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Pacific Sociological Association

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Source: *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 119-138

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/sop.2008.51.1.119>

Accessed: 21/01/2014 15:26

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SPORTING GIRLS, STREETWALKERS, AND INMATES OF HOUSES OF ILL REPUTE: MEDIA NARRATIVES AND THE HISTORICAL MUTABILITY OF PROSTITUTION STIGMAS

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines the mutability of symbolic sanctions—or stigmas—applied to sex industry work by examining newspaper narratives in one medium-sized Canadian city over two time periods: 1870–1910 and 1980–2004. The article’s purpose is first to get a sense of what the authors call the ecology of stigmas—their relation to the temporal and spatial contexts in which they are produced—and second to give needed historical context to them and the representational tropes that currently dominate media, policy, and academic discussions about prostitution. This article finds significant continuities and discontinuities between media representations during the two study periods. In particular, prostitution stigmas are constituted out of cross-articulations of narratives around containment, culpability, and contagion across the twentieth century, but the ideational contents and empirical referents of these narratives reflect the intersection of sex industry contexts with historically specific concerns around gender, sexuality, race, and social status. Stigmas of the sex industry, rather than being constant, reveal themselves to be both deeply ecological and accommodating to a range of concerns about female sexuality and normative behavior that are sensitive to historical time.*

Keywords: prostitution; sex industry; stigmas; media narratives

This article examines the mutability of symbolic sanctions—or stigmas—applied to sex industry work by examining newspaper narratives relating to one medium-sized Canadian city over two time periods: 1870–1910 and 1980–2004. Stigmas are powerful social labels that have profound consequences for those individuals to

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Sociological Perspectives, Vol. 51, Issue 1, pp. 119–138, ISSN 0731-1214, electronic ISSN 1533-8673.

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whom they are applied. Stigmatized individuals are subject to a range of penalizing behaviors, from shunning and avoidance to restraint and physical abuse and assault (*enacted* stigma) (Scambler and Hopkins 1986). Sometimes this negative treatment becomes internalized, leading to a tainted image of the self (*felt* stigma). Stigmas have totalizing properties, so that any sign of a stigmatized attribute or behavior renders a person wholly damaged. In addition, stigmas are not evenly distributed across populations but instead target people with less power, and the ability to resist and rewrite stigmas is significantly mediated by class, race, ethnicity, and gender (Link and Phelan 2001). Investigating the contents of sex work stigmas, and the processes by which they are disseminated, is thus intimately linked with any project aimed at improving the life chances of those who work in the sex industry.

The present study looks at media representations as important conduits of stigma against those working in the sex industry. This is because it is through the media that most of us, including academics and policy makers, acquire much of our knowledge of sex work. In addition to making possible what can be known concerning sex work, newspaper narratives (as a modality of discourse) have historically constructed and continue to construct sex work in ways that legitimate certain techniques of speaking about and intervening in the industry (Hunt 2002). The (mis)representations of sex workers found in mainstream media outlets thus have the potential to shape both day-to-day interactions sex workers have with the public and their clients as well as the legal and policy environments that shape their lives.

Situated in a small literature on print representations of people working in the sex industry (Capretti 2005; Van Brunschot, Sydie, and Krull 1999), we expand on the existing scholarship on the symbolic and moral regulation of prostitution in the North American context, which has largely overlooked the potential heterogeneity and variability of sex work stigmas. We draw on newspaper narratives of sex industry work in one medium-sized Canadian city, Victoria, over two time periods, 1870–1910 and 1980–2004, to focus on the temporally and spatially located context in which discourses and stigmas of commercial sex exchange reside. We use this case study to (a) give historical context to current academic and public policy debates concerning sex work and (b) add to the emerging scholarship on the structural mediation and historical variation of stigmas (Kusow 2004; Link and Phelan 2001; McCormack 2004).

THEORETICAL LENS: STIGMA AS AN ECOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT

Erving Goffman (1963) defined *stigma* as an “attribute that is deeply discrediting,” which reduces the bearer “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (p. 3). Rather than focus on the effects of stigma for individuals, an approach common to symbolic interactionism, we focus on stigma as enacted in media discourse. We treat stigmas as structurally mediated cultural objects that (a) are constructed and disseminated through discourse, (b) transcend the experience of particular labeled individuals, and (c) emerge from structures of social stratification. Stigmas thus gain import as an interpretative tool that people draw on in everyday

interactions. In their application as such, stigmas acquire material presence in the lives of individuals with subjugated identities (Goffman 1963).

Stigmas emerge as important artifacts of the processes through which the media report on the sex industry. Here, we are less interested in the “truth” of these media reports than in the structural processes and power relations that underlie how stigmas are made, verified, and legitimated. We track how stigmas are given meaning through the use of standardized narratives and, in doing so, identify both continuities and discontinuities in these narratives. Before presenting our results, we draw briefly on insights from media studies to highlight how the structural underpinnings of meaning-making processes render the stigma surrounding sex work an ecological rather than individual-level variable.

MEDIA (S)EXPERTS: AUTHORITY, INSULARITY, AND ECOLOGICAL TRANSPARENCY OF MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF SEX WORK

For our purposes, the structural underpinnings of the media practices around stigma construction have at least two sets of empirical and theoretical implications: (a) stigmas are produced within ecological contexts—that is, prostitution/sex work stigmas are not free-floating symbolic constructions but rather are firmly rooted in and expressive of specific sociopolitical and cultural environments—and (b) unequal relations between media authors, audiences, and the “objects” of sex industry narratives help to insulate media narratives from empirical argument and the efforts of activists and academics to insert alternative depictions into the media.

