



Research Article

Feminist Re-imaginings of a Victorian Brothel: Using a Dialogic Method Between Practitioners and Academics

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Introduction

Miss Laura's Social Club is a former Victorian brothel that serves as the Visitors' Center for Fort Smith, Arkansas, USA. Built in 1896, Miss Laura's was owned and operated by Laura Ziegler. The structure was just one of seven houses of prostitution that made up "The Row"—Fort Smith's red-light district. Ziegler sold the house in 1911 to one of her workers, Bertha Gayle Dean, who ran the house until 1924 when Fort Smith passed an ordinance making prostitution illegal. Until the mid-1940s, however, Dean continued to operate a "boarding house" which was in fact, a clandestine brothel. After extensive renovation, Fort Smith housed its Visitors' Center in the residence in 1992. Miss Laura's is the only restored brothel in Arkansas that is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Fort Smith has fostered an identity as an "Old West" town. Located on the western Arkansas-Oklahoma border, the city of approximately 90,000 was described in the late 19th century as the last bastion of civilization before travelers entered "Indian Territory." Miss Laura's Social Club is just one of several attractions focusing on Fort Smith's reputation as a border town such as a national historic site featuring the courtroom and gallows of "Hanging Judge" Isaac C. Parker, a federal judge in Western District of Arkansas, and the U.S. Marshal's Museum.

Miss Laura's Social Club is a genteel name that sanitizes the exploitation of the women who lived and worked there. A popular tourist attraction since the early 1990s, the restored brothel has served as the city's visitor center and more importantly, as a representation of a

mythical American west. The exhibits portrayed a deeply erroneous image of prostitution in the late 1890s and early 20th century. While the city considers the site a marketing tool for tourism, visitors see it as a museum and therefore tend to trust how it presents Old West history (Voelkel & Henehan, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2018). Such inaccuracies are common, particularly in southern United States cultural sites but the concern for us, to borrow from Worthington et al. (2021), is that “when difficult or painful histories are hidden from the public by the tourism industry or public history professionals, the public not only receives incorrect or fractured histories but also internalizes misconceptions, myths, and falsehoods” (p. 2).

Where we Began

In 2014, authors Voelkel and Henehan undertook a study of the educational practices of Miss Laura’s, based on the question of how the experiences of docents and visitors of Miss Laura’s Social Club resulted in learning. As we interviewed both docents and visitors, however, an additional question emerged: What is the master narrative or story of Miss Laura’s Social Club and what might be its impact? Our original study was framed through the museum pedagogical work of Taylor (2010), as well as public pedagogic narratives of Sandlin, Wright, and Clark (2011), given that Miss Laura’s is, like all museums, a public pedagogical site and is highly gendered (e.g., Clover et al, 2016). Taylor (2010) identified cultural institutions such as museums and historic sites as places aimed at cognitive change within a specific context and featuring a unique narrative that is sometimes contested. A critique of cultural institutions is that they provide master narratives—mostly masculine narratives—that depict the cultures and/or histories of what and who was perceived to be normal, and through their images and stories, visitors learn about who they were, are, or should be in “regard to race, class, gender, sexuality and so on” (p.5). Sandlin et al. (2011, p. 10) call on adult educators to challenge these types of master narratives by exploring how public pedagogies can promote critical discussion and question what they call “critical transformational learning” in the interests of social justice and change. While we originally wanted to focus solely on our previous studies on how informal learning was occurring at Miss Laura’s historical site, we soon discovered that the narrative told through exhibits and its tour guides was more compelling and a major issue of gender justice. We found that the legends and stories about Miss Laura shared in the visitors’ site did not, as noted in the introduction, reflect the truth of the women’s experiences in the house. Specifically, we found that the master narrative of Miss Laura’s Social Club, and the two madams, Miss Laura, and Bertha Gale Dean, glamorized these women as proto feminist figures, and positioned the brothel as symbolic of the power of elite men of Fort Smith who used the club to further their business connections. In addition, the narrative suggests that the women were “rescued” from rural lives of hard work and made into “ladies” by Miss Laura. There was a keen bias toward narrative “happy endings” of women marrying clients and settling down to live happily ever after. Again, as noted, we found that although the city viewed Miss Laura’s as a tourist attraction and a marketing tool for the city, visitors viewed it as a museum and therefore, absorbed its narratives as historic fact or truth.

