but their goal was not to please society but instead, "rescue souls and bodies from the grasp of the evil one, and win them for Christ."[459] Within the first year of being an organization in Memphis and only four years after the publication of Meriwether's *Soundings*, the WYWCA had taken on the call to reform sex work, not only saving souls, but in Watson's words, saving the female body. This goal subsequently resulted in the WYWCA becoming a policing force surrounding the female body, utilizing their influence and reform process to try to impose definitions of the female body that conformed to traditional notions of womanhood and Christianity. This process identifies the female body as a site of social control during this period.

After the death of their founder and first president, Elizabeth Johnson, the WYWCA fell on some difficult times, fighting to stay afloat. Still, their "Mission Home" was the one area they refused to compromise support for. In 1883, the home had a resident staff, including a matron, Mrs. Kate Darragh, an assistant, Miss Stewart, and a teacher, Mrs. S.A.

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[457] Wedell, *Elite Women*, 37-38.
[458] Watson, "History," 8 and 11.
[459] Watson, "History," 8.

Means. Watson stated that with such a talented staff, the WYWCA felt as though "every soul brought within its influence would receive a blessing if open to one."[460] During this period, the home housed 68 people, 40 of whom were children. Soon, though, the WYWCA decided to separate the adults and children, renting another house in Fort Pickering, to be run by Mrs. M. E. Wormeley and Mrs. Kate Darrah.[461] Within the records, it is not clear whether the children were separated from their parents, but it seems that the population of the Fort Pickering home was of both orphans and children of sex workers.[462]

In 1887, the WYWCA opened a boarding house for young women moving from the rural country to the city. Watson discusses the importance of having such homes for these women. During this time, the population was greatly increasing in Memphis and there were a "large number of young women coming to the city seeking employment, determined upon a course of independent self-support, as strangers, without means at their command." The WYWCA wanted to prevent the girls from becoming "exposed to temptations and [being] without protection." They became the parent to the many women susceptible to such a fate.[463] It is clear that what the WYWCA feared was that these women would fall into the life of sex work. Reformers believed that many of these women, due to poverty and separation from family life, could be easily tempted by what reformers believed was the fast-paced, party-like environment of a brothel. Alcohol, silk dresses, and male attention, not to mention the duplicitous madams that sought fresh bodies for their businesses, called these young women out of a life of moral decency and into the hands of the devil himself. So,

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[460] Watson, "History," 12.
[461] Watson, "History," 12 and 15.
[462] Wedell, *Elite Women*, 38.
[463] Watson, "History," 16.

they opened the Anne Brinkley home to prevent this fate from overtaking innocent, young women, further institutionalizing their control over the female body.[464]

Ironically, around this same time, the WYWCA had also opened a "refuge" home, which as Watson states, was a "reformatory for unfortunate friendless women," also known as sex workers. This new project was called the Ella Oliver Refuge. In the end of her short history of the WYWCA, Watson mentions the refuge home among one of the "objects" receiving "the most earnest efforts of the Association" by 1901.[465] As the original Mission Home met with prejudice, so must have the refuge, which would explain its absence from most of the history she wrote about. Still, the women of the WYWCA put in place organizations aimed at saving young women from an immoral fate.

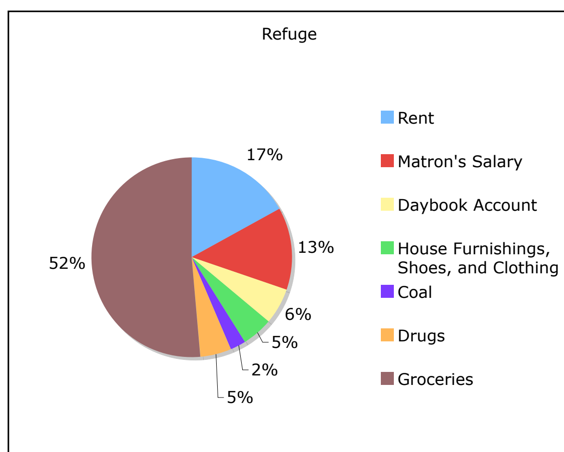
The process of reforming sex workers who entered the Ella Oliver Refuge Home, also known as the Ella Oliver Refuge, included repentance, job training, and social training. Inscribed on the doorway of the home was this: "We might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge, to lay hold upon the hope set before us," setting the tone for the supposed purpose of the home.[466] The Refuge served both as a safe house for some sex workers to give birth to a child and for others to get job training. The residents were mostly trained in house work, as the "intelligence office" only really got calls for workers who were trained as domestics. To the WYWCA, this served not only to prepare women for future, respectable employment but possibly even to be productive wives in their own households. The household work they were taught included house cleaning, sewing, and laundry. The Refuge even opened a "laundry for profit" to help offset the costs of the Refuge. The women of the WCA hoped that this "combination of strong religious faith and the ability to perform

[464] Watson, "History," 19.
[465] Watson, "History," 20.
[466] "From Hebrews vi.," *Evening Appeal*, 1-10-33.

at least some type of honest work would ensure individual survival once a girl left the Refuge."[467]

In 1901, the corresponding secretary, Mrs. J. C. Ottinger, wrote a report concerning the activities of the organization for that year. The two main focuses by this time were the Refuge, which had been moved to its permanent home on 903 Walker Avenue, and the newly renovated Anne Brinkley Home which was the residential home for respectable, single, working women. Ottinger does make a note of the success of the homes, claiming that they had turned many applicants away from the home because so many applied. She makes a case that the "Christian women of Memphis" need "to give more earnest support to this noble cause which should appeal to every kindly heart."[468]

Each year, the Women's Christian Association also provided annual reports on their use of funds and the social services they offered. As the chart detailing Refuge spending demonstrates, a majority of the spending went into groceries for the home, followed by rent, and then the matron's salary. The breakdown of spending for the home provides some insight into what went on within the home. In particular, the need to spend 5% of the budget on house furnishings, shoes, and clothing gives some indication that most of the women entering into this home did not have a lot of personal possessions. Or, their personal possessions were probably not acceptable for the life



[467] Wedell, *Elite Women*, 39.
[468] Mrs. J.C. Ottinger, "Report of Recording Secretary," in "27th Year Book of the Woman's and Young Woman's Christian Association: 1900-1901," 23.

of women outside the sex trade. Arguably, relegating part of the WCA's budget to dressing their clients respectably was another facet of exercising control over the female body through regulating women's appearances, as I discussed in Chapter Five.

The Annual Reports also include reviews of the work of each home written by its committee Chair. By 1901, Mrs. Jesse Brown reported that the Refuge Home had helped around 1,000 children and 1,300 "misguided girls." The report also states that by helping these girls, they have "saved" them "from a life worse than death," with "many of them now leading lives of usefulness, happy in the love of a compassionate Saviour."[469] Furthermore, Brown used the report as an opportunity to once again call for other women in Memphis to join in on this work. She argues that there is no "greater field of work for our dear Lord than the building up of poor, weak bodies in broken lives, establishing habits of righteousness in those of her own sex who, having lost their moorings, are seemingly inevitably drifting into eternal ruin but for the timely assistance of a helping hand."[470] Once again, the WYWCA appears to claim that moving into sex work for women was a result of poor moral strength. Furthermore, by referencing the prostitutes' "bodies," Brown identified the control of female sexuality as a way to assert hegemonic notions of womanhood, defining the sexual prostitute's body as weak and in need of reform.

Given this entire report of the Refuge Home, it is interesting that Brown does not go into any more detail about the types of girls they were trying to help. Who were they? First, there were 74 people in the house, which the WYWCA called "inmates." The *Commercial Appeal* also utilized the term "inmate" to describe sex-workers in Memphis in 1874. It seems

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[469] Mrs. Jesse Brown, "Review of Refuge Home Work," in 27th Year Book of the Woman's and Young Woman's Christian Association: 1900-1901," 28.
[470] Watson, "History," 31.

to imply that the women were not voluntary members of brothels but rather, prisoners. Yet, the WYWCA used the same term, "inmate" to describe the reformed women. If the women were there voluntarily, why were they termed "inmates?"[471] Use of this term by women reformers implies the element of social control in their work. After all, they were the keepers of these "inmates."

Only 74 of these "inmates" were actually adults, while 31 were children. As such, it is clear that many of the sex workers the house took in were mothers. Indeed, the WYWCA kept an entire separate group of information dealing with the children of "inmates." In one year, there were eight infant deaths, 37 births, and 11 still living in the home. Other key information in these numbers is the number of women who were "honorably discharged," 18. The term "honorably discharged" suggests they succeeded in becoming respectable women. However, it also appears that not all the women were happy at the Refuge, as ten left without permission.

Rather than expand on the information she provides about the "inmates," Brown goes into a diatribe about how rewarding it was to help women who have "sinned." She claims that "the sinful woman is an outcast, homeless, and friendless" but thankfully, God "had builded [a] Home of Refuge where she can go and learn of Him, be saved from her sins, be built up into respectable womanhood through the influence of God's Children, who know Him as the God of Love." Instead of offering help for the sake of helping women out of the cycle of selling their own bodies for survival, the women of the WYWCA first judged them as sinners and then only provided help in the form of Christian proselytizing. So what happened to those women who had been "honorably discharged" from the Refuge house?

