

“The Worse Element”

Black Sex Workers, White Slavery, and Sexual Policing in San Diego

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In this essay, I trouble the term *white slavery* by studying municipal authorities’ policing of Black sex workers in early twentieth-century San Diego. Though white-identified women were arrested and detained for prostitution-related offenses, authorities disproportionately surveilled and criminalized Black women as well as other nonwhites, notably Mexican and Chinese immigrants and Indigenous Americans. An analysis of the city’s multiracial, interracial sex tourism industry as well as its attempts to police that industry and advance racialized concepts of social hygiene illuminates how the displacement and prosecution of Black women was central to the development and imaginary of San Diego as a white, militaristic tourist destination.

San Diego is an important case study because it exemplifies the interplay between private, state, and federal authorities, allowing a fuller understanding of how the moral panic about white slavery impacted Black sex workers. Since authorities surveilled specific interzones, Black rooming houses near the police-protected vice district, this study also reveals how key housing and space/place are key to the strategy of policing Black women. Major Bascom Johnson, a member of the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA), US Army Sanitary Corps director, and sanitarian, described San Diego as similar to the “Mexican town of Tia Juana . . . a gathering place for every species of underworld character.”¹ Prior to the migration

Radical History Review

Issue 149 (May 2024) DOI 10.1215/01636545-11027522

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of Black women from the American South, the Page Act of 1875 and the Immigration Acts of 1903 and 1908 curtailed the influx of Chinese and Mexican immigrants, and the local dispossession of Kumeyaay native land displaced Indigenous women, including sex workers. The deportation of Black women, however, proved more troublesome. As pressure mounted to clean up San Diego in time for the city's first military project, the Panama-California Exposition of 1915, the forced exodus of Black women became a top priority for local police beginning in 1910.²

During the Progressive Era, female moral reformers joined with powerful, prestigious, and predominately male professionals in the social hygiene crusade to combat white slavery.³ The moral positioning of white womanhood as superior and more hygienic than nonwhite womanhood was an implicit feature of the discourse on white slavery. Male sanitarians claimed to approach venereal disease and prostitution as part of a scientific discourse of social hygiene, but this discourse was based on eugenic ideas of the danger nonwhites posed to white society as pollutants. Since California was the first state that required doctors to disclose the identities of those who had venereal diseases, the California State Board of Health touted itself as a "pioneer" in the fight against syphilis and gonorrhea.⁴ That same year, San Diego's Public Health Department targeted tenement housing where Black women and men lived over public health concerns. San Diego became a testing ground for the Red Light Abatement Act of 1913, a statewide policy that threatened property owners with forfeiture if their properties were used for prostitution. The tactics used in San Diego were lauded by social hygienists and other reformers to combat vice and prostitution during wartime.⁵

White Slavery

The term *white slavery* was deployed by various political actors in a wide range of places and time periods. Usage differed from one place to the next—in some places the term was synonymous with prostitution while in other places it described exploitation more broadly.⁶ In the US context, scholars point to the ways that antitrafficking legislation spurred on by the "white slave panic" responded to middle-class anxieties informed by immigration and urbanization in the early twentieth century.⁷ The racial implications of the term *white slavery* held particular meanings and nuances along the US-Mexico borderlands of the West Coast, where sexual policing of Chinese, Mexican, Black, and Indigenous women took on a different character than that of white women. As the border scholar Julian Lim explains, the diverse racial and spatial demographics of people of color in early twentieth-century California created racial anxiety about whites' proximity to these "mongrel" populations and spaces.⁸ Scholars point to the ways that sexual policing in the borderlands was part of larger nation-building projects. The Page Act of 1875 was the first federal law to deny entry into the United States to women for "lewd and immoral purposes."⁹ Grace Peña Delgado examines the entwinement of immigration and moral purity

legislation at the beginning of the twentieth century as elements of one system that made decisions about entry based on women's "sexual piety and purity."¹⁰ The result was the heightened deportation of Mexican women beginning in 1907.

