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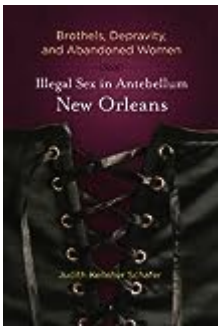

Judith Kelleher Schafer. *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women: Illegal Sex in Antebellum New Orleans.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011. 248 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8071-3715-4.

Reviewed by Emily Epstein Landau (University of Maryland, College Park.)

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Commissioned by Timothy W. Jones (University of South Wales, & La Trobe University)

Antebellum New Orleans: "A Perfect Sodom"

âIf one wanted to be sarcastic,â wrote âSemper Idemâ in 1936, âone could say that New Orleans and prostitution are synonymous.â[1] In spite of this longstanding perception, very few scholars have written about New Orleans prostitution. Even Storyville has received scant attention from historians.[2] For the antebellum period, Richard Tanseyâs 1979 article, âProstitution and Politics in Antebellum New Orleans,â stands alone.[3] So it is highly fortuitous that Judith Kelleher Schafer has written a serious book about prostitution and the law in antebellum New Orleans.

Schafer is a recognized expert on antebellum Louisiana legal history. Her previous books, *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana* (1994) and *Becoming Free, Remaining Free: Manumission and Enslavement in New Orleans, 1846-1862* (2003), examine the legal culture of antebellum Louisiana, especially with regard to slavery and race. While Schafer was conducting research for the latter book, she found numerous court cases that referred to âkeeping a disorderly brothel,â and other illegal or taboo sex practices. Intrigued, she noted them and put them aside. *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women* is the result of her return to those cases and the many more she found by searching through the minute books of New Orleans First Criminal Court. She also has read every dayâs morning and evening edition of the *New Orleans Daily Picayune* from March 1846 to April 1862. The reader benefits greatly from Schaferâs inclusion of these reports, whose tone is often as revelatory as the information they contain. She also examined census and tax data to ascertain who owned the properties dedicated to prostitution, and to identify groups of women living together. Schaferâs book represents a gargantuan feat of archival research and fills a major gap in the history of prostitution. In doing so, it sheds light on an infamous but neglected aspect of antebellum New Orleans history.

Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women is organized thematically into nine chapters, plus a brief introduction and conclusion, exploring the relationship between commercial sex and Louisiana law; interracial sex; the sexual exploitation of children; âinfamous pub-

lic womenâ; crime among and between prostitutes; violence in prostitutesâ lives; the (rare) trial of a prostituteâs murderer, providing a revealing look into social and legal attitudes toward women, gender roles, sexuality, and prostitution; the business of brothel keeping; and a final chapter on the passage of what is known as the Lorette Ordinance, a failed attempt in 1857 to regulate some, and criminalize other, aspects of prostitution. The book brims with stories: wonderful, awful, intriguing, maddening stories about women with nicknames like âJudy Come Home with the Soap,â and is itself a primer on how to conduct archival research, especially in court records.

Schafer exposes the dark underside of a world at which many popular writers have only winked, offering a welcome corrective to the myth that prostitution in New Orleans was less demeaning and exploitative than elsewhere in America. Landlords, politicians, pimps, and, depending on their level of autonomy, madams profited from prostitution–but very rarely the prostitutes themselves. Readers will be interested, if not surprised, to learn that some of New Orleansâs most prominent citizens were also real estate moguls who acquired properties and rented them to prostitutes and brothel keepers, driving respectable citizens out of the neighboring structures. They then purchased their property, and rented it out to more prostitutes and brothel keepers, and so on. John McDonogh, the patron of New Orleansâs and Baltimoreâs public education systems was one such mogul. We also learn that brothels in antebellum New Orleans allowed sex across the color line; that enslaved men in New Orleans patronized brothels and had sex with white prostitutes; and that in at least one instance, an enslaved woman managed her masterâs brothel. We see that Irish women immigrants were often tricked, coerced, or sold into prostitution upon their arrival in New Orleans. Schafer shows that prostitution was a wretched way of life for women; it was often violent, sometimes deadly. We see that prostitutes in antebellum New Orleans were a desperate lot. They were not proto-feminists, and they did not develop a sisterhood. This latter point speaks to work on nineteenth-century prostitution that depicts prostitutes as more organized and group-identified than Schafer finds evidence for here.[4] And Schafer is astute and sensitive in her analysis of *State of Louisiana v. Abraham Parker*, one of the rare court cases involving the murder of a prostitute for which there is a full record.

Schafer does not offer a theory of prostitution or gender relations, or engage a broad historiography of sexuality. Her perceptive insights do not lead to a deep investigation of the complexities of power relations in this urban slave society. For example, in her chapter about the sexual exploitation of children, Schafer details the arrest and prosecution of an evil stepfather. The case is deeply disturbing, but sheds little light on the cityâs culture of permissiveness, since this manâs behavior clearly fell beyond the pale, even in New Orleans. The cityâs libidinous license did not mean it condoned child rape and incest, and it is important to emphasize the difference between these, even if one understands prostitution as fundamentally the exploitation of women within a society that offered them little opportunity for work or self-fulfillment, which Schafer clearly does.

Prostitution is a problem of culture, gender, economics, and of course sexuality. Schafer stares these myriad issues in the face without rose-colored glasses, making *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women* sad, refreshing, and above all, necessary.

Notes

[1]. Semper Idem [pseud.], âThe âBlue Book,â a Bibliographical Attempt to Describe the Guide- books to the Houses of Ill-Fame as They Were Published There. Together with some pertinent and illuminating remarks pertaining to the establishments and courtesans as well as to harlotry in general in New Orleans,â *Heartmanâs Historical Series*, no. 50 ([New Orleans?]: privately printed, 1936), Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

[2]. Emily Epstein Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness: Sex, Race, and Memory in Storyville, New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013); and Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004) both analyze the district.

[3]. Richard Tansey, âProstitution and Politics in Antebellum New Orleans,â *Southern Studies* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1979): 449â479, also cited elsewhere as *Southern Studies* 19 (Winter 1980): 455-470.

[4]. Schafer does not directly refer to Ruth Rosenâs *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), but her emphasis on a lack of sisterhood among New Orleans prostitutes speaks to some of the conclusions that Rosen reached about later nineteenth-century prostitutes in New York City.

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