

2009

## 'Whore-friendly people': heritage tourism, the media and the place of sex work in Butte, Montana

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### Recommended Citation

Dando, Christina E., "'Whore-friendly people': heritage tourism, the media and the place of sex work in Butte, Montana" (2009). *Geography and Geology Faculty Publications*. 20.  
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/geoggeolfacpub/20>

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# **‘Whore-friendly people’: heritage tourism, the media and the place of sex work in Butte, Montana**

## **‘Gente amigable con las putas’: el turismo patrimonial, los medios y el lugar del trabajo sexual en Butte, Montana**

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### **Abstract**

In 1997, the International Sex Workers Foundation for Arts, Culture and Education (ISWFACE) began the process of purchasing a historic parlor house brothel (the Dumas) in Butte, Montana to create a cultural center and museum. This business transaction drew national and international attention while Butte citizens questioned the presence of ISWFACE in their community. Using media accounts of the Dumas, I examine the framing of sex work and its place in the heritage tourism landscape of the American West. The case of the Dumas captures the complicated relationship between history, a community, tourism and the media on local as well as national/international levels. Sex work is part of the historical landscape of the American West, but is fading from view as communities actively shape their public image, erasing this element from their landscapes.

### **Keywords**

media, prostitution, sex work, memory, heritage tourism, American West, medios, prostitución, trabajo sexual, memoria, turismo patrimonial, oeste americano

### **Introduction**

‘Never in my life have I encountered more whore-friendly people.’ (Norma Jean Almodovar in Nordhaus 2001, 3)

In 1997, a newly-formed organization, International Sex Workers Foundation for Arts, Culture and Education (ISWFACE), began the process of purchasing the Dumas Brothel in Butte, Montana, then an antiques store/museum. ISWFACE felt that it was the perfect location for a cultural center and permanent museum, with the thought ‘This is a place that we must make our own once again!’ (Almodovar 1997).<sup>1</sup> ISWFACE's president Norma Jean Almodovar emphasized the geographical importance of the Dumas: ‘Until we bought the Dumas, ISWFACE existed in my office and on the Internet. It will now be an actual place to go’ (Stucke 1998a, A7). The purchase of the Dumas by ISWFACE made national and international news. Butte community leaders and citizens began questioning ISWFACE's intentions, clearly uncomfortable with their presence, their place reclamation and the publicity.

Of Butte's once thriving tenderloin, the Dumas is one of the few remaining structures (Figure 1), along with the Blue Range crib building across the street (Figure 2) and the brick-paved Pleasant Alley behind it. It is the only parlor house still standing in Butte, is one of the few remaining examples of the architecture peculiar to prostitution left in the country and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Tenderloin, crib and parlor house are examples of a fading vocabulary delineating the landscape of prostitution in the American West.<sup>2</sup> The Dumas represents both the historic landscape of Butte and all the parlor houses and prostitution practices that once were part of the landscape of the American West.

**Figure 1 The Dumas Brothel, a working brothel from 1890 to 1982, is an example of the architecture peculiar to prostitution. Constructed around a central skylight and hall, it has parlors and dining room on the first floor and small private rooms on the second floor. In the basement were the smallest rooms and least expensive service providers. Photograph courtesy of the author.**



**Figure 2 This building is across the street from the Dumas and is an example of 'cribs'. Prostitutes would rent these small, one-room apartments, each with a door and a window (visible above), usually with a sink in the corner. It is currently owned by the Blue Range Engineering Co. Photograph courtesy of the author.**



The contested terrain of the Dumas Brothel raises significant questions regarding: (1) the construction of place in heritage tourism (Does accuracy matter? Who controls the image? And how should we address place purification?); (2) the portrayal of women and practice of prostitution (How should the role prostitutes played in our history be addressed? Is there a place in our historical landscapes for them? In our heritage landscapes?); and (3) the media's role in shaping and publicizing places (How do we balance local versus national interests? How should controversial practices, such as prostitution, be handled?)

The media coverage of the Dumas constructs images of both sexuality and place and has significant implications for heritage tourism and the American West. Here, I utilize published media accounts (newspaper and magazine articles) on the Dumas Brothel to explore the portrayal of sex work and its place in the heritage tourism landscape of the American West. Through critical textual analysis of the media accounts, I examine the discourses of place, sexuality and gender in the local (inside) versus national/international (outside) media, analyzing the framing of the conflict. I believe on a national level there is a fascination with sexuality particularly when it is safely set in the past, but that on a local level, morality questions regarding present day sex workers override the preservation of the Dumas. As a result, the only acceptable landscape of the tenderloin appears to be as a ghost town, a dead, historic landscape, presenting no threat to the moral landscape of Butte.

### **‘... they don't know how to deal with real prostitutes’**

The public obviously is fascinated with the subject of prostitution but they don't know how to deal with real prostitutes. (Norma Jean Almodovar in Cook 1998, 34).

For this study, I am focusing on the media's coverage of the Dumas on the local versus national/international levels. The location of the media reflects its readership's interests, as well as those of its owners and advertisers. Proximity to the news event can have an impact on how the news is framed: ‘the further removed one is from a controversy, the easier it is to be liberal regarding it’ (Bendix and Liebler 1999, 660). *The New York Times*’ perspective is known to be ‘provincial’, focusing on the interests of the Manhattanite, but is projected far beyond the boundaries of New York City and New York state with national syndication, wire service and website (Cunningham 2001). There is no heartland, let alone Western, media perspective, distributed nationally (Massing 2007, 14).

Scholars interested in the media's impact on public opinion in general have studied 'framing', the ways in which the media shapes the discourses surrounding issues (Durham 1998, 103). This includes the work of geographers interested in exploring how news constructs place as well as geopolitical understandings (Bendix and Liebler 1999; McFarlane and Hay 2003; Larsen and Brock 2005). By framing the issue, the media limits the range of interpretations by the audience, shaping perceptions of issues, institutions and places (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000, 94). Studies have shown that these frames have 'significant consequences for how audiences perceive and understand issues and can alter public opinions' (Shen and Edwards 2005, 796).