Additional studies have focused more broadly on women's immigration to California and their experiences of sexual exploitation and other forms of violence. Brian Donovan examines how "yellow slavery," the trafficking of Chinese women in San Francisco's Chinatown, incited anti-Chinese and anti-Asian violence on the West Coast, in comparison to similar "crusades" in New York City and Chicago.¹¹ Bernadine Marie Hernández explores the ways that the Page Act not only curtailed the immigration of Asian women but that of Mexican women as well.¹² Celeste R. Menchaca traces how privately owned companies, such as the San Diego and Southwestern Railroad, constructed and leased space to the Bureau of Immigration for the detention of women between 1903 and 1917.¹³ While detained, women often experienced physical, sexual, and verbal abuse by authorities.

Although no formal history of the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA) has been published to date, the politics of social hygiene has been taken up by a diverse array of historians investigating the control of women's bodies, especially sex workers, by federal, state, and municipal authorities during wartime. Allan M. Brandt's work offers a comprehensive analysis of venereal disease policy from the Progressive Era through the New Deal and the military hygiene program during World War II.¹⁴ As the primary leaders of this movement, the American Social Hygiene Association and the Rockefeller-funded Bureau of Social Hygiene blended two seemingly opposing forces—claims of morality and scientific language. Hygienists characterized prostitutes as vectors of venereal disease who would infect vulnerable men, with innocent wives bearing the brunt. John Parascandola's scholarship on the history of syphilis details how the US Public Health Service established a national program of quarantine hospitals to detain and treat prostitutes and "promiscuous women" during World War II.¹⁵ Claire Strom traces how the majority of women arrested for venereal disease in World War II Orlando were working-class Black females in their late teens and early twenties.¹⁶

White slavery is, obviously, a deeply racialized term. There is a rich scholarship on the history of white slavery in the United States, but until recently, scholarly attention to Black women's presence in the sexual economy of this country, and more specifically within the discourse of white slavery, has been largely absent.¹⁷ Scholars including Kevin Mumford, and more recently Cynthia Blair and LaShawn Harris, have explored the histories of Black sex workers in turn-of-the-century Chicago and New York City.¹⁸ Blair challenges the field of African American history, which represents sex work practices as "Black women's utter defeat."¹⁹ She points out that men's control of women's labor did not begin until after the 1920s, suggesting that Black women could have possibly exercised great bodily, economic, and sexual autonomy as sex workers in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. Anne

Gray Fischer's work on contemporary policing in the United States illuminates how the criminalization of Black women's sex work by authorities was the central way the state enforced racial segregation and then gentrification to manage the racial anxieties of the national body politic. Beginning in the twentieth century, authorities essentially decriminalized white women's sex work and instead shifted to the "sexual policing" of Black women's bodies.²⁰

All of these studies have contributed to our understanding of the ways that the highly racialized term *white slavery* was deployed throughout the United States after the turn of the twentieth century. San Diego offers a particularly important case study to extend this investigation. One of the unique aspects of the sex trades in San Diego during this period was the interracial character of the trades, and it is clear that the anxieties whites experienced were based largely on racist attitudes and actions toward not only Black workers but Asian, Indigenous, and Mexican workers as well.

San Diego: Prostitution in an Interracial City

In 1910 the *San Diego Union* reported on Mary Shaw, an "Indian Girl" who accused Leon D'Imar Richardson and an unknown Black madam of white slavery. The admission came after Shaw and Richardson were arrested at the Melbourne rooming house on suspicion of burglary. Authorities told *Union* reporters that Shaw was the daughter of a well-known Cherokee "Indian Chief" named Peter Hargo at the "Coweta Indian Territory." Authorities said that Shaw "become hysterical" while in custody and told them that Richardson took all of her earnings and that she "blamed him for all her misery." Allegedly, Richardson had convinced Shaw to relocate from Los Angeles to work at a brothel managed by a "San Diego negress." Authorities continued to detain Richardson in hopes of convicting both him and his rumored Black Madam.²¹