[471] "100 Years Ago, News of Bygone Days," *Commercial Appeal*, February 13, 1874.

The WYWCA either provided a job for the women through their "Information Office" or the women were sent to live with relatives.[472] Other than that statement, the WYWCA does not provide much more information on the lives of the women who passed through the Refuge.

The annual yearbooks from the years 1901 to 1907 reflect a growing reform movement in Memphis and often, display the motivations of the reformers through the success stories they published. As Mrs. Jesse Brown states in the beginning of her 1902 Refuge Home Committee Report, "the desire in the present day to raise the fallen and help the friendless is growing."[473] In this report, she even included a success story from the Refuge. Louemma Angel, a former resident of the Refuge House, "found her Saviour in the forgiveness of her sins," while being reformed by the members of the WYWCA. A picture is included in the annual report of a beautiful woman. She stands daintily clad in white, with a veil to match, a striking image of physical purity.

LOUEMMA ANGEL.
Received in Refuge Home, now Missionary in Bombay, India.

The ladies of WYWCA consider her their most prized success story, as her son, whom she birthed at the Refuge House was a successful student in St. Louis and she was a missionary in Bombay, India. Apparently she wrote letters home to the organization; Mrs. Jesse Brown described her words as "so filled with the beautiful faith of a consecrated life, given in

[472] Wedell, *Elite Women*, 40.
[473] Mrs. Jesse Brown, "Review of Refuge Home Work," in 28th Year Book of the Woman's and Young Woman's Christian Association: 1900-1901," 16.

service to Him who died for her, prove a benediction, an inspiration to renewed effort."[474] So, for the WYWCA, Louemma Angel has become the paradigm of Christian womanhood. Her change in dress and manner signifies the control the WYWCA had over the female body. She represented Christian chastity and piety rather than sexuality and entrepreneurship. Thus, she symbolized the goal of the refuge: acknowledging sin, redeeming one's self, and subsequently, adhering to the standard of female morality that the WYWCA inscribed on the female body. Moreover, reading across these sources and inverting the image of Angel, reveals the alleged construction of sex workers as undermining the paradigms of "true white womanhood."[475] More information on this standard lies in another mission run by the organization: the Anne Brinkley House.

The chairman of the Annie Brinkley House, Mrs. W. F. Taylor, also wrote several annual reports starting in 1901, shorter than Mrs. Jesse Brown's, but just as informative. She wrote that the Anne Brinkley Home was intended to house young women and maintain their chastity and health. As she notes, "suitable rules govern the Home, and each girl is required to guard its honor by her conduct and conversation."[476] A matron was employed to make sure these rules were followed and with her "Christian manner, seeks to win them to a higher and nobler life." The Home could house 50 girls comfortably. Significantly, the policies of admittance to both homes sheds more light on the beliefs these reformers held regarding sex workers and the proper understanding of womanhood.

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[474] Brown, "Review of Refuge Home Work," 17.
[475] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 152.
[476] Mrs. W.F. Taylor, "Report of Anne Brinkley Home," in 27th Year Book of the Woman's and Young Woman's Christian Association: 1900-1901," 36.

In the history written by Ellen Watson, she mentions that the WYWCA did not give "help" without an "investigation" into the client they were helping.[477] What does an "investigation" mean? The WYWCA did not provide any information in their annual reports, by-laws, or Constitution on what the standards were for acceptance into either the Refuge Home or the Anne Brinkley House. Were some girls simply not allowed in at all? For example, in the Anne Brinkley House in 1902-1903, 129 applications were submitted to the WYWCA and 37 were not accepted into the house.[478] Between 1904 and 1907, 197 girls were rejected.[479] The report does not give any information on the reasons why the girls were rejected from the home. Despite these rejections, Mrs. Jesse Brown reported in 1901 that the Refuge had helped around 1300 girls. The numbers in the annual reports, however, do not reflect such a grandiose number. Similarly, the numbers in the reports for the Refuge Home do not even include information on whether the girls were applying to the home, if any were rejected, if they were recruited, or any information on how the home gained any members at all. On March 12, 1924, the *Commercial Appeal* reported that "hundreds of girls have found sanctuary at this refuge, shielded from the hypocritical scorn of society. There they have found new hope, new courage, and have gone out again into the world with heads held high."[480]

In the 1901 Report of the Recording Secretary, Mrs. J. C. Ottinger stated that applications to both the Refuge and the Anne Brinkley House had greatly increased and as a result, "properly endorsed applicants have necessarily been turned away, because there was

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[477] Watson, "History," 8.
[478] C.E. Lots, "Report of Matron Anne Brinkley Home" in "Twenty-Ninth Year Book of the Women's and Young Women's Christian Association," 26.
[479] In the later reports, such numbers are not provided.
[480] *Commercial Appeal*, March 12,1924.

not room to receive them."[481] From this statement, it must be noted that the WYWCA had "indorsed applicants," meaning applicants that fit certain standards for admission. Although none of the official documents of the WYWCA state what these guidelines might be, a statement concerning the policy of the board for the Refuge house in the *Commercial Appeal* sheds light on the subject.

> The home is for reconstruction of young lives, physically and spiritually, and not a lying- in hospital for prostitutes. It is not open to second offenders or married offenders. Caring for such cases, the board feels, but encourages prostitution. This policy of the Ella Oliver board may be termed an "artificial distinction" by social workers, but to those who are devoting their services to this type of work, it is very real.[482]

This statement provides a significant amount of information. First, by referring to "a lying in hospital for prostitutes," the statement distinguishes the Refuge home from those hospitals where sex workers were welcome when they needed medical help, including abortions, medicine for sexually transmitted diseases, and obstetrics. But, the WYWCA would not engage in the non-judgmental care of "immoral" women. Second, the statement clarifies which women would be termed unacceptable. Any sex workers who had been found to be repeat offenders were not welcome in the Refuge.

Finally, the women of the WYWCA made a distinction between worthy prostitutes and those undeserving of help, namely "second offenders" and "married offenders." By stating that this home was for those who desired to be reformed, both "physically and spiritually," the statement made it clear that women there just for physical care without moral redemption were not welcome at the Refuge. This raised several questions. If the woman was recorded under the Census or by the police as a sex worker more than once,

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[481] Mrs. J.C. Ottinger, "Report of the Recording Secretary," in 27th Year Book of the Woman's and Young Woman's Christian Association: 1900-1901," 23.
[482] "Policy of the Board," *Commercial Appeal*, January 8, 1932.

was she not welcome? Did they bar her if she had been a delinquent from the Refuge? Or if she had been known to receive money for a sexual act more than once? Certainly, if the sex worker was married she was not welcome. It is significant that the Refuge would refuse these women. Apparently, long-term liaisons were only sanctified if it was between two Christian individuals, who courted in a chaste fashion, and wound up married.

Significantly, the unnamed unwanted inmates included women of color. Although the reports do not indicate the race of their charges, outside source material indicates that the WYWCA focused on white women in their reform efforts. In fact, all of the paradigms of success that the WYWCA upheld as their models were young, white girls. Moreover, the WYWCA was segregated by race.[483] Logically, then, if the Memphis WYWCA was engaged in reform of women of color, they would have likely had a separate facility for these workers and they did not have a separate facility. The silence on the issue of race reflects the larger construction of worthiness that many of these reformers espoused, in that a worthy charge would be one who could be reformed. As Kevin Mumford and Laura Hapke have noted, racial constructions shaped the concept of worth for many white Progressive era reformers.[484] As I indicated in my introduction, African American club women challenged such constructions through the "politics of respectability" and class-based debates about what respectability really meant.[485] Still, in Memphis' reform

[483] Only one issue, temperance, brought women together across the color line in joint efforts of reform. See, Wedell, *Elite Women*, 67.

[484] Laura Hapke, "The Late Nineteenth-Century American Streetwalker: Images and Realities," *Mid-America* 65, no. 3 (1983): 155-156.; Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century,* (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997) 20, 14, 16-17, 38.

[485] See, for example, Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Books, 1996) 32 and 55.; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) 187. Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004) 12.; Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk with*

movement, women of color were often viewed as inherently depraved by white female reformers and thus, unable to be reformed. Conversely, white women could be reformed if they showed willingness, as the mission of the Refuge indicated.[486]

As the evidence suggests, not every sex worker would be invited to be reformed at the Ella Oliver Refuge. In comparing these standards to the census records on sex workers, it seems that many of the women would not be eligible, since many were either repeat offenders, mothers, or married women, all of whom would have been rejected by the Refuge. The WYWCA's standards for admission thus reinforce the evidence for their agenda of social control. The women of the WYWCA did not drastically alter their own social location through reform. Although moving into the public sphere, the women of the WYWCA championed traditional gender roles and racial constructions through their reform work. This process was evident in their budgets and standards of admission in both the Ella Oliver Refuge and the Anne Brinkley House. These women viewed their own definition of womanhood to be the superior definition. As such, they attempted to train other women in their ways, through domestic job training, dressing correctly, and spiritual overhauls—but only those deemed worthy according to race—reflecting their racist construction of womanhood in Memphis. Thus, the women of the WYWCA were essentially conservative in their reform process, replicating their own sense of respectability and constructions of gender, race, sexuality, and class.

You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935 (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010) 3.