We further specify the ecological context of stigma production by unpacking how contexts shape their dissemination, interpretation, and signification. First, we understand social location to be a fundamental feature of media/audience relations: the mediation that text producers perform between “expert” knowledge and “lay” knowledge occurs within a social context in which proximity to authority is unequally distributed (Anderson 1991; Giddens 1991; Hillard 1984; Joffe 2002; Seale 2003). The social location of people working in the sex industry—the objects of media narratives of prostitution—has particular implications for the production of stigmas. The hidden and clandestine nature of the work (Benoit and Millar 2001; Benoit and Shaver 2006), reinforced by urban patterns of spatial segregation and practices of political, economic, and moral distancing, means that media narratives become the primary, if not the only, site at which a significant portion of the citizenry “interacts” with people working in the sex industry. This means that the fictive characters, stereotypes, and morality fables used by the newspaper media in their narratives of the sex industry are relatively unassailable, especially to the extent that audiences lack experiential knowledge by which to challenge them. Furthermore, unlike some other groups that have encountered subjugation through dominant discourse and that have been able to successfully mobilize alternative vocabularies and understandings to fight back in the mainstream media (such as North American gay movement activists), those who sell sex services have been unable to successfully advance vocabularies of resistance and often tend to be wary of contributing to media (Weitzer 1991). In essence,

then, social location factors privilege the mainstream media as a site through which legitimate knowledge of the sex industry is disseminated.

Second, as notably argued by Hall (1978) and others, power relations tilt the interpretative field onto which stigmas are disseminated (Barak 1994; Hall 1978; Kitzinger 2000; Sacks 1996; Seale 2003; Watkins and Emerson 2000). While these scholars have been careful to specify that interpretation of print media texts is an interactive process, staged between both encoders (authors) and decoders (readers), with readers positioned as having some choice in the matter, it is also the case that power inequities shape the field on which both encoding and decoding occurs. Meaning flows more smoothly from some structural positions than others, and the ability to resist and rewrite subjugating interpretations is unequally distributed. The social, economic, and moral marginalization experienced by many within the sex industry also disadvantages them in terms of their location within interpretative fields.

Finally, we draw on the concept of cultural resonance to illustrate how stigma signification is at once rooted in media power relations and ecological contexts (Berbrier 1998; Kubal 1998; Mirola 2003). The resonance of symbolic constructs—the extent to which they ring true—is stipulated to be an emergent property of their commensurability with the kind of experiential knowledge that auditors can bring to bear on their interpretation. Cultural resonance is thus essentially an ecological variable that situates the meaning-making activities of social actors within specific sociohistorical contexts (Swidler 1986, 1995). By extension, then, sex work stigmas that resonate with print media audiences are those that reference and support salient knowledges.

In sum, the social location of mainstream media authors and audiences, vis-à-vis the “objects” of sex work narratives, coupled with the structural undertones of both signification and interpretation activities, suggest that stigmas be treated analytically as structurally disbursed and ecologically embedded cultural objects that reflect and refract contemporaneous concerns.

SEX WORK AND ITS REGULATION IN VICTORIA, 1870–1910 AND 1980–2004

Victoria is a midsized city located on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, just off the west coast of Canada. While the home of Aboriginal groups for centuries, European settlement in this region dates from the establishment of a Hudson's Bay outpost, named Fort Victoria, in 1843. The settlement was incorporated as a city just nineteen years later, in 1862. The earlier time period in this study thus captures life in a very young urban center in its initial period of emergence. Victoria served as a key seaport destination site as well as the main center of commercial and government activity in what was later to become the province of British Columbia. Until 1886, when the Canadian Pacific Railway located its terminus in the township of Vancouver, Victoria was the largest city west of the Great Lakes, located in central Canada, and north of San Francisco. Census data for the region¹ put the population of Victoria at 7,788 in 1881, 17,998 in 1891, and 22,243 in 1901. As late as 1901, the male-to-female ratio was 5 to 1, indicating Victoria was still

more of a trading post than a diverse conurbation, occupied by a relatively transient workforce comprising mostly men working largely in jobs related to primary extraction or secondary industry.

As noted by urban historians, sex commerce has often been more tolerated in cities with a large, unattached, male population, as was common for cities in the early stages of industrial capitalism (Fingard 1989; Strange 1988). This was also the case in Victoria in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The city had a thriving "sporting industry" (high-end parlors and brothels with saloons and gambling) in one end of town, a "crib trade" (one-room shacks at street level) in Chinatown, and "street workers" plying their trade in various locations around the city's downtown harbor location. Brothels outnumbered churches by 6 to 1 in many late nineteenth-century Canadian towns (Gray 1971), and there were at least nine brothels in Victoria's Chinatown alone in the 1870s (Yee 2005).

The earliest prohibition against sex work in Canada was in the Nova Scotia Act of 1759, which made the status of being a "streetwalker" a criminal offense. Although criminal penalties for "procuring" and "living off the avails" were made more stringent during the Victorian period between 1869 and 1913, laws penalizing customers were the least enforced (Shaver 1994: 129). Instead, sex work was regulated through vagrancy statutes and targeted primarily "women adrift"—women found on the street and unable to "account for themselves"—and turned a blind eye to off-street activities of the "sporting girls" (McLaren and Lowman 1990).