Authorities listed Black women as proprietors starting in 1910, which seems to indicate that Black women began to either buy or rent these properties in order to provide fellow Black women with housing accommodations. Black women from the South had come to San Diego in search of labor, and as is well known, few professions were open to them, which led many to sex work.²² The city's local Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and other institutional residential hotels prohibited Black women and other women of color; dilapidated rooming houses used by Asian immigrants provided the only affordable living options.²³ While more established Black urban communities created some housing resources for Black female migrants in other cities such as San Francisco, the Black community in San Diego lacked the resources to do the same.²⁴ Many women lived with other women to share rent and for other communal support since their salaries were too low for them to live independently in rooming houses like men.²⁵ To the local papers, like the *Union*, "colored rooming houses" like the Parker House and the Clermont Hotel

were havens for "disreputable negro women."²⁶ In "Women Fight with Stones on Street," the *San Diego Union* reported that Leola Butler, Kate Jackson, and Clara White, "three buxom women of Ethiopia parentage," were fighting and "using language of a kind not countenanced by the best society" in front of the Parker Hotel. In another article in 1910, "Negro Women Have Trouble on H Street," it was reported that an alleged quarrel occurred between a proprietor, Emma Samuel, "a negress," and her roomer Sally Jones, "a muscular woman of color."²⁷ Samuel was a "proprietress of one of the three rooming houses conducted by as many women in the old Kelley rookery."²⁸

Yet, since many of the arrests of Black women routinely included the arrests of other non-Black women, they were evidently not the only ones occupying Black rooming houses. Authorities routinely arrested and charged Black women with vagrancy for being in the company of non-Black women, whites or others. In February 1909, the *Evening Tribune* reported that Judge Thorp sentenced Maria Rivas and Maria Breedlove, two Mexican "girls," and Dora Bennis, an Italian "girl," to fifteen days in jail and a thirty-dollar fine.²⁹ The women were arrested with Laura Donnelly, "a young negress"; however, Donnelly pled not guilty and was therefore to be arraigned at another date. A month later, authorities sentenced sisters Laura and Mary Donnelly to ninety days in jail for being "idle, lewd, and dissolute persons and, therefore, guilty of vagrancy."³⁰ The Donnelly women were arrested together with two or three Mexican women, who were neither named nor charged with a crime. In 1914, authorities "found persons of all nationalities and color in a J—rooming house on lower Fifth street."³¹ Police arrested Lillian Anderson, a Black woman, and "captured a horn and some of the clothes of a marine" in her room. Victoria and Maguli Savallia, who were Mexican, were also arrested by police but were not prosecuted by the court.

The presence of white bodies in interracial places manifested a crisis about white men's desire for interracial contact. In some instances, authorities would also charge white men with vagrancy. On Saturday March 26, 1910, Anna Barnett, "a 200-pound negress," was arrested for allegedly assaulting and robbing Jack Osborne. Initially Chief Wilson and Detective Joe Myers thought Barnett had boarded a train back to Los Angeles, but they later discovered Barnett at a "shack on M street, near the Cuayamaca railroad station." The *Union* reported that "little sympathy was shown to Osborne in the court proceeding, in view of his having frequented the society of negroes, and the admission he made that he had invited the women to his room." Osborne had met Barnett and an unidentified Black woman at a saloon at Fourteenth and K Streets and later invited them to his rooming hotel. Osborne alleged that once in his room, Barnett held him up and went through his pockets, stealing ten dollars from his wallet. Osborne threw up his arm to "protect his head" once he saw that Barnett had a knife. The knife lacerated his skin from the "top of the shoulder, [to] around the shoulder blade and beneath the arm." Osborne

did not “endeavor to explain the presence of the two negro women in his room,” which ultimately resulted in the postponement of the trial.³²