[486] Laura Hapke, "The Late Nineteenth-Century American Streetwalker: Images and Realities," *Mid-America* 65, no. 3 (1983): 155-156.; Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century,* (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997) 20, 14, 16-17, 38.

The Memphis female reformers of the WYWCA utilized their own understanding of morality to enact reform, one that made it impossible to recognize the moral, gender, sexual, and social order of the sex industry. In fact, Madeleine articulated an alternative morality, different from these reformers. She did not represent the lewd sex worker that the reformers envisioned. Instead, she had her own version of moral standards. Madeleine saw salvation in some of her relationships. She rarely fully named the men she stayed with but referred to one, Paul, who proposed marriage several times. He lived in Montana and always came to her side when she was in trouble. For example, when her child died, he came to her from Montana to Chicago immediately, prompting her to call him her "salvation."[487] Madeleine refused to marry him because to her, it would be a loss of independence. She did not view this as being improper behavior but instead had her own code of morality, viewing herself as holding the middle ground between puritanical True Womanhood and sexual perversity.

Similarly, other sex workers in river town brothels found belonging in the sex industry, forming families with their fellow workers and madams. For example, anecdotal evidence from the end of Annie Chambers' life suggests the close bond formed between workers and their madams. As Chambers' eyesight failed and her health declined, many of her workers often stopped by the former brothel to take care of her. As her neighbor (and reformer Mrs. Bulkley) indicated, the former "girls" would "read the Bible to her" and keep her company.[488] These types of narratives, from memoirs to newspaper anecdotes, suggest that the sex industry maintained an alternative space of belonging, where marriage and

[487] Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 200.
[488] Jim Lapham, "The Conversion of Annie Chambers," *Kansas City Star Magazine*, 11-17,1974.

traditional family structures were not always valued in the same fashion as the relationships forged between workers.

Ultimately, the women of the Women's and Young Women's Christian Association created an institution that served to police the female body and define womanhood in religious terms. Their homes, both the Ella Oliver Refuge and Anne Brinkley House, demonstrated their understanding of acceptable and unacceptable behavior for women, condemning sexual behavior outside of marriage, as well as alcohol, parties, and even some clothing. To their organization, such boundaries were necessary during a period that saw extreme urban growth and with it, a growth of sex work in Memphis. But, the WYWCA's understandings of womanhood and the boundaries it imposed on the body, demonstrated why these reformers clashed with the identities of the sex workers, drawing resentment rather than praise. The WYWCA saw the sex worker and any woman who fell into that life path as morally weak and impure. The WYWCA and later reform groups were successful in slowly eradicating sex work; the city of Memphis took notice, and eventually passed laws that prevented sex workers from remaining in the red light district. What becomes evident from the WYWCA records was that female reformers were more interested in controlling prevailing definitions of womanhood and the female body than actually helping the sex worker.

By policing sex workers and unmarried women's behavior and appearance, these reformers offered salvation in the form of a forced version of white, middle-class, gendered respectability in which women who identified with alternative definitions of femininity or challenge their presumptions of racial difference would be imprisoned or ignored. Significantly, as I indicate in my chapter on Memphis' history of the sex industry, this

reductive reform mission allowed certain workers, mainly African American sex workers, to work without much interference from these reformers. As a result, the African American sex work population in Memphis grew exponentially by 1910, allowing for increased economic prosperity and development of a cross-cultural interzone in downtown Memphis. So, even though Memphis' reformers implemented narrow and racist understandings of womanhood that bolstered their own social positioning, their reform efforts did not undermine the economic and social power of sex workers in Memphis. Finally, it is important to recognize that Memphis' religious brand of reform was not the only approach to controlling sex work.

St. Louis: Legalizing Sex Work and Controlling Women's Bodies Through Healthcare

Not all cities approached sex work reform in a religious manner; rather, cities like St. Louis took a public health approach to sex work reform in the 1870s, transforming the sex workers of the industry into more active political participants. In fact, Memphis and St. Louis signify "two contradictory approaches" to sex work reform between 1870 and 1920.[489] Some reformers desired to follow a European model in which "governments had moved to a system that combined toleration of houses of ill repute with registration of their inmates and weekly or biweekly inspections by physicians to curtain the spread of venereal disease."[490] Others, like those in Memphis, focused on "social purity" and the desire to entirely eradicate "white slavery" through moral reform.[491] St. Louis reformers debated both approaches and attempted a unique experiment of legalization between 1870 and 1874. Although this experiment did not last and was eventually superseded by moral reformers

[489] Duane R. Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice: Prostitution and the St. Louis Social Evil Ordinance, 1870-1874" *Gateway Heritage* (Fall, 1990): 23.
[490] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 20.
[491] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 21.

like those in Memphis, this brief period of legality significantly shaped the sex workers of St. Louis' sex industry and their interactions with the government.

For European reformers, the chief concern over sex work and society was the spread of venereal disease, particularly to soldiers. Historian Duane Sneddeker provides a glimpse into the history of this brief period of legalization in "Regulating Vice: Prostitution and the St. Louis Social Evil Ordinance, 1870 to 1874." He notes how cities such as "Paris, Berlin, Brussels, Vienna, and many other cities, involved the registration of prostitutes, their segregation into prescribed districts and houses, and their periodic medical inspection to ensure that the men of the armed forces were not infected."[492] In St. Louis, the public health concerns were linked less to the health of soldiers and more to the health of the general public and government authorities.[493] Contextually, an 1857 report written by Dr. William Sanger on sex worker influenced many of these cities' decisions to regulate rather than eradicate sex work.[494] Sanger found that sex work would increasingly spread venereal disease and as St. Louis' health officer, Dr. William H. Barret, cited, "prostitution cannot be suppressed."[495] As a result, in 1870, St. Louis sought to regulate sex work, rather than fully eradicate it.

The reform efforts began in 1870 but had their roots in public health concerns plaguing St. Louis for several decades. As I indicated in Chapter Two, earlier health scares brought by the transient river population traveling through the Mississippi River Valley had made St. Louis particularly aware of public health concerns. Several cholera outbreaks, in fact, resulted in a complete overhaul of the sewer system in St. Louis prior to the Civil

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[492] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 21-22.
[493] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 23.
[494] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 21.
[495] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 23.

War.[496] However, these infrastructure changes did not entirely stem public health threats and for many city officials in the post-bellum period, sex work was one major public health threat in need of regulation. Thus, in 1870, state senator Louis Gottschalk brought forth Senate Bill 362, which included a clause that allowed the city "to 'regulate or suppress bawdy and disorderly houses, houses of ill-fame or assignation.'" The Bill "also reorganized the St. Louis Board of Health by adding seats for representative from the Board of Police Commissioners and the city counsel."[497] This Bill served as the foundation for the new approach to regulate sex work.

The new city council began meeting to discuss the problem of sex work in St. Louis and decide on the proper way to handle the public health threat. Inspired by European models, the council decided "to establish regulation." Proposed by Senator Gottschalk, the council debated how regulation of the sex industry should be implemented. They decided to first register all sex workers and the houses they worked in, giving "the list to the Board of Health, which would appoint two medical inspectors." Sex workers would pay a fee for registration that would pay for monthly medical inspections, as would madams who ran brothels. The council debated whether to also build both a hospital for sex workers and a "house of corrections." Initially, the city hoped to use the local public hospital, known as the City Hospital, for sex workers. However, the City Hospital did not adequately detain disease sex workers. As such, the board relented and built the "Social Evil Hospital" and a "House of Industry" to further regulate and reform sex workers. Thus, on July 10, 1871, the law known as the "social evil" law was passed.[498]

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[496] Andrew Hurley, Editor, *Common Fields: An Environment History of St. Louis* (St. Louis, MO: Missouri History Museum, 1997), 5 and 151.
[497] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 23.
[498] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 24.

In practice, the social evil legislation conducted three different forms of regulation of sex workers: weekly examinations, isolation and treatment, and strict registration and control—all of which required that sex workers essentially pay for their own reform. First, six doctors worked for the St. Louis Board of Health, conducting weekly inspections of registered sex workers. These inspections would require the workers to pay their "hospital dues" and if "found infected" to be isolated within the newly built Social Evil Hospital for at least a day.[499] Importantly, the hospital not only served as an actual hospital intended to heal the sick but also a gateway for reform of sex workers. Although seemingly stringent, these new regulations were enforced by the growing power of the St. Louis Board of Health and the Board of Police Commissioners. Both boards required that that sex workers new to the city immediately register within one day of arriving in the city. If she worked for a brothel but did not get registered within one day, "the police could order any houses to close or move, and no houses could open without the permission of the Board of Police Commissioners."[500] Finally, to prevent any circumvention of this new legislation, the Boards also prevented in sex work outside of a brothel setting, making streetwalking and individual public solicitation in public spaces illegal.[501] So, was the law effective?

The ultimate goal of the Board of Health was to not only reduce the spread of venereal disease but also reduce the overall number of sex workers in St. Louis after the passage of the social evil law. Initial reports indicated success, with the number of sex workers temporarily dropping. However, by 1873, numbers of registered sex workers increased, indicating that the regulation did not have the intended ultimate effect that the

[499] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 24-25.
[500] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 25.
[501] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 25.