I will be utilizing a framing analysis method adapted from Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and adding two frames: historical and sensational (see Table 1).<sup>3</sup> The media coverage of the Dumas involves framing in terms of human interest, conflict, morality and economics. But I felt that these frames did not capture other elements that were central to the newspaper coverage of the Dumas, particularly the history being employed as well as the fascination with prostitution. The historical framing of the Dumas, I believe, is one way the controversy is being presented to the public, emphasizing the historical importance of the site at local, regional and national levels. I also believe that the more tawdry elements of the Dumas story, of conflict and sex, results in sensational framing. Sensationalism produces reactions by exaggerating and providing lurid detail, focusing on violence, crime and sex scandals, employing at the same time frames of human impact and morality, appealing to the readers' emotions (Baum 2002, 94). Seeming to provide entertainment, 'sensationalism plays an important role in *maintaining* a society's commonly shared notions of decency and morality by publicly showcasing what is unacceptable' (Grabe et al. 2001, 636).

**Table 1. Framing analysis questions.**

FRAMES
<i>Human Interest frame</i>
1. Does the story provide a 'human face' (example) on the issue?
2. Does the story employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring, sympathy or compassion?
3. Does the story emphasize how individuals and groups are affected by the issue/problem?
4. Does the story go into the private or personal lives of the actors?
5. Does the story contain visual information that might generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring, sympathy or compassion?
<i>Conflict frame</i>
1. Does the story reflect disagreement between parties – individuals – groups – countries?
2. Does one party –individual – group – country reproach one another?
3. Does the story refer to two sides or to more than two sides of the problem or issue?
4. Is the conflict positioned as: a) insiders vs. insiders? b) insiders vs. outsiders? c) outsiders vs. outsiders?
<i>Morality frame</i>
1. Does the story contain any moral message?
2. Does the story make reference to morality, God, and other religious tenets?
3. Does the story offer specific social prescriptions about how to behave?
<i>Economic frame</i>
1. Is there a mention of financial losses or gains now or in the future?
2. Is there a mention of the costs/degree of expense involved?
3. Is there a reference to the economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action?
<i>Historical frame</i>
1. Does the story mention the historical relevance?
2. Does the story provide any specifics of the historical relevance?
3. Does the story tie the specifics to general history of the area?
4. Region?
5. Nation?
6. Global?
7. History of a specific group?
<i>Sensational frame</i>
1. Does the story focus on a topic associated with sensationalism – crime, accidents/disasters, celebrity news, scandal and/or sex?
2. Is the story covered in a way that is meant to startle or titillate readers? (Details, graphic images, etc.)
3. Is the story presented primarily for entertainment purposes?
4. Or is it 'news you can use'?

The saga of the Dumas was extensively covered by Butte's local newspaper *The Montana Standard*, mostly as straight news. But articles have also appeared in *The New York Times* and *Time*, in newspapers around the country, and in Canada and Europe, as straight news as well as features and travel articles. Travel journalism, an area growing in coverage and interest, has yet to be fully explored by the academic community, particularly as 'an institutional site where meaning is created and where a collective version of the 'Other/We' is negotiated, contested and constantly redefined' (Fürsich and Kavoori 2001, 167). The local and national/international articles represent what the average tourist might encounter about Butte and that potentially shape their cognitive images of this place.

I have located 36 articles from *The Montana Standard* and other Montana newspapers and 37 articles from national and international media sources, using the online archive for *The Montana Standard* and LexisNexis Academic, an online, full-text database.<sup>4</sup> Once collected, articles were read and analyzed. Using the questions posed in Table 1 and by examining the articles' focus, the facts employed and the sources utilized, it is possible to identify the frames applied by the writers (McFarlane and Hay 2003, 217–218). In general, articles tended to employ two or three frames. The news sources frame different tales of the Dumas, depending on their location and audience (Tables 2 and 3).

**Table 2. Montana newspaper coverage (36 articles).**

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
	11 articles	8 articles	4 articles	6 articles	2 articles	1 article	0 articles	4 articles	0 articles
<i>Human interest</i>									
H1	2	1						2	
H2	2	1						2	
H3	1	1			1			1	
H4	1	1			1			1	
H5	2	1						1	
<i>Conflict</i>									
C1	5	7	3	5	2			1	
C2	2	6	2	5	2			1	
C3	3	6	3	5	2			1	
C4									
a.	4	1	1	3					
b.		4	2	2	2			1	
c.		1							
<i>Morality</i>									
M1	1	5							
M2		5							
M3	1	5							
<i>Economic</i>									
E1	5	2	3	5	2			1	
E2	4	1	2	5	2			1	
E3	1	1	3	5	2			1	
<i>Historic</i>									
H1	11	4	2	3	1			2	
H2	4	2			1			1	
H3	1	2							
H4		1		1					
H5	1								
H6									
H7									
<i>Sensational</i>									
S1	9	4		2	1				
S2	7	3		2	1				
S3	3			2	1				
S4		2		1					

**Table 3. National/international coverage (37 articles).**

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
	9 articles	14 articles	4 articles	6 articles	0 articles	0 rticle	0 articles	4 articles	0 articles
<i>Human interest</i>									
H1	2			1				3	
H2	2			1				3	
H3								3	
H4	2							2	
H5	2							2	
<i>Conflict</i>									
C1	2	9	2	3				2	
C2	1	9	2	2				1	
C3	2	9	2	3				1	
C4									
a.	1	5	1	2				1	
b.		5	1	3				1	
c.		1							
<i>Morality</i>									
M1		7							
M2		5							
M3		3							
<i>Economic</i>									
E1	5	4	2	5				2	
E2	5	4	2	3					
E3	1	3	2	2				2	
<i>Historic</i>									
H1	8	10	3	3				4	
H2	6	6	2	3				2	
H3	5	7	3	3				1	
H4	2	1	2						
H5	2	2							
H6									
H7	4	2	3						
<i>Sensational</i>									
S1	9	9	3	4				3	
S2	8	7	3	3				3	
S3	9	9	3	3				3	
S4									

### **‘Too busy working *on* the Dumas to do any working *in* the Dumas’**

*The Montana Standard* began its coverage of the Dumas with Almodovar's first visit to see the Dumas in April 1998. Even before making an offer, Almodovar had plans:

‘Next year, I want to bring in sex workers from around the world to work on the building,’ she said. ‘We've been calling it our “summer camp.” There's a lot of people just dying to come over.’