Black Settlement in San Diego

As early as the mid-nineteenth century, the intermixing of white, Indigenous, Black, and Mexican laborers during the California gold rush alarmed authorities in San Diego. In 1852, a San Diego grand jury recommended the expulsion of a group of Blacks from Old Town, then the city’s red-light district. The reports claimed that a saloon owned by Williams Heath Davis was “patronized by a rough element of Indians, Mexicans, and Negroes” and was becoming “the common rendezvous for all the negroes about town.”³³ The foreman referred to the group of Black men as a “den of stable animals, who have lately come in our midst,” who “indulge their brutal appetites by drugging the Indian women.” He recommended that “these colored men be compelled to leave our town, unless they be employed in some useful labor.” The report recommended that all “Indians” be kept to the north of the San Diego River, the northern boundary of the town at the time. Although an 1850 state law prohibited interracial marriages, census records reveal that Black men married outside their race fairly often.³⁴

The Black population in urban San Diego continued to increase near the end of the nineteenth century as the city began to militarize its harbor.³⁵ Longshoring and other forms of maritime work represented a common occupational field for Black men in the end of the nineteenth century in San Diego.³⁶ Since there were no navy ships based in the city until after 1900, the large number of sailors was not reflected in nineteenth-century censuses for San Diego as they resided on the ships.³⁷ Longshoring was a high-paying job.³⁸ Black longshoremen began working aboard navy ships, which created racial animosity with white laborers.³⁹ In an 1893 incident, “union thugs” attacked three sailors, including a “negro sailor . . . [who was] dragged out and whipped.”⁴⁰ Though there was clearly an interracial presence in the city, the tensions between whites and nonwhites remained.

Though Black San Diego residents were relatively scattered around the city, Black laborers tended to live in certain areas of downtown. The only occupational group concentrated in that area was the longshoremen, most of whom lived in the Fifth Ward between the docks and the downtown district and near the bay.⁴¹ In the 1900s, the buildings in the Fifth Ward became increasingly crowded and dilapidated. They were described as “tenements” and “shacks” in a survey of social conditions in 1914.⁴²

Henry Brown owned the only Black-owned saloon in San Diego in 1880.⁴³ During this time, saloons were attached to rooms, commonly called “cribs” and “stables,” where women (often more than one at a time) performed sex work.⁴⁴ Brown first traveled from San Francisco to San Diego in 1870 and returned to stay in 1874. He worked as a barber and saloon owner. Most census takers used the term *boarders*

to indicate prostitutes. Brown had six boarders at his saloon; four were young women with Spanish names, sixteen and seventeen years old. Tracking Black women in the census is tricky since many passed as white or identified as Indian for strategic reasons. A noteworthy incident involved a seventeen-year-old woman who was described as "one of the colored lights of the local half-world."⁴⁵ According to the *Union*, she pretended to hire a horse and carriage for local use but instead drove to Los Angeles with her boyfriend. She was sentenced to two years at San Quentin Prison.

"Slum Eradication"

In 1908, the city attorney realized that his department had no power for "slum eradication" unless the health department could "present proof" that health was the factor rather than mere social immorality.⁴⁶ Dr. Francis H. Mead, the health officer, instructed Walter Bellon, the plumbing inspector and a social hygienist, to condemn blighted downtown buildings and flag them for removal: "Walter, the town folks are talking about a World's Fair to be held here, and want to make the town attractive for the tourists who will come. The Board of Health wants the Stingaree district cleaned up, and also the waterfront."⁴⁷ Bellon explained in his memoir that "court action at times could drag on for years, perhaps very little accomplished, except the cost. But when health is the factor to be considered, the course is sure and effective, if properly handled, and executed, and if political pressure is held in check."⁴⁸ He insisted that the Health Department "was only interested in how people were living and . . . not concerned what they were doing."⁴⁹ While the Health Department was charged with condemning buildings for destruction, the city council and municipal police targeted transient labor.