Board of Health desired: eradication.[502] Why? Because as Duane Sneddeker indicates, "the police failed to impose effective control over the registered women."[503] A highly "transient" population, these workers and their madams consistently moved between houses in the city, resulting in "821 permits to change residence" in the first eight months of the laws passage.[504] Moreover, the public health officials did not take into account the political influence of the workers and their madams. Having spent most of their careers navigating the police and reformers, both madams and sex workers had developed skills to negotiate and influence governmental authorities.

Several examples from this period of legalization demonstrate the power of the madams to circumvent certain regulatory aspects of these laws. For example, infamous Madam Kate Clark was able to set up her new brothel near the river without little opposition, even though she desired to move her place of business to a neighborhood that did not typically house sex workers. The Board of Police Commissioners immediately approved her application, as the *St. Louis Democrat* reported in 1873.[505] Madams consistently circumvented the law. As Sneddeker reports, "when another madam was turned down in her bid to move closer to the river, she refused to pay her dues, and though the police arrested her, the city attorney refused to prosecute."[506] These longstanding relationships with the police allowed sex workers to deploy their previously established relationships with governmental authorities to not experience the full extent of the regulatory control the social evil law was intended to deploy.

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[502] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 25.
[503] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 26.
[504] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 27.
[505] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 27.; *St. Louis Democrat*, August 17, 1873.
[506] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 27.; *St. Louis Democrat*, September 20, 1873.

Importantly, both madams and sex workers also tended to eschew many of the efforts of "reform" that the regulatory law put into place. First, once the House of Industry was built, sex workers rarely suffered the reform efforts of this newly built reform home. Although intended to teach the workers "respectable" methods of work, many sex workers actively attempted to escape the homes. The only means to stem their bids for freedom was to take their shoes, which the industry home started doing in 1873.[507] In fact, as I will discuss when covering the after effects of this brief period of legalization, sex workers continuously challenged reformers' efforts to control them and to train them in the ways of respectability. As Duane Sneddeker indicates, the reverse became true during this brief period of legality, in which sex workers began to see themselves as more "respectable" and subsequently, more visible.[508]

One infamous narrative of visibility was the Mardi Gras Ball of 1874.[509] The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* described the event in great detail, noting it was the social event of the season. In fact, it was the final event of the social calendar, falling on the eve of Ash Wednesday and thus, prior to when all the attendees needed to repent for their frivolity. The reporter detailed the entertainment from an African American minstrel troupe to raucous dancing. The writer also went into great detail describing the dress of all the attendees, noting the most beautiful of the women in attendance and their eveningwear and jewelry. In this litany of descriptions, the writer also describes several infamous madams, with little indication that he was describing sex industry workers. In fact, if the reader did not know the infamous names of these madams, they would have no indication that he was describing the attendance of madams at the premier social event of the St. Louis social scene in 1874. He

[507] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 28.
[508] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 28.
[509] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 29.

starts with Madam Vic Debar, noting that she was "escorted by Joe Carr, who was apparently oblivious to all surroundings." The beauty of Debar entirely distracted him. Next, the author describes the "handsome white silk" dress of Kate Clark and the "black domino" dress of "her next door neighbor" Lizzie Saville. Noting some social blunders of other sex workers, he discussed how Nellie Chapman's "extremities" were "padded out" and how one of her workers, Nellie, got "very drunk." Eliza Stubblefield engaged in extreme public displays of affection with her escort. Madam Leonard, described by the author as "the keeper of the most notorious, as well as the most exclusive assignation house in the city," wore a green dress that had previously "adorned the person of an United States Ex-Senator's daughter," indicating her social standing and understanding of fashionable dress. Finally, Irish Mollie was described as wearing "a scarlet silk" gown and "wearing elaborate diamonds" as she "danced with a Main street merchant, and bought wine, declining change."[510] Significantly, all of these descriptions indicate the wealth of these madams and workers, their social standing and visibility in the city, and their own engagement with the social scene of St. Louis.

First, as the author describes the sex workers without much fanfare, it appears the writer both expected to see this large turn out of madams at the ball. These presumptions indicate that madams were regular attendees at St. Louis social events, often interacting with the elite of St. Louis society. Second, the descriptions of the madams' dresses indicates their social standing and understanding of fashion in St. Louis society, appearing similarly dressed as their elite social counterparts and at times, outdoing them. Finally, the entire description and affair indicates the social acceptance of madams and sex workers in St.

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[510] "Mardi Gras: The Social Season Goes Out under the Blaze of Gas" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* February 18, 1874.

Louis in 1874. In fact, as the author indicates, Police Chief McDonough also attended the affair, lording over the attendees "in a private box" set above the dance hall. McDonough, a member of the new council regulating the "social evil" of sex work, did not challenge the attendance of these madams but instead appeared to expect it.[511] Overall, this event indicates that the social evil legislation appeared to break down barriers between "respectable" society and sex workers, allowing both to co-mingle in the same high society arenas. This brief moment of shared frivolity, likely not the only one but the most visible in the historical record, left an imprint on the St. Louis sex industry that maintained heightened visibility throughout the 1880s and 1890s.

Nonetheless, the brief tenure of legality was not to last in St. Louis. From its inception, the law drew the ire of religious reformers in the city who sought a far more radical approach to eradicate sex work rather than regulate it. For example, William Greenleaf Elliot became a chief proponent of eradicating the law and sex work, using his influence as a minister to gain power and solidarity with other religious leaders.[512] To combat the regulation, he penned a lengthy essay for the *St. Louis Globe* titled "A Practical discussion of the Great Social Question of the Day." Elliot begins by indicating that the regulatory practice of sex work reform had been used throughout Europe with little to no success. He proposes, in contrast, an equal "kindness" to the workers and "condemnation of sin" to be the method of reform.[513] He considers the regulatory practices of St. Louis to be "an abomination absolutely without excuse" and proceeds to describe practice in detail.[514]

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[511] "Mardi Gras: The Social Season Goes Out under the Blaze of Gas" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* February 18, 1874.
[512] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 30-31.
[513] William G. Elliot, "A Practical Discussion of the Great Social Question of the Day," Missouri Historical society, 252.9364. El46, MO.1/2, 1.
[514] Elliot, "A Practical Discussion," 2.

One consistent concern he indicates is the unequal treatment of sex workers, in which those workers of a "better class" are often treated with less strictness than their lower class counterparts. However, to Elliot, this inequality in treatment is particularly problematic because "it is among the 'higher class' that the men who carry disease to the innocent are more likely to come."[515] Essentially, Elliot cites popular discourses of this period that correlate sex worker disease with the destruction of elite men and subsequently, their families. Usually, this discourse is coded as fear of the destruction of white men, the white family, and the white race.[516] In describing his fears of syphilis, he does not fear the effects the disease could have on the sex workers or even their clients. Rather, he fears that the disease would destroy "the purity of womanhood and the helplessness of infancy," as men contract it from high class sex workers and bring it home to their wives and children.[517] Ultimately, it is those concerns that drove Elliot's hope to eradicate the law and in his conclusion, he indicated that he considered sex work as treating women "as the instruments of man's pleasure, as if she were a lower grade of creation."[518]

Using a fascinating argument driven by both religious beliefs and certain feminist ideals, Elliot asserts that the entire practice of regulation is not effective and instead, perpetuates a highly problematic occupation that degrades women and carries the possibility of destroying the innocent lives of middle and upper class families in St. Louis.[519] In fact, Elliot's multi-faceted approach to the social evil question allowed him to make allies in the religious and feminist communities of St. Louis. He was supported by ministers and

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[515] Elliot, "A Practical Discussion," 2.
[516] See, for example, Eithne Luibhéid, *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) 31-54.
[517] Elliot, "A Practical Discussion," 3.
[518] Elliot, "A Practical Discussion," 8.
[519] Elliot, "A Practical Discussion," 8.

feminist leaders, such as Rebecca Hazard, the "founder the of the Women's Suffrage Association of Missouri."[520] However, Elliot did not successfully defeat the regulation of sex work but instead, had to diversify his approach to protesting the Bill and subsequently, he mobilized members of the sex industry to fight against him.

In August of 1873, Eliot attempted to challenge "the constitutionality of the Social Evil Ordinance by filing a complaint against two prominent madams under the state statute forbidding the operation of bawdy houses."[521] Once again demonstrating their social and economic connections, the madams in question—Kate Clark and Lizzie Saville—jointly hired J.R. Claiborne to represent them. He was known as "the best defense attorney available."[522] The case went all the way to the Missouri Supreme Court. Claiborne defended the madams, claiming that the local ordinance superseded the state law. However, the local courts disagreed, "convicting the women on August 23rd." Judge Colvin sided with Eliot, noting that the regulatory practices were "'contrary to the spirit of Christian civilization.'"[523] However, once again showing their knowledge of the legal system, Clark and Saville appealed to the Missouri Supreme Court, even threatening "to sue the city for the dues they had paid under the ordinance if it were overturned."[524] The Missouri Supreme Court sided with the madams, affirming the constitutionality of the social evil ordinance. Significantly, Eliot also attempted to sue the owner of the madam's houses, Logan Dameron, greatly angering city officials. Damon was a "respectable businessman" and Elliot's attempt to besmirch his name was not looked upon kindly by city authorities.[525] Importantly, the

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[520] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 31.
[521] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 33.
[522] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 33.
[523] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 33.
[524] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 33.
[525] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 33-34.

presence of Dameron in the legal case of Clark and Saville reveals another important aspect of the madam's power—they often rented from well-known and established businessmen in St. Louis society, allowing them more political power and social prowess than reformers like Eliot could challenge.