While early industrial Victoria was reputed to be such a "den of iniquity" that there was "not another city where the laws of cleanliness and health are so openly disregarded, and where disorder, licentiousness, and filth are allowed to stalk so unrestrainedly in the streets" (Editorial, *Vancouver Daily Post*, 4 April 1866), contemporary Victoria is marketed to tourists as a rather placid and even staid seaport city, where visitors are enticed to take horse-drawn carriage rides and enjoy "high tea" at one of the many British-style pastry shops found in the downtown area. While there is less obvious spatial concentration of poverty in the Victoria Metropolitan Region than in many other Canadian urban centers, poverty is nevertheless a significant issue, not least because housing costs are among the highest in the country (Canada Housing and Mortgage Corporation 2006). So while it is not practiced as openly as in the past, there remains a significant trade in sex services in the metropolitan area at present (local police estimates put the sexual service workforce at about 1,500 adults), driven at least in part by tourism as well as poverty (Benoit and Millar 2001).

Discussion and legislative activities aimed at sex work regulation in North America and parts of Europe since the 1960s have been marked by two contending discourses: (a) a return to a more volatile and moralizing rhetoric that sees sex work as inherently linked to urban decay and street disorder and (b) a pro-rights movement led by workers' groups, feminists, civil libertarians, and various committees arguing for broader legal and social reform (Shaver 1996: 209). The legislative outcomes of the ensuing debates saw vagrancy laws, which had regulated on-street sex work since the late nineteenth century, repealed and replaced by "solicitation" laws in 1972, which were in turn replaced by "communication"

laws in 1985 (Lowman 1987). This last legislative change had been intended to ensure that clients would be arrested along with workers (i.e., whereas one person can solicit, it takes two people to communicate) (Shaver 1994).

What distinguishes the contemporary period of regulation is that the legal changes have criminalized many of the practical activities associated with selling sex. For example, Section 213 of the Criminal Code, amended with Bill C-46, makes communicating in public for the purpose of buying or selling sex a criminal act. Benson and Matthews (2000) argue that such criminal code legislations continue to be disproportionately applied to on-street workers. However, at the municipal level, other forms of regulation emerge in relation to off-street workers (Benoit and Millar 2001). For example, licensing of escort agencies at the municipal level is not unusual across Canada, though the fees vary, as does the actual enforcement of the regulations governing both the on- and off-street areas of the industry (Benoit and Shaver 2006).

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

Data presented in this article are derived from an analysis of articles published in the main print news organs in the research site (the *Colonist*, published between 1876 and 1910; the *Times*, published between 1901 and 1910; and the *Times-Colonist* (TC), published from 1910 to the present day) over two time periods: 1870–1910 and 1980–2004. Articles from Period 1 (1870–1910) were located using a paper subject index. We used a sequential sampling technique wherein issues for a single day (beginning with Sunday) were read for relevant articles, followed by the next day, until “saturation” was reached (no more new topics or themes were seen to emerge from the data).² Articles from Period 2 (1980–2004) were located using a computerized search and a paper subject index. All the articles were coded using an “open-coding” technique. The first and second author independently read through the entire archive and identified both explicit and embedded contents to generate a large list of themes. Subsequent passes through the data were used to collapse these themes into a series of narrative categories, and in a final reading of the data, each article was assigned once to each of the main narrative categories.

Two issues, both of which are intrinsic to the historical-comparative aspect of our research question, warrant discussion. First, as described earlier, the different collection strategies mean that while we can be reasonably certain that we captured the sum of newspaper coverage pertaining to our subject matter for the most recent time span, we can only assume (but cannot say with certainty) that the coverage for the last decades of the nineteenth century is representative.³ Second, various structural shifts over the timeframe of the study (130 years) mean that the TC was itself a vastly different kind of print media during the two study time periods. This has to do with more general changes to media production, including a proliferation of different news mediums in the latter half the twentieth century, which both opened up more venues for opinion dissemination and decreased the comparative dominance that print media enjoyed in the late nineteenth century (Habermas 1991; Katz and Rice 2002). At the same time, in recent years, there has been increasing centralization of media ownership, which has

had an arguably homogenizing influence on the values underlying news reporting. Contemporary media therefore have simultaneously been subjected to pressures of homogenization and hybridization, thus shifting the importance of the local in news production (Croteau and Hoynes 2001).

For the present study, these historical differences give cause for caution when making comparisons. In particular, the earlier newspapers were produced solely for local consumption and, to a great extent, by local authors (although there are also a significant number of syndicated news materials and wire stories in the historical papers). There are, however, strong historical continuities that make this comparison feasible—namely, that the objects of media narratives of sex work continue to be both socially and morally distanced from media authors and mainstream audiences.

SEX WORK IN THE VICTORIAN MEDIA: CONTAINMENT, CONTAGION, AND CULPABILITY

We located a total of seventy-five articles on prostitution/sex industry in the two major local newspapers—the *Colonist* and the *Times* (these two newspapers were amalgamated in 1910)—published between 1870 and 1910. The great majority of these articles consisted of crime reports, recordings of police returns, and court proceedings. As well, there were editorials and feature stories with topics including “the seedy side of Victoria’s Chinatown,” the “white slave” trade, celebrity-style coverage of the trials of Victoria’s more famous brothel keepers, and the “moral state” of Victoria.