The impetus for this dialogic study was a change in city leadership which wanted to undertake an evaluation of Social Club. New leaders site re- imagined so that it appeal to tourists but would realistic portrait of the lives workers who inhabited the imtheir change and due to

New leaders wanted to see this site re-imagined so that it would continue to appeal to tourists but would also reflect a more realistic portrait of the lives of the women workers who inhabited the

Miss Laura’s wanted to see this would continue to also reflect a more of the women space. As part of our past research,

the new leaders—a city employee charged with the operations of Miss Laura’s and a volunteer historian—reached out to us to discuss ways forward. This article reflects on the qualitative study that resulted from this engagement. It is an imagining and re-imagining of the exhibit space of Miss Laura’s through a collaborative dialogue between two museum educators—Angel and Shanna—and us, Micki, and Shelli. The overarching question used to guide our collaborative study was: How can conversations between academics and practitioners help us to better reimagine an exhibit to more accurately reflect the lives of the women who lived and worked in the space? While our findings matter, it is our methodology that is of most importance in the article.

Feminist Adult Education and Dialogue as Research

Before we move to the study, it is important to situate this article in discourses of critical feminist adult education and public pedagogy. For English and Irving (2015), feminist pedagogies and research have been for decades, important means to empower women. Their centrality is to provide opportunities for discussion and dialogue about issues of power and how they are maintained or challenged through our institutions. In our work, we have taken feminist adult education and research as ways “to focus on the stories that are told about women with the intent of unearthing stereotypes and misrepresentations that seep into our consciousness” (Voelkel & Henehan, 2022, p. 45). Our institutional focus as noted, has been museums and how they silence or misrepresent the lives of women. As we focus on institutions, we engage in discourses of public pedagogy and the need to examine how these discourses enact and reenact societal norms. Almanssori (2023) argues that this is “particularly significant for feminist thinkers” who want to focus on the agency of women in problematic public pedagogical contents such as the museum (p. 132).

As we engaged in our discussions for this study, we found that we were not only addressing the issues that were affecting women, in our case the historical issue of prostitution, we were also reimaging a more historically accurate portrayal of the site that could lead to positive changes in terms of the narratives that visitors could experience about these women and others involved in “the trade.” The imagination is important because it allows us to move beyond current reality and manifest a different future. For feminists, the imagination can provide powerful insights into how we can reframe the lives of women and other marginalized people. For Fraser (2015), it is important to reimagine a new legacy of women as “active participants in the making of history” (p.705). She therefore advocates for ways to imagine a broader understanding of history that can shape new consciousness and hopefully, agency. For Mani (2014), using the imagination to shape an ideal is as powerful as one’s ability to achieve that ideal. Sadlier (2020) calls this “internalizing a collective ecstatic spirit [whereby women] thwart the patriarchal structures that have kept them in place while” creating an inclusive and ethical society (p. 588).

As alluded to above, dialogue is central to feminist adult education and research. Roca et al. (2022) speak of what they call ‘egalitarian dialogue’ which they see as critical to enhancing both the practice and impact of qualitative research. Egalitarian dialogue combines experience, opinion, reflection, and knowledge aimed at transforming some existing reality which in our case, was Miss Laura’s heritage site. There are a number of studies that show the potential of dialogic forms of research as university-community collaborations. In a study of teacher educational practices in an Amish school, for example, two academics engaged in dialogue with a teacher practitioner and used the practitioner’s voice as a co-author, rather than simply the

participant or subject of their research (Zehr et al., 2005). For these researchers, dialogue “builds relationships based on a desire to understand one another’s point of view and promote reciprocal learning” (p. 596). Dialogue is also the key to removing the distance often found between researchers and participants and places them, to return to Roca et al, on a more equal footing with a shared intention to bring about change. A study by Farias et al. (2019) also found that taking a dialogic approach generated important reflections between scholars and practitioners in the interests of social justice and change. For example, collective reflection through dialogue gave rise to (new) “knowledge about power relations and socio-political conditions specific to the problems people are facing, including actions for improving their situation” (p. 235). For Beech et al. (2010), practitioner-academic dialogue works when there are a number of meetings, as this establishes a long-term research relationship from which true generative ideas emerge.