Eventually, the debate of the social evil ordinance reached a fever pitch, with all members of St. Louis society weighing in, from reformers to madams. The two major newspapers—the *St. Louis Globe* and the *St. Louis Democrat*—each worked to publish as many stories on the debate as possible.[526] As Sneddeker indicates, the two newspapers published everything from debates on the social evil law, descriptions of events at brothels, to madams giving "interviews during the debates on the social evil law."[527] The State Senate, pressured by the mounting campaign to repeal the law, began to vote on revisions to repeal the social evil ordinance in 1874. Although the repeal initially failed, it was passed on March 18th because the two sides of the debate compromised, repealing the registration of the law and the legalization of sex work but maintaining the Social Evil Hospital and House of Industry.[528] Despite its repeal, however, the legacy of legalization in St. Louis would remain, as the relationship between the sex workers and police was firmly established, as was the highly politicized sex work industry.[529] Some stories demonstrate both the distaste for reform and the politicized world of the sex industry in the period after the repeal of the social evil ordinance.

Sex workers often held reformers in contempt—not desiring the reforms the activists offered them. This contempt went so far as sex workers achieving daring escapes from

[526] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 38.
[527] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 38.
[528] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 40-41.
[529] Sneddeker, "Regulating Vice," 43.

reform houses to achieve their freedom and return to work. For example, the *St. Louis Globe Democrat* published a story about a sex worker escaping the House of the Good Shepherd in the middle of the night. The worker, legally named Mary Rice but working under the name Hattie Wallace, jumped out of a second-story window to achieve her freedom. Upon landing, Wallace gravely injured her leg and an African American woman aided her, carrying her to a local brothel at 212 Poplar Street. The madam, Aug. Rohn, aided Wallace. Eventually, Wallace ended up in the City Hospital, where she became known to the writer at the *St. Louis Globe Democrat.* Importantly, the *Globe Democrat* attempted to undermine her reasons for escaping, warning readers that Wallace's entrance into sex work was because she was seduced by a young man who refused to marry her. Like many other tales in local newspapers, writers used sex worker stories to bolster heteronormative warnings of untoward sexual behavior. They noted that she went to the House of the Good Shepherd voluntarily but eventually "became tired of the restrictions imposed, and not being able to get away when she chose, adopted the means of escape above related."[530] Ultimately, her story indicates that certain sex workers did not desire the strictures of reform often imposed on them and moreover, that these workers often looked out for one another, as the madam did for Hattie Wallace in her time of need. Although the local newspapers did not acknowledge these bids for freedom as evidence of distaste for the reform efforts, the record still remains that the efforts of these reformers—particularly the methods of controlling women's bodies and actions through moral lessons—were not met with success in the industry.

[530] "Flight By Night," *St. Louis-Globe Democrat,* Issue 13, June 1, 1876.

After the repeal of the social evil ordinance, different versions of reform continued to emerge in St. Louis; however, sex workers readily challenged these diverse efforts. The social evil ordinance had a long lasting effect on the sex work industry in that it had given sex workers and madams a political voice—a voice these workers continued to deploy even after the ordinance was repealed. For example, one method of reform was to regulate how close a brothel could be to a church or school. Called "The Hundred-Yard Law," reformers attempted to eradicate sex work by consistently challenging the locations of brothels. These reformers even went so far as to set up temporary churches outside of brothels to make the brothels appear in violation of the new law.[531] But, the sex work industry did not take these types of reform without response. Rather, madams often actively challenged reformers. For example, Mollie Brown—who ran a brothel on South 6th Street—petitioned against the law. She argued that the law was unfairly applied to her brothel and her neighbors' businesses because "the church which causes the trouble came into the territory later than the women." Convinced by her argument, the Judge ordered that any raids of these brothels "be postponed until the Legislature or the Supreme Court decides the matter."[532] Stories of legally savvy madams are consistently referenced in the local newspapers, demonstrating that madams learned a great deal from the brief period of legality and the use of the courts to their own benefit.[533] Finally, the public health approach was not the only method of reform St. Louis activists engaged. In fact, like other cities, St. Louis also worked to regulate space—a particular approach that Kansas City attempted to deploy to battle both the sex industry and the Pendergast political machine.

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[531] "The Hundred Yards Law," *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 55, July 17, 1886.
[532] "The Hundred-Yard Law," *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 95, August 26, 1886.
[533] See, for example, "Local Brevities," *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 268, February 16, 1887.; "The Hundred-Yard Law," *St. Louis Globe Democrat,* Issue 95, August 26, 1886.; "Forced to Remove," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Issue 343, May 2, 1887.

Kansas City: Battling the Pendergast Machine and Sex Workers

As indicated, each city took a unique path to reform of sex work, revealing multiple types of Progressive Era thinking. Kansas City reformers attempted to reform the sex industry through complete eradication but often experienced push back from the police who hoped to control sex work by controlling the locations the industry could remain. In fact, the method of segregation was backed by the Pendergast political machine and thus, the reform efforts were often hindered by that collective political power. As a result, sex workers fought by the policing efforts and the reformers, attempting to maintain independent control over the industry. Thus, reformers in Kansas City faced two key opponents: the government and sex workers. The consistent battle between these three parties reveals that the government did not want to reform the industry as it was lucrative and benefitted the Pendergast political machine, reformers considered their work morally justified, and sex workers disdained all forms of reform, attempting to maintain control over the industry despite the push and pull of reformers and the government. Infamous madam Annie Chambers dealt with the push and pull of reformers and police in Kansas City for the latter half of her career. As such, her experiences with the reformers' push to control the spatial layout of the city serves as a key example of the types of reform the Kansas City sex industry experienced.

As already indicated, Annie Chambers and other madams in Kansas City maintained a symbiotic relationship with the police. Between 1870 and 1900, Annie Chambers rarely dealt with reformers and their efforts to eradicate the sex industry in Kansas City. Rather, she often experienced the typical brief arrests that served to pay the police for their protection. In fact, Annie Chambers often called upon the police when

needed. For example, in 1886, Chambers called upon officers when two of her clients became drunk and "boisterous." The clients continued to leave Chambers' business and return, becoming rowdier as the day went on. Eventually, Chambers refused them entry and when they attempted to use violence to enter her establishment, she sent a servant to the police for protection. A passing officer, named Officer Kane, saw the incident and approached the customers. Their altercation resulted in Office Kane shooting and killing one of the clients. As the newspaper report indicates, the use of the police officers for protection by Chambers was not uncommon and she was not arrested for her involvement with the clients.[534] However, trouble for Chambers came around 1911, when the first reforms to control the location of sex work began.

In 1911, famed madams Annie Chambers, Flo Beach, and Cora Totty were all arrested. They were "charged with violating the order of Judge Clarence Burney," who had "closed the North Side" to sex work "some time ago." In this initial arrest, the three madams were only kept for a night and "released on bonds of $51." However, the arrests are significant because they signified the start of a long battle between police, reformers and the sex industry in Kansas City. Although only briefly mentioned by the *Kansas City Times*, this short article indicated that the madams would "try to make test cases" of these new laws, challenging the ability of anyone to control their businesses and where they conducted their work.[535] For the police, segregation seemed a productive compromise with reformers, as it allowed sex work to remain in the city but kept it separate from "respectable" places of

[534] "The Tables Turned," *Kansas City Times,* February 22, 1886.
[535] "North Side Women Arrested," *Kansas City Times,* November 7, 1911.

business and homes. They believed sex work was a "necessary evil."[536] However, reformers—such as the Kansas City Anti-Vice Society—highly disagreed.

Started by the Church Federation of Kansas City, the Kansas City Anti-Vice Society was formed to challenge the police efforts to segregate the sex industry. Specifically, the Society disputed "the police commissioners that a vice district, segregated below Seventh Street, is the remedy for the social evil."[537] Initially, the Society registered their disagreements with the police commissioners in the *Kansas City Times* but organized to publish their own pamphlets by the end of 1913. Titled "Kansas City's Shame," the pamphlet details the alleged "facts" about the industry in Kansas City, the failures of segregation, and their suggestion of "suppression."