If they do ‘come over,’ Almodovar said, they will be too busy working on the Dumas to do any working in the Dumas, ‘If you know what I mean.’

If camp comes together, the Dumas will become home to artwork and other exhibits about or by prostitutes and other sex workers that, Almodovar hopes, ‘will humanize us.’

‘The goal is to challenge the perception of people's ideas of who sex workers are,’ she said. (Sasek 1998, A1)

Almodovar makes it clear that her intentions for the Dumas are as a museum but her presence and her ‘friends’ (implying other sex workers) suggest a return of prostitution to Butte. Presented as a news



story, the article's focus on Almodovar and her sensational statements seems to be designed to produce a strong reaction in its readers, less an unbiased news story and more a piece of sensational news.

Over the course of the next year, *The Montana Standard* published at least eight articles about Almodovar and the Dumas, promoting ISWFACE's plans to have the Dumas as a cultural center, museum and art gallery for the foundation and its 'unusual collection of works' (*The Montana Standard* 1998, A2). Much of this coverage included references to the historical significance of the Dumas (historic framing). Almodovar emphasizes the importance of this structure and their plans for it:

She calls the building 'the tangible embodiment of the prominent socioeconomic role that prostitution played in communities throughout American history.'

'ISWFACE will bring sex workers from around the world to work with archaeological and engineering students to excavate and restore the cribs, tunnels and adjacent property...' (*The Montana Standard* 1998, A2)

The presence of the sex workers and the work to 'restore' implies returning the brothel to a usable state, rather than a museum (as in 'preserve'), as they make it 'their own' once again.

In a follow-up article, Almodovar attempts to clarify the art ISWFACE will display:

'It has to be something that has to do with the art and culture of sex workers,' she said, assuring that the Dumas won't become a clearing house for smut or stage for pornographic movies. 'For example, we want to give a porn actress an outlet to show other facets of her life besides hard-core porn... Art that is considered too sexual or graphic will be housed in a special exhibit for adults.' (Stucke 1998a, A1 and A7)

While the article seems to be trying to put fears to rest, the use of language such as 'smut' or 'hard-core porn' is titillating (sensational framing). Almodovar emphasizes that the art was part of creating alternatives for sex workers, to express themselves and possibly as a future career. But this is lost in the discussion of Almodovar's extraordinary life, her work to legalize prostitution and her internet business of selling video clips and other sex-related items. Her statements to the press clearly come from the position of a self-professed whore. She also described how most of the construction/reconstruction work would be union labor, suggesting a benefit to local businesses (economic framing). This creates an interesting tension: tourist dollars are generally considered good but the prospect of these dollars being related to sex work presents a new/old issue for Butte.

There is no denying prostitution's presence in the American West or in Butte (Clements 2005, 342).<sup>5</sup> The more difficult issue is society's views on prostitution: is it male exploitation of women (objectification and victimization)? or women controlling their own sexuality (agency and empowerment)? (McLaughlin 1991, 264; Miller 2004, 148). Heather Lee Miller's 2004 essay 'Trick identities' breaks down the binaries often constructed around sex work, suggesting that sex workers are both agents *and* victims: 'agents in that they choose to perform certain sex tasks as part of their workaday life; victims because they must also appeal to (and presumably sate) customers' desire in order to earn a living' (Miller 2004, 146). Miller goes on to address the conflation of sex workers and sex, when work is work and the sexual acts they perform as work 'uncouples the connection between sexual desires, sexual acts, and conventional object-based categories for sexual identity' (Miller 2004, 146). It is a difficult task disconnecting the sex worker from the sex, given the intimate nature of sex work, but doing so points to prostitution as a service industry, with a clear line drawn between the work performed during business

hours and their private lives after hours (McLaughlin 1991, 265). This is complicated by the sex workers who embrace this 'unique kind of sexual identity, one that resides at the nexus of sexuality and work identity', embracing the label of 'whore' (Miller 2004, 147). By focusing on women's individuality, their unique situations, the choices they make, it is possible to negotiate the complexity of sex workers while avoiding the stereotypes. Almodovar speaks of wanting to challenge people's perceptions, yet she herself embraces the identity of whore, setting up a contradiction in her words and actions (Sasek 1998, A1).

### **'A century of business transacted here'**

Almodovar's promotion of Copper Block Park, shortly after agreeing to purchase the Dumas, results in the first clear evidence of community discord (insider-outsider conflict) (Stucke 1998b). 'Copper Block Park', created by the city to commemorate the tenderloin, is the green space surrounding a parking lot (Figure 3). For the monument, local high school students created silhouetted sheet-metal figures representing prostitutes and their customers to be placed around the park, highlighted with 'red lights'. A commemoration plaque on the site reads, in part:

This unique park commemorates a century of business transacted here. Residents still recall some of the women who were characters and community benefactors. The park is dedicated to these and thousands of other women who lived and sometimes died within the shadows of the district, contributing so significantly to Butte's legendary history.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 3 Copper Block Park is on the site of the Copper Block saloon and hotel, demolished in the early 1990s. It was reportedly the center of the tenderloin community where many individuals received their mail. Photograph courtesy of Lara Dando.**



Almodovar actively promoted the dedication of the park, linking her work at the Dumas with the city's recognition of the district. The county approved the press release Almodovar prepared for the

dedication. But as dedication day approached, the county declared that 'We're not doing the dedication. We can't do anything that's not done', citing a contractual problem with the construction company (Stucke 1998b, A9). Almodovar, however, framed things from a different perspective: 'Some may think that this makes [the county] look like they condone prostitution' (Stucke 1998b, A9). The tensions over the dedication of Copper Block Park capture the dilemma of Butte: how does a community acknowledge/preserve history while not condoning past/present practices that are contrary to their current moral order?