A Portrait of Miss Laura’s Social Club

Miss Laura’s is a two-story Victorian mansion painted dark Green with contrasting white trim. The house is located along intersecting railroad tracks in downtown Fort Smith, within sight of the Arkansas River.



Figure 1 Miss Laura's Social Club Marketing Photo

Visitors enter the restored home through double doors which open into a space decorated to appear as it did in the 1890s. While the contents of the house have evolved over time, when we began our studies in 2014, the rooms were decorated in shades of red with rich wallpaper and dark wood. The Front Parlor space included a contrast between an exhibit case showing the cosmetics and aids that made the prostitutes “glamorous” and a series of literature racks showing the various tourist attractions of the area.



Figure 2 The Front Parlor in 2014

Inside the display case notable exhibits included satin gloves, opera glasses, cosmetics, belladonna cigarettes, and a bottle of laudanum (liquid opium). Tour guides emphasized that the belladonna cigarettes were used to make the “girls” pale in appearance and the laudanum was used to dilate their eyes. The 2023 research completed by Angel and Shanna found that the cigarettes and laudanum were not used for those purposes; belladonna cigarettes were a lung treatment, and the laudanum was used for a variety of illnesses and pain.



Figure 3 Exhibit Case in Front Parlor showing belladonna cigarettes and laudanum.

The exhibit case in this room is typical of the problematic exhibits throughout the house that emphasizes the glamor and idea that somehow working in Miss Laura's taught women social graces that allowed them to move up in society.

Beginning the Conversation

In late 2022, Angel, an administrative assistant for the city's tourism was tasked with coordinating volunteers for Miss Laura's. She was troubled by the messages conveyed by the volunteer tour guides and suspected that the often-repeated stories were fiction, not fact. She recruited her historian friend Shanna to research the history. During their research, the two practitioners found the previous articles on Miss Laura's that Micki and Shelli had written. In December of 2022, Shanna reached out to Micki and Shelli via email to ask for a meeting. In her email, Shanna wrote: "It's been discovered that much of the information they have about the history of the building is either grossly inaccurate or has no evidence to back it up."

When the four of us met in January 2023, Angel and Shanna had already conducted extensive research into both Miss Laura's and prostitution in the old west. They used our description from the previous study of the narrative at Miss Laura's as a starting point for what they wanted to accomplish which as noted, was to recreate a new narrative for Miss Laura's that

would be more accurate and to tell the real story of the women who worked in the brothel. This was not just about the past, however, but also a means to combat contemporary misconceptions about prostitution and its impacts on women and society. At our first meeting we asked: How could a collaborative dialogue help shape the new narrative?

The Dialogic Approach

Inspired by the methodology of a study of Amish schools through dialog between an Amish teacher and two researchers (Zehr et al., 2005), we chose a method in which we incorporated individual reflections, group discussions, and direct actions at the heritage site.

After an initial meeting in which we asked Angel and Shanna to work on the dialogue project with us, each participant wrote a reflection on one of the exhibits at Miss Laura's—the Front Parlor. We used the initial reflections as a baseline for where we each stood before the actual dialogue began. The reflections are incorporated into the descriptions of each participant later in this paper.

Micki and Shelli developed a list of semi-structured interview questions to use as a recorded dialogue between the parties. The researchers used Zoom meeting software to conduct the meeting and to generate a transcript of the discussion. Micki and Shelli used the Zoom transcript and the text of the written reflections to identify themes from the dialogue.

Angel and Shanna used the discussion as inspiration for a redesign of the house's exhibits, and to generate a new script for tour guides and a list of references and reading suggestions for visitors. While Micki and Shelli drafted this paper, Angel and Shanna read each successive draft and gave input for the revisions.

The semi-structured interview questions included questions about each participant's experience working with history and tourism, questions about our previous criticisms of the current narrative at Miss Laura's, and questions about the problematic exhibits and narrative stories. The interviews also addressed questions about feminism that are labels reluctantly applied in Fort Smith which is a culturally conservative community. These questions were important to make sure that all the participants were comfortable with discussions from a feminist perspective.