In establishing the "facts," of the Kansas City sex industry, the Society demonstrated their presumptions about sex work. First, the Society notes the amount of money patrons spend on this industry, claiming it was 1.5 million dollars or "considerably more than the salaries of all the public school teachers in the city." And as the Society indicates, these patrons are "respectable citizens" and members of churches. In fact, many of the workers of the sex industry are "married women, presumably respectable, who live in the better parts of the city," according to the society.[538] These initial "facts" establish the reasons why a reader should care about the sex industry's presence in Kansas City. Next, the Society establishes "facts" about the horrors of the industry. First, they note that "the average life of a prostitute

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[536] Kansas City Anti-Vice Society, "Kansas City's Shame," Society for the Suppression of Commercialized Vice, Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library, 2.
[537] "Prostitution," *Kansas City Times*, September 20, 1913.
[538] Kansas City Anti-Vice Society, "Kansas City's Shame," 2.

is five or six years." They argue that many sex workers start in nicer homes and after many years in the business, move into the "depths of degradation" in low-class houses.[539]

As I established in Chapter Four, the opposite life path seems to be true for sex workers. Although reformers often assumed both a short life span and a slow decline in the quality of life for sex workers, many used the business to expand their mobility and their economic positioning, moving up rather than down in the business and society. To the Society, however, the sex industry was a dead end business that was "a life worse than death" with nearly 100 "daughters" entering the industry every year in Kansas City to keep up with demand.[540] Calling upon the moral conscious of their readers, the Society asserted, "no citizen of Kansas City can escape his share of the responsibility for allowing these conditions to exist."[541] If those horrors are not enough for the reader, the Society then details the alarming rates of the spread of venereal disease in Kansas City, claiming that nearly 61 percent of all men in Kansas City "have, or have had, a venereal disease." And to further indicate the seriousness of this problem, the Society notes that "about one out of five daughters of Kansas City parents will marry a diseased man."[542] To the society, the spread of venereal disease "if unchecked will destroy our civilization." Thus, they call upon "every Christian man and patriotic citizen of Kansas City" to oppose the sex industry.[543] However, the Society did not want segregation to be the answer.

As already noted, the police commissioners sought to segregate the sex industry in Kansas City to appease reformers. However, the Society highly disagreed with the policy of segregation. They provide thirteen reasons. First, "segregation is an admission that the

[539] Kansas City Anti-Vice Society, "Kansas City's Shame," 1-2.
[540] Kansas City Anti-Vice Society, "Kansas City's Shame," 2.
[541] Kansas City Anti-Vice Society, "Kansas City's Shame," 2.
[542] Kansas City Anti-Vice Society, "Kansas City's Shame," 2.
[543] Kansas City Anti-Vice Society, "Kansas City's Shame," 2.

divine law of chastity does not apply in Kansas City."[544] As the Society was formed by a conglomeration of churches, this initial argument reflects the religious background of many of its members, asserting the need for sexual purity as ordained by God. Second, "segregation assumes that prostitution is a necessary evil."[545] Third, segregation does not actually work. Fourth, "segregation cannot check the spread of venereal disease."[546] Fifth, segregation acts as an "advertisement" to potential patrons, as it becomes abundantly clear where the sex industry exists if segregated to one district. Sixth, segregation encourages building owners to rent to madams because they can charge high rents and earn more money. Seventh, segregation "confiscates the property of honorable men who have residence buildings for rent in the segregated district," giving them no choice but to rent to the workers of the industry.[547] Eighth, "segregation perpetuates the brothel."[548] Ninth, segregation does not respect the law but continues to violate it. Tenth, segregation does not protect the women of Kansas City from the "passions" of "vicious men." And if it were meant for that purpose, the industry should "be operated as a public charity and not run as a commercial enterprise."[549] Eleventh, "segregation stimulates the white slave trade" to staff the industry. Twelfth, segregation prohibits reform efforts, as a "wayward girl" becomes unreachable once she enters "a segregated district." And finally, segregation undermines civilization as it does not properly handle "this evil" but perpetuates it.[550] And for this myriad of reasons, the Society greatly opposed segregation and instead, suggested total prevention of the sex industry.

[544] Kansas City Anti-Vice Society, "Kansas City's Shame," 3.
[545] Kansas City Anti-Vice Society, "Kansas City's Shame," 3.
[546] Kansas City Anti-Vice Society, "Kansas City's Shame," 3.
[547] Kansas City Anti-Vice Society, "Kansas City's Shame," 3.
[548] Kansas City Anti-Vice Society, "Kansas City's Shame," 4.
[549] Kansas City Anti-Vice Society, "Kansas City's Shame," 4.
[550] Kansas City Anti-Vice Society, "Kansas City's Shame," 4.

By suggesting total suppression of the sex industry, the Society did not provide a concrete model to eradicate the sex industry but instead asserted six "preventative measures" to prevent one's child from either entering the industry or patronizing it. First, they noted that Christianity should be used to provide "incentive to right living." Second, they suggested teaching children proper "sex hygiene." Third, they hoped to improve "housing conditions in Kansas City." Fourth, they wanted the police to more closely supervise any commercial or public spaces, like parks. Fifth, they advocated for "the enforcement of the severest penalties against the white slave traffic." And sixth, they suggested "a living wage as the minimum in every industry."[551] This final point is intriguing as it suggests that the Society understood why workers enter the industry—not entirely out of moral degradation but because of the need for money and a livable salary. In that way, the Society set itself apart from other reformers, such as those in Memphis, who solely focused on the morality of the industry and not the living conditions of the city in which the industry flourished. The Society, the police, and the sex industry became embroiled in a three-way fight to either eradicate, segregate, or leave alone the industry.

For Annie Chambers and her fellow workers, the legal battle started in 1911 but became increasingly volatile by 1913. She and several other madams were issued "injunctions" by the police to close their business and move to the segregated district below 7th Street.[552] By 1915, the Society also challenged Chambers and her fellow workers, attempting to eradicate the industry. Chambers consistently fought back against both forces and often, the governmental authorities sided with Chambers. In April of 1915, Chambers re-opened her brothel despite the injunction against her. However, the courts did not find

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[551] Kansas City Anti-Vice Society, "Kansas City's Shame," 6.
[552] "More Padlocks Go On Today," *Kansas City Star*, October 15, 1913.

her in "contempt of court," allowing her to keep it open. In court that day, the city attorneys, Chambers' attorneys, and the Anti-Vice Society battled. As soon as the court sided with Chambers, the representative of the Anti-Vice Society, Mr. Brown, "filed notice that he would carry the case to the appellate court."[553] Initially, the Anti-Vice Society believed they would have the support of the police in their crusade, as the following day, Captain Frank Anderson "said that the police would not allow the places to open again, no matter what the circuit court held."[554] Yet, by September of that year, it was clear to the Anti-Vice Society that the police would not support their crusade. In an effort to cooperate, the Anti-Vice Society spent months "furnishing the chief with absolute evidence against seventy immoral houses and ten gambling dens in unhampered operation in Kansas City." In response, the police only made about six arrests, proving to the Anti-Vice Society that the police did not want to regulate the sex industry in Kansas City.[555] To ward off criticism, the police commissioner authorized two token arrests of madams Annie Chambers and Mrs. J. O. Evans. They were "arraigned" and released on bonds of 1,000 dollars each.[556] Chambers' high profile role in the sex industry made her a ready target for this type of token arrest and thus, she became a key focus of the ensuing battle between police, reformers, and sex workers. The judges in these cases proved the most difficult to battle.

When Annie Chambers entered the courtroom, she often had a sympathetic judge. Although arrested in September of 1915, Chambers was immediately released and her trial delayed. In October of 1915, Judge Clark put off rendering a judgment against Chambers

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[553] "Anti Vice Society Lost case," *Kansas City Star*, April 28, 1915.
[554] "Immoral Houses Score," *Kansas City Star*, April 29, 1915.
[555] "Goes After Chief Hammil," *Kansas City Times*, September 17, 1915.
[556] "The Officers Made Arrests," *Kansas City Times,* September 18, 1915.

and her co-defendant until several other similar cases were tried.[557] By November, police raided Chambers' brothel while she was out on bond. In a sting operation, the police sent undercover officers posing as "out-of-town visitors" to Chambers' brothel. Police then raided the brothel, finding "two cases of iced beer" and arresting seven workers and two other clients for violating the "vice ordinances."[558] The following Monday, Chambers and her lawyers showed up to a packed courtroom full of police and members of the Anti-Vice Society. The assistant city counselor asked the secretary of the Anti-Vice Society to sit by him, so he could hear the proceedings better. However, Judge Kennedy used his power to undermine the secretary. He stated: "Good Morning, Mr. Spencer. Let's see, we don't get along well together, do we? Not well at all. I believed you'd better go back and sit in the courtroom." And Spencer moved to the back of the courtroom where he could hardly hear or see.[559] This anecdote, retold in the *Kansas City Times*, indicates that even if the sex industry did not have friends in reformers or the police, the judges of the criminal courts were certainly sympathetic.

In fact, during Chambers' trial, Judge Kennedy argued that the raiders of Chambers' brothel "induced the women to break the law" and thus, he did not abide by their tactics. He continued the case, noting he would not rule on it until the issue of whether he had "jurisdiction" was clear. The reporter noted that the sex workers were happy with the decision, as were the police, who as the reporter suggested, appeared to not want to raid the brothels but felt pressure to do so. The only unhappy participant was Nat Spencer, who left the courtroom to "dig himself out of the mob."[560] In 1916, the Court of Appeals ruled that

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[557] "Puts off Vice Decisions," *Kansas City Times,* October 16, 1915.
[558] "Raided the Chambers Resort," *Kansas City Times*, November 17, 1915.
[559] "Vice Raiders to Blame," *Kansas City Times*, November 17, 1915.
[560] "Vice Raiders to Blame," *Kansas City Times*, November 17, 1915.

the injunctions were not allowed against brothels, as "an immoral house was not a public nuisance."[561] Thus, the legal woes of Annie Chambers and her fellow workers appeared over, at least for the time being. She could now operate her house without interference by reformers or police and the charges against her were dropped.