On February 10, 1910, the city council passed Ordinance 3985, "An Ordinance Prohibiting the Keeping of Dance Halls and Drinking Places Resorted to or Frequented by Lewd and Dissolute Persons or Prostitutes."⁵⁰ The new ordinance declared it unlawful to have "house, hall room or other place where drinks of any kind are sold . . . which is resorted to by prostitutes . . . or by lewd and dissolute persons."⁵¹ Those who violated the ordinance would be cited every day until they complied; individuals in violation would be guilty of a misdemeanor, punishable by a fine of up to three hundred dollars and/or imprisonment for 150 days.⁵²

Newspapers documenting the enforcement of Ordinance 3985 of 1910 suggest that Black women primarily were being punished for using Black rooming houses to perform sex work. "The notorious Parker House on Second and H streets, which is favored by negro women of low character received a visit from the chief and the inmates warned to keep *inside* the lines of the redlight section as outlined by the police, or to leave the city."⁵³ The Parker House was one block outside the protected district. The Clermont Hotel, described as a haven for "disreputable negro women," was two blocks east of the protected district, located at 501 Seventh Ave. The *Union*

reported that the ordinance meant that “women living in up-town rooming houses must either seek a legitimate vocation in life, leave the city or make the restricted district their home.”⁵⁴ Because of miscegenation laws, it was highly unlikely that the remaining high-end brothels would employ Black women.

During the redevelopment of downtown San Diego, California passed the Red Light Abatement Act of 1913, which fined owners of buildings used for prostitution and forbade single women from renting apartments. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union and other women’s organizations were the first to introduce the bill in California.⁵⁵ The first law of this kind had been passed in Iowa in 1909; it enabled the state to regulate the use of private property and made it possible for any citizen to file a complaint. If the courts could provide sufficient evidence that a person was running a “disorderly house,” the premises could be forcefully vacated.⁵⁶ If police concluded that building owners were renting to women of “ill repute” or who were even suspected of engaging in prostitution, they could be fined and in jeopardy of losing their property.⁵⁷ As Peter C. Hennigan argues in his work on California’s Red Light Abatement Act, “progressive reformers would seize upon [the] erosion of common law principles to transform public nuisance law into a powerful legal weapon for controlling public and private property.”⁵⁸ Antivice authorities would raid homes without notice to investigate the complaint. At other times, authorities sent an informal notice to the owner indicating that their property was being cited for prostitution.

The American Social Hygiene Association, founded in 1913, served as a “legal clearing house” for challenges to California’s Red Light Abatement Act.⁵⁹ The ASHA recognized early that adherence to a model law could insulate the laws from constitutional challenges.⁶⁰ A rooming house on Fifth, across from city hall, was the first building to be shut down after the passage of the Red Light Abatement Act. During the raid, authorities “rounded up thirteen negresses, three white women, an Indian woman, a negro and a white man in a raid on waterfront shacks.” A reformist was quoted as saying, “The aim is to get rid of the prostitutes by closing all the places to them. That is the reason for the direction of the campaign against the owners of the house. This will be a complete clean-up and may require a month or more.”⁶¹ According to Bellon’s memoirs, “the Redlight Abatement Act came directly on the heels of the Health Department’s sanitary crusade in the Stingaree.”⁶²

In 1900 twenty-six saloons operated in downtown San Diego; by 1905 the number had doubled to fifty-three. During the beginning of the health crusade, the number declined to thirty-nine and then dropped to thirty-five by 1912.⁶³ The police raid in 1912, which finally closed the police-protected vice district, demonstrates how this space was the last to be demolished during Bellon’s health crusade in the red-light district.⁶⁴ According to the Health Department, the greater red-light district spanned over one hundred blocks, but Stingaree was the most popular district for prostitution—spanning a twelve-block radius.⁶⁵ Bellon’s hand-drawn

map in 1909 explicitly locates and names popular saloons and brothels. Some of these same locations remained until the 1912 raid.