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The Academics

Micki

Micki is a faculty member at a mid-south comprehensive regional university who works primarily with workforce training, industry, and technical programs. Working with Shelli, she authored four previous articles about Miss Laura's Social Club. A white woman in her late fifties, Micki identifies as a feminist and maintains an interest in theatrical performance and narrative. In her pre-dialogue reflection, Micki wrote:

I was most struck by the exhibit in the center of the room (the main parlor). At the time we originally visited in 2014, an exhibit case in the parlor featured artifacts of the lives of “the girls”: opera glasses, a pair of evening gloves with jeweled clips, cosmetics and

small pots to mix cosmetics in, and most troubling to me, a pack of belladonna cigarettes (described as making the women pale), and a bottle of laudanum. In the narrative from docents, the emphasis was on the cosmetics, belladonna, and laudanum making the prostitutes appear lighter in complexion as this was a prized feature.

Shelli

Shelli is faculty member in teacher education at the same institution as Micki and oversees assessment for the education programs. She is a white female in her mid-fifties. A multiple generation Fort Smith native, Shelli, who is an enthusiastic proponent of most Fort Smith endeavors, originally did not find Miss Laura's problematic. As she brought students to the site, however, she was struck by how the narrative affected her students. A co-author with Micki of four previous papers about Miss Laura's, Shelli was anxious to protect the work and good intentions of those who previously ran Miss Laura's, while wishing to present a more historically accurate portrait of the lives of the women who lived and worked there. In her pre-dialogue reflection, Shelli wrote:

In the fall of 2013, I was teaching at the University of the Ozarks, and I invited a colleague to come to my hometown. We began our day at the visitor's center, where we received the more adult version of the tour, and my friend was highly offended at the thought that the tour guide was presenting the idea that prostitution was a good option for women in the early days of Fort Smith. In the fall of 2014, Micki and I began our research into adult learning strategies utilized in local historic settings, and we chose Miss Laura's for our first option. We surveyed my students who had toured in the spring, along with other participants who were currently touring. This is when my eyes truly opened to the message that was being shared, as my male student was so amazed to have learned that prostitution was such a great career for women in earlier days. As I think back to the exhibits, I was never taken aback by anything in the cases, nor was I offended by the health certificate. I was completely blown away that my friend from the Ozarks, and a male student, both received the message that being a prostitute was a good thing in the narrative that was being shared!

The Practitioners

Angel

Angel is a staff member at Fort Smith Visitor's Center and is tasked with working with tour guides to welcome and provide information about the house to the site's visitors. Angel has devoted herself to reshaping the narrative at Miss Laura's to reflect a more realistic look at what life might have been like for residents. A white single parent in her early forties, Angel views the building with a critical eye. In her reflection she wrote:

My first impression of the center social parlor is that it has very little to do with the brothel as a house museum. Most of the room is taken up with brochure racks. There are a few pictures on the wall of what appears to be a vacant house. The display case in the center is rather small but seems to paint a rather enchanting picture of a glamorous life. An ornately decorated book, perfume, satin, lace, and rhinestone embellished items. Belladonna cigarettes insinuating that they are somehow a drug as they are placed near the laudanum bottle. A best wishes card and an album of sorts. Only people with means

were able to procure these types of items.

Shanna

Shanna is a volunteer who has used her skills as a historian to fact check and research the lives of prostitutes in brothels like Miss Laura’s. A white single parent in her late thirties, Shanna has worked in tourism for many years; she began seriously researching local history when she worked toward her master’s degree in military history. In her reflection, Shanna wrote:

While it was true that prostitution was one way for women to support themselves and make a lot of money, the guides didn’t really go into how it was a short-lived profession because once their looks faded, they were cast aside or sent to lower-end establishments. They didn’t tell me how women became prostitutes because it was either that or go to work as domestics and wage laborers who were harassed by their bosses and often required to exchange ‘favors’ to keep their job. They didn’t tell me that many women turned to prostitution because they felt they should be getting paid for what they were being asked (and sometimes forced) to give away for free. Sadly, women often felt safer in a brothel than they did in any other profession. And these are the stories that need to be told.

Our Findings

Based on our recorded Zoom dialogue and our written reflections, we discussed ideas that included feminism and activism, the glamorization of prostitution, the need to market the city (a central part of Angel’s job), and the role that museums can play in a gender unjust world. Notions of historical credibility and accuracy emerged throughout the conversation.

