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Author(s): Catherine Christensen

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Mujeres Públicas: American Prostitutes in Baja California, 1910–1930

CATHERINE CHRISTENSEN

The author coordinates the Teaching American History project at the University of California, Irvine.

This article explores the circuits of migration among American prostitutes in Mexican border towns between the years 1910 and 1930. After California's Progressive movement shut down the state's red light districts, American prostitutes found that the vice districts of Mexicali and Tijuana offered opportunities for economic and social advancement not available to them in the United States. As transnational subjects, these U.S. women exploited the ethno-cultural complexities of the border to claim "whiteness" as "Americans" and yet also relied on the Mexican state to guarantee their rights and liberties. Their story contributes to scholarly debates about prostitution and speaks to the absence of research on American women in the historiography of the twentieth-century U.S.-Mexican border.

Key words: Women, U.S.-Mexican borderlands, prostitution, law, race, ethnicity

At Mexicali, the investigator met "Ida" practicing prostitution in a "crib." She is an American about 25 years of age and came to Mexicali from Salt Lake City about six months ago, when they closed the houses of prostitution there. She said that no one brought her or sent her here, but that she had made her own arrangements. She said that other sporting girls had told her about it; she said that Mexicali was a terrible place but that she had made a lot of money there . . . over 100 men a week at \$3 a piece.¹

The League of Nations published the story of Ida in a "Special Investigative Report on White Slavery," conducted in 1927.

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1. League of Nations, *Report of the Special Body of Experts on Traffic in Women and Children, Part Two*, Document Class IV–Social, No. 2, Geneva, Nov. 27, 1927, p. 122.

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Ironically, the “conversations with underworld characters” that informed the report critically challenged the very narrative of victimization that fueled the international white slave panic.² Women like Ida professed that they had not been coerced into prostitution but instead had entered the trade by their own volition and immigrated to brothels in Mexico as a rational economic choice. Additional investigative reports submitted to the American consul at Mexicali that year likewise revealed that these “inmates” voluntarily and deliberately moved south of the border. One American woman found “shackled” in the cribs of Mexicali refused to be rescued by U.S. reformers and explained that “no one was holding her but that she preferred to earn her living there rather than over a washboard.” The report went on to concede, “as a matter of fact, those girls are all there because they want to be there. They rent their own rooms, for three dollars a day and are their own bosses, working or not as they choose, and subject only to regulations requiring weekly medical examination and keeping off the streets. They come of their own free will and can leave any time they see fit.”³

This article examines how American prostitutes negotiated space, power, and identity at the U.S.-Mexican border from 1910 to 1930. As prostitution was criminalized in the United States in the early twentieth century, word of better economic prospects across the border spread among women banished from American red light districts. American prostitutes availed themselves of the opportunities found in the Mexican vice centers of Baja California. They readily discovered that the border cities of Mexicali and Tijuana both promised lucrative work and offered institutional recognition and protection through a system of regulated prostitution.⁴ As transnational subjects, U.S. prostitutes relied upon their American racial and national identities to position themselves in Mexico’s social geography, yet they also leveraged the rights of state protection within Baja California’s political structure. They optimized the ethno-cultural

2. “White slavery” emerged in the early twentieth century as a potent cultural myth that explained the descent of young women into prostitution as a result of coercion by male immigrant procurers.

3. Enclosure from Carmi A. Thompson in letter from Robert Olds to American Consul Frank Bohr, Nov. 9, 1927, document number 812.40622/282, Records Relating to the Internal Affairs of Mexico, Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter RG 59).

4. Throughout the text, I use the city’s modern name “Tijuana,” but select quotations and excerpts use the town’s original spelling as “Tia Juana.”

complexities of the border to their advantage—asserting their status as “American” to claim whiteness and its associated privileges, while also demanding that Mexican courts, immigration officials, and municipal authorities guarantee their rights and liberties. Displaced and disenfranchised in the United States, American émigrées indeed experienced the southern border as a “transitional social reality,” a contested space characterized by social and racial fluidity and a place that offered marginalized members of the body politic “opportune frontiers.”⁵

Beyond offering an unexplored dimension of Progressive Era reform in the U.S. West, the story of American women in Mexico also contributes to both U.S. women’s history and the historiography of the twentieth-century U.S.-Mexican border. Locating networks of prostitution outside the U.S. urban context (and within a regulated system that yields archival records) illuminates heretofore unknown dimensions of sex work in U.S. history and provides an added dimension to prostitutes as historical actors. Accordingly, this research fits within feminist debates about sex trafficking that pivot on questions of agency or victimhood.⁶ While not offering definitive claims for either empowerment or exploitation, my work follows the lead of scholars Katherine Bliss, Donna Guy, and Kamala Kempadoo, who reveal how prostitutes in Mexico, Argentina, and the Caribbean, respectively, shaped their worlds and political possibilities despite marginalization. Likewise, I seek to recover how American women defied

5. Kathleen Staudt and David Spener, “The View from the Frontier: Theoretical Perspectives Undisciplined,” in David Spener and Kathleen Staudt, *The U.S.-Mexico Border: Transcending Divisions, Contesting Identities* (London, 1998), 6.

6. In both historical accounts and contemporary discussions, feminists disagree on the implications of prostitution for women. Scholars and activists such as Kathleen Barry, Sheila Jeffreys, Catherine MacKinnon, Christine Overall, Laurie Schrage, and others oppose prostitution as a form of violence against women produced by patriarchy, coercion, and economic marginalization. Alternatively, feminists such as Laura María Agustín, Sarah Broomberg, Jo Doezenia, and Kamala Kempadoo insist that, although prostitution can be oppressive, sex work can be volitional and need not be exploitative. Like Kempadoo, many historians seek to represent prostitutes as sexual agents and workers rather than as passive victims. See Kathleen Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality* (New York, 1996); Sheila Jeffreys, *The Idea of Prostitution* (Melbourne, 1998); Catherine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987); Christine Overall, “What’s Wrong with Prostitution?: Evaluating Sex Work,” *Signs*, 17 (1992), 705–724; Laurie Schrage, “Should Feminists Oppose Prostitution?” *Ethics*, 99 (1989), 347–361; Laura María Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry* (London, 2007); and Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezenia, *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition* (New York, 1998).

structural limitations and contested the institutions, ideologies, and practices that bound them, since scholarship of the region has largely failed to recognize their historical subjectivity and impact.⁷

Although the expansive histories of the U.S.-Mexican border by Oscar Martínez, Paul Vanderwood, Rachel St. John, and Eric Schantz take account of the presence of U.S. prostitutes in Mexico, few studies focus explicitly on the experience and significance of such American women in the twentieth-century borderlands.⁸ My research foregrounds their historical imprint and influence on northern Mexico's regulated vice industry. While this article focuses on the agency and activism of American prostitutes in Mexico, it also alludes more generally to the cultural and political consequences of their presence—how beliefs about their victimization as “white

7. Donna Guy examined the legalization of prostitution in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Argentina. While broadly considering the significance of female sexuality to family, class, and the nation, Guy also probed the experiences of prostitutes. Katherine Bliss made similar assertions in her research on prostitution in Mexico City between 1890 and 1940. Bliss shared Guy's interest in discerning the cultural and political implications of prostitution, as well as its influence on the Mexican Revolution, and offered compelling examples of activism and protest among prostitutes. Kempadoo's research likewise examined the possibilities for oppression, liberation, and activism among sex workers in the Caribbean in both historical and contemporary times. See Donna J. Guy, *Sex & Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1990); Katherine Elaine Bliss *Compromised Positions: Prostitution, Public Health and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico* (University Park, Pa., 2001); and Kamala Kempadoo, *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor* (New York, 2004). Among borderlands scholars, Linda Gordon and Katherine Benton-Cohen have addressed the role of white women in the Arizona borderlands. See Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), and Katherine Benton-Cohen, *Borderline Americans: Racial Division and Labor War in the Arizona Borderlands*, (Cambridge, Mass., 2009).

8. Oscar J. Martínez, *Troublesome Border* (Tucson, 1989); Paul J. Vanderwood, *Satan's Playground: Mobsters and Movie Stars at America's Greatest Gaming Resort* (Durham, N.C., 2010); Rachel St. John, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border* (Princeton, N.J., 2011); Eric Michael Schantz, “All Night at the Owl: The Social and Political Relations of Mexicali's Red Light District, 1913–1925,” in Edward Grant Wood, ed., *On the Border: Society and Culture between the United States and Mexico* (Lanham, Md., 2004), 91–143; Schantz, “From the ‘Mexicali Rose’ to the Tijuana Brass: Vice Tours of the United States-Mexico Border, 1910–1965” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2001). Although not focused on women, Eric Michael Schantz contributed valuable research on the political economy of sex work in Baja California and, significantly, was the first to examine the rare archival records of American prostitutes in Mexico. See also Vincent Z. C. de Baca, “Moral Renovation of the Californias: Tijuana's Political and Economic Role in American-Mexican Relations, 1920–1935” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 1991); Robert Buffington, “Prohibition in the Borderlands: National Government-Border Community Relations,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 63 (1994), 19–38; and T. D. Proffitt III, *Tijuana: The History of a Mexican Metropolis* (San Diego, 1994).

slaves” prompted U.S. support to close the international boundary line. In this way, their stories connect to my broader interest in examining the role of American women in state building and national consolidation at the U.S.-Mexican border.⁹ This article proceeds in three parts, considering the labor migration of American prostitutes into Mexico during the U.S. Progressive era, their protest and engagement with the Mexican state in the early years of vice tourism (1912 to 1914), and, finally, their strategic racial positioning as reflected in prostitution records from 1919 and 1921.