The historic landscape of resource extraction in the West was a bachelor world of miners, loggers and cowboys (Holdsworth 1995, 12). There were lodging sites and extraction sites as well as locations where the men could deposit their wages or ore (banks), replenish supplies (stores) and relax through drinking, gambling and sex (Holdsworth 1995, 16). The large male populations working in the American West required certain 'feminized service industries – laundresses, cooks, housekeepers, seamstresses and prostitutes' – and their scarcity tended 'to raise their economic value' (Hurtado 1999, 6). Prostitution, the largest employer of women, was a fundamental element of this landscape (Goldstein 2005, 215).<sup>7</sup>

As male-dominated industries grew and prospered in the West, more saloons, casinos and brothels were established. As demand grew, prostitution became highly stratified, meeting all budgets, tastes and requirements, such as in Butte:

Each woman's status was determined by a combination of race, ethnicity, education, sociability, and sexual skill and was reflected in the place in which she worked. Parlor houses, such as Butte's elaborately furnished Windsor and the Irish World, were the top of the line; they functioned as social centers as well as brothels. Madams hired attractive women, usually white, who dressed well, acted like ladies, and played the parts of companions as well as sexual partners.... But the vast majority of prostitutes in Butte, women of all ages and races, were 'everynight workingman's whores' who lived and worked in the cribs lining the streets and alleys of Butte's tenderloin. (Murphy 1993, 287)

The tenderloin community was comprised not only of the working women but also their male partners (sometimes husbands) and their children (Butler 1985, 46). The women supported nearby businesses, particularly merchants, pharmacists/herbalists and restaurants. The community generally sustained each other in hard times (Murphy 1993, 292). But the supportive community seldom made news: more often, reports in the local newspapers dealt with fighting, stealing, or suicides of prostitutes, actions triggered by the harsh realities of 'the sporting life' (Murphy 1993, 291; Baumler 1998, 11–12).<sup>8</sup>

Once common in the Western landscape, the material culture of prostitution is today fading, as thousands of former brothels have been demolished (MacKell 2005; Goldstein 2005; Foster, Lindley, and Ryden 2005). Some have survived by being converted to bars and restaurants, such as Big Dorothy's brothel in Helena, Montana. A few have been converted to museums: the oldest in the country is the Old Homestead Museum in Cripple Creek, Colorado, which began tours in 1958.<sup>9</sup> The existence of the Dumas and of the tenderloin district of Butte is not contested. It is included in tourism materials. It has been commemorated with a plaque and a park. But the extent that the Dumas and the district will be heritagized by the Butte community is still contentious.<sup>10</sup>

A 9 December 1998 *Montana Standard* article sets the stage for full-blown community conflict. It describes Almodovar's plans for 'Ice Camp '99', a Butte festival celebrating the history of prostitution, bringing in sex workers from around the world for seminars and for Dumas restoration work

(Stucke 1998d, 1). There is a tension in the article between sensationalism (listing all the euphemisms for prostitutes) and descriptions of Almodovar's attempts to work with the Butte community, meeting with county officials to smooth over past conflicts and establish the ground rules for Ice Camp '99. Almodovar makes it clear that women coming in for the camp would not engage in prostitution, would sign waivers and obey the law, acknowledging she could be charged with trafficking if they 'worked'. The article ends on a cautionary quote from a county official: 'As a community, we just have to be very careful and cautious. We don't quite know everything yet' (Stucke 1998d, 1).

### **'Exhibitionists'**

National media coverage began in 1998 when news of the Dumas' purchase reached the press. Headlines such as 'Exhibitionists', 'House of Historical Repute' and 'Red Light, Green Light' play on the naughty stereotypes of prostitutes and brothels (Johnson 1998; Hanrahan 1998; Cook 1998). This sexy, fun image of prostitutes and brothels was a view cultivated by Almodovar and consumed voraciously by the press. The framing of these early articles covers the historic significance of the structure (historic) and the transaction between Giecek and ISWFACE/Almodovar (economic) but both with a strong element of sensationalism.

Provocative language is used within the articles to describe the brothel, ISWFACE, Almodovar and the business deal between Almodovar and Giecek. It is an occasion to freely use words such as hookers, johns, brothel and whorehouse because these words are totally appropriate in this context. It is an occasion to talk about a place that was built for the explicit purpose of sex and, thus, an occasion to talk about sex itself. If we strip away the sensational aspects, we are simply discussing the purchase of an old building in an economically struggling town by a businesswoman from out of town. At this level, there is no story and essentially no media interest, outside perhaps the local business news. It is the sex permeating every element of this story that takes it from local business news to something that might catch the eye of a reader in Omaha or New York.

The Butte-Silver Bow Chamber of Commerce called a meeting of the citizen's groups and Almodovar to air concerns and negotiate a compromise. Almodovar's position was firm:

'First, I want everybody to know that if 100 percent of the people in Butte were against what we were doing, we would still do it because it's history,' she said Monday. 'Not all the money in Butte or anywhere else can rewrite history, and I won't let them erase it. We will be coming. That's not a threat, that's just a statement.' (Setterberg 1999a, A1)

Almodovar uses history to argue for the preservation and restoration of the Dumas. The citizens groups focused their concerns on the presence of sex workers: tempting youth into prostitution and bringing a 'bad element' into the city. Butte was once called the 'Devil's perch' and had a terrible reputation from mining, drinking, gambling, prostitution and labor violence (Baumler 1998, 4). Through the curtailing of prostitution, the decline of mining and the passage of time, Butte's reputation has shifted from a 'rip-roarin' mining town' to a quiet, if slowly dying, Western town. The groups appear to be attempting to incite a 'moral panic', through moral framing, to mobilize the community by demonizing the threat, in an effort to purify the space (Hubbard 2004, 1695). Almodovar responds to their concerns by pointing out that sex workers have always been in Butte and people turned out fine: "'The brothels were running when all these people grew up here, and they weren't destroyed,'" she said' (Setterberg 1999a, A1).