Feminism and Activism

We discussed our definitions of feminism as well as whether or how we identified as a feminist. Since all four participants live in a conservative community in Arkansas, a very conservative state, we were careful throughout the dialogue to define feminism. In our experience, feminist and feminism are not neutral words in the community under study. In

For those with an evangelical, religious upbringing the word feminism has been co-opted to describe feminists as those who hate men, want to destroy families, or

previous research projects, Micki and Shelli have found that some conservative women will express support for and agree with feminist ideas if the terms are defined as equal opportunities for women. For those with an evangelical, religious upbringing the word feminism has been co-opted to describe feminists as those who hate men, want to destroy families, or stop women from bearing children; when we allow participants to define feminism, we usually discover that they don’t disagree with actual feminist thinking, particularly in terms of career opportunities.

For Angel, feminism was equivalent to activism, “I think of activism for equal rights, activism for being seen—all the things that women’s suffrage would hopefully lead to. Feminism is the continuation of that.” Shanna seized on the concept of women’s voices: “I think there are

different degrees of feminism, and how people go about participating in that. Overall, it's just a belief that women's voices should be heard in an equal aspect.” Micki expressed a similar view:

I just feel like it means not putting women above men or putting men down or wanting bad things to happen to men. It's just being treated with the same respect, having the same opportunities. And just recognizing that there are differences between men and women. But those differences shouldn't exclude people from opportunities. Shelli, who grew up in a conservative Christian church had a much more difficult time relating to the word feminism: My definition of it was Gloria Steinem burning bras. You know, women shouldn't be feminine and all this. So, my eyes have been opened through this whole route of research that we've gone through, because we went into the feminist pedagogy research piece. It is very much what Angel said and what Shanna said that it is. It is about equal rights for all. It's not just about elevating women. It's just about making sure that everyone has a seat at the table.

While each participant identified herself as a feminist, some were more tentative in taking on that identity. What was important for Angel was to stress the difference between feminist activism and the state of being a feminist:

I guess you know, just in light of what we all discussed, I guess. Yes. To an extreme degree. No, I mean I wouldn't have been those people out there burning bras, and you know things like that. But also, I wasn't alive during that time, so I maybe I could see what I would have done. Yeah, I don't know.

Given Shelli's religious background, her identification as a feminist was also a struggle:

I am a feminist. I own it now. It was difficult to be honest. It's been very difficult for me to say the words “I am a feminist.” But I am, and for me it really is all about empowering women. I don't want women to ever feel the way I felt when I was in my twenties.

Shanna did not appear to struggle with identification as a feminist noting right away, “I do consider myself a feminist, because I believe in the equality aspect, equal equity.” Yet, Shanna did not consider herself to be a feminist activist. Micki also easily identified herself as a feminist: “I definitely consider myself a feminist, though I would have been quieter about saying it a few years back because of how toxic that word is to a lot of people.”

A key point of agreement among the four was the discomfort with more visible forms of activism such as protests, altering or labeling museum exhibits, or aggressively stating points of view. While all felt strongly about equity and equal status for women, the museum practitioner was comfortable with changing the museum but through less public forms of activism. In the context of Miss Laura's Social Club, the “activism” took the form of creating a new narrative for docents to deliver and recreating exhibits that could be proven as factual.

Glamorization of Prostitution

In the course of the formal discussion all four participants identified exhibits or narrative points that they found problematic. Micki found the glamorization of the prostitutes problematic: “What I found problematic was the glamorization of what I saw as exploitation. So, for example... the belladonna cigarettes, and the cosmetics, and laudanum.” Angel agreed

that the glamorization of prostitution was problematic:

We know that the madams pushed quite a bit to be glamorous. But what I was seeing was that you needed drugs to get through whatever this was. ... You might have had these pretty things, but you needed drugs to deal with what it took to get to these pretty things, and that is a *misrepresentation* of what life really was.

Shanna also saw the exhibits problematic:

I won't, say, a glorification of prostitution, but it was very much a happily ever after. So, like they came in, and they use the drugs to make them beautiful, not to escape their reality, and they pulled them off the farm to help them earn way more than their family could make. And then, at the end of the day, you know they left and happily married in society, and raised families. And you know the historian in me just knows that that's not the case most of the time.

Micki compared the narrative told by the docents to variations of Cinderella: "They're telling the story of *Pretty Woman*. They're telling the story of Miss Kitty on *Gunsmoke*. They're telling the story of *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*."

Shanna stressed that the *Cinderella* narrative did not arise from any actual evidence from the house. They justified it with: they go into this wage labor, and to work as domestics, and they're being pressured by the man or the boss to give favors. Sometimes it's just being taken, and then they realize we can go into these brothels, get paid for it and be protected at the same time.