Migrations and markets in Mexico

Some evidence was discovered of an existing international traffic in American girls, but almost entirely directed towards Mexico, Cuba, Panama and one or two cities in Canada. . . . On the Mexican border . . . there was found to be considerable crossing of American girls into the Mexican towns of Juarez, Matamoras [*sic*], Nuevo Laredo, Nogales, Tia Juana, and Mexicali, in all of which there are open tolerated prostitution districts. In most cases these girls were professional prostitutes, but in a few they were inexperienced minor girls who were seduced and placed in houses of prostitution without knowing what they were going to.¹⁰

In 1909 America’s Progressive reform movement drove “the remnants of the recently closed red light districts of California” south into the Mexican border towns of Tijuana and Mexicali—vice centers in the northern district of the federal territory of Baja California.¹¹

9. The story of American prostitutes in Mexico fits within my larger body of research on the role of women in the construction of the U.S.-Mexican border in the early twentieth century. I argue that the presence of white American women in Mexican vice dens evoked hysteria among U.S. reformers seized by fears of white slavery and miscegenation. Clubwomen’s efforts to eradicate American prostitution and gambling in Baja California vice districts successfully persuaded U.S. officials to restrict passage at the southern border and, accordingly, helped inscribe both real and imagined divisions between the United States and Mexico in the 1920s. Catherine Christensen, “*Mujeres Públicas: Euro-American Prostitutes and Reformers at the California-Mexico Border, 1900–1929*” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 2009). See also Kendall Croston, “Women’s Activities During the Prohibition Era Along the U.S.-Mexico Border,” *Journal of Borderland Studies*, 8 (1993), 99–113.

10. League of Nations, *Report of the Special Body*, 178.

11. Edwin E. Grant was a zealous American reformer who lobbied the U.S. government to end vice commerce at the U.S.-Mexican border. Edwin E. Grant to Secretary of State Charles Evan Hughes, Oct. 14, 1924, doc. 812.40622/111, RG 59. In this article, the term “vice” is used in some instances to refer specifically to prostitution and in other cases encompasses related illicit activities such as gambling, drug smuggling, and so on.

Mexican clubs and cantinas provided employment for American women banished from brothels in U.S. cities as a result of laws like the 1913 Red Light Abatement Act, a piece of legislation that made the owners of rented properties used for vice and prostitution subject to punishment. Although the crusade against prostitution aimed to penalize those who profited from vice, prostitutes often bore the worst consequences from such reforms. The dismantling of the brothel system scattered women throughout cities and rendered them vulnerable to harassment as streetwalkers and to exploitation by male criminal syndicates. Consequently, as one woman explained, she “left home in 1914 . . . about the time things went bad in the States,” and many others did the same.¹² One madam, a former prostitute who now managed a brothel, explained, “I am glad I got away because it got worse and worse . . . they all went shut and I never regretted leaving.” Upon their removal from U.S. cities, American prostitutes pursued money and illicit markets across state and national borders—immigrating to Mexico and other parts of the globe. Records indicate that these women circulated among various red light cities. An American prostitute working in Mexico traced her associate’s trajectory throughout renowned vice centers as “not going to Calexico [to work in Mexicali], but to Globe [Arizona] instead, and then to Honolulu.”¹³ Such testimony suggests that these women often embarked upon seasonal migratory movements rather than unidirectional and permanent settlement.

The expansive and enterprising global circuits of American prostitutes exemplify “transnational” migrations—defined as a process whereby migrants operate in multiple social fields that transcend geographic, political, and cultural borders. Significantly, their departure abroad fits in the larger story of gendered and transnational migrations among marginalized women. Donna Guy’s *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires* uncovered the incidence of a transnational sex economy among European prostitutes in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Argentina. Historian Eileen Scully likewise discovered the presence of American women in turn-of-the-century

12. League of Nations, *Report of the Special Body*, 176. This was spoken by an American prostitute who had migrated to Havana, Cuba.

13. *United States of America v. F. B. Beyer*, 1176 (S.D. Cal, Los Angeles, 1916), p. 100, U.S. District Court Southern Division (Los Angeles) 1900–1929, Case 1130, box 67, Criminal Case Files, Records of the District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter RG 21).

China who were pushed out by declining opportunities in U.S. cities.¹⁴ Diminishing markets also sent American prostitutes south into Mexico where prostitution was legal, lucrative, and regulated by the municipal government.

State-sanctioned vice districts developed along Mexico's northern frontier both as a result of American capital investment in Baja California and because of economic dislocations hastened by Mexico's revolution between 1910 and 1920. After a wave of moralizing campaigns that cast U.S. barkeepers and brothel owners out of California, many acquired permits to re-establish their businesses beyond the international boundary. These "Border Barons" set up what Paul Vanderwood described as "Satan's playground," "a circus and a boom town with . . . the customary retinue of professional gamblers, card sharps, bunko men, prostitutes and their pimps."¹⁵ Vice tourism revived faltering border economies with "sin taxes," and by 1911 Tijuana hosted a burgeoning industry of gaming, spectator sports, and sex commerce. Mexicali's bars and bordellos emerged alongside Tijuana and the thriving agricultural community of California's Imperial Valley. The transborder farming district attracted U.S. investment and an all-male labor force that cultivated the region's export crops and, incidentally, its alcohol, gambling, and prostitution markets. By 1915 the leader of Baja California's Northern District, Governor Esteban Cantú (1915–1920), expanded and institutionalized economies of vice by selling "entertainment" concessions for public works (and for his own personal fortune). His establishment of a regulated prostitution system proved particularly lucrative—taxes collected on sex commerce accounted for much of the district's revenue, generating 26 percent of Mexicali's municipal income in 1916 and 14 percent ten years later.¹⁶ Cantú's successor, Abelardo L. Rodríguez (1923–1929), continued to subsidize Baja

14. Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Christina Blanc-Szanton, "Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration," in Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton, eds., *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered* (New York, 1992); Eileen P. Scully, "Prostitution as Privilege: The 'American Girl' of Treaty-Port Shanghai, 1860–1937," *International History Review*, 20 (1998), 876.

15. Paul Vanderwood attributed the establishment of Tijuana's vice district and its preeminent gaming resort, Agua Caliente, to four American entrepreneurs (i.e., the "Border Barons): James Crofton, Wirt Bowman, Marvin Allen, and Baron Long. Vanderwood, *Satan's Playground*, 77.

16. Schantz, "From the 'Mexicali Rose,'" 176.

California's government through vice tourism during the opportune years of U.S. Prohibition. Border resorts flourished in the 1920s as Americans sought forbidden entertainments at infamous establishments like Tijuana's Monte Carlo and Foreign Club, or Mexicali's largest and most notorious prostitution house, the Owl.

The border that American women crossed into Mexico did not function as an impermeable territorial boundary early in the twentieth century. Indeed, rigid U.S. immigration restrictions did not emerge until later in the 1920s. Although concern over the "back door" entrance for Chinese evading American exclusion laws gave rise to initial policing efforts, state surveillance against Mexican nationals developed later in response to both large-scale immigration during the Mexican Revolution of the 1910s and national security interests during World War I.¹⁷ Moreover, growing opposition to Mexican vice resorts (and to prostitution or "white slavery" in particular) further strengthened American efforts to restrict passage across the international line, especially during Prohibition. Growing racial animus toward Mexicans in the United States as a result of their increased presence, as well as America's general climate of xenophobia, coincided with efforts to fortify the border and helped inscribe deep national and political divisions between the two countries in the coming years.¹⁸ Yet until then, perhaps the greatest obstacle to the southward passage of certain American women was Mexico's 1908 immigration law, which prohibited the entry of "Prostitutes; persons attempting to introduce prostitutes into the country; persons living on the earnings of prostitutes; persons accompanying them; persons exploiting or promoting prostitution;

17. The first immigration restrictions directed against Mexicans (Immigration Act of 1917) imposed a literacy test and an \$8.00 head tax on Mexican immigrants. For more on the formation of the U.S.-Mexican border, see St. John, *Line in the Sand*; Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, N.J., 2004); Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults & Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley, 2005); and Grace Peña Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican: Global Migration, Localism, and Exclusion in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Stanford, Calif., 2011).