Coverage of the meeting continued in the next day's newspaper, incorporating for the first time voices from Butte in support of Almodovar's efforts (Setterberg 1999b). Local resident Zena Beth McGlashan presented a \$1000 donation for the restoration. The article states that 'those who agreed with McGlashan were in the majority', but the article centers on Almodovar and her opposition. Only McGlashan is quoted as supporting ISWFACE while Don Ulrich, Bob Poore and Bob Brooks are quoted as being against, creating the illusion of a gendered conflict. Almodovar again attempts to frame the argument in terms of history and an openness to the experiences of others: 'It is, she said, about preserving an important part of Butte's history and about giving sex workers the opportunity to share the side of themselves unrelated to prostitution through their art and poetry' (Setterberg 1999b, A7). Bob Brooks, opposed to ISWFACE, responded, 'We can't ignore the past, we can't erase the past... but we want to stop this kind of behavior from being glorified' (Setterberg 1999b, A7). Brooks then called for a boycott of ISWFACE's project.

In Butte, as in many places in the American West, there is a free-for-all struggle between the actual events, community memory, heritage tourism's imagery and the perceptions of outsiders. Place and memory are inextricably linked, with places and artifacts triggering memories and embodying the experiences and memories of those long gone. As events move farther and farther away in time, our memory reshapes the events in an effort to 'make sense of its past, present, and future' (Hoelscher 2005, 35). As the community is transformed over time, community identities must be reinvented, in 'an ongoing process of creating plausible fictions' (Wilson 1997, 7).

These plausible fictions, based on truth but transformed into something neither entirely real nor entirely fiction, have also been termed 'mythic history'.<sup>11</sup> Mythic history of place is central to cultural memory, providing a unifying vision of a place, a people and their history, emphasizing certain aspects of the environmental and social history while minimizing others (Wilson 1997, 8; Mitchell 1992, 199). Celeste Ray (2005, 82) eloquently writes: 'Heritage is a rhapsody on history. We strike the chords we wish to hear.' This mythic history/heritage can be constructed by nearly anyone, but those with economic and/or social power often strike louder chords and their vision of history usually wins out (Hoelscher and Alderman 2004, 349–350; Sibley 1999, 117–119). As a unified vision is constructed, differences in people and land use often result in the urge to exclude certain elements that do not neatly fit with the mythic history being constructed (Sibley 1988, 416). This is particularly true when the economic future of the community is at stake.

Heritage tourism has long been a source of economic development for the American West, playing on popular images of the region (films, novels, television, news), but reinforced by historical artifacts, buildings and landscapes (Wilson 1997; Van West 2005). Sites must conform to tourists' expectations, while the myth is manipulated to be used as a tourism marketing image (Wilson 1997, 9; Wood 2000, 34). The repression or distortion of history is intensified by tourism, in what Wilson (and others) refer to as 'historical amnesia' (Wilson 1997, 311 and 313; Hodgins 2004, 104). Historical amnesia creates a rosy nostalgic image of the past, glossing over the messiness of the history of the American West, over complex race, ethnicity, gender and/or environmental issues.

Locations and artifacts offer a chance to interact with history, to walk through, try, experience history (Wood 2000). Communities build onto existing history, importing historic buildings from other locations or constructing new buildings in the old style. In shaping these landscapes, communities cultivate a sense of coherence and stability, enhancing their place (Hoelscher 2005, 42). Ambler (1995, 40) writes:

‘As purveyors of cultural values, few sites would ever risk looking trashy.’ Immersed in the display, it can be difficult for visitors to differentiate between fact and fiction, reducing ‘their ability to achieve the necessary arm’s length for doubt or debate... easily silencing questions that are never asked’ (Wood 2000, 40). It is a fine line between providing an ‘authentic’ artifact and creating a fetish or shrine that ‘leaves a legacy of hero worship and elite cultural hegemony’ (Van West 2005, 57–58).

In June 1999, Concerned Citizens for a Better Butte and Montana Help Our Moral Environment sponsored a two-day conference to ‘map out a strategy for making Butte an inhospitable place for International Sex Workers for Arts, Culture and Education to carry out its plans to establish the brothel museum’, to prevent ‘the downfall of the city’ (Setterberg 1999c). Conference attendees included community members and others opposing ISWFACE’s plans, including anti-prostitution activists from outside Montana (resulting in, interestingly, outsider–outsider conflict framing). The speakers and workshops focused on the organization of the sex industry, experiences of former sex workers and the changes in a community ‘after the sex industry takes hold there’ (Setterberg 1999c).

### ‘Putting prostitution on the map’

National coverage in 1999 continued to frame the events in terms of the historical significance of the structure, continuing the sensational tone, but now included the local conflict. An Associate Press story, apparently based on *Montana Standard* coverage, raised the basic issues outlined above: ISWFACE/Almodovar will lead to Butte’s youth becoming criminals, Butte’s reputation being tarnished and Butte becoming ‘the prostitution capital of Montana, or Sin City’ (*The Associated Press* 1999a). The articles also included the Almodovar quote (above) about Butte’s brothels being present for years and people not being ‘destroyed’ by their presence (*The Associated Press* 1999a, 1999b). An article in *Civilization*, however, mentions something not covered in *The Montana Standard*: the Butte Chamber of Commerce and *The Butte Weekly* both supported Almodovar’s efforts (Connors and Austin 1999).