In contrast to the other women, Shelli was accepting of the narrative and did not question it until other people reacted to the content of the exhibits:

My friend got so offended and embarrassed me, and she was like "You are not telling me the prostitution was a good job for these ladies, are you?" And that was the first time I ever was like, she is really responding to this differently. I found that that's what really started my wheels moving.

Elitism

Another approach the participants' found problematic was the narrative that Miss Laura's was an elite place designed to cater to the wealthy and prominent members of Fort Smith society. Angel found the idea of elitism problematic because there is no solid historical evidence:

The reality is, we don't know that. We don't know that it was a high-class brothel. We don't know that it was higher end. ... I wouldn't want to perpetuate that until we can give it some type of historical credence.

Shanna, the historian of the group, clarified that the house *might* have been higher end because of its architecture and the fact that the madams regularly had prominent citizens testifying on their behalf in court cases.

But there are reasons to think that that is the case. The reason we wouldn't want it to be a

lower house is because of how the girls were treated, and it was about quantity, not quality. They didn't have all the protections and checks in place, and what they called cribs, and some of those girls might see 50 to 100 men a night.

Micki objected to the characterization of the brothel as an elite site by asking, “Why is that a good thing? Why is being the elite house a selling point?”

False Narratives

All the participants found the narrative told by the docents during guided tours to be the most problematic aspect of Miss Laura’s. Angel said, “What's got to be changed is what started us down this path to begin with, which is the narrative. Ultimately, to deliver something that is based on historically accurate information and to not be telling the *Pretty Woman* story.” Shanna agreed, emphasizing the importance of transparency in explaining what is and is not known:

“What's got to be changed is what started us down this path to begin with, which is the narrative...”

The narrative obviously has to change, but finding ways of telling people, we don't know this, but based on this other information, this is what we can surmise. Being very clear and transparent in that aspect. And you know here's the things that we do know. And here's what we know didn't happen or wasn't true, because the real story itself is very interesting. There is no need to embellish it.

Micki agreed with the practitioners that the narrative was problematic:

I'm in agreement with all of you that the narrative is the most problematic thing like, really, there was nothing inherently offensive about opera glasses or silk gloves with jewel clips, or any of those things that were in that display case. It was the way it was presented that these things were used to make the girls more glamorous. That really got my goat.”

Shelli emphasized the need for historical accuracy, “That makes me happy just making sure it's historically accurate, no matter what the narrative is.”

Marketing Tool Versus Museum

A major discussion point was the dual role that Miss Laura’s plays as a marketing tool for the city in promoting tourism and the site’s role as a house museum. A finding in the original study (Voelkel & Henehan, 2015) was that while the city considered Miss Laura’s a marketing tool, visitors considered it a museum. Shanna suggested that Miss Laura’s is both:

The reality is that it's both, I mean, if you have exhibits set up, and you're getting tours of the house that pretty much makes it a museum. So, the city can claim whatever they want. The end of the day, it's a museum, and people are coming there for information, not just about the city, but about the house and the exhibits themselves. The draw was not because I wanted information about Fort Smith. I was there because it was a brothel.

Angel explained that within the city there are disagreements about whether the site should be treated as museum or a visitor's center:

My clear opinion of the matter is that it is a visitor center inside of a museum ... a lot of visitors' centers are inside of really cool, interesting places. ... But the people that come into our building, we always ask, would you like some visitor information? Would you like a tour, or both?

Shelli saw the site as a museum:

I see it as a museum, and that's how I've always seen it. It's a fun place to go get information about the city, but as an outsider, I mean even as a young mother, I took my children there on a field trip. So, I got the sanitized tour, but I've always seen it as a museum. I have lived there [in Fort Smith] my whole life, and so it was fascinating to me. When we did the research, we saw this interesting disconnect between the tour guides and the participants.

In contrast, Micki expressed irritation with the city attitude: "They're claiming. Oh, it's not a museum, but they're using the history and presenting this Wild West, *Guns*, *Smoke*, Dolly Parton nonsense as a marketing tool, and being disingenuous, saying, it's not a museum." Through the discussion, it became clear that the practitioners, Angel, and Shanna, agree that the site is a museum, and that they must treat it as such no matter what the city believes.