18. While many historians have connected increasing racial prejudice to the large-scale immigration of Mexicans between 1910–1920 during the Mexican Revolution, scholars such as Douglas Monroy and Tomás Almaguer showed that the racialization of Mexican subjects emerged as a protracted process that commenced earlier with the U.S. annexation of Mexican land in the mid-nineteenth century. Douglas Monroy, *Thrown Among Strangers: The Making of Mexican Culture in Frontier California* (Berkeley, 1990); Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley, 1994).

and persons without profession, occupation or work, or having no respectable livelihood.”¹⁹ Mexican immigration policy was eventually reformed in 1926 (when explicit provisions regarding prostitution were dropped), but the active enforcement of laws against foreign women appeared to decline earlier, in 1915, when Baja California instituted a formal system of regulated prostitution. Before that, authorities sought to apprehend and deport women whose entrance into Mexico imperiled the “moral and medical” order of the nation.²⁰

Accordingly, both American and Mexican officials expressed dismay over the “constant stream of prostitutes coming and going” between the United States and Mexico. While the practical consequences portended the threat of disease and smuggling, the symbolic significance of such female mobility proved even more menacing. The crossing of “American women of questionable character . . . back and forth” across the U.S.-Mexican border not only defied the mechanism of national and geographic exclusion, but it also made a mockery of American efforts to police the entrance of non-normative sexuality from beyond its gates.²¹ In *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border*, Eithne Luibhéid explained that the international border has functioned as a critical site for the regulation of sexual norms and identities, particularly among women. Luibhéid illuminated how the U.S. immigration-control system, like Mexico’s, historically disciplined both lesbians and prostitutes by refusing them entrance through “selective immigration” laws, such as the Immigration Act of 1903 and the Mann White Slave Traffic Act of 1910.²² Although the emigration of American prostitutes might appear to have enhanced the body politic by purging undesirables, their constant re-entrance into the United States

19. League of Nations, *Report of the Special Body*, 124.

20. President Plutarco Calles implemented the Ley de Migración in 1926 both to manage Mexican emigration and to provide greater protection to native laborers. Mexico’s 1908 Immigration Law prohibited entrance to those of “*notoria incapacidad en el orden moral y en el sanitario*” [obvious moral and medical incapacity]. Robert Chao Romero, *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882–1940* (Tucson, 2010), 185.

21. American Consul H. C. von Struve to Secretary of State Hughes, Nov. 28, 1922, doc. 812.40622/24, RG 59; von Struve to Hughes, June 29, 1923, doc. 812.114/76, in *ibid.*

22. Eithne Luibhéid, *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* (Minneapolis, 2002). The Immigration Act of 1903 stipulated that “the importation into the United States of any woman or girl for the purposes of prostitution is hereby forbidden.” The Mann White Slave Traffic Act of 1910 likewise “prohibited the importation and interstate transportation of women for immoral purposes.” *Ibid.*, 8–9.

exposed both the inability of the state to enforce such restrictive mandates and the prostitutes' determination to occupy and optimize both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border.

Mexico offered improved economic prospects for women facing diminished opportunities in Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, and elsewhere. Prostitution was a lucrative trade beyond the border and offered twice the earnings available in the United States. If "Ida" spoke accurately of making "\$3 a piece" from "over 100 men a week," then her income far exceeded the average \$25 per week earned by prostitutes in the United States (or the \$4 to \$6 a week garnered for "honest" factory jobs).²³ These American women also signed well-paying contracts with proprietors in Tijuana and Mexicali to work as "entertainers" and "waitresses"; the contracts promised them anywhere from \$25 to \$30 a week and up to 50 percent commission on each drink sold. Although these women agreed to formal prohibitions against sex commerce, those employed as "cabaret dancers" or "percentage girls" in Mexico typically engaged in prostitution as well. Despite drafting contracts with legal provisions for entertainment and service work, saloon managers readily admitted: "You know, they don't come here for that purpose, but we can't get them through unless they swear that they do."²⁴

By 1915 protests had surfaced among U.S. government officials and citizens concerned that the illicit workforce of Mexicali and Tijuana had been "recruited from the young womanhood of California."²⁵ That year, American newspapers remarked on the "400 damned good girls" who had migrated south to work in Baja California's bars and brothels. By 1925 the *Los Angeles Times* reported on "500 inmates" in Mexico's Northern District, "80% of whom [were] white."²⁶ Other estimates counted 700 American women working in Tijuana and Mexicali during the 1910s and 1920s.²⁷ While many Americans viewed prostitutes themselves as primary agents in the sex trade, other citizens relied on narratives of white victimization

23. League of Nations, *Report of the Special Body*, 122. Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900–1918* (Baltimore, 1982), 147.

24. *United States of America v. F. B. Beyer*, 95–96.

25. Edward B. Brown to E. T. Earle, July 8, 1916, doc. 812.4065/90, RG 59.

26. "Mexicali, The 'Outlaw of the West' Provides Refuge for the Bad Man and the Fallen Woman," *San Diego Sun*, May 19, 1915, p. 1; "Mexico Orders Brothels Near Border Closed," *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 1925, p. 5.

27. According to Rachel St. John, over 700 American prostitutes came to Baja California within a two-to-three-year period. St. John, *Line in the Sand*, 156.

and insisted that “American women [would] not disgrace [their] country by keeping company with lowdown Mexicans.”²⁸ Indeed, feminist scholars have stressed the importance of female sexual chastity in defining national honor and demarcating the boundaries between whites and non-whites.²⁹ In this way, the very public display of sexual impropriety among European American prostitutes in northern Mexico belied U.S. claims to moral and national superiority and imperiled assertions of racial purity and dominance.

As a result, many Californians relied upon stories of abduction and coercion to mitigate anxieties over commercial sex and the prospect of miscegenation among Americans living and working in Mexico.³⁰ Between 1915 and 1930, the press in San Diego and Los Angeles detailed young girls’ “harrowing experiences with Mexican white slavers” and told of the “many young girls, under the age of 20 being brought to Tijuana.”³¹ Reports of “American girls” forcibly drugged and enslaved in the Mexican underworld both explained the descent of young women into prostitution and reasserted racial lines by condemning the sexual crimes of non-white men. Tales of trafficking and debased sexuality marked Mexican bodies as menacing to the nation and contributed to the “darkening of the Mexican image” in the American mind in the 1920s.³² Thus, narratives of white slavery not only appeared to account for the deliberate movements of American “professional prostitutes” into Mexico but assigned blame to non-white outsiders, galvanizing support for restricting passage at the international border.

28. Brownsville Woman to Secretary of State Hughes, July 2, 1924, doc. 812.40622/87, RG 59.

29. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, “Introduction,” in Yuval-Davis and Anthias, eds., *Woman-Nation-State* (New York, 1989), 10.

30. Rosa Linda Fregoso explained that the American acquisition of the Southwest and its “mixed breed” populations in the nineteenth century heightened regional anxieties about sexual and social mixing and engendered a uniquely western obsession with racial purity. Rosa Linda Fregoso, *MeXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands* (Berkeley, 2003), 134.

31. “Back from Tia Juana Hell-Pit,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 1915, section II, p. 1; “Chief Wants Tijuana Closed,” *San Diego Sun*, April 22, 1915, p. 1; “Awful Menace of Tijuana Dives and Track Related at City Hall Conference,” in *ibid.*, June 7, 1916, p. 1.

32. Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*, 72. Brian Donovan’s work on white slave crusades showed the importance of such narratives in racial group-making and elucidates the linkages between sexuality and gender in the construction and keeping of racial hierarchies, particularly during the turn-of-the-century hysteria over racial degeneration. Brian Donovan, *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender, and Anti-vice Activism, 1887–1917* (Chicago, 2006).

Contesting boundaries and claiming space

American prostitutes used northern Mexico's legal and regulated system of prostitution to their advantage. As transnational subjects, they both resisted and relied upon state oversight, selectively positioning themselves either as foreigners unaccountable to Mexican law or as residents with rights to state protection. Mexico's regulation of prostitution had begun in 1865 during the French occupation of Mexico City.³³ Mexican health officials slightly modified the French law with their own *reglamento* in 1872. The *ayuntamiento* [city council] of Mexico City later established geographic boundaries for sex commerce with a tolerance zone around the capital's Cuahuhtemoczin Street in 1912. Baja California's management of "public women" began that same year, when Provincial Governor Escudero Gordillo adopted Mexico City's program of registration and medical inspection.³⁴ Although Baja California's formal (and more comprehensive) system of regulation did not emerge until 1915 with the enactment of Governor Cantú's "Sanitation Regulation," Gordillo's administration nonetheless attempted to contain the practice of clandestine prostitution and the illegal immigration of foreign prostitutes through a somewhat perfunctory system of oversight.

Between 1912 and 1914, Mexican authorities pursued numerous deportation suits against *las norteamericanas* who violated immigration laws and refused registration with the *ayuntamiento*.³⁵ State officials showed inordinate concern over the elusive movements of unregistered and untractable women and grew exasperated with the

33. This system originated in Paris in the 1830s but became more widely implemented and standardized in British colonies throughout the world with the British Contagious Diseases Act in 1864—legislation that governed sex commerce among soldiers in British colonies. Mark Overmyer-Velázquez, *Visions of the Emerald City: Modernity, Tradition, and the Formation of Porfirian Oaxaca, Mexico* (Durham, N.C., 2006), 101. See also Bliss, *Compromised Positions*, 27–29.