A *Boston Globe* news article frames the Dumas and the conflict from a tourist angle, describing the museum and the Dumas Brothel Biker Run fundraiser, inviting readers to envision a visit to the Dumas (Figure 4):

From the balcony, visitors can see three levels of ‘cribs.’ These were small, glass-fronted bedrooms that, once the customer was enticed inside and the shades drawn, became the prostitute’s workplace. (Gaughran 1999, A11)<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 4 The second floor of the Dumas features a balcony looking down on the first floor, a skylight, and private rooms for entertaining clients. Photograph courtesy of the author.**



Playing on reader's curiosity, enticing them in, *The Globe* article can be interpreted as a promotional piece on the Dumas.

A feature by *Baltimore Sun* staff writer Mike Bowler 'Putting prostitution on the map,' also presents a tourists' experiences of Butte:

Visitors can be guided through the building for \$3. They can dress up in Victorian costumes and have their pictures taken on one of the brass beds, admire the art and artifacts of sex workers, and perhaps chat with the 48-year-old former Los Angeles police officer and Beverly Hills call girl who's restoring the Dumas as a museum of prostitution. (Bowler 1999, 2A)

Bowler addresses the resistance to ISWFACE and includes a quote from a Butte activist that provides new insight: 'We worked so hard to restore Butte's image, and then she plops down here... and says she wants to make Butte the sex capital of the world. It breaks my heart' (Bowler 1999, 2A). It is clear that the preservation of the structure is not the issue: it is Almodovar and ISWFACE's (framed as outsiders) impact on a 'cleansed' Butte.

The national news coverage of Butte was contrary to the booster images carefully crafted by Butte supporters. Using brochures, tourism magazines, print ads, websites and television spots, place is advertised in carefully crafted words and images to bring tourists and their dollars into a region. A community may spend a great deal of time and effort to shape the image they wish to promote of themselves, packaging place and their history for mass consumption (Hodgins 2004, 99). Despite community efforts, they cannot entirely control the image of the place, even as it impacts on their lives and landscapes. A Butte booster who was opposed to ISWFACE acknowledges this when he states: 'We don't need this in our town... We're selling our heritage for a few tourist dollars, and we're going to be

tagged with this prostitution thing for the rest of our lives' (*The Associated Press State and Local Wire* 1999).

The following year, only one major article about the Dumas appeared but reached an extensive national audience: 'The oldest profession gets a new museum' appeared in *Time* magazine on 14 August 2000 (Cloud 2000). *Time* used sensational language and quotes, beginning with Almodovar's 'I loved being a whore, and that offends people', as it describes the purchase and the conflict with Butte citizens (Cloud 2000, 4). It pulls in the history of Butte and the Dumas, pointing out that places like the Dumas were where 'miners could rise from the underground to, as local booster Donal Moylan puts it, "fight, f\_\_\_\_\_ and drink."'13 This local geography is also employed to suggest that the support and opposition was spatial: the 'flats', described as 'suburban', were opposed while the uptown area (closest to the Dumas) was supportive. A quote, the first from a Butte woman against Almodovar/ISWFACE, voices 'flats' concerns over the example it would be setting for Butte youth. An uptown resident voices support:

A former Dumas client who estimated he has had sex with 50 prostitutes, [Curt] Buttons, a retired railroad worker, has given more than \$1,500 to restore the Dumas, 'I hate the town Butte is becoming,' he says. 'You can't have a great time.' (Cloud 2000, 4)

Buttons' quote is also remarkable for it acknowledges the presence of johns in the Butte landscape. All the previous national press coverage about the Dumas and the conflict frames it in terms of insiders (Butte citizens) versus outsiders (Almodovar). The *Time* article breaks the binary and suggests it is not so straightforward.

But things take a different turn in Butte in August. *The Montana Standard* covers a growing battle between Giecek and Almodovar, the business relationship collapsing after two failed biker rallies, lackluster fundraising efforts and a general lack of capital. 'Almodovar and brothel owner spar over financial issues,' describes how Giecek changed the locks and is attempting to put the Dumas back on the market (McCartney 2000). Giecek said ISWFACE had not purchased the building in the expected time frame and failed to pay for upkeep, mortgage payments and utilities.

### **'Whose whorehouse is it anyway?'**

The conflict between Almodovar and Giecek continued through 2001 as Giecek placed the Dumas up for sale on eBay and Almodovar challenged the sale, stating that 'It belongs in the hands of the people who made it what it was' (McCartney 2001a, 2001b, 2001c). As a result, framing was largely economic and in terms of conflict (conflict between Almodovar and Giecek). A settlement was reached in December 2001, severing the business relationship between Giecek and Almodovar, as she reluctantly relinquished claims to the Dumas (McCartney 2001d, 2002a). A separate arbitration attempted to address Giecek's claims for back wages, keeping Almodovar involved with Butte and Giecek. In town to attend a hearing, Almodovar filed charges of fraud against Giecek, alleging that 'artifacts' that Giecek said were from the Dumas, a supposed 1911 vibrator, old cosmetics and furnishings, had been purchased at swap meets and thrift shop (McCartney 2002b).

In 2001, the national/international coverage of the Dumas split between two major topics – the brothel being placed for sale on eBay by Giecek and the legal battle between Giecek and Almodovar over the Dumas (maintaining historic and sensational framing). A *Denver Post* article, 'Brothel still stirs passions in



Montana', describes Butte and the Dumas at great length, with the focus on Giecek and his experiences, and has a brief interview with prospective buyers from California, who stated 'I think I talked to more people in four days in Butte than I have in the past year in Los Angeles' (Franscell 2001 B-01). ISWFACE is not mentioned. The economic framing focuses on the opportunity, a historic real estate gem awaiting the right person. This is in sharp contrast to 'Whose whorehouse is it anyway?', a *Financial Times* of London article on the conflict between a 'retired call girl' and an 'antiques dealer' (as Giecek is described) (Nordhaus 2001). It includes a quote from Almodovar, the quote that begins this article, which echoes the sentiments of the prospective buyer from the *Denver Post* article. Both outsider women found Butte a welcoming environment.