We found three interlocking and mutually reinforcing narrative themes running throughout this time period, which we identified as referring to either (a) containment, (b) culpability, or (c) contagion. The numerically dominant theme (25 percent of the articles) concerned how police, legislators, and the public should best deal with the “problem” of prostitution, perhaps unsurprising given the above apparent attention to the “criminal” nature of prostitution. We classified these discussions as “containment” narratives to recognize the attention to spatial and legal activity aimed at confining and decreasing the visibility of sex industry activities. The second most common theme (21 percent of the articles) revolved around the extent people working in the industry could be deemed accountable for their actions. These discussions were categorized as “culpability” narratives. Finally, discussions of the kinds of risk posed by workers to the citizenry were grouped together as “contagion” narratives (16 percent of the articles). We kept count of police returns separately, as they tended not to contain any codable material.⁴ Table 1 presents a numerical breakdown of the dominant theme of each media article found during the first study period.

These narratives were used to produce three kinds of relatively standardized storylines: (a) stories that called for spatial confinement and containment to control contagion and to produce controlled and morally aesthetic urban space, (b) morality myths around culpability that constructed workers as either incompetent or completely corrupt (revealing much about how ideas about moral agency inform stigma constructions), and (c) contagion narratives that positioned workers

TABLE 1
Sex Work Stories in the *Times* and the *Colonist*, 1870–1910

<i>Thematic Content</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	
	n	%
Containment narratives	19	25
Culpability narratives	16	21
Contagion narratives	12	16
Police returns (arrests of frequenters, inmates, keepers) ¹	28	37
<i>Total</i>	75	100

¹The police returns, as published in the *Times* and the *Colonist*, are significant in that they suggest that inmates (women working in brothels) were arrested at twice the rate of frequenters (clients).

as reservoirs of moral and/or medical malaise. It is in seeing the cross-articulations of these three narratives that the stigmatic contents of sex work, as produced by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century media authors, are revealed. Later, we discuss each of these three narrative themes, and how they were used in concert with one another, in greater detail.

(i) Containment Narratives: Prostitution Offends the Eyes and Ears of Decent People

The media narratives of this time reflected the widespread Victorian view that the sex industry is a necessary evil—evil in its existence but necessary in that it protects the virtue of well-to-do women. To many observers and legislators, the very existence of the sex industry in fact reflected the already suspect moral character of lower class women (Luddy 1997; McLaren 1987; McLaren and Lowman 1990). Containment narratives were often spun with contagion narratives, illustrating that the issue was spatial confinement, not suppression:

What action will [the police] take towards confining to very narrow limits an evil that has been suffered to increase . . . it is not the existence of vice that we have found fault with but it is with the spots that it has selected for its abodes where it shocks the moral sensibilities and offends the eyes and ears of decent people and lures the young to destruction. (“Editorial,” the *Colonist*, 21 June 1876)

Echoing this concern for regulating location, media stories very often identified the whereabouts of bawdy houses and where they were appropriately located: “the house formerly occupied by Dr. Frank Hall in Herald Street was being used for the purposes of a bawdy house and it was situated right in the residential portion of the city” (the *Times*, 18 February 1908); “the fact is that this woman had located a house of prostitution in a block in which all the other residents were decent people” (the *Times*, 27 June 1908). These narratives also suggest that visible sex work activity morally contaminated the streets and prevented public ventures by regular citizens: “it is a fact that ladies who once felt free to use that part of Government Street now do not care to do so” (the *Colonist*, 22 January 1908).

Containment narratives express a concern for regulating urban order through legal and policing strategies, such as enforcing a semilegal red-light zone (the *Times*, 27 February 1907), but also through maintaining the proper moral aesthetics of urban space. In this vein, arguments were made that residents should be spared the “sound of quarreling in which women’s voices were heard intermingled with those of men . . . it is an outrageous thing that red lights be permitted to glare out upon all passers by in full view of two of principal street car lines in the city” (the *Times*, 22 January 1908) or women “making an exhibition of [themselves]” (the *Colonist*, 5 May 1892).

(ii) Culpability Narratives: Moral Incompetents or Simply Corrupt?

Culpability narratives featured two contrasting conceptions of the moral agency of women in the sex industry in the late nineteenth century—as either knowing, self-conscious, and therefore culpable actors or as moral incompetents who denied full knowledge of moral order and could not be assigned blame. The first of these depictions is more dominant in the media narratives of the early twentieth century, although this is likely a function of the fact that almost all the stories that fit into this thematic category were about well-known brothel keepers and their experiences in court. In these stories, “women of the half-world” (the *Colonist*, 27 February 1908)—exemplifying the “deplorable case of . . . female depravity” and carrying on with “a bold front” (the *Times*, 29 September 1909)—were almost beyond the reach of the law: “The woman in question is so attractive that the four bailiffs put in her house by the officer of the law forgot their duties and left the premises at her request” (the *Colonist*, 1 March 1892). Similarly, several stories emphasized how one brothel owner, Estelle Carroll, escaped jail time through what appears to be a combination of personal guile, knowledge of the law, and intimate connections with members of the Victoria elite: “Estelle Carroll again beats the police” (the *Times*, 15 August 1908).