By 1914 authorities proclaimed that the city had been "invaded by floaters," despite the fact that "[Black] joints" were being removed from the city. Chief Wilson stated that the "undesirable" "floaters" had come to San Diego with "round trip" tickets from Los Angeles. Once arrested for prostitution, Black women were told to leave "on the owl train" to Los Angeles. The women were also taken to "the identification bureau" so that they could "be identified if seen operating again."⁶⁶ By the time the exposition began in 1915, Bellon's crusade led to the demolition of over five hundred structures throughout downtown under the guise of public health concerns, displacing Black transient laborers and destroying the few remaining Chinese tenement houses.⁶⁷

In 1917 Dr. A. E. Banks, health officer and superintendent of public health in San Diego, wrote a letter to Dr. W. A. Sawyer, the secretary to the California State Board of Health, outlining seven steps cities ought to take to eliminate vice: (1) the reporting of all cases of venereal disease among servicemen and military personnel to the city's public health department; (2) that the "worse element" of prostitutes be eliminated through use of "prompt arrest under vagrancy charges" and by being "anything but lenient" in prosecutions; (3) regulating the placement of bars; (4) prohibiting prostitutes from bars and restaurants; (5) special training for municipal police officers on how to successfully obtain evidence for prosecution; (6) guidelines for the "detection of diseased women"; and (7) cooperation with civilian doctors on reporting private patient information to the city health board.⁶⁸ At the end of the letter, Banks made an appeal to the State Board to go so far as to approve the forcible quarantine of women as a tactic to ensure the health of US servicemen. Johnson, speaking from his role as director of the Army Sanitary Corps, declared that given the threat of venereal diseases to military functioning, "treatment and quarantine of those infected [would] produce very remarkable results."⁶⁹ As Johnson saw it, prosecuting prostitution was something San Diego had to do "to fulfill its obligations to the boys in khaki," particularly in exchange for federal funding.⁷⁰ In a 1917 publication of the *Journal of Social Hygiene*, Major Johnson described the success of pilot programs for eliminating prostitution in San Diego. However, venereal disease still posed a threat to the city's military presence, as these diseases were "the greatest single cause of such loss of man power, and hence of inefficiency in the army."⁷¹

Campaigns to Eliminate Vice and Venereal Disease

Toward the end of World War I, the US military began to systematically quarantine Black Caribbean women in Panama. As Joan Flores-Villalobos examines in her book on Black women's reproductive labor during the construction of the Panama Canal, the presence of seemingly unattached Black women in the region troubled military officials, who insisted that Black women have "natural protectors" if they wanted to

work in Panama.⁷² Black women who did not have male proxies were automatically assumed to be prostitutes. The Health Department of the Panama Canal, comprising both Panamanian and American hygienists, stated that “ninety per cent of the patrons of the prostitutes of Panama and Colon have been American soldiers, sailors, and civilians.”⁷³ With the implementation of General Order no. 20 in 1918, landlords who rented to prostitutes were fined; only physicians were allowed to dispense drugs to treat venereal disease; officials made “all vice illegal,” and the governments increased funding for “medical officers” and “personnel of the health department.”⁷⁴