The Dumas continued to make occasional appearances in *The Montana Standard*, as well as the national and international news, usually mentioned as one of the tourist sights of the city (Inbody 2003; *The Montana Standard* 2004). In 2005, Giecek made headlines when he closed the Dumas permanently and then again when the building was robbed, the thieves taking the 'artifacts' (some were recovered) (framed as human interest, although national continued to focus on historical and sensational) (Johnson 2005; Nicles 2005; *The Vancouver Sun* 2005; *Windsor Star* 2005).

**'Butte is a town that doesn't hide its history.' (Stucke 1998c)**

*The Montana Standard's* framing of the Dumas purchase, Almodovar and ISWFACE, presents the events in terms of conflict and sensationalism (although not to the extent of the national/international media). Almodovar states repeatedly that ISWFACE wants to 'challenge the perception of people's ideas of who sex workers are' but the sensational framing just reinforces the stereotypes of self-proclaimed 'whores' (Sasek 1998, A1). This sensational framing serves to both interest readers in a titillating topic but also questions the place of the Dumas in the community. *The Montana Standard* also frames the issue in terms of a conflict between the community (insiders) and Almodovar/ISWFACE (outsiders, emphasized by mentioning their place of origin). There are Butte citizens who support Almodovar and ISWFACE but their perspectives are hardly addressed. As a result, Almodovar and ISWFACE are associated with 'outsiders' who will come in and negatively affect Butte, such as sex workers, bikers and other 'negative elements', all constructed as deviants. Almodovar attempts to break this dichotomy: on at least two reported occasions, she points out the presence of the brothels, sex workers and johns in Butte *before* she arrived. The citizens of Butte insist that they have 'cleaned up' Butte. But this may only be wishful thinking: Butte's county has the highest crime rate in Montana (fourth in terms of violent crime), while only being the fifth largest city.<sup>14</sup>

Almodovar's presence and the division in the community that her plans created confront the sense of unity that is central to *community*. She disrupted the landscape of Butte by her desire to draw attention to a site with a long history in the community but the biggest threat is what *she* embodies – sex. While trying to reassure Butte, her self-professed whore keeps slipping out: 'We aren't having a sex festival... that would be fun, but that's not what we're about' and 'They said I wanted to turn Butte into the "sex capital of the world"... Not that it's a bad idea, but that's not what we're trying to do' (Nordhaus 2001, 3; Setterberg 1999b). Almodovar's coquettish comments appear to be a part of an attempt to emphasize her femininity, as commented on in several of the articles: 'Almodovar appears almost girlish. She has a soft, earnest voice, wears enormous false eyelashes, and adorns her bright red hair with a purple bow' (Nordhaus 2001, 3). Almodovar also comes across as a 'media whore', a woman actively seeking media attention (Gamson 2001). She proudly tells one reporter that she has been interviewed more than 500

times but 'I have yet to be interviewed because I'm an artist' (Sasek 1998, A1). In seeking media attention, Almodovar 'exploits the visibility of the public sphere to make a powerful claim for rights and recognition' (Hubbard 2004, 1688). She knows that 'whoever succeeds in having their views consistently reported gain the power and acceptance' (McGregor 1998, 193). By emphasizing her femininity and playing to the press, Almodovar is trying to draw public attention to her cause while trying to humanize prostitutes, but this appears to backfire in Butte. Instead, she is a whore twice over.

Butte seems to be concerned that the presence of sex workers will contaminate the youth of Butte, will draw a 'seedy element' to the city and will reverse the work to 'restore Butte's image'. But restore Butte's image to what? Prostitutes have been a part of Butte's landscape since the very beginning and in fact still are (*The Montana Standard* 2000).<sup>15</sup> By not keeping or preserving the place of prostitution in Butte, the danger becomes its mystification, perhaps even its glamorization. Sanitized, even appealing depictions of prostitution are readily available in Hollywood films (such as *Pretty Woman*). It is well documented that, at the tenderloin's peak, leading 'moral' citizens owned a majority of the cribs and brothels and others in the police department or on the city council may have received 'taxes' paid by prostitutes (Baumler 1998, 8–10). And there is no way of knowing how many of the 'moral citizens' visited the ladies (and/or men) of the tenderloin. Butte at one time tolerated prostitution, viewing it as a necessary evil 'to absorb the "excess lust of men"' (Murphy 1993, 294) and that when the district was open, 'men knew where to get their pleasures' (Murphy 1997, 78). Butte's clean-up is only superficial. How many prostitutes (current and former), pimps and their customers still live in Butte? What of the wealthy Butte citizens whose fortunes were built on the proceeds from renting the cribs and owning the brothels? Where did they all go? With the disappearance of the tenderloin's structures, the questions seem to evaporate, its social history purified along with its landscape.

### **The wild West**

The framing of the Dumas and Almodovar/ISWFACE by the national/international press focuses strongly on the historical/sensational elements of the Dumas and on the conflict *within* Butte between Almodovar and Butte citizens. No voices are brought in to address the conflict on a national level. Instead, the conflict is consistently framed on the Butte level, presented as an amusing story with a naughty element, taking place in a peripheral location.

The historical/sensational framing of the Dumas presents it as both a unique artifact of the American West and as a 'safe sex' place: 'The Victorian-era brothel is one of the more acceptable areas of sex in our culture. It doesn't seem X-rated or immoral' (Cook 1998). The past is literally a foreign country – removed far enough from the present that it will not 'contaminate' or sully visitors but allowing an opportunity to safely visit, talk with a former (or currently non-working) sex worker and perhaps 'play' the role, by dressing up and having one's picture taken. It is a form of ghost town, a place where people do not live and work, where tourists can visit and reflect on the past (DeLyser 1999, 606). Tourists do not have to live with this landscape, with its passions and its memories.

The work to create a 'mythic history' can also be seen in Almodovar and ISWFACE, as much as in Butte. They desire to create a place where sex workers do not work but gather to remember their history, recognize their creative talents, and exchange ideas and information; that is, to create a place for ISWFACE's community, to 'put it on the map' (Bowler 1999, 2A). By situating it at the Dumas, they are tapping into a location that is rich for 'their' history, that they feel they can connect with. When asked if they might 'glorify' prostitution with such a commemoration, one sex worker commented: 'No

way. I know for sure this was a rugged business. Douching with Lysol, years of raging alcohol abuse. You see that here too' (Cloud 2000).