In contrast, and less common, were stories that emphasized moral ruin and incompetence. The objects of these counterstories were “common prostitutes” whose words were “not worthy of credence” (the *Colonist*, 21 May 1880), “abandoned women” (the *Colonist*, 4 March 1890), and “desperate characters” (the *Colonist*, 29 September 1884) arrested for not being able to “give satisfactory accounts of themselves” (the *Colonist*, 6 June 1899). Stories of moral ruin and incompetence erase culpability (as moral incompetents are not able to make correct choices) but, like with the “knowing” constructions detailed earlier, present actors beyond redemption and whose behavior cannot be understood as part of conventional mores. The differences between these two kinds of stories, however, demonstrate that social status is important in mediating the extent to which those who violate normative sexual behavior are allowed to retain moral agency.

(iii) Contagion Narratives: Parents, Lock Your Boys up at Home!

Contagion narratives most prominently featured the fear of spreading moral malaise as a source of concern. As one writer states,

I know it for a fact that more than one youth of my acquaintance has been well-nigh ruined by falling into the snare of these moral pests . . . parents must either lock their boys up at home, especially at night, or else send them away in order to save their virtue, health, and social standing. ("Letter to the Editor," the *Colonist*, 16 June 1876).

Once exposed to moral contaminants, however, disease is purportedly not far behind: "Prostitution [that] proves utter physical ruin to the woman is equally injurious to the man who is her partner in shame. The truth of this statement is sufficiently attested by the scores of men who in our hospitals are dying of the most foul disorders" (the *Colonist*, 3 January 1899).

Fear of moral contagion was heightened by interweaving class and ethnoracial anxieties into these narratives. In references to the so-called "white slave trade," where white girls "immured in opium bondage, guarded by yellow men" languished (the *Times*, 14 February 1908), ethnoracial groups operate as an additional vector by which moral malaise can spread: "It has been ascertained that Chinese women are in the habit of luring boys of tender age into their dens after dark and several fine, promising, lads have been ruined for life in consequence" (the *Colonist*, 14 June 1876). In fact, the sex industry itself is such a morally ambiguous space that all kinds of social boundaries get transgressed: "Men who would spit on a Chinaman in ordinary life are bosom friends with them in these dens of darkness" (the *Colonist*, 4 February 1896). Here, ethnoracial categories and deviant sexuality become mutually reinforcing signifiers of urban and moral disarray: "traffic in Chinese girls is one of the evils of [having] a Mongolian section of a city" (the *Colonist*, 1 December 1891), while the sex industry transmits corrupted morality across racialized lines.

Drawing on nineteenth-century scripts around morality heightened this sense that people working in the sex industry functioned as reservoirs of moral contamination (Backhouse 1983, 1991; McLaren 1986, 1996). Here, the industry and "the scandalous misdoings of men and women who led little girls into habits shameful and criminal" (the *Colonist*, 7 June 1876) become vectors by which "natural" class differences in virtue become subverted: "girls, [who] had been well brought-up, daughters of well-to-do people who have no idea of the evil ways into which their children have fallen" (the *Colonist*, 5 June 1892), while "young men of good families" are enticed into vice "in consequence of the open manner" by which it is conducted (the *Colonist*, 6 January 1903). At this juncture, we see the intertwining of narratives of confinement and contagion: "People have a right to demand that the vicious propensities of those who society declares to be outcast shall not be suffered to occupy places where spider-like they may entrap every foolish young person who may approach their dens" (the *Colonist*, 21 June 1876).

SEX WORK IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA: CONTAGION, ENSLAVEMENT, AND RISK

The subject index of the Victoria *TC* for the years between 1980 and 2004 identified a total of 425 articles that concern some aspect of the sex industry. As in the earlier time period, the majority of these articles are crime reports (ranging from

TABLE 2
Sex Work Stories in the *Victoria Times-Colonist*,
1980–2004

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Contagion narratives	119	28
Slavery narratives	106	25
Risk narratives	78	18
Culpability narratives	65	15
Societal failure narratives	30	8
Other	27	6
<i>Total</i>	425	100

arrest stories to assault reports). There are also several op-ed pieces, letters to the editor, and editorials, which contain more general discussions regarding the “rights and wrongs” of prostitution and the effect of the sex industry on tourism and business in the city of Victoria. We identified five main narrative themes during this time period, listed according to frequency: (i) contagion, (ii) slavery, (iii) risk, (iv) culpability, and (v) societal failure. Table 2 presents a numerical breakdown of the frequency of these narrative themes.

The sheer number of media articles during this time period suggests that the topic of sex work is of considerable interest to print media authors and, presumably, their readership. In addition, and not surprising given the much larger number of articles to analyze, the contemporary period yielded a greater proliferation of dominant themes. As seen in Table 2, dominating this time period (28 percent of the total media discussion) are discussions that identified workers as vectors of contagion (medical, criminal, and moral). Second, slavery narratives describe sex industry workers as having been entrapped or enslaved (25 percent of the articles). A third theme (18 percent of the articles) focuses on the high risks, including violence and disease, associated with sex industry work. Fourth (at 15 percent), and echoing some of the historical concerns, are discussions concerning whether those working in the sex industry are to be held culpable for their actions (a discussion that veers between the poles of criminality and victimization). The final theme (8 percent of the articles) deals with concerns regarding the failure of social institutions (primarily, the family, schools, and religious institutions) to prevent the “sexual exploitation” of young girls. These different constructions of sex industry work are reflective of the contradictory and conflicting views of different advocacy/professional groups (police, public health, social work, feminist, and academic) that mark a stake in the sex industry in the later period.