Many of these army and navy medical officials would later join the American Social Hygiene Association as health professionals and then the Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA), the military’s police force charged with protecting soldiers from venereal disease.⁷⁵ In 1916 Charles Eliot, the president of Harvard University and honorary president of the American Social Hygiene Association, declared, “If the civilization of the white race is to survive, it must be saved through the diffusion and adoption of sound policies in regard to social hygiene, carried enthusiastically and persistently into action.”⁷⁶ The scientific discourse about disease and gender posited Black women as particularly sexually perverse, evidenced by their higher rates of venereal disease.⁷⁷ Lloyd Thompson and Lyle B. Kingery, both doctors of the United States Army Medical Corps, argued that enslaved Africans had “spread this plague [of syphilis] in the New World” in 1619.⁷⁸ Their study cited a French scientific journal in which a doctor claimed to have “never examined a negress over fourteen years of age who was a virgin.” These medical researchers concluded that “women of the [Negro] race indulge in sexual intercourse as much as the men, and it would naturally follow that they contract syphilis as frequently” and that “negro women are more often infected than [Black] men.”⁷⁹ As Nancy K. Bristow explains, “members of the CTCA maintained that the constructive programs of supervised recreation and social hygiene education for soldiers and civilians were the heart and soul of CTCA design,” and “Black women were twice condemned as criminals by the CTCA.”⁸⁰

Black men were also targeted by the rhetoric of social hygiene. The CTCA viewed African American troops as incapable of conforming to the organization’s “white, urban, middle-class image.”⁸¹ Unlike white men, Black soldiers were compulsorily quarantined and received prophylactic treatments when coming back from tour.⁸²

The movement to eradicate venereal disease among the military merged with the expanding repertoire of policing women of color in San Diego. On May 26, 1917, the San Diego church federation met at the YMCA to listen to A. E. Banks, who had succeeded Francis H. Mead as health officer, discuss how the city planned “to combat the social evil and prevent venereal diseases among service men.” Banks acknowledged that the campaign now understood the issue of venereal

disease as being more of a "health problem," rather than a "moral question."⁸³ In that same year, reports of vagrancy in printed news media included commentary on the antivice unit of the military, the CTCA, as well as the new Mission Valley isolation hospital, which opened in 1917. In that same year, the *Union* reported that military and civilian police were called to a brothel at 1746 North Street, where federal and municipal authorities found soldiers in the house and "turned over" the servicemen to military officials. Ella Hubert was charged with "running a disorderly house," while Inez and Hora Grayson, "both negresses," were held on vagrancy charges and then taken to Mission Valley for examination.⁸⁴ That December, Gertrude Salisbury, a "negress," was held for examination after a raid on a rooming house in "lower Sixth street."⁸⁵

In 1918, San Diego County appropriated \$10,000 toward a venereal disease isolation hospital that admitted both "Mexican and negro women."⁸⁶ It was reported that the institution treated on average 22 patients daily, with a maximum of 48. By January 1, 1921, three years after the hospital first opened, it had admitted a total of 810 patients. Under quarantine regulations, women were committed for the period of infectivity: "6 weeks for syphilitica, 12 for gonorrhoea cases."⁸⁷ No men were admitted, and the institution did not provide statistics as to the number of patients admitted for having had "sexual relations with soldiers and sailors." The treatments for venereal disease were painful and largely ineffective and did not stop until after World War II, when penicillin was discovered as a cure. According to federal government reports, as many as thirty thousand women were under some form of detainment during World War I. In the end, over half a million dollars were spent on the creation or maintenance of 43 detention homes to hold women charged under federal laws.⁸⁸

To make matters worse, women could be detained even in the absence of clear evidence of prostitution or venereal disease. On the morning of December 19, 1920, Irene Shepherd, a thirty-four-year-old licensed hairdresser and beauty shop owner, was preparing her daughter for Sunday school when officers H. H. Kenney and Bernard Sotomayor came to her door and stated that the "Chief of Police of the City of San Diego desired to see her."⁸⁹ Irene Shepherd lived with her husband, Asa Shepherd, a white US serviceman, but it is unknown if he was home at the time of her arrest.⁹⁰ According to Shepherd's civil complaint, she accompanied Kenney and Sotomayor to the police station, where she was "immediately confined without being informed as to the charge against her" and was "humiliated, grieved and ashamed" during her "malicious prosecution" on a charge of keeping a "disorderly house" and being an "immoral person."⁹¹ Soon after her arrival at the local police station, Shepherd was taken to the Mission Valley Isolation Hospital.⁹² Dr. Alex M. Lesem, the head physician, claimed that Shepherd was "suspected of being infected with a contagious, infectious and communicable disease, namely, syphilis and gonococcus infection."⁹³ At the facility, Shepherd refused a medical examination by