## Conclusions

We live on haunted land, on land that is layers deep in human passion and memory.  
(Limerick 2000, 73)

Patricia Limerick's quote, that we live on 'haunted land', captures for me the dilemma facing Butte today. The landscape of Butte has a complex stratigraphy – of mining, of prostitution, of labor history, of family history, of booms and busts. There is no arguing over or denying the history of this place. But it is living on and with this stratigraphy that presents a challenge. This stratigraphy can be 'mined' in the name of heritage tourism but the question is – how deep do we go? And what are the ramifications of unearthing some, but not all, of these layers of passion and memory? Do we leave them buried or does that present greater threats for the living by not acknowledging them?

Butte sees itself as 'cleaned' up, striking the chords it wants to hear, because there is no visible prostitution on the map. The district has been closed, the landscape sanctified by the erection of Our Lady of the Rockies on the mountainside over Butte. But the prostitutes are still there: the closing of the district just displaced them, moving them from the visible sexual landscape of the tenderloin to the invisible world of houses, hotels and cars (Murphy 1997, 79). In this cleansed landscape, tailings piles are being left *in situ*, as artifacts of the 'authentic' mining landscape (Dobbs 1996).<sup>16</sup> The poisonous tailings piles 'belong' while the prostitutes are displaced and only referred to in terms of the past. Just as prostitution was part of the social and economic history of Butte, so too does it deserve to be remembered as a genuine 'artifact' of Butte's history.

The American public is fascinated by sex... as long as it is not in our home communities. One hundred years ago, when the tenderloin was at its peak, with the Dumas as one of its jewels, Almodovar's identity would not have been 'out of place'. But since the topocide of the district, it is as if she is trying to speak for the dead, to give them a voice (Porteous 1989, 230).<sup>17</sup> Butte views her actions as trying to bring the dead back to life, to return prostitution to the district, but this 'death'/purification is only an illusion – some never left Butte – or prostitution. Butte may fear the 'glorification' of prostitution but thoughtful framing of the site can reveal the complex lives lived in the elegant space, can reveal not the outside 'Other' but the sister/wife/daughter/mother. History is a commodity that a community can mine, mold and market, but it is also for reflecting on where we came from (Hodgins 2004, 100). The Dumas offers the opportunity to educate the public on the complex nature of prostitution and its politics if we can find a way of acknowledging the passion and memory beneath our feet, as well as the sex in our own communities.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to my sister and my parents for humoring me when I suggested years ago that we go see the brothel-turned-antiques store in Butte. Thanks to Norma Jean Almodovar for providing copies of some of the news articles analyzed here. Thanks to the editors and anonymous readers for their excellent suggestions for improving this paper. Special thanks to: William and Caroline Dando; Lara Dando; Mona Domosh; Susan Maher and John Price of the English Department, University of Nebraska-Omaha; Ellen

Baumler of the Montana Historical Society; and Zena Beth McGlashan of Butte for their thoughtful readings of this manuscript.

## Notes

1. This reference is a brochure produced by ISWFACE. All other materials used in this article are from published sources.

2. 'Tenderloin' – a prostitution district. 'Crib' – a small, usually one-room apartment where prostitutes live and work, often built like one story row houses. 'Parlor house' – a high-end house of prostitution, associated with elegant furnishings and the most expensive prostitutes, often run by a madam (female owner or manager). For more terminology, see Jan MacKell's *Brothels, Bordellos and Bad Girls* (2004, 287–290).

3. I have added a question to the conflict frame to explore the positions of the conflict participants.

4. I have done my very best to gather as many articles on the Dumas as possible, even if it was just a mention. I am limited to some extent by the online LexisNexis database, which provides articles only from the Associated Press wire service for Montana and does not include any Montana newspapers. My sample was enhanced by a clippings packet provided by ISWFACE. I view the articles here as a reasonable sample of the media coverage on the Dumas.

5. Prostitution can be defined as the exchange of some sexual act for money and is not limited by gender or race.

6. Sign text provided by Ellen Baumler of the Montana Historical Society.

7. Much work has been done on the history of prostitution in the American West, such as Marion Goldman's *Gold Diggers and Silver Miners: Prostitution and Social Life on the Comstock Lode* (1981); Anne Butler's *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865–90* (1985). See also Murphy (1993) and Baumler (1998).

8. When prostitutes are remembered, it is often only in terms of community contributions, helping during an epidemic or raising money for orphans.

9. The status of the Old Homestead Museum has vacillated over the years, sometimes stable, sometimes in danger of being replaced with a casino (MacKell 2005, 227).

10. While some Butte citizens might welcome the loss of the Dumas, others are still working to save the structure. 'Citizens for Preservation and Restoration', composed of young Butte professionals, raised funds to ensure the Dumas' roof did not cave in during the winter of 2008 (personal correspondence with Zena Beth McGlashan, 12 March 2008).

11. Scholars in many disciplines, including geography, have explored concepts of landscape, memory and mythic history. See especially Mitchell (1992); Hoelscher and Alderman (2004); and Hodgins (2004).

12. The author's description of the Dumas is incorrect. From the balcony, you can only see down to the first floor, not to the basement. In the Dumas, cribs were only in the basement.

13. The censoring of Moylan's quote is by *Time* (Cloud 2000).
14. Silver Bow County 2007 crime statistics from the Northwest Area Foundation: <http://www.indicators.nwaf.org/>(accessed 3 December 2008).
15. I have found it difficult to locate current statistics on prostitution in Butte. Statistics on violent and property crime are generally available; prostitution is not categorized as either.
16. The Silver Bow Creek/Butte area is the largest Environmental Protection Agency Super Fund site in the country (Langewiesche 2001).
17. J. Douglas Porteous coined the term 'topocide' to describe 'place annihilation'. See Porteous (1989, 230).

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