34. Schantz, "From the 'Mexicali Rose,'" 103.

35. Deportation records come from the Casa de la Cultura Jurídica in Mexicali, Baja California. While the rich cache of Mexican court cases illuminates how foreign women engaged the state, these records are not without limitations. Not only have such "official" documents been produced, shaped, and edited by authorities, but the nature and purpose of the legal proceedings circumscribed the women's arguments and their representation in the historical record. Their standing to fight deportation rested largely on demonstrating conformity to laws or, at the least, acquiescence to state power. Thus, such intentions likely tempered their assertiveness and displays of agency.

“difficulty in making foreign prostitutes abide by immigration laws.”³⁶ Yet, unlike American efforts to purge U.S. red light districts of disorderly women, Mexicali’s Secretaría de Gobernación [Secretary of Interior] urged Mexican immigration officers to administer deportation claims with all “prudence,” observing the requisite legal processes necessary for expulsion.³⁷ The Mexican state’s conferring of such legitimacy on U.S. prostitutes in part explains why many slated for deportation vigorously protested their removal in district courts and frequently returned to Baja California even after their banishment. While some who were extradited simply dismissed court mandates to leave, other American women assertively protested the deprivation of their “sacred liberty” in Mexico.³⁸

When Mexican immigration officials apprehended Bille Mason (twenty-four years old) and Lon Martin (twenty-three years old) in 1914, the American émigrées claimed ignorance in their defense. That March, Immigration Inspector Carlos Portillo handed them over to the judge of the Court of the First Instance for the violation of immigration laws and, more significantly, for “mocking the vigilance of [his] employees.” He claimed the two women surreptitiously returned to Mexico after they had been ordered out just days before. In separate hearings, both Mason and Martin professed that neither understood Spanish nor the order of Inspector Portillo. Accordingly, they explained their noncompliance and their refusal to ratify their conviction with a signature. Portillo protested both

36. *Criminal—En auxilio de la Justicia Federal Por el delito de infracción a la ley de Inmigración Contra: Bille Mason y Lon Martin* [In the assistance of the federal court for the crime of the infraction of immigration law against Bille Mason and Lon Martin], March 31, 1920, Case 245, Exp. 5, Leg. 24, Court of the First Instance, Casa de la Cultura Jurídica in Mexicali, Baja California (hereafter Casa de la Cultura). Article 3/0 prohibited the entrance of prostitutes into Mexico.

37. *Instrucciones de la Secretaría de Gobernación para que sean expulsadas las prostitutas estadounidenses que entraron por Mexicali, Baja California, acusadas de haber violado las leyes de inmigración* [Instructions of the Secretary of the Interior for the expulsion of American prostitutes who entered through Mexicali, Baja California, accused of violating immigration laws], 1913.1 [5.5], 1913, available as Exp. 56, Caja 96, Periodo Revolucionario, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Tijuana (hereafter Instituto de Investigaciones). The original documents are located in the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City.

38. In her complaint against Mexican officials, Genevieve “Dixie” De Mille protested the abrogation of her “liberty so sacred” [*libertad tan sagrada*]. *Juicio de Amparo de Genevieve o Dixie De Mille Contra Delegado Municipal y Comandante de Policía* [Amparo trial of Genevieve or Dixie De Mille against the municipal delegate and chief of police], Dec. 3, 1920, Case 39, Leg. 18, Exp. 10, First District Court, Casa de la Cultura.

claims, insisting that he had explained the ruling “in total clarity,” and he further asserted that neither woman had signed the order because “they advised her not to.”³⁹ Unfortunately, the extant court documents fail to identify exactly to whom “they” referred. However, given the stated difficulty in enforcing immigration laws among American prostitutes, it is likely that officials interpreted such defiance as deliberate strategies shared and employed by a collective of American women evading the law and their deportation. Such a statement also speaks to the existence of social networks among foreign prostitutes in Mexico. Although the records do not indicate what became of the case or of Lon Martin, Bille Mason soon returned to live in Baja California, reappearing in the official prostitution registry in both 1919 and 1921.⁴⁰

While Mason and Martin leveraged their status as foreigners, other American prostitutes relied on their knowledge of the Mexican legal and political system and invoked the full protections of the law. In January 1913, immigration officials summoned Sucie Roundtree, a twenty-three-year-old Los Angeles native, and Le Roy Tynsley, a twenty-two-year-old from Memphis, to their office on charges of breaching immigration and registration laws. In two separate hearings, Roundtree explained that she had entered Mexico in September 1912 and could not comply with the law’s requirement to register because of the district’s political turmoil. She insisted that the 1912 occupation of Mexicali (at hands of the Magonista rebels) created an “abnormal state” that precluded her from following the dictates of the law.⁴¹ Nonetheless, she pledged compliance and agreed to leave Mexico. Four days later, however, she returned to the office to protest her deportation, contending that her status as

39. *Infracción Contra: Bille Mason y Lon Martin*, pp. 6, 4, 7.

40. References to Billy [*sic*] Mason from the Owl Saloon were made as late as 1927 in *The Rounder*, Tijuana’s gambling circular. *The Rounder*, May 14, 1927, p. 7.

41. *Violación á la ley de Inmigración contra Le Roy Fynsley* [*sic*] [Violation of immigration law against Le Roy Fynsley [*sic*]; Tynsley also appears in various documents as Leroy Tinsely and Leroy Fenseley], April 9, 1913, Case 146, Exp. 14, Leg. 23, District Court 23, Casa de la Cultura; *Penal Contra Susie* [*sic*] *Roundtree Violación ley inmigración* [Penalty against Sucie Roundtree immigration law violation], Jan. 29, 1913, Case 114, Exp. 5, Leg. 23, District Court 11, in *ibid.*, 1–2. The Magonista rebels, led by Ricardo Flores Magón, were not in fact part of the revolutionary movement in Mexico but a band of European American expatriates, radicals, Wobblies, socialists, anarchists, Indians, and Mexican nationals seeking to reestablish a separate republic of Baja California (with little support from Baja residents). They captured Mexicali in 1910 and Tijuana in 1911 before the movement splintered and ultimately failed.



Figure 1. Bille Mason in the prostitution registry. Gobierno del Distrito de Baja California, *Registro de Meretrices*, 1919–1922, used courtesy of Archivo Histórico del Estado de Baja California, Mexicali, Baja California.



Figure 2. Suecie Roundtree in the prostitution registry. Gobierno del Distrito de Baja California, *Registro de Meretrices*, 1919–1922, used courtesy of Archivo Histórico del Estado de Baja California, Mexicali, Baja California.

a *vecina* prior to the promulgation of the law exempted her from its jurisdiction. Here her use of the term *vecina* extended beyond the present-day usage most commonly defined as “neighbor.” Instead, she invoked the Spanish term that then signified “a settler or resident of town” or, more simply, *a citizen* [italics mine].⁴² Although Roundtree did not naturalize as a Mexican citizen, she nonetheless assumed that she deserved the associated entitlements and protections. Her case soon moved to Mexicali’s District Court, where the judge called Roundtree and the inspector to a *careo* [face-to-face testimony] to expose the discrepancies between their statements. This practice reveals the relative equality before the law between this known prostitute and a government official. Roundtree’s petition then moved to an even higher district court in Ensenada, where it was ultimately denied. Still, she was respectfully accorded her due process and, following her extradition, returned again to Mexicali, where she remained into the 1920s.

The deportation case of Le Roy Tynsley received even more thoughtful consideration by Mexican courts. Tynsley returned to petition for a suspension of her expulsion, claiming protection under article fifty-seven of the immigration law, which exempted foreigners with three years residence from expulsion. Furthermore, she announced that her request had been submitted to the Council of Immigration and to the Secretaría de Gobernación, on whom she would rely to “assert [her] rights.” Tynsley’s letter proved persuasive enough to initiate a special tribunal for her case in February 1913. After the council confirmed her expulsion, Tynsley issued yet another petition for immunity to the Secretaría de Gobernación and included a complaint regarding the acts of the Administrador de la Aduana [customs inspector]. Exploiting the known opposition to the Magonista movement in the North, Tynsley refashioned her story to implicate the immigration officials who had indicted her, along with the rebels who attempted to take over the Mexican government.⁴³ This time she emphasized the discrimination and

42. Oakah L. Jones, Jr., *Los Paisanos: Spanish Settlers on the Northern Frontier of New Spain* (Norman, Okla., 1979), 266.

