
Perspectives on Prostitution: Fiction, History, and Technology

Discussant: Sun-Young Park, PhD candidate, Architecture and Urbanism,
Harvard Graduate School of Design

Panel Reporter: Jessica D. Armour, MIT

Panel Summary: Vanessa Vega, MS, Occupational Therapy, Tufts University

Panelists:

Jessica Tanner, PhD candidate, Romance Languages and Literature, Harvard University

“Urban Cartographies of Desire: Writing the Prostitute in the French Naturalist Novel”

Mithali Thakor, PhD candidate, History, Science, Technology, and Society, MIT

“Mobile Bodies: Practicing Cell Phone-Based Transactional Sex in Gujarat, India”

Marika Cifor, MA and MS candidate, History and Library and Information Science,
Simmons College

*“Intimate Relations: An Examination of the Historical Relationship of Lesbians and Prostitutes in
the United States, 1935–1965”*

Jessica Tanner, of Harvard University Romance Language and Literature, opened the panel with a discussion of the prevalence of prostitution in French novels of the late-nineteenth century. She detailed the paradigm shift in the format of prostitution in the 1870s from brothel-based to street-based, noting that brothels had previously afforded government control of prostitution. The move to the street, she argued, blurred the line between fille (whore) and femme (woman of class). Tanner drew attention to the juxtaposition in architecture at the time, between open, lighted boulevards and the dark, narrow side streets of Paris. Referencing Joris-Karl Huysmans’s 1867 novel *Marthe: The Story of a Whore*, Tanner described the experience of a woman entering prostitution out of desperation only to discover the government’s control over prostitutes—

forcing her to leave the brothels and take to the streets. The story, Tanner asserted, is one of order and control, coupled with a changing Paris that creates disorder in the way society viewed the city and the women who worked its streets. The goal of this novel, according to Tanner was to create order in the nascent city spaces, and the authors of the time used women in literature as metaphors for this radically changing space.

The second panelist, Mithali Thakur a student of History, Science, Technology and Society at MIT began with an exercise: she asked attendees in the room to stand and pretend to speak on the phone to an advisor or boss. She then asked us to pretend to speak to our mothers or fathers. Finally, we were asked to imagine speaking to our lovers or significant others. The purpose of the exercise was to make the audience more aware of the shift in body language, tone, stance, and use of space dependent on the person with whom we were speaking. Thakur argued that cell phone use in India, specifically in Gujarat, changes the risk and role of prostitution in the modern societal sphere. Cell phone use has transformational power for the users. Thakur's paper was based on interviews with peer educators in the area. She learned the subtle body languages and terminology used by the groups there to lead to a better understanding of their lifestyle. Thakur acknowledged that, as an American-born Indian, these interviews and research induced a constant redefinition of herself. She also recognized the transformative power of cell phone use to navigate this criminal form of work. She asked, does mobile phone usage change the ability of sex workers to navigate spaces and social roles? And her answer was a resounding yes: cell phones allow sex workers to talk in public spaces, changing the zones of society which are open to sex workers. Before cell phones, sex workers would have had to stand on a street corner, in constant fear of discovery by local police. Phones allow them to move freely in society, taking work via the phone anywhere, and reducing both the shame and the fear associated with prostitution. Thakur posits that cell phones allow sex workers to exist above the marginalized, victimized traditional role of sex workers.

Marika Cifor, the third panelist and student of History and Library and Information Science of Simmons College, focused on two vastly differing spaces in her talk: the conceptual space and material space of the mid-twentieth-century United States. Within the conceptual space, she discussed the relationship of lesbians and prostitutes within sexology: psychoanalysis of both lesbians and prostitutes determined that their "deviance" sprung from psychological issues. Further

more, these psychoanalysts attempted to tie women's sexuality of the body to that of the mind, analyzing physical differences between "normal" women, lesbians, and prostitutes. Cifor notes that Robert Dickenson was particularly responsible for this. Specifically, she points to his completely unfounded theory that there were ten typical characteristic differences that could be found within the lesbian body (and in particular, their sex organs). Changing focus, Cifor then discussed the depiction of relationships between lesbians and prostitutes within the genre of pulp fiction, which emerged in the 1950s. Both lesbians and prostitutes were portrayed as dangerous characters—largely, Cifor posited, because problems between heterosexual men and women were understood to be tied to the existence of lesbianism. In her discussion of material spaces, she brought into focus concepts of urban geographies and modern lesbian bars. Cifor argued that shifts in prostitution led to a shift in ties between lesbian culture and prostitution. Lesbian bars, which began in the 1940s, tended to be near where lesbians worked, played and lived, and strengthened their communities by establishing a "lesbian space." Prostitutes were an established part of this lesbian space. Cifor concluded by positing a conceptual and material relationship between lesbians and prostitutes that is rooted in history and shared societal "otherness." She further argued that the advent of the lesbian bar scene gave both lesbians and prostitutes agency within a master narrative.