Dr. Lesem. Although Shepherd claimed “having committed no crime or [misdemeanor],” she had broken a social taboo in the developing military town by being a Black woman who had sex with a white serviceman. At that time, army officials classified the crossing of the racial line as an example of “crimes of moral turpitude,” which had consequences for servicemen and their families.⁹⁴ It is unclear if Shepherd was a sex worker, a housewife, or both. Regardless of her profession and social status, Shepherd had much to lose by not cooperating with authorities, including facing sexual and physical assault, forced sterilization, losing custody of her child, and risking her husband’s continued employment in the US Navy.

According to her application for habeas corpus, two days before her arrest, an antvice detective went to Shepherd’s house and asked if she “would indulge in sexual intercourse with him for a consideration.” Police authorities claimed that Shepherd agreed to the arrangement and was told by the antvice officer that he would come later “to commit the act.”⁹⁵ It is not clear whether the antvice investigator pressured Shepherd for sex in exchange for his silence with regard to her white husband. Historically, the law aided police authorities who routinely raped Black women.⁹⁶ Although authorities claimed that “negro sailors” informed police that “there were some girls to be found at the residence of Mrs. Shepherd,” the negro sailors were never named nor called as witnesses during the hearing for Shepherd’s request for release—which implies that this story might have been fabricated. The California appellate court officially referred to her as “Mrs. Shepherd”; however, her white husband was not mentioned in official municipal, state, or federal records.⁹⁷

Sexual policing in early twentieth-century San Diego demonstrates how the discourse of *white slavery* (with all its racialized and racist implications) intersected with discourses of social hygiene. This white slavery/social hygiene nexus informed the regulation and policing of people of color, specifically Black women, in particular ways in San Diego. The discourse of social hygiene contained a moralized view of prostitutes as pollutants and also incorporated an implicit eugenical understanding of racialized social danger. Despite apparently opposing frameworks, underneath the claims of science or morality there is considerable overlap between these two contemporary discourses.

Conclusion

San Diego’s reliance on the federal government for basic infrastructure and its hope of becoming a major military hub led to its immediate action to combat vice in the city. As World War I approached, the US War Department was concerned that venereal disease would severely impact the health and morale of servicemen. While immigration law curtailed the migration of Chinese and Mexican women, municipal and military authorities experimented with new domestic policies. Under the guise of sanitation and public safety, city health officials spearheaded slum eradication projects and other urban development schemes. While these policies were not

explicitly racialized, they targeted the housing and labor institutions of working-class people, including Black women.

While US westward expansion and imperialism in the Pacific created the interracial milieu of the Southwest, federal, state, and municipal authorities created and enforced antimiscegenation laws to manage and control racialized populations. Once these projects ended, however, US immigration and domestic policy curtailed and even prohibited women from these places. Despite their internal deportation, Black women continued to labor within San Diego's interracial sex tourism industry as sex workers and even wives to white servicemen. Black women exercised citizenship rights as proprietors and sex entrepreneurs, which demonstrates how their labor was integral to the development of San Diego though it was not tolerated and continued to be the cause of social anxieties.

Christina Carney is assistant professor of women's and gender studies at the University of Missouri. Her forthcoming book, *Disreputable Women: Black Sex Economies and the Making of San Diego*, attends to how Black, queer women are (mis)characterized in the historical archives of San Diego, the development of urban space using Black women as pollutants to the cityscape, and how "disreputable" Black, queer subjects speak back in performance and culture.

Notes

1. Johnson, "Some Communities of the West," 497.
2. Amero, "Making of the Panama-California Exposition"; Cimino, "Safeguarding the Innocent."
3. Luker, "Sex, Social Hygiene, and the State," 611.
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