43. *Violación á la ley . . . contra Le Roy Fynsley*, April 9, 1913. In her statements, Tynsley conflated the Magonista rebels with Mexico’s broader revolutionary party, the Maderistas. According to scholars of Mexican history, the Magonistas intentionally coopted the term “Maderista,” which signified a more liberal (and popular) reform movement in Mexico at the time. See Marco Antonio Samaniego López, “The Impact of Maderismo in Baja

maltreatment by immigration officials, and, furthermore, she blamed her expulsion on the “caprices of certain generals at the border.” She continued, “fortunately for the nation of Mexico, the delirium that overtook the Maderista employees has disappeared.” In doing so, Tynsley showed herself to be nationalistic and politically savvy. She exploited existing antagonism within the government to her own advantage while attesting to her unwavering loyalty to Mexico and the presiding administration. Unfortunately, the Secretaría de Gobernación rejected her plea, explaining that he could not overturn the expulsion.⁴⁴ Like Roundtree, Mason, and others, Tynsley eventually found her way back to Mexicali and continued to work as a prostitute into the next decade.⁴⁵

Although Baja California’s prostitution mandates were revised and further regimented after 1915, American prostitutes continued to assert their rights in Mexico in the 1920s and challenge government officials who they felt stepped beyond their authority. In 1920 American “dancer” Genevieve (“Dixie”) De Mille filed an *amparo* [petition of protection] against the *delegado municipal* [city official] and the chief of police in Tijuana. The filing of an *amparo* does not simply represent one’s “defense” but rather constitutes a demand for the government to redress the violation of one’s liberties.⁴⁶ De Mille alleged that state officials had violated her personal rights by unfairly imprisoning her and ordering her exile from Mexico without any motive or power to do so. She decried the abrogation of her “personal guarantees and rights granted by . . . the political Constitution of the United States of Mexico.” She proclaimed that “our

California, 1911,” *Estudios de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea de México*, 18 (1998), 89–120.

44. *Quejas de la prostituta estadounidense [sic] Leroy Tynsely [sic] por el decreto de expulsión en su contra expedido por el inspector de inmigración de Mexicali, Baja California* [Complaints against American prostitute Leroy Tynsely [sic] by the decree of expulsion against her issued by the immigration inspector of Mexicali, Baja California], 1913.13 [5.17], April 12, 1913, Exp. 57, Caja 96, Periodo Revolucionario, Instituto de Investigaciones. Interestingly, paperwork regarding Tynsley’s case extends beyond her expulsion in April 1913 until the following August. Such documents suggest that she may have attempted one more petition for revision of the order.

45. Gobierno del Distrito de Baja California, *Registro de Meretrices*, 1919–1922, Archivo Historico del Estado de Baja California, Mexicali, Baja California (hereafter Archivo Historico).

46. *Juicio de Amparo de Genevieve o Dixie De Mille*, Dec. 3, 1920. *Amparo* is defined as a federal judicial protection of a citizen against governmental abuses of all kinds. Richard Baker, *Judicial Review in Mexico: A Study of the Amparo Suit* (Austin, Tex., 1971).

penal laws do not give legal jurisdiction to delegados municipales nor much less to the chief of police to issue orders of apprehension and order exile of innocent persons as in the present case.” Her lengthy appeal for a suspension of the expulsion order was replete with references to penal laws and constitutional articles enumerating the specific infractions committed and the limitations of authority granted to such officials. De Mille relied on a lawyer for her final court hearings for both defense and translation purposes; however, she represented herself in several of the court proceedings and showed remarkable competency and familiarity with Mexican law. Although the court ultimately upheld the order against her, De Mille’s challenge regarding the jurisdiction of local officials made its way to the Supreme Court of Mexico.⁴⁷ Furthermore, her case attests to the liberties assumed by American women in Mexico and, significantly, shows the willingness of the legal system to hear their voices and acknowledge their rights.

Beyond simply according foreign prostitutes rights and representation in Mexico’s legal system, the state often ruled in favor of “public women” who filed complaints, and it reprimanded the immigration officials who infringed upon their liberties. According to Eric Schantz’s research on vice commerce in Mexico, government authorities in Baja California imprisoned seven different deputy prefects and immigration inspectors between 1912 and 1914, many of them for mistreating “public women.”⁴⁸ In October 1912 they rebuked Inspector Javier Velasco for “mistakenly” identifying Elena Warren as a prostitute (an accurate designation) and deporting her. Officials chastised him for not consulting the prostitution registry and warned him to “proceed with caution in excluding or deporting women.”⁴⁹ Two months later

47. “Nuestaras [*sic*] leyes penales no dan competencia a los Delegados Municipales, ni mucho menos a los Jefes de la Policía, para librar ordenes de aprehensiòn y mandar desterrar a personas inocentes como en el presente caso” [Our criminal laws do not give jurisdiction to the municipal delegates, let alone the police chiefs, to issue arrest warrants and banish innocent people as in this present case], *Juicio de Amparo de Genevieve o Dixie De Mille*, Dec. 3, 1920. Dixie De Mille’s case indicates that the *amparo* was ultimately decided by the Supreme Court in Mexico (where most *amparos* are decided), but files for her appeal are missing. Ultimately the judge ruled that, although said authorities exceeded the authority granted by the Mexican Constitution, there were urgent cases in which such officials could lawfully order a detention.

48. Schantz, “From the ‘Mexicali Rose,’” 127.

49. *Deportación de Elena Warren, ciudadana estadounidense [sic], realizada por el Sub-inspector de Inmigración de Mexicali, Baja California, y lista de prostitutas radicadas en la localidad* [Deportation of Elena Warren, American citizen, by the Deputy Inspector of

the *ayuntamiento* suspended Velasco yet again at the request of prostitute Maxine Brown for her “unjustified” imprisonment.

These American women also insisted that the state proceed with caution with respect to fiscal matters, and they often thwarted the municipal tax system, which expropriated revenue from their labor. When deputy tax collector Marcus Hollman encountered madam Clara Wallace in August 1912 for a routine collection, she sent him away, explaining that she did not have the expressed sum at her disposal because her check from the Bank of Calexico had not yet arrived. Sensing Wallace’s strategy to evade payment, Hollman sought authorization to levy a 6 percent late fee. Wallace successfully diverted the attention of authorities by issuing her own complaint. She explained that, because Hollman had no office to collect payments, one never knew when he would arrive—and he often made visits at “inappropriate times”—mostly during the night. Failure to pay at such times, she explained, would result in threats and his refusal to accept the payment later. Furthermore, she alleged that his monetary demands seemed arbitrary and “were made to satisfy his emotional whims.” She likewise protested Hollman’s classification of her establishment as a house of assignation (where rooms were rented for sexual exchanges) rather than a brothel (where women took residence). Wallace therefore asked the municipal president to reclassify her business and to recognize her responsibility in managing a brothel. Moreover, her portrayal of Hollman’s intemperance and insolence further enhanced her self-construction as a respectable businesswoman who disapproved of his late-night visits. Her insistence on establishing the parameters of his collection times reveals the (albeit limited) power that public women exercised in defining their own space and temporal boundaries. Although it is unclear what became of Wallace, in this case the law came down squarely on her side against the inspector.⁵⁰

Both the seemingly ineffectual enforcement of immigration law and the apparent ease of re-entry among American prostitutes raise questions about the meanings and motivations of such “crack-downs.” If the monetary importance of vice limited government

Immigration Mexicali, Baja California, and list of prostitutes based in the town], 1912.117 [3.37], Leg. 15, Caja 54, Periodo Revolucionario, Instituto de Investigaciones.

50. “Clara Wallace,” Aug. 16, 1912, File A-322/1912, Serie: Tesorería, Sección: Ayuntamiento, Fondo: Gobierno de Distrito del Norte, Archivo Histórico.

efforts to end the trade, what explains the deportation of foreign women? Were they mere performance? Eric Schantz speculated that the removals were a symbolic display of state power and legitimacy during the politically unstable years after the *Porfiriato* (1911–1914).⁵¹ Crackdowns can also be read as means of keeping social order through the public assertion of dominant hierarchies by male officials. As such, the policing of prostitutes comprised a performance whereby class and gender identities were constituted and staged.⁵² As male officials defined propriety and enforced spatial boundaries among marginalized women, they also shored up both middle-class masculinity and state authority. Nevertheless, such statements of power did not go uncontested by American prostitutes who were presumably aware of the ritual and pretense.

Ultimately, their persistence in evading deportation and returning to Mexico forced changes in the state's prostitution policy. By 1915 the influence, agitation, and activism of foreign prostitutes helped to establish Baja California's system of regulated prostitution. Consequently, deportations declined with a system of increased surveillance. Still, Governor Cantú and subsequent territorial governors such as Abelardo Rodríguez relied upon occasional vice sweeps to pacify the *gente decente* [decent people] and show public support for President Álvaro Obregón's (1920–1924) moralizing program.⁵³ Yet even federal reform campaigns were often diplomatic efforts to assuage American outcries to "purify" the U.S.-Mexican border, especially during Prohibition and World War I, and only temporarily interrupted prostitution markets.

Negotiating racial borders and identities

In 1915 Governor Cantú established Mexicali's zone of tolerance and issued Baja California's official "Sanitation Regulation" as well as the "Regulations for the House of Tolerance of the City of Mexicali."⁵⁴ His mandates for registration, examination, and

51. Schantz, "From the 'Mexicali Rose,'" 80. *Porfiriato* refers to the period of the presidency of José de la Cruz Porfirio Díaz Mori between 1876 and 1911.

52. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990).

53. President Álvaro Obregón's efforts to clean up vice were known as the *programa de moralización* [moralizing program].

54. *Reglamento de Sanidad para el Distrito Norte de la Baja California* [Sanitation Regulation for the Northern District of Baja California], Caja no. 6, F-BC, Serie Penal Año

confinement sought to monitor more closely the movements of public women and capitalize more fully on their taxable labor. And yet, despite their subjection to more systematic controls, these women showed themselves as agents in the historical record—contesting spatial constraints and strategically representing themselves in state records. Indeed, municipal registries reveal that U.S. prostitutes negotiated their social identities and optimized their American identity within Mexico's more variegated racial schema.

Scholars Ann Stoler and Laura Briggs have traced the beginning of regulated sex commerce to nineteenth-century colonialism, explaining that such “health and hygiene” practices emerged as a “tool of empire” to assert white racial and cultural supremacy among European imperial powers. Beyond preventing venereal disease, the registration, medical inspection, and incarceration of indigenous women reinscribed distinctions between white colonizers and non-white colonial subjects. Regulation thwarted the incidence of race mixing (or at least attempted to) and codified racial difference by marking non-white women as hypersexualized and “diseased.” Accordingly, the sexual morality of white womanhood symbolically established European national boundaries and cultural authority.⁵⁵

Schantz argued that Cantú's regulation of vice commerce in northern Mexico—specifically his registration of prostitutes—effectively modernized Baja California and provided a means to project “order, legitimacy, and morality” along the border. Cantú's scheme of taxation generated economic resources to underwrite investments in infrastructure—in irrigation, transportation, commercial agriculture, public education, and the state's military. Similarly, in his work on prostitution in turn-of-the-century Oaxaca, Mark Overmyer-Velázquez explained that methods of registration, gynecological examination, and the organization of a public health bureaucracy provided a primary means of extending state authority and making modern citizen subjects.⁵⁶ In much the same way, the

1913–1915, Sección 70JD, Fondo: Distrito Del Norte, Archivo Histórico; *Reglamento Para las Casas de Tolerancia de la Ciudad de Mexicali* [Regulations for Houses of Tolerance in the City of Mexicali], enclosed in case file for *United States of America v. F. B. Beyer*, 1176.

55. Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, 2002); Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley, 2002), 23–25, 61–65; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, “Introduction,” in Yuval-Davis and Anthias, eds., *Woman-Nation-State*, 10.

56. Schantz, “From the ‘Mexicali Rose,’” 178; Overmyer-Velázquez, *Visions of the Emerald City*.

bureaucratization of sex commerce and the production of statistical knowledge about the populace in northern Mexico also signified a “technology of rule” that characterized the modern state. Feminist scholars have likewise affirmed that the management of female disorderliness by a “masculine” government figured centrally in constructions of the “rational” modern state.⁵⁷

Accordingly, Cantú’s ensemble of regulations and institutions outlined the laws of conduct for individual prostitutes and madams. The new regulations required the registration of prostitutes with the city government, weekly submission to medical examination, and the payment of state fees and taxes. Other provisions offered detailed proscriptions to regulate the movements and behavior of public women within city space and enumerated corresponding punishments for the violation of such statutes. *Los reglamentos* prohibited registered women from “congregating in the streets,” “mixing with others in the plazas,” acting “scandalous” in public places, “dressing inappropriately,” “going into cantinas,” “greeting passers-by,” “interrupting men in the streets who were accompanied by women,” and visiting men of “honorable families.”⁵⁸ Aside from protecting the general populace from sexually transmitted diseases, the relegation of non-normative sexuality into marginalized “immoral” sites served to divide women by their apparent virtue and, significantly, reinforced monogamous heterosexuality and dominant norms of female respectability. Although Mexican elites and politicians still considered prostitution necessary for containing male sexual energy, thus preserving the Mexican family, they feared the blurring of gendered spheres and the destabilizing of women’s social roles.⁵⁹

Cantú’s detailed ordinance attempted to prevent the transgression of spheres among prostitutes and protect Victorian prescriptions of morality that enthroned women as guardians of the home, the family, and even the nation. Because women’s sexuality historically marked the borders of the nation, the existence of unbridled prostitution implied the loss of control over female sexuality and, consequently, the body politic. As such, the assertion of government

57. Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, N.C., 1995); Leslie Ann Jeffrey, *Sex and Borders: Gender, Nationality, and Prostitution Policy in Thailand* (Vancouver, B.C., 2002), 97.

58. *Reglamento Para las Casas*, 9–10.

59. Bliss, *Compromised Positions*, 28.

control over public women provided a symbolically potent and (notably gendered) display of the masculine state's power and sovereignty.

Despite the comprehensive oversight of Mexico's regulated system, American prostitutes nonetheless thwarted Cantú's regime of state surveillance and contested the spatialized moral order of Baja California's border towns. American tourists and observers in Mexico repeatedly commented on the flagrant disregard of regulations and noted the transgression of gendered space among "the 400 painted women who roam the streets of Mexicali, scantily clad."⁶⁰ Despite the sensationalized nature of such accounts, American journalists and critics consistently depicted the very public presence of public women—"strolling prostitutes"—in border towns.⁶¹ In 1926 Edwin T. Earle's *Los Angeles Examiner* mocked the enforcement of the *reglamento* in Mexicali:

They tell you here that these women are never allowed to leave their "bars" in which they are employed. Yet the Examiner representatives have seen them strolling on the streets of Calexico shopping side by side with American housewives and children, enjoying, by all appearances, all the freedom of American citizenship.⁶²

Indeed, American prostitutes refused to recognize the dominant socio-spatial order that sought to contain them to specific sites; instead, they redefined and reclaimed that space. In rejecting divisions between public and private, such women transcended the geographic barriers imposed by the government and re-imagined their position *vis-à-vis* the state and society.

The official registration of women entering the sex trade also sought to facilitate the economic and social management of prostitutes by organizing "unruly" women into seemingly manageable units. Yet, to such women, registration with the state provided an opportunity to renegotiate their social identities. Scholars insist that the nature of prostitution lent itself to practices of "re-making" among women. In most cases, women of the trade assumed an alternative identity and a professional name either for purposes of

60. "Mexicali, The 'Outlaw of the West,'" 1.

61. Enclosed in letter from Reverend John Wood to President Calvin Coolidge, March 2, 1926, doc. 812.40622/201, RG 59.

62. "Mexicali Harbors Dregs of World's Womankind," *Los Angeles Examiner*, Feb. 22, 1926, sec. 1, p. 6.

protection (in order to shield family members) or as a rite of passage into the subculture.⁶³ Thus, historians can read Baja California's official prostitution registry as the consciously crafted scripts that women wrote about themselves, not simply as state-assigned demographic profiles.⁶⁴ The League of Nations investigator described the process of registration for prostitutes in Mexico City:

The underworld considers that young girls can easily be registered because papers are not asked for by the Health Bureau. They will register any girl here above 18; and if she were 17 they'd register her, too . . . Here you show nothing. When a girl wants to be put on the books (become registered) she goes to the Health Department and tells them. They ask her her name, and her age and her nationality. She can tell them anything. The authorities confirmed the statement that they take only the word of these girls as to names, ages, and nationalities without requiring documentary proof.⁶⁵

Mexico City provided the model for Baja California's system, and a close look at Mexicali's official prostitution registry suggests that American prostitutes conceivably took the liberty of proclaiming their "names, ages, and nationalities" as they wished. While the apparent uncertainty of their assertions testifies to the active negotiations of the registrants, such data may compromise a statistical analysis and render it less reliable. Nonetheless, an aggregate look at the women's professed identities helps recover their historical presence at the border and, significantly, reveals interesting patterns of social and racial positioning.

63. Ruth Rosen noted that women chose new names as a means of "bonding to a subculture considered deviant and degraded by the dominant culture." A new name also provided a way of cutting all ties with one's former life and creating loyalties to the new. Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 102.

64. The official registry is a large leather-bound book. Each page includes one black and white photograph with corresponding demographic information. Although compiled by Mexican officials for the purpose of tracking women and collecting taxes, a quick look at the photos suggests that many prostitutes perceived their presentation in the catalog quite differently. While some showed an acquiescence to authority on their visage, whether hesitant or defiant, others displayed more care in their self-presentation. The preponderance of hats, plumes, furs, jewelry, and subtle smiles reveals that, for many, their visual representation in the photograph provided yet another arena for self-fashioning. In contrast to police records that most commonly privilege the voice of male authorities and the state, the registry yields more opportunity to see prostitutes as historical actors. In this way, the registry also reveals how historical interpretation is shaped by the nature of sources available. *Registro de Meretrices*, 1919–1922.

