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The View from Two Fields

History and Archaeology of Historical Sex Work

ANGELA J. SMITH, ANNA M. MUNNS, AND KRISTEN R. FELLOWS

Since the 1980s scholarship centered on the historical sex trade—prostitution, brothels, madams, cribs, streetwalkers, pimps, houses of ill fame, and so on—has grown in significant ways.¹ Though not a dominant line of historical or archaeological research, this area of inquiry has expanded within both scholarly disciplines. Moreover, this research has impacted broader discussions of gender, sexuality, women's history, urban studies, and feminist scholarship. There also seems to be an interest from the general public in the history of sex work and sex workers, evidenced in the past two decades by popular television series like HBO's *Deadwood* and *Westworld* and AMC's *Hell on Wheels*, which all portray historical sex workers in complicated and meaningful roles. Even early popular histories such as Herbert Asbury's (1938) *The French Quarter* and Al Rose's (1974) *Storyville, New Orleans*, or, more recently, Karen Abbott's (2008) *Sin in the Second City* have made the history of sex work more visible to the public, albeit by romanticizing the stories involved. Academic work does not happen in a vacuum, and the expanded focus on the world of historical vice in both research and popular culture demonstrates shifts in cultural mores and interests that have influenced scholarship in both arenas. This volume represents not only a continuation of this scholarship but a deepening of questions being asked and understandings being developed within the realm of academic research.

The chapters in this volume represent some of the most recent work from both fields that look into the lives of those involved in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century sex trade throughout the United States as

well as the national and local contexts for this labor. To date, most research has focused on major urban centers, a handful of sites, and feminine gender identities and materialities. Working from scholarly foundations laid in previous decades, many of the contributors to this volume are beginning to push research into new and exciting directions. These chapters broaden the geographic scope of scholarship and work to expand both the who and the how of this line of inquiry. Moreover, by placing historians and archaeologists side by side, we hope to expand the readership of these chapters beyond disciplinary silos and strengthen the scholarship of the historical sex trade.

To understand the context for the essays in this volume, this chapter includes a discussion of primary sources available to scholars and an overview of the scholarly literature in both fields. Our goal has been to place the two disciplines into dialogue with one another, so we have integrated the scholarship from both fields into a single literature review. This process revealed patterns that were often parallel, as well as highlighted points of divergence when either historians or archaeologists focused on different topics or themes. Trends within each field also shaped a divergent scholarly trajectory in each discipline. The literature review demonstrates points of intersection to the reader and the changes in scholarly approaches to the topic over time. A timeline emerges that shows an uptick in historical scholarship that expands the field beginning in the 1980s as part of the “new” social and cultural history. Archaeologists followed suit a decade later, after urban cultural resource management work produced notable findings. As a result of this work, archaeologists expanded the available knowledge with material culture analysis and contributed to a greater understanding of the places and conditions in which sex workers found themselves beyond the information gleaned in the archives. The literature review reveals the contrasting approaches between the two fields. It also demonstrates the potential for collaboration, which is demonstrated through our work in this volume.²

Getting beyond the Superficial: Primary Source Challenges When Studying Historical Sex Work

Both historians and archaeologists use primary source evidence to reconstruct the past. Historians have traditionally relied on large bodies of archival records for their source material, and archaeologists have

predominantly focused on the material culture uncovered during excavations and documents associated with a single site. Importantly, neither the documentary nor the material records will ever offer scholars of the past everything we want to know.

Thus, locating sources is the largest hurdle for scholars of historical sex work. The sources that document the experiences of those involved in the United States sex trade are often scant and difficult to pin down. Many sex workers moved through cities and towns under assumed names and left few, if any, records (textual or material) of their lives. In fact, many of these women purposefully obfuscated records in an effort to mask their identity. After all, their profession was not exactly legal, and operating in a world of vice had a social stigma. There are few first-person sources that detail the experiences and motivations of women who entered sex work. Yet, in the last 40 years, historians and archaeologists have mined a variety of sources in innovative ways to shed new light on this fringe world.

Prostitution reform reports from the Progressive Era provide some of the best sources for sex trade information.³ These sources have provided significant material for scholars to deconstruct and interpret for research and have opened pathways for scholars to approach the topic with new questions and methods (Gilfoyle 1994). Published reports of vice commissions throughout the country provide material that many historians have used to understand both the reformers and those they sought to reform.