A consequent analysis of these five themes revealed that they are spun together in particular ways to produce relatively standardized scripts regarding sex industry work. In particular, “slavery” narratives and “risk” narratives are used in ways to mutually reinforce one another, whereas stories emphasizing societal failure are generally used to bolster a particular construction of culpability. For this

reason, we collapse the “slavery” narratives with the “risk” narratives and the “societal failure” narratives with “culpability” narratives. As a result, we were better able to see how three standardized scripts—(i) risk, (ii) contagion, and (iii) culpability—that run throughout the entire print media archive work together. As well, by drawing out the underlying link between stories that emphasize danger and stories that discuss slavery, we are able to identify that the theme dominating contemporary discussion of the sex industry is “risk.” Later, we discuss how these themes are produced in newspaper media stories in greater detail.

(i) Risk and Slavery Narratives: Parents, Lock Your Girls up at Home!

As detailed previously, earlier media authors speculate on the risk of entrapment of innocent men by wayward female sex workers. It is thus interesting to note that one of the dominant themes in contemporary media discussion, particularly after 1990, revolves around the risk that young girls face of being entrapped by “predatory pimps” and thereafter forever enslaved within the sex industry: “predatory pimps target Victoria in teen recruiting” (*TC*, 14 February 1997) and “prostitution circuit keeps girls in slavery” (*TC*, 24 August 1997). One interpretation of this shift is that it is in part the effect of feminist discourse on understanding gender relations in the sex industry; here, the pimp emerges as the villain: “The pimps are reaping the reward. These girls are being totally used . . . no one is working independently” (*TC*, 20 June 1991). However, containment narratives also figure very strongly in these stories through the use of two kinds of distancing rhetorical devices. The first of these presents (usually together) racialized and infantilized depictions: “prostituted girls are essentially slaves . . . in India and Thailand” (*TC*, 30 August 30 1996). Second, violent acts are not put forth as gendered or sexualized but rather as localized to the sex industry, perpetrated by the “prostitute killer” or “predator of prostitutes” (*TC*, 15 March 2002) targeting “teen hookers” (*TC*, 14 June 1991). Risk, enslavement, and entrapment thus remain important prisms through which sex work is viewed from a shifting gender lens in the contemporary period, but at a relatively comfortable distance. It is important to note that in comparison to the earlier period, these later narrative tools are more distancing and voyeuristic, reflecting perhaps in part how urban growth and development in Canada has deepened social and spatial segregation patterns.

(ii) Containment Narratives: Sex Work as Site of Disease, Criminality, and Moral Malaise

Another dominant theme during the contemporary period is that people who work in the sex industry function as reservoirs of a range of urban malaises: “street prostitution with all its attendant blights, including violence, drug addiction, disease, and degraded neighborhoods, has long been one of the most unsavory problems affecting Canadian cities” (“Editorial,” *TC*, 13 January 1996). These narratives, however, are linked with spatial containment themes in ways that bounded risk and contagion to particular areas (“along Yates to Douglas, incorporating Broad and Johnson, the corner at Government . . . is known as Herpes Corner”; *TC*, 12

December 1982) and to individuals working in the sex industry (“HIV woman barred from city core”; *TC*, 20 February 1992). Containment and contagion are similarly interwoven when the focus is on the problematic urban aesthetics of sex work—the “neighborhoods [that] are blighted by prostitution” (“Editorial,” *TC*, 12 May 1984)—or criminality and danger—“government street hookers say there will be a territorial war” (*TC*, 17 August 1985) and “teen sex rings” make for an “eerie feeling of impending violence on city streets” (*TC*, 10 October 1984). A similar use of spatial containment narratives to bound risk occurs throughout the coverage of the investigation and trial of the man responsible for the deaths of more than sixty women “missing from Vancouver’s East Side” and “struggling with drug addiction and involved in the sex trade” (*TC*, 23 May 2002).⁵ By identifying lifestyle and spatial context (the Vancouver East Side is famously the poorest urban area in Canada, with the highest concentration of homeless people and drug users; Woolford 2001) as the cause of violence, these stories reassure readers that this risk is far removed—economically and socioculturally—from them.

(iii) Culpability Narratives: Are Sex Workers Savvy Criminals or Victims?

The question of culpability appears to be as equally fascinating to contemporary media writers as it is to their historical counterparts. Culpability narratives in the contemporary context tell two kinds of stories that share a similar view of women as morally unsalvageable. First, some of these stories tell of women who are both savvy to the law and immune to its reach: “laws against soliciting by prostitutes are unenforceable . . . the situation is virtually out of control” (*TC*, 22 December 1982). At the other end, however, culpability narratives tell stories of women as abandoned victims. These are often interwoven with tales of institutional failure, wherein schools and families have failed them at an early age: family members may expend considerable effort to locate their “fallen women” and reform them, but to no avail. These women are the “morally destitute” (*TC*, 6 May 1985), and this, along with their feelings of “worthlessness” (*TC*, 27 March 1982), keeps them on the street: “I feel so helpless. It’s in my mind constantly what I have done. I’ll never regain my self-respect” (attributed to a former worker, *TC*, 18 March 1986). The lack of moral agency present in both of these kinds of culpability narratives presents girls and women who cannot help themselves. The extent to which others can help is also called into question.