The Front Parlor Reimagined

A few days after our group discussion in late spring 2023, Angel redesigned the existing exhibits throughout the house, created a new narrative guide for the tour guides, and created a list of sources and suggested reading for visitors. All changes were based on the combined research of the practitioners. To examine the changes brought about by Angel and Shanna, Micki and Shelli focused on the front parlor, a room that had previously housed an exhibit in a small display case that showed the daily lives of the women who lived and worked at Miss Laura's. In 2014, the display case included opera gloves, jeweled clips, cosmetics, a pack of belladonna cigarettes and a bottle of laudanum among other items. During the original study, Micki and Shelli took the house tour from three separate docents each of whom emphasized how Miss Laura took in women from the country, taught them to dress, helped them learn social graces, and then moved up in society, presumably into marriage with a former client. In 2023, the display case is gone, replaced by another case which shows items that were used in everyday life: a man's celluloid collar, playing cards, women's hats and a hat box from Fort Smith's premiere department store, a spice rack, books, magazines, and flat irons. Everything in the display has a known provenance and can be traced to the time period in which Miss Laura's was running. Another display case features clothing and shoes. The rest of the room contains

literature racks advertising Fort Smith tourist attractions and city information.

Figure 4. Front Parlor Display Case 2023



While the change in appearance is modest, the change in the narrative is striking. During the tour Angel provided to Micki and Shelli, she referred to what we know about the exhibits and what we do not know. She was able to explain the source of each exhibit and how it related to the lives of the women who lived in the house. Most importantly, the tour guides have a script with bulleted points about the house; each piece of information is footnoted with the source. This document allows the docent to share the source with interested visitors. A printed list of suggested reading called “Want to Learn More?” is provided to interested guests, which includes a number of books written about prostitution in the Old West, including several books written by actual madams.

The Future of Miss Laura’s

By the end of 2024 Miss Laura’s will no longer be the Visitor’s Center in Fort Smith. The building currently houses offices for the city’s Convention and Visitors Bureau; these offices will be moved from the building and become additional exhibit spaces. The site will be renamed Miss Laura’s Brothel Museum. Angel plans to continue research to continue to reshape the narrative: “Eventually, the history told here will be about the whole row and potentially other areas in Fort Smith. This may be the last house standing but it is a smaller portion of a bigger story.”

Final reflections

In our (Micki and Shelli’s) previous work on Miss Laura’s Social Club, we imagined what a more truthful Miss Laura’s would be like:

As adult educators we wonder how we can best help visitors process and learn from visits to Miss Laura’s Social Club. Is it our place and/or responsibility to step in when the site is clearly successful in its primary mission to attract visitors to Fort Smith? We have concluded that all we can do is to encourage adults to question what they learn via cultural institutions. On the other hand, what is the responsibility of those who operate cultural institutions to represent marginalized voices and alternate narratives? We have concluded that all we can do is to encourage adults to question what they learn via cultural institutions. Of course, like to alter or expand the narrative told at Miss Laura’s Social Club, we cannot. We can only use our influence to tell the stories of marginalized persons—particularly women—in our future research. (Voelkel & Henehan, 2016, p. 1301)

Beyond our personal satisfaction and craving for change at Miss Laura’s Social Club, our experience collaborating with Angel and Shanna allowed us to experience what Sadlier (2020) named a “collective ecstatic spirit” (p. 588). Our dialogue allowed us to create Sadlier’s inclusive

space, which allowed us to imagine not only new exhibits for Miss Laura's but also to influence the creation of an entirely new and more historically accurate narrative that can be supported through cited references. Additionally, we experienced what Fraser (2015) described as making history through dialogue that allowed for individualistic active participation. As Roca et al. (2022) suggested, our dialogue combined personal experience, varying opinions, intentional reflection, and historical knowledge to imagine the new narrative.

We suggest that our experience with Angel and Shanna can provide a model for other feminist researchers in museums and other curated spaces to address inaccuracies, inequities, and the whitewashing of inconvenient truths. By combining the power of the feminist imaginary with the tool of dialogue, this methodology has potential to change the way in which narratives in cultural spaces can be constructed and updated. Because Angel and Shanna reached out to us and offered us an opportunity to bring our viewpoints into the narrative of Miss Laura's, we realized our wish to do so. While there is more work to do, we are happy to see our work influence this historic site.

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