In frustration, the Anti-Vice Society attempted to take reform into their own hands, sidestepping the police by forming their own raid squad and attempting to continually bring cases against Chambers. In June of 1916, the "free lance vice squad" raided her house. However, because they had no jurisdiction, the judge threw out the case. The Anti-Vice Society then put pressure on the police to raid Chambers' house and they did, claiming that she had refused to move after being "banished from the North Side district some three years ago." When the case went to trial, the judge refused to hear it without having Secretary Nat Spencer in the room, noting it was his complaint and thus, he needed to be present.[562] When Spencer arrived, the judge seemed more concerned about prosecuting Spencer than Chambers. Spencer spoke at the trial, claiming that "Annie Chambers had been violating the laws of God and man for a third of a century." The judge responded, asking "but why is the Anti-Vice Society so interested in this case? Why have you been getting all this information? Who and what is the Anti-Vice Society, anyways?" Spencer responded, explaining the purpose of the organization and that they existed because the police would not do their job. The Judge told Spencer to tread carefully when criticizing the police chief and turned Spencer over to questioning by Chamber's lawyer. He asked Spencer: "You can't chloroform these women, or dump them in the river, what would you do? This high,

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[561] "Vice Can't Be Enjoined," *The Kansas City Star*, February, 7, 1915.
[562] "A Test for North Side Vice," *The Kansas City Star*, June 12, 1916.

mighty, and pure society of yours would it take these women up, help them, and look after them?" Spencer replied that they would but that "they don't want to reform."

In the actual charges of the case, Chambers claimed that she was not running a brothel but instead, enjoyed the company of young women in her old age and was taking care of one young woman "who was a consumptive." Judge Coon did not render attempt to shut down Chamber's brothel but instead, fined her 100 dollars. Chambers appealed.[563] Her trial is indicative of several core aspects of the Kansas City reform efforts. First, neither the police nor the judges in Kansas City's courts desired to reform the sex industry. Second, the reformers saw their reform efforts as a divinely ordained moral imperative. Finally, the sex workers did not want the reform and the reformers knew this but acted anyway.

Over the next several years, the police, judges, reformers, and sex industry maintained the power struggle of reform, segregation, and protection. In 1919, Chambers' house was raided again but she was not prosecuted. The story indicates how the increased scrutiny had changed Chambers' business practices. Rather than openly solicit business on her front step, Chambers now could only advertise her business as a rooming house and only those who knew otherwise could enter. She kept a "heavy iron chain across the front door" and she only admitted new clients who arrived with "regular frequenters" to avoid police raids.[564] The Anti-Vice Society became increasingly frustrated, often claiming that corruption went as far up in the Missouri government as the governor.[565] However, by 1921, the Anti-Vice Society had a new tool at their disposal—a law passed by the Missouri legislature "which provides that any building used for lewd and immoral purposes can be declared a nuisance, and can be abated and suppressed by a permanent injunction in a suit

[563] "Attacks Police in Vice Case," *Kansas City Star*, June 13, 1916.
[564] "A Pioneer Protected Resort," *Kansas City Times,* October 14, 1919.
[565] "Blames Vice on Gardner," *Kansas City Times*, October 16, 1919.

brought by the prosecuting attorney on behalf of the state."[566] Under this new law, the Anti-Vice Society convinced prosecutor Cameron Orr to ask for an injunction against Chambers' brothel. And in 1921, he did.

This final case that would eventually close Chambers' brothel was still highly contested, demonstrating the divisions in the Kansas City community over sex work reform. As noted, Orr filed the injunction against the brothel and Chambers, her husband, and several of her workers were arrested. Judge Thomas P. Buckner came to Chambers' aid quickly, holding court in his own house at 11 pm on a Friday evening. Buckner released the prisoners on bond but the police, not wanting to undermine the new law, refused to take the bond money. Thus, Buckner returned it to Chambers and her workers.[567] Sidestepping Judge Buckner's sympathy for Chambers and her fellow workers, Orr filed the injunction suit in Judge Allen Southern's division and Judge Southern immediately ordered Chambers to appear in court. The suit claimed that Chambers ran an immoral house and sold liquor.[568] Ultimately, Judge Southern decided to grant the injunction, ordering Chambers' house permanently closed.[569] Chambers, however, attempted to keep her resort opened. In October of 1921, she "was found guilty of contempt of court" and sent to jail.[570] It appeared that Chambers no longer had the same legal sway she once did, at least not after the passage of the new statewide law to allow injunctions against brothels. Her house was officially closed in December of 1921. Chambers had attempted to have the injunction removed from her house but she was "overruled" and the judge ordered the resort to "remain closed."[571]

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[566] "War on Annie Chambers," *Kansas City Times*, June 28, 1921.
[567] "Annie Chambers is Cited," *Kansas City Times*, June 27, 1921.
[568] "War on Annie Chambers," *Kansas City Times*, June 28, 1921.
[569] "Chambers Resort Closed," *Kansas City Times*, June 29, 1921.
[570] "Annie Chambers to Jail," *Kansas City Star*, October 29, 1921.
[571] "Resort Must Stay Closed," *Kansas City Star*, December 10, 1921.

Yet, Chambers still found a way to use the industry to make money. Rather than run a brothel, she ran a boarding house and used her notoriety to attract patrons, creating events where Kansas City's elite came for dinner and to hear stories of Kansas City's wide-open days.[572] In fact, if Chambers had been younger when she was jailed and the legislative tide turned against her, she would have likely kept fighting as other madams did after 1921.

Kansas City's sex industry did not close. Rather, as the divided local government indicated, the Pendergast machine and its long reach of power allowed the industry to diversify and expand well into the 1940s as I discussed in my chapter on Kansas City. Ultimately, as in Memphis and St. Louis, the approach of reformers to their reform efforts often reflected a misunderstanding of sex workers and the worlds they had created for themselves. In Kansas City, reformers even admitted that they knew sex workers did not want their aid. Still, they pressed forward, attempting to eradicate the industry. Due to the unique political situation in Kansas City, reformers did not entirely succeed. However, in other cities, these efforts were highly successful at eradicating the sex industry and forcing it underground by 1918.

Conclusions

Examined collectively, these three snapshots of reform in Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City indicate the varied approaches to reform efforts that Progressive Era activists engaged. Importantly, in each city, tension often arose between sex workers and the reformers. This tension resulted from several factors including the reality that many sex workers did not want reform, the reform efforts that activists engaged were problematic, and the workers developed political voices to challenge the power of the reform efforts. As a

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[572] W.G. Secrest, "South-Siders Getting Thrill from Sight-Seeing: Colorful Figure in Red Light district for Half Century Relates her Story Nightly." *Kansas City Journal Post* May 15, 1934.

result, these snapshots of Progressive Era activism provide insight into the alternative social worlds of the sex industry between 1870 and 1940. Rather than replicate the gender, sexual, racial, and class order of the reformers, members of river town sex industries often challenged the reform efforts of these activists when the reformers' maintenance of white middle, class, heteronormativity hindered sex worker activity, displaying and fighting for their alternative social worlds.

Conclusion

The death was peaceful and a welcome one for Annie Chambers. Two weeks ago when she became ill, the 92-year-old woman expressed only the desire to go to sleep. Her life had been tranquil and happy since she found religion in February, 1934. With her last moments, as all through her illness, were the Rev. David Bulkley and Mrs. Bulkley. It was through Mr. Bulkley that Annie Chambers found the solace of trust in God.

Annie Chambers' Obituary[573]

Surrounded by her reverend neighbor, his wife, and several of her former workers, Annie Chambers died at the age of 92 after a brief illness. Significantly, "at her funeral flashily dressed women sat next to those garbed in the uniform of the Salvation Army. Unshaven and ragged men stood side by side with prosperous looking businessmen. They all had their memories of Annie Chambers."[574] This wide range of people reflects Chambers' varied life. Signifying the transitions of the Kansas City sex industry, Annie Chambers went from new madam to extremely successful businesswoman to target of reform to a reform "success" story. In fact, prior to her death, Chambers' Christian conversion by the Bulkleys became legend.

Reverend Bulkley had purchased Madam Lovejoy's former brothel, positioning his Salvation Army mission next door to both Annie Chambers' former brothel and Eva Prince's former business. Although Eva Prince no longer ran the brothel, several sex workers still inhabited the mansion in the 1930s. One such worker knocked on the front door of the Bulkley mission. She carried in her arms her dead baby. Crying, she asked Mrs. Bulkley if her husband would give her daughter a proper funeral, as her "little baby was pure." Reverend Bulkley readily agreed. Several workers gathered to witness the funeral of

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[573] "Annie Chambers: Kansas City's Most Notorious Madam Became a Benefactor of the Poor." *Explore Kansas City* Vol. 5, #6 (December, 1999): 26-27.