DISCUSSION

Comparing media narratives of the sex industry over the two historical periods reveals continuities as well as shifts in stigmatizing constructions of people working in the sex industry. Table 3 illustrates how these two periods compare to one another.

A prominent historical continuity is the emphasis on sex industry workers as conduits of infection. However, the nature of that infection shifts somewhat, with historical narrators focusing more on a moral kind of contagion, while the later news stories focus on how workers are by and large “vectors of disease”: “unprotected sex

TABLE 3
Continuities and Discontinuities in Media Narratives of Prostitution

<i>Narrative Conventions and Themes</i>	<i>Present 1870–1910</i>	<i>Present 1980–2004</i>
Contagion	Yes	Yes
Containment	Yes	Yes
Female sexuality	Yes	Yes
Culpability	Yes	Yes
Enslavement	No	Yes
Risk	No	Yes

with [prostitutes] is like Russian roulette . . . HIV-infected woman [charged] with two counts of aggravated sexual assault after two men said they had unprotected sex with her" (*TC*, 3 December 1991). This narrative feat—where it would appear that workers somehow spontaneously generate moral lassitude and/or disease and that the solution to this social problem lies solely in confinement or containment of the prostitution "problem"—is broadly accomplished in the same way during both study periods (i.e., by linking and cross-articulating narratives around urban order and containment). As Hunt (2002: 6) suggests, narratives are more potent if they appeal to both economic and moral interests. Stigmas around contagion are intensified by references to unsanctioned social mobility, such as would occur when the sex industry pulls people from middle and upper classes toward moral abandon—"young men from good families" (the *Colonist*, 6 January 1903) and the "honour roll student . . . it can happen to any kid whether they are well off or not" (*TC*, 28 May 2002)—or as would allow corrupt women to quickly gain wealth.

Another striking continuity throughout is an attention to female sexuality. We see this in the almost complete absence of discussions of males who work in the industry, as well as in the relatively little attention paid to male clients, or "johns" (though male pimps are discussed). Sex industry involvement is consistently conflated across time with problematic female sexuality. Furthermore, this gendered script is overlaid with other concerns. For instance, during both periods, the concern with deviant female sexuality has the potential to subvert attention to social class and racial purity: the sex industry in Victoria not only entices men and girls from good families into vice but also makes interracial intimate relations (a "sordid misalliance"; the *Times*, 30 June 1908) a possibility (not only between white men and Chinese girls but also more generally between whites and Chinese). This evinces the way that sex work is a discursive category linked to disciplinary discourses around female sexuality and sexual virtue (Stansell 1986; Walkowitz 1992).

Finally, there is an almost exclusive attention to the public or visible aspect of sex work in both study periods, accompanied by an attention to urban order and the need for the regulation of the moral aesthetic of city spaces, as evidenced by the focus on spatial containment in the earlier period and on street activities in the recent period. In all of the media stories, the predominant concern is making sex work invisible, not eradicating it, especially to clarify that good citizens should

have a higher moral claim to public spaces than sex workers: "To whom do our streets belong? To the prostitutes or the preachers?" (the *Colonist*, 4 February 1896) and "the mayor is glad to see federal government is moving to push prostitutes off the streets, but doesn't want to see them disappear completely" (*TC*, 4 May 1985). This focus on activities visible on the street is paralleled by policing practice. As noted by McLaren and others, the history of antiprostitution legislation reveals a preoccupation with regulating the visible aspects of sex work (Hubbard 1999; McLaren 1987, 1996; McLaren and Lowman 1990; Shaver 1994).

The most striking historical differences concern constructions around moral agency and risk. The media stories from the earlier time period accord moral agency to its characters by, for instance, portraying them as willfully corrupt and savvy criminals who employ "ruse[s] to evade the law" (the *Colonist*, 30 June 1908). In addition, many of the stories of the "madams" who ran the brothels in the Victorian era portray women, often by name, who are entrepreneurial (by using their wits to outsmart legislators and police), ambitious, and often physically beautiful. In contrast, contemporary representations emphasize the childlike naivety of the victims of the sex industry and use discussions of physical defects (scars from drug addiction, for instance) to represent how they are wholly morally damaged: "Cindy stands alone on the corner . . . she's pretty, painfully thin and vulnerable" (*TC*, 3 August 1999). The protagonists of contemporary media stories are presented thus as either pre-agentic—"we need to stop these children in their tracks as hookers and prostitutes" (*TC*, 15 March 1999)—or as without the capacity to develop moral agency (not least because most of them are discussed only after they have died), whereas at least some of the women in the historical media stories are given characters, names, and moral will.

When coupled with the attention to risky behavior that also dominates the contemporary period, the characters in these recent stories become triply laden with stigma: contagious and dangerous but also lacking the capacity to act with moral will. Importantly, while there is some reference to the "danger" posed by those working in the sex industry in the earlier study period, these risk discourses are more likely to speak of a risk to the unsuspecting public: "Whose boys are to be the victims of this Moloch of destruction . . . to be set out on the broad road to hell?" (the *Times*, 3 January 1899). In contrast, the risk discourses found in the contemporary period focus less on the danger to the public and more on individual workers' "risky behavior": "It's a high risk profession. They jump into a vehicle going to an unknown destination and don't know what they will be doing until they get there" (*TC*, 31 August 1991). This risk-based problematization attributes blame to the workers themselves and the spaces in which they work, while offering them up as the appropriate target for legal and moral intervention.