Some of the most valuable sources are court records, including census, magistrate, arrest, and jury trial documents. These materials are typically found in government records housed in local archives. Unfortunately, because of the volume of these records, particularly in large urban areas, many have been destroyed. Such decisions by municipal officials in many towns and cities throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries have left a fragmented record for researchers. Of those, however, trial records are less voluminous and tend to be available. They provide names, addresses, indictments, testimony, and trial outcomes to scholars and have become cornerstones in recent historical sex work historiography. There are also published accounts in newspapers and records of various reform organizations. Finally, scholars have begun to mine land ownership records to understand vice districts. Cross-referencing land ownership records with census and newspaper searches in Ancestry.com or the Library of Congress' Chronicling America website provides a wealth of information for contemporary scholars. By systematically triangulating

these sources, recent historical sex work scholars have opened new gendered, spatial, economic, social, and cultural interpretations.

While archaeologists have relied on historians for the broader historical context in which to place site-specific studies, archaeologists incorporate their own analyses of documentary sources into the study of material remains from excavations of brothel sites. In archaeological research, material remains work in tandem with documentary evidence, sometimes confirming and at other times calling into question interpretations based on textual sources (Seifert 2005). Much of this work has been conducted under the auspices of cultural resource management (CRM), which involves archaeological testing and mitigation of future sites of modern development (e.g., Foster et al. 2005; Seifert 1991; Yamin 2005).⁴ The work done on this topic in the CRM setting set the stage for the growing interest in research on historical sex work within academic archaeology (e.g., Crist 2005; Dawdy and Weyhing 2008; Meyer et al. 2005; Van Buren and Gensmer 2017). As will become evident in the review of the literature, the brothel as a site type is the most easily accessible aspect of the historical sex trade for archaeologists. The more ephemeral nature of cribs, street walking, and other less formal types of historical prostitution do not leave much trace material.

It is not only source availability that makes historical sex work tricky for researchers; evaluating sources for biases is also difficult because of the subject matter. Generally speaking, scholars of the past recognize the biases inherent in the various types of data used in research. For documentary sources it is important to consider who created the document, their cultural influences (i.e., religion, gender, class), their intended purpose for the document, and their assumed audience, among other factors. Obviously, first-person accounts such as diaries or personal letters will offer dramatically different data than court dockets, even when discussing the same event.

Likewise, the material record comes with biases unique to this type of data. Some of the largest issues come in the form of preservation and deposition or creation of the record. Physical conditions such as moisture levels and acidity of the surrounding soil matrix can dramatically alter or even eliminate some types of material culture. Human or animal activities can also greatly disturb deposits from an earlier era. And some artifacts are poorly represented in the archaeological assemblage from the beginning. For instance, items that tend to be passed from generation to

generation despite some wear and tear might never find their way to the trash pit or privy. Repurposing objects that no longer serve their original function is yet another reason an artifact might not be discarded. Both the documentary and archaeological records represent imperfect data sets. Overall, we can all agree that the more lines of evidence are brought to bear on the past, the stronger the interpretation will be.

Both documents and artifacts have their strengths and shortcomings. As the chapters in this volume ask new and innovative questions of the primary sources, they highlight the need for continued creativity and ingenuity in studying the historical sex trade. In the final chapter we explore questions of methodological and interpretive innovations as necessitated by the limited nature of these primary sources, as well as points of intersection between the fields and the chapters. In the meantime, we encourage readers to consider that limitations in primary sources can sometimes lead scholars to push beyond the obvious and produce interesting and insightful interpretations.

Primary Themes

While historians and archaeologists have often approached the study of historical sex work from different perspectives, they have focused on similar themes. Both historical and archaeological studies of historical sex work have been heavily influenced by feminist theory and other trends that have turned toward more inclusive discussions of the past. Recent research in both fields has worked to complicate the image of women engaged in sex work and to allow for the interplay between structure and agency since at least the 1990s (Gilfoyle 2005). The scholarship trajectory of historical sex work mirrors that of many subaltern groups and falls in line with general trends of research in both the humanities and social sciences. In the review of the literature we weave together the work done in both fields, a slightly more complicated task than might appear at first blush. Instead of taking a purely chronological approach, we discuss a variety of intersecting themes between the two fields. To be certain, there is a temporal framework to the scholarship and there are moments and areas where each field has led the discussion. This review will introduce the reader to scholarly debates and frameworks that, regardless of discipline, offer valuable context and complementary insights into historical sex work.