65. League of Nations, *Report of the Special Body*, 119.

The registry for 1919 and 1921 indexed 360 women in total (60 of whom appeared both years). Of the 300 women, 79 percent claimed American nationality, 11 percent claimed Mexican nationality (with two designated *Mexicana-Tejana* and *Mexicana-Americana*), and the remaining named various European nationalities—two Italian, two French, one Russian, one Spanish, one Portuguese, one English, and one Canadian.⁶⁶ Seventy-five women named California as their state of origin, most of whom arrived from San Francisco (twenty-seven) and Los Angeles (twenty-six). However, almost every state in the union was represented, particularly known centers of vice such as New Orleans, New York, and Kansas City—indicating that vice commerce and sex workers followed patterns of migration similar to other labor markets.⁶⁷ Most of the profiles likewise contained notations about the dates registrants departed from their work sites (only some entries included the dates they returned).⁶⁸ This presumably reflected efforts to monitor their passage throughout the municipality and across the border; it simultaneously attests to the transnationality of their lives and labor. Moreover, all entries described “*señas particulares*” [identifying marks] of individual women such as gold teeth, moles, freckles, or other characteristics that might render them more identifiable. Such details provided further means for authorities to track them but also suggest that the women likely modified their physical appearances and identities.

The average age of the women registered was twenty-six in 1919 and twenty-seven in 1921. The youngest recorded was seventeen and the oldest forty-one (as well as two women who were thirty-nine years of age—surprisingly old, compared to statistics in the United States for the same period, which indicate the average prostitute’s age was twenty-two). This disparity of age between prostitutes in Mexico and

66. The exact number of prostitutes registered, as well as their racial/national designations, is difficult to ascertain for several reasons. Some of the entries are incomplete; moreover, it appears that several women changed their names between 1919 and 1921. An estimated eight to ten women reappear in the 1921 registry with an altered first or last name. Despite striking resemblances to photos from the earlier registry, such entries were counted as separate registrants. Despite the considerable numbers of Chinese prostitutes in California, there is no historical record of their presence in Mexican border towns.

67. It is unclear whether the women were identifying their place of origin (birthplace) or the location of their last residence. Presumably, if more claimed the latter, the majority of women would cite California.

68. Such information was included in registrant profiles with the words “*Se Fue*” [went away] and a corresponding date. Some entries included when registrants returned.

the United States suggests that women remained in prostitution longer when working south of the border and were less hindered by the “occupational hazard” of age. However, even such numbers are still mere approximations and subject to the creative revisions of the registrants. Many of the featured photographs belie the corresponding ages, and several women, such as Dollie Moore and Lola Gillespie, declared they were the same age in 1919 and 1921. Nonetheless, Mexican vice markets still likely expanded the opportunity for “older” women to work, as several Americans who appeared in the Mexican courts as prostitutes in 1912 remained on the registry in 1919 and 1921.⁶⁹

A prostitute’s “color” or race also figured prominently in the registry’s scheme of classification. Accordingly, 78 percent of those registered identified as “*blanca*” [white], 7 percent as “*negra*” [black] or “*mulata*” [mulatta], 8 percent as “*morena*” [brown-skinned], and the remaining 5 percent claimed an alternate “mixed race” status of “*trigueña*” [wheat colored] or an even more descriptive combination of *trigueña-mulata*, *negra-morena*, and *blanca-mulata* [wheat-mulatta, black-brown, white-mulatta].⁷⁰ Such ascriptions were specific to northern Mexico, which employed a different racial system than that of the United States. In contrast to the rigid social system characteristic of British colonies, Spanish and Portuguese colonialism engendered relatively fluid racial systems in Latin America. Spaniards of pure European/Christian descent sat at the top of a regime of racialized castes, which ranked people hierarchically according to their degree of racial mixture or *mestizaje*. Mexico developed a highly variegated racial schema with myriad designations—*mestizo*, *castizo*, *mulato*, *morisco*,—all describing varying degrees of Indian blood that determined one’s closeness to the white ideal.⁷¹

69. Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 145, 100. American prostitutes in Mexico appear to have worked longer than those in the United States, who began sex work at an average age of under twenty-two and stopped before reaching thirty. *Ibid.*

70. The exact breakdown is as follows: six *negras*, twenty-four *morenas*, eight *trigueñas*, sixteen *mulatas*, and 234 *blancas*. Five women shared split designation (*trigueña-mulata*, *blanca-mulata*, and *negra-morena*). Seven entries (2 percent) omitted the registrant’s racial designation. Twenty-one profiles were likewise missing information regarding their respective nationalities.

71. In the fifteenth century, Spanish conquerors brought to the New World ideas of “honor” based on the purity of blood, born out of the threat of religious (Jewish and Moorish) contamination on the Iberian peninsula during *La Reconquista*. Religious distinctions from the Old World translated to racial distinctions in the New World where whiteness signified “purity of blood,” “honor,” and the possession of “reason.” Still, this “pigmentocracy” afforded *castas* (and those “without reason”) a remarkable degree of

Moreover, racial boundaries grew increasingly porous and inclusive in the northern frontier of Mexico, where the incidence of “racial drift” allowed mixed people to transcend the boundaries of color and achieve “whiteness” by displaying a “civilized” style of life.⁷²

The mutability of racial categories in northern Mexico contrasted with more rigid prescriptions of race in the United States, which, if anything, tended to grow more restrictive in the late nineteenth century. Within the United States, a black/white racial binary classified anyone with “one drop” of black blood as definitively black and until 1900 circumscribed whiteness to include only those of Anglo Saxon and northern European stock.⁷³ After the turn of the century, the category of whiteness slowly expanded but remained contested throughout the 1920s. Scholars Matthew Frye Jacobson and Mae Ngai have written that immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe (Italians, Jews, Slavs) remained marginalized as “not white” or, at the least, “less white” until the 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, when European American racial distinctions began to collapse and converge in contraposition to “darker,” non-European races. While Linda Gordon has claimed that the multiracial character of the American Southwest allowed those of European descent to forge a common whiteness against discernibly non-white groups like the Chinese, Mexicans, and Native Americans, recent work has re-examined the prospect of “becoming white” in the West. Historian Frank Van Nuys has stated that even Californians construed American racial identity as strictly Anglo Saxon and viewed “Jews, Injuns, Chinamen, Italians, huns—the rubbish of the world” as definitively not white.⁷⁴

In the borderlands, neither exclusively Mexican nor purely American racial systems prevailed. Rather, they converged and competed to engender a distinctive social order that reflected both the embrace of hybridity and the primacy of whiteness. Like much of

social mobility, as their somatic proximity to whiteness endowed them with increased social status and claims to honor.

72. Ana María Alonso, *Thread of Blood: Colonialism, Revolution, and Gender on Mexico's Northern Frontier* (Tucson, 1995), 53.

73. F. James Davis, *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition* (University Park, Pa., 1980), 4–6.

74. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*; Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction*, 98; Frank Van Nuys, *Americanizing the West: Race, Immigrants, and Citizenship, 1890–1930* (Lawrence, Kans., 2002), 11.

northern Mexico, the border areas exhibited a unique tolerance for fluidity informed by a distrust of (and vulnerability to) American racial logic. Many connected America's rigid classificatory schema to its imperialist ventures and the incidence of anti-Mexican bigotry in the United States. However, because of the borderlands' shared geography and colonial past, the regional race consciousness was also inevitably shaped by American ideologies, solidly premised upon white supremacy and the inferiority of dark and indigenous peoples. Scholars have come to define the borderlands by this coexistence of disparate racial meanings and by the consequent ambiguity of its social order. While such ambiguity conceivably presented social possibilities for marginalized Americans, those in the borderlands nonetheless had to negotiate shifting and divergent racial codes.⁷⁵ Prostitutes who arrived from the United States quickly discerned when and how to position themselves strategically as white and American.

Although discerning the ethnic lineage of European American prostitutes in Mexico proves difficult, studies reveal that the majority of women in the United States who entered prostitution at the turn of the century were of foreign parentage.⁷⁶ In the United States, therefore, such prostitutes endured both social disfranchisement as "painted women" and racial marginalization as undesirable immigrants. In the more permissive social sphere of Mexico, European American expatriates positioned themselves as definitively "white," touting anglicized names like "Babe," "Billie," "Rose," "Lula," and "Betty" and shedding all vestiges of an ethnic past. Scholars have noted that in Mexico, "'white' usually meant 'American,' and 'American' came to mean 'white.'"⁷⁷

75. Elliott Young, "Imagining Alternative Modernities: Ignacio Martínez's Travel Narratives," in Samuel Truett and Elliott Young, eds. *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History* (Durham, N.C., 2004), 169; Benton-Cohen, *Borderline Americans*, 29; Karl Jacoby, "Between North and South: The Alternative Borderlands of William H. Ellis and the African American Colony," in Young and Truett, eds., *Continental Crossroads*, 231. Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa pointed out that, beyond a fractured landscape, cultural crossings at *la frontera* created an alternative space for identity formation and forged a "new mestizo consciousness" among those in the borderlands. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, 1999), 99.

76. Ruth Rosen asserted that native-born daughters of foreign-born parents were more likely to enter the trade than foreign women. William Sanger's 1858 study of New York, however, stated that half of all prostitutes were recent immigrants to the United States. Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 139.

77. Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction*, 104–105.

Aside from those identified as mixed race and with the exception of two women designated “*morena*” [brown] and “*castaña-obscura*” [dark brown], all who claimed “American citizenship” also self-identified as “white.” Even those like Bernice Vern, who originally registered with the state in 1912 and self-identified as “*Irlandesa*” [Irish], had changed their racial designation to white by 1919.⁷⁸ Moreover, American women of Mexican descent also leveraged their U.S. citizenship. Seventy-five percent of the women who registered as “Mexican” in nationality but were born in the United States self-identified as “white” (compared to 50 percent of those born in Mexico who claimed whiteness). This positioned them at the top of the three-part hierarchy, according them significantly higher payment (not to mention higher state taxes) as well as a measure of status denied them in the United States. Recent work on prostitution suggests that this consciousness of racial privilege was shared by such American women even beyond Mexico. Eileen Scully’s research reveals that American prostitutes in turn-of-the-century China likewise “comprised an aristocracy of labour in the hierarchy of Asian colonial prostitution.”⁷⁹ Her research confirms that prostitutes abroad capitalized on both their whiteness and their national identity as “American girls” in light of aging, increased regulations, and declining markets at home.

African American women also discovered greater advantages in Mexico and availed themselves of the complex racial system in the country’s northern region. In his work on African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, Gerald Horne explains that “the borderlands confounded the color line” and reconfigured dominant U.S. hierarchies of race. Horne’s work confirms that, beyond the border, African American women “straightened their hair, learned Spanish and posed as Mexicans.”⁸⁰ Accordingly, many black Americans moved south of the border and leveraged the mutability of Mexico’s racial schema and the opportunity to “pass.” Of the thirty-five African American women on the official prostitution registries in 1919

78. *Lista de las mujeres públicas que existen en la localidad y que las tiene conocimiento la Subprefectura* [List of public women that exist in the town and that are known by the Sub-Prefecture], 1912.117, Exp. 15, Caja 54, Periodo Revolucionario, Instituto de Investigaciones; *Registro de Meretrices*, 1919–1922.

79. Scully, “Prostitution as Privilege,” 876.

80. Gerald Horne, *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910–1920* (New York, 2005), 68, 49–50.

and 1921, only six self-identified as “*negra*”; sixteen emphasized their mixed heritage and proclaimed themselves “*mulata*.” Most notable were the fourteen African American women who identified as “*morena*” and “*trigueña*,” as well as *trigueña-mulata*, *negra-morena*, and *blanca-mulata*, all classifications that simply did not exist in the United States. Mexico’s identity as a largely *mestizo* nation rendered such intermediate positions mainstream and afforded privilege above pure *indios*—those of pure Indian ancestry who occupied the bottom of the social ladder.

We cannot assess or affirm whether such women conformed to their professed racial designations according to the prevailing definitions of the day. Nonetheless, it appears that, for many of the American *trigueñas* and *morenas*, little correlation existed between their stated “race” and actual somatic features. Despite her classification as “*trigueña*” in the 1919 registry, for example, Alma Williams exhibited a conspicuously dark complexion. Her registration as *negra* two years later further testifies to the instability of such categories. Likewise, both Mascine Miller and Robbie Aylor displayed relatively few features of racial mixture yet self-identified as *morena*. Still, the incidence of American prostitutes repositioning themselves racially and claiming whiteness (or *more* whiteness) not only illuminates the border as a transitional space but also reveals how race as a category functioned differently across time and geographic borders.

Despite the possibilities for social advancement, African American women nonetheless suffered discrimination in northern Mexico. Officials in Baja California attempted to institute racial segregation when possible, particularly within the realm of vice tourism. The Owl—Mexicali’s biggest gambling den, brothel, and saloon—segregated its space between white patrons and *gente de color* [people of color], marking off the rear of the building as a separate cantina for non-white gamblers.⁸¹ Even so, racism was not as entrenched in Mexico, and many black Americans seemed to do comparatively well. Mexicali’s tax records of 1913 indicate that the only

81. Schantz, “From the ‘Mexicali Rose,’” 182. Furthermore, existing deportation records reveal that a preponderance of women forcibly exiled from Baja California were of “*la raza negra*” [the black race]. *Lista de prostitutas extranjeras autorizadas por el Sub-inspector de Inmigración de Mexicali, Baja California, para residir en el lugar* [List of foreign prostitutes authorized by the Sub-Prefecture to live in the place], 1912.117, Exp. 15, Caja 5, Periodo Revolucionario, Instituto de Investigaciones.



Figure 3. Alma Williams in the prostitution registry. Gobierno del Distrito de Baja California, *Registro de Meretrices*, 1919–1922, used courtesy of Archivo Histórico del Estado de Baja California, Mexicali, Baja California.

woman-owned cantina and brothel was run by *la negra* Lina Lee, who paid the city fees to sell *licores y tabacos* [liquor and tobacco] and to administer her house of gambling and prostitution (up until 1921, and possibly beyond). Apparently, she even employed at least one white woman to work under her charge.⁸²

Conclusion

American prostitutes remained in Baja California throughout the 1920s and continued to enjoy social and civic advantages in northern Mexico's regulated system, calling upon the state and even the federal government to act on their behalf. In January

82. *El Subcolector de Mexico Correspondiente a bailes publicos por el mes de Noviembre 1913* [The Mexico Subcollector corresponding of public dances for the month of November 1913], Fondo: Gobierno del Distrito Norte, Archivo Historico. The official prostitution registry of 1919 indicates that Lina Lee's house of assignation was still operating at the time. The 1919 prostitution registry reveals that Lillian Walker, a white, twenty-two-year-old prostitute from Boston, worked in the house of "la negra Lina Lee." *Registro de Meretrices*, 1919–1922.

1928, forty-seven prostitutes petitioned the federal *delegado de sanidad* [sanitation delegate] in response to the introduction of a weekly tax levied by the municipal government upon each woman for the purpose of medical inspection.⁸³ They decried the tax as “arbitrary and onerous to [their] interest” and pleaded for the state’s justice, help, and protection against the city government. The department of health in Mexico City responded quickly and issued an order for officials in Mexicali to revoke the municipal tax.⁸⁴ While still subject to state oversight and regulation, foreign-born prostitutes continued to influence and limit the jurisdiction of the *ayuntamiento* in Baja California.

Despite the state’s purported authority over their lives, European American, Mexican American, and African American women actively negotiated the boundaries of mobility and opportunity below the border. Working as prostitutes, entertainers, and waitresses, American female expatriates both created and optimized the lucrative vice markets of Baja California. As their rights contracted in the United States with the criminalization of prostitution, these women leveraged their American identity in Mexico to claim a more privileged racial status. The characteristically liminal nature of the borderlands and the permeable racial schema of northern Mexico allowed them to redefine their social identities and also assert their rights and liberties in northern Mexico’s political and legal system. They engaged the state in various ways to elude deportation, claim their own space, and control their labor. In doing so, American prostitutes showed their historical subjectivities as workers and agents, not victims.

Indeed, the U.S.-Mexican borderlands afforded women unique opportunities for activism, and their movements had political and cultural consequences. The presence of American prostitutes in Mexican border towns profoundly informed the cultural imaginings of the border and subsequently influenced U.S. border policy. As

83. *Solicitud del Concejo Municipal de Ensenada, Baja California, para que no se ejecute la prohibición de cobrar cuotas por control médico a las prostitutas*, [Request to the City Council of Ensenada, Baja California, to not run the prohibition against charging fees for medical control of prostitutes], [11.53], 1928, Exp. 13, Caja 45, Serie 2.127.1(30)8, Fondo: Dirección General de Gobierno, Instituto de Investigaciones.

84. The Spanish phrasing ran “*justicia que nos asiste, nos imparta protección y ayuda contra tal medida del H. concejo Municipal*,” in *ibid.* Officials in Mexico City ultimately determined that the sanitation inspector could proceed with charging the owners of establishments.

“repositories of national honor,” these American prostitutes abroad critically challenged U.S. assertions of moral and racial superiority. Thus, many Americans explained such women’s participation in Mexico’s vice markets with narratives of victimization and white slavery. Stories about the “selling of American girls” below the border recast the disgrace of their sexual labor as coerced and consequently stigmatized Mexico and its people.⁸⁵ Denunciations of Mexican “white slavers” evoked images of depraved sexuality that marked difference and forged racial borders between white Americans and the darker populations at their southern border. Significantly, fears about the alleged traffic in white women galvanized support among Americans to fortify the international divide between the United States and Mexico in the 1910s and 1920s. In this way, the migration of American prostitutes into Baja California not only contributed to the consolidation of the U.S.-Mexican border but also helped to re-inscribe the political boundary as a racialized and sexualized border and a line of protection for the national body. Accordingly, American women figured prominently in the history of the U.S.-Mexican borderlands, and their story illuminates the symbolic significance of white womanhood to the nation.

85. Edward Browne to E. T. Earl, July 8, 1916, doc. 812.4065/90, RG 59.