Contemporary media depictions of sex work are quite far removed from empirical reality (Benoit and Millar 2001; Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips, and Benoit 2006; Phillips and Benoit 2005) and are much more reflective of broader social concerns than the variable actualities of commercial sex exchange. This distance between reality and media depictions is, if anything, more pronounced in the contemporary period and is amplified by the prolific use of decontextualizing tropes, such as the use of stereotypes as story templates (drug-addicted, HIV-infected prostitutes,

runaways from broken homes as teen hookers), which confine risk to prostitutes and discount their humanity in the process: “mom walks street combing for clue as to who killed her hooker teen” (*TC*, 10 June 1992). This greater distance is probably due in part to the growth of the community and the transformation of the *Victoria Times* and the *Colonist* from community newspapers to media outlets that rely on newswires for the bulk of their news stories, as has been the typical story in most North American cities over the past quarter century. In the end, however, this distance between media stories and the reality in which sex workers live has some profound implications.

CONCLUSION

Lianos and Douglas (2000) argue that perceptions of interpersonal risk and danger have sharpened in recent decades in high-income countries and it is such dangers that enthrall and alarm the public. Media representations of the sex industry are one arena in which social risk and dangers are reflected on and examined: here, people who work in the sex industry, and the places in which their activities occur, function as tropes for a range of purported social dangers (criminality, addiction, sexually transmitted infections, and moral malaise) and as vectors by which dangers are transmitted. The extent to which these media representations are constant over the time period of this study reveals that this symbolic function of sex work is far from new.

In fact, while there are significant differences in stigmatizing constructions over the hundred-year period, these differences lie mostly in the specific ideational contents of narratives (e.g., historical contagion narratives refer to race and class purity; contemporary urban space narratives refer to better business practice) and in its empirical referents (e.g., What does disease refer to—moral lassitude or sexually transmitted infections?). However, the historical persistence by which symbolic constructions of sex work are used as tropes for danger and contagion, and as a discursive category by which disciplinary discourses around female sexuality are given both empirical flesh and resonance, echoes Link and Phelan’s (1995) thesis regarding the enduring importance of distal or fundamental causes of health inequalities. Proximate causes of the stigmatization of sex work change over time, but no matter what these proximate causes are, sex work remains controversial and stigmatized. This suggests that there are more fundamental factors at work: sex work stigmas are not about the “rights and wrongs” of prostitution but instead are about how rules around sexuality and sexual virtue are used to shore up orders of social, ethnoracial, and gender inequality.

Second, consistent throughout the entire study time period are manifold problematizations of sex work, in which involvement comes to represent a range of deviant and suspect behaviors. Seen in historical context, these representations lose empirical credibility. However, the fact remains that these representations offer people working in the industry and their work spaces as appropriate sites for surveillance and intervention by police, policy makers, and academics alike. This focus, however, continues to individualize (that is, focus on proximate risks) and thus obscures the fact that, as the research literature indicates, there are more

fundamental factors, including socioeconomic, racial, and gender inequality, girding both stigmas of sex work and the very existence of the sex industry itself.

The study presented here focused only on media representations in one North American city over two time periods. Although our findings cannot be generalized to other urban centers until further empirical research is carried out, we nevertheless believe our study offers two insights worthy of future attention: (a) stigmas have an ecological nature—that is, the ideational contents of sex work stigmas reflect sociohistorically specific concerns—and (b) stigmas have an almost limitless elasticity—in this case, they are able to accommodate countless concerns regarding urban disarray, moral order, female sexuality, normative gender behavior, and so forth. These two insights offer, we believe, a much-needed intervention into current academic and policy-oriented debates concerning sex work. Recent scholarship on the sex industry has tended to be split among three relatively incommensurable positions, as scholars argue whether sex work should be viewed as economic choice, as enslavement and exploitation, or as risky and disease bearing. This study suggests that all of these positions are significantly governed by the tropes, stereotypes, and objectifying discourses that in their production as enacted stigmas form part of an apparatus of symbolic regulation and sanction of individuals who exchange sex commercially. If we aim to produce research and engage in social action that will substantially improve the life chances and work environments of persons working in the sex industry, we must also recognize our complicity in producing and reproducing sex industry stigmas.

NOTES

1. The Victoria region included Esquimalt, North and South Saanich, and Metchosin.
2. This is less a sampling method than an attempt to gain as comprehensive a sense of the contents of the archive as possible.
3. The computerized search of articles during the later time period was conducted by entering in more than twenty possible combinations of words and phrases in common use that refer to people working in the sex industry and then eliminating duplicate hits. For the earlier time period, existing paper subject indices are incomplete, and we supplemented these indices by using a sequential sampling technique, described earlier.
4. However, the police returns, as published in the *Times* and the *Colonist*, are significant in that they suggest that inmates (women working in brothels) were arrested at twice the rate of frequenters (clients).
5. More than sixty women are reported as “missing” in Vancouver’s Downtown East Side, twenty-seven whose bodies have been found on the farm of Robert William Pickton, facing murder charges for their untimely deaths.

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