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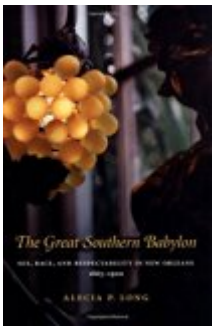
Alecia P. Long. *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004. xviii + 286 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-2932-6.



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Last year's Hurricane Katrina brought to light many of the misconceptions that shape the nation's perception of New Orleans. In a city where a sinful indulgence in food, drink, and music is encouraged, good times are plentiful for visitors. But the lives of many residents who labor in or behind the city's tourist industry have remained largely invisible. Bringing attention to areas beyond the city's famed tourist districts, the calamity that followed Katrina reminded the nation that despite its cultural distinctiveness, New Orleans, like other parts of America, north and south, is characterized by the intertwined race and economic inequalities that are the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow segregation.

Alecia P. Long's fascinating history of New Orleans in the decades following the Civil War provides important evidence to understand the city's complexity and its place in the nation's imagination. Specifically, Long focuses on the concurrent and intersecting forces of racial segregation, commercialized sexuality, and tourism that took root during the Gilded Age and Progressive eras. Forced by the Civil War to abandon its role as the nation's largest slave market, the city was reshaped into a tourist destination renowned for decadence, especially prostitution and sex across the color line. Simultaneously, Emancipation and the expansion of women's economic and public opportunities in the years following the Civil War raised some residents' anxiety about the changing moral order. Long's study traces the establishment of commercial sex districts and the tourist trade these districts supported, as well as the efforts of reformers who sought to contain vice and, with it, regulate residents' morality, through confining prostitution within specific areas of the city. Whereas Charleston and other bastions of slavery sought to build an economic basis through shaping and exploiting Americans' nostalgia for the Old South, or through seizing the engines of New South industry, commercial and political leaders in New Orleans sought to cash in on their town's already established reputation as a place tolerant of both prostitution and miscegenation. As Long argues, through its permissiveness, New Orleans both stood apart from and was inextricably linked to the rest of the nation. Reformers and social conservatives railed against the loose sexuality

and racial mixing that came to characterize New Orleans, but by providing a place where people could go to act in ways that might be unacceptable at home, the city nonetheless played an important role in maintaining the rest of the nation's safety.

The Great Southern Babylon establishes how New Orleans' reputation as a center of commercial sexuality and interracial sex was based in its importance as a slave market, particularly where "fancy girls," light-skinned, mixed-race slaves, were sold for sexual purposes. In the years following the end of slavery, the city's association with sexual pleasure and sex across the color line grew, helped along by city leaders' decision to create geographically bounded vice districts, one that became the famed Storyville neighborhood. Businesses that offered sexual intimacy with mixed race, light-skinned prostitutes--quadroons and octoroons marketed as exotic attractions--exploited the city's slave-era past and capitalized on white men's illicit desire for sex across the color line. Through enacting successive ordinances that sought to confine prostitution and bawdy activity to specific parts of the city, to exact penalties on prostitutes, and to regulate prostitution through licensing fees, city leaders aimed to control, rather than eliminate, the sex trade. In their efforts, politicians and business leaders were influenced by the goal of economic success, as well as the seemingly incongruous aim to achieve respectability for the city and for their selves.

Long's distinct contribution comes from her understanding of the connection between the simultaneous attempts to remake the city's geography through implementing racial segregation and designating vice districts. Looking at New Orleans, Long points out that the city's prostitution districts, defined by a series of ordinances passed between the 1850s and the 1890s, constituted the first forced residential segregation in the city. As the nineteenth century waned, white supremacy asserted itself through a web of laws, beliefs, and practices that promoted racial separation and hardened the color line into a racial order with no place for mixed-race people. By 1897, when city leaders wrote the ordinance to create Storyville, New Orleans vice districts increasingly converged within African-American neighborhoods. The concurrent shaping of distinct residential areas for blacks and whites, and for prostitutes and "respectable" folks, reflected city leaders' conviction that physical separation offered a means to shield respectable men, women, and children from those whose race and sexual activity made them dangerous or too marginal to warrant protection.

Ordinary people were caught in the transformations the city underwent during these decades, and Long never forgets that this history goes beyond the activities of city leaders and the reformers who struggled to balance the desire for economic accumulation with the imposition of middle-class morality. Although focused on the city and state ordinances that addressed and attempted to control commercial sexual activity, ***The Great Southern Babylon*** pays close attention to the personal impact exacted as the structures of segregation and regulation were constructed. Using a rich multitude of primary sources--court records, newspaper accounts, promotional materials--the author tells the story of the city's post-Emancipation period from a variety of perspectives. Prostitutes, reformers, business people, journalists, and rural migrants appear as important characters in this account, and through resourceful research and perceptive interpretation of primary documents, Long brings forth the experiences of people who struggled to shape personally meaningful familial and working lives during a period of tremendous change. Indeed, the author's sympathy clearly lies with women who worked in the sex industry and others whose intimate relationships cast them outside the constantly changing boundaries of acceptable society. The activities and motives of New Orleans politicians and reformers are treated in a fairly perfunctory manner; organizations and movements

that have received attention elsewhere, such as those associated with the black women's club movement, are largely omitted from this account. Instead of privileging the organized efforts of middle-class reformers, Long empathetically covers the activities of prostitutes and madams who fought, individually and collectively, against external forces that threatened to circumscribe their working lives. Caught up by larger forces of change that they could not stop, women and African-American residents nonetheless used the courts, along with the public and private realms of home and work, to defy and challenge ordinances and conventions that disadvantaged them, and to thereby actively participate in the city's economic and social life. As a result, this book becomes an important resource for historians interested in urban development, race and sex relations, and the history of this all too American city.