[574] Dory DeAngelo, "Life in the Good Old Days: Colorful Character Left Impression on KC," *KC Life Downtown* Volume 1 (6-24-87): 2.

the baby and the reverend gave a rousing and loud sermon. Next door, an almost blind and arthritic Annie Chambers opened her window to listen to the sermon. As legend states, what she heard transformed her life. Allegedly, this "was the first sermon she had heard since she was a girl" and it caused her to cry. She stated that her "soul was stirred," as she had lost two babies as a young wife prior to her entrance into the sex industry. Reverend Bulkley, unaware of his next-door neighbor hearing his sermon, continued his mission of saving wayward men. He decided to rent Eva Prince's old brothel, attempting to weed out the last vestiges of the sex industry in the neighborhood. However, Bulkley could not afford the rent. Rather than call in his debt, Eva Prince offered to sign the house over to Bulkley, requesting only that he would "never turn a" girl "out" who was looking for shelter. Bulkley readily agreed and transformed a second former brothel into another "Safe Harbor" for his wayward men. Chambers quietly watched these transformations from next door.[575]

One evening, Mrs. Bulkley and Annie Chambers met on the sidewalk outside their respective homes. Chambers told the reverend's wife of how she heard the sermon and watched the many reforms her husband had implemented. She stated, "I've been watching you. I want you to be my friends." And so, the two became close friends. Chambers doted on Mrs. Bulkley, giving her several trinkets including gold jewelry and a seal skin coat. Mrs. Bulkley and her husband visited Chambers often, giving her a Bible, bringing her dinner, and praying with her. Eventually, Chambers decided to give her home to the Bulkley's mission, as Eva Prince had done. She thought it would make "a good place for a refuge or home for girls who needed love and sympathy." Chambers had converted thanks to the ministrations of the Reverend and his wife. She stated that her favorite Bible verse was:

[575] A. B. MacDonald, "Gift to Union Mission of Old North Side Resort," *Kansas City Star,* February 18, 1934.

"Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow, though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." The Reverend and Mrs. Bulkley cared for Chambers until she died, ensuring that after her death she would be remembered by her former name—Leannah Loveall—and that the history of Chambers' resort would largely be buried.[576] And so, at her funeral, sex workers, reformers, government officials, and businessmen all stood together, saying goodbye to the notorious madam of Kansas City's red light district.

Importantly, the legend of Chambers' conversion has reshaped the historical remembrance of the Kansas City sex industry. Like another Annie in Memphis—Annie Cook—Annie Chambers became notorious not simply for her long tenure as the queen of the red light district but because of her conversion. Arguably, in the historical memory of Kansas City, Annie Chambers became a safe figure to revere because she both bolstered the construction of Kansas City as the gateway to the "wild west" but did so safely due to her end-of-life conversion. This phenomenon, what I term the sinner to angel trope, shapes the archives of river town sex industries, as the most well-remembered figures tended to have converted and thus became worthy of remembrance in later years.

Moreover, this trope presents another reductive narrative constructing sex worker life and culture. As I indicated throughout this dissertation, sex workers often railed against constructions of their life and work by outsiders, particularly reformers. These constructions often produced tropes of sex workers—such as the innocent, naïve, trafficking victim or the hypersexual, predatory, opportunists. Furthermore, these tropes often reflected presumptions of racial difference, as reformers sought to reclaim the innocence of white sex workers and not black sex workers. As I indicate in the previous chapters, sex workers

[576] Macdonald, "Gift," 3-6.

challenged these reductive narratives in several fashions, from carving spaces of belonging for themselves and others to navigating the public and private divisions of river town societies, undermining heteronormative family structures and capitalizing on selling sex to consistently challenge reformers and government officials who wished to control, eradicate, or move the sex industries. By recognizing sex workers as workers and mediated agents, I show the significance of their contestation and the visions of an alternative moral universe in which the alleged dredges of society are not rendered invisible but recognized as part of the fabric of river town social life and culture in Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City.

In the past several decades, feminist debates over sex work have levied similar tropes as the historical ones I detail. Within these debates, a dichotomy exists between believing that sex workers could choose to enter the industry and do meaningful work within it and the belief that sex workers could never choose sex work because the selling of sex is inherently patriarchal and promotes male ownership of sexuality. The latter feminists believe that sex work is always coercive—no matter the circumstances upon which a worker entered in the industry.[577] Although simplified, this debate signifies some of the core presumptions about sex work. First, that choosing sex work would be unlikely. As the historical discourse indicates, sex work is associated with depravity and social outcasts—so why would anyone choose this career? Second, that sex work could never be a choice because the industry is governed by inherently unequal systems of power. And finally, that sex work is, at its base, coercive. Unfortunately, both the historical and modern debates can influence historian's questions about sex work. But as Marilyn Wood-Hill notes, rather than position sex workers with preconceived categories of victim or agent, it would be more

[577] Melissa Hope-Ditmore, Antonia Levy, and Alys Willman, Eds., "The Meaning of the 'Whore': How Feminist Theories on Prostitution Shape Research on Female Sex Industry," in *Sex Work Matters: Exploring Money, Power, and Intimacy in the Sex Industry* (London: Zed Books, 2010) 28-64.

fruitful to "see them [sex workers] as the immensely varied group of human beings they were, drawn together by the way they earned money, whether as a temporary expedient or a long-range commitment."[578] With that call in mind, I structured my dissertation to recognize the varied lives of sex workers, the many factors mediating their social and economic positioning in river town societies, and ultimately, how these workers navigated those powers mediating their lives in order to survive.

Arguably, then, this dissertation provides some fodder for more recent debates on agency, sex work, and reform. Rather than presume that all sex workers are either coerced or agents, a shift in the conversation needs to occur in which activists recognize the varied lives of sex workers and what governs their choices. In fact, this dissertation demonstrates that the model of agency or coercion is inadequate. Rather than situate the debate within this binary, I show the performative role of sex workers in the constitution of race, class, gender, and sexuality through their labor, calling upon their roles as cultural consumers and producers to understand their labor. This more dynamic understanding of sex worker labor eschews the binary of agency or coercion and asks that scholars and activists alike recognize the dynamic positioning of sex workers in historic river town societies and even in current iterations of the sex industry. Moreover, rather than presume coercion or presume agency, discussions of reform should be led by the workers themselves and engage the possibility of legalization in its many forms. Significantly, many sex workers have begun this important work and their voices should be given more collective significance in debates over their livelihoods.

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[578] Marilyn Wood Hill, *Their Sister's Keepers: Prostitution in New York City, 1830-1870* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 1.

As I indicated, by the 1940s, the sex industry had been driven largely underground. A combination of reform efforts, prohibition, and shifting sexual norms drove the industry into more invisible spaces. This invisibility does not indicate the eradication of sex work; rather sex workers became more overtly controlled by other underground crime rings, including the selling of alcohol during the Prohibition Era and today, the selling of drugs. Such a move has recast the construction of sex work to be consistently associated with crime, drug use, and societal depravation. Thus, many activists, citizens, and scholars make presumptions about sex work based on an understanding of its current workings in certain western, capitalist nations like the United States. However, in my research of this dissertation, I realized that such presumptions need to be rooted out to make sense of this seemingly invisible world.

This project started as an undergraduate honor's thesis. In 2005, a construction crew unearthed remnants of a brothel in downtown Memphis. The local newspaper, *The Commercial Appeal*, published a story detailing unusual artifacts turned up in the archaeological dig, including a baby doll. The writer puzzled over why a baby doll would be found in a brothel, suggesting that turn-of-the-century brothels were sites of debauchery and not of families. I questioned the author's assumption, and I sought greater context for the mysterious doll. In researching my honor's thesis on the red light district in Memphis, I discovered that several brothels were home to children of sex workers, particularly African American brothels as I discussed in my chapter on Memphis' changing red light district. The baby doll was not an anomaly; rather it signified the familial structure of brothel culture in turn-of-the-century Memphis. This experience greatly shaped my research interests in the history of sex work and my research methods. I learned how to cull the limited archives on

sex workers to seek historical context for the remaining evidence on the sex industry. I found not only context for the doll but also evidence of a migrating sex industry in the South and Midwest—evidence that would become the foundation of my dissertation and key to my larger ethical and academic commitment of uncovering the lives of marginalized sex workers.

By setting aside my own presumptions about sex work, I found a much larger archive and new questions to ask about the history of sex work in Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City. I asked: what kind of agency did sex workers have in the South and Midwest? What kind of mobility did they enjoy or not enjoy? What similarities and differences did river town red light districts share? How did sex workers influence the social and cultural worlds of these river towns and how did these river town social and cultural worlds influence sex workers? With the six chapters of my dissertation, I show how the mobility of sex workers and ideas significantly shaped the development of river towns in the U.S. South and Midwest. Specifically, by analyzing sex work as a form of local and regionally networked labor constituted by sex workers, reformers, consumers, and madams, I am able to reveal that river town brothels played an integral role in producing one of the most influential, but generally overlooked, cultural and economic landscapes in U.S. history. This project demonstrates the importance of sex workers and brothels as cultural consumers and producers to the social and economic worlds of river towns. With the selling of sex, sex workers carved economic and social autonomy for themselves while simultaneously capitalizing on systems of oppression, such as the production and maintenance of white, middle to upper class, social norms. Ultimately, I show the dynamic, rather than static, qualities of economic, sexual, gendered, and racial structures and performances in

Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City between 1870 and 1840, with implications for understanding the workings of social hierarchies more generally during this formative period in U.S. history. Finally, as Madeleine calls for at the end of her autobiography, this dissertation renders "the broken fragments of life" visible rather than hide those "fragments" in "patches" "on the underside" of river town social life.[579]

[579] Madeleine, *An Autobiography*, 329.

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