

**Queering the Nineteenth Century Brothel:  
Identity and Sensory Experience at 12 Orange Street in the Five Points**

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## Chapter 1: A Narrative Introduction to the 12 Orange Street Brothel

NATIVE moments! when you come upon me—Ah you  
are here now!  
Give me now libidinous joys only!  
Give me the drench of my passions! Give me life  
coarse and rank!  
To-day, I go consort with nature's darlings—to-night too;  
I am for those who believe in loose delights—I share  
the midnight orgies of young men;  
I dance with the dancers, and drink with the drinkers;  
The echoes ring with our indecent calls;  
I take for my love some prostitute—I pick out some  
low person for my dearest friend,  
He shall be lawless, rude, illiterate—he shall be one  
condemn'd by others for deeds done;  
I will play a part no longer—Why should I exile my-  
self from my companions?  
O you shunn'd persons! I at least do not shun you,  
I come forthwith in your midst—I will be your poet,  
I will be more to you than to any of the rest.

Walt Whitman, “Native Moments” (1867, in *Leaves of Grass*)

The typical image of a nineteenth century brothel in the United States as portrayed by historians and archaeologists is one of female prostitutes, male patrons, and heterosexual transactions. Women entered this line of work for its financial benefits at a time when they coped with limited available economic opportunity (Hill 1993, 1). Men visited brothels seeking “sexual pleasure” and “extramarital companionship” (Yamin 2005, 9; Gilfoyle 1994, 113). This research expands on the literature pertaining to nineteenth century prostitution in the United States by offering a different image of a nineteenth century brothel. The 12 Orange Street brothel in New York City’s Five Points district is used as a case study of a “queer brothel.” Based on historical and archaeological evidence, this case study provides an image of a brothel with male and female staff who may not have dressed, behaved, or engaged in sexual relationships in ways accepted by

“respectable” society.<sup>1</sup> They ran a lively and successful business in a tenement cellar, a type of space described by journalists at the time as “dens of death” (*The New-York Daily Tribune* 19 June 1850). The brothel offered more than financial freedom for its prostitutes and the ability to purchase sexual services for its patrons. The brothel was an underground space where brothel-staff and patrons could detach from the moralizing outside world and express their gender and sexuality freely. In this thesis, the brothel at 12 Orange Street is analyzed through the lenses of queer theory and sensory archaeology to interpret, rather than assume, identity and lived experience in the brothel. To begin, this chapter provides the results of my research through a narrative account of the brothel at 12 Orange Street drawing on the primary evidence of my study: nineteenth century newspaper articles, the indictment of the proprietor of the brothel (*State ex rel. Blackall et al. Donahue* 1843), and the brothel’s archaeological assemblage. The story is told from the perspectives of “outsiders” and “insiders” to highlight the identities of those who inhabited the brothel, their experience in the brothel, and the struggle between dominant society and the queer subculture.

### *The perspective of “outsiders”*

The morning of July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1843 began like every other for Robert Gordon. He walked to his shop at 10 Orange Street in the Five Points, a short way past the African Mutual Relief Society and just around the corner from the Old Brewery Tenement and the neighborhood synagogue. The heat was particularly strong that day, amplifying the unpleasant aromas that arose from the Collect Pond landfill and spread throughout the Five Points. As he unlocked the door to his shop, he immediately began working, sweeping the floors and making sure the

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 2, “Queering the past” and “A note on language and terminology...” for definitions of “gender nonconforming” and “queer” as applied in this thesis.

shelves were stocked, until he was interrupted by the entrance of Edward Blackall, an Irish resident at 12 ½ Orange Street. The two had developed an amicable relationship over the years, making small talk and discussing neighborhood happenings while Blackall purchased his groceries. But today, Blackall's demeanor hinted to Gordon that their conversation would be serious, not lighthearted.

Blackall paced around the store describing his sleepless night. All through the night he could hear men and women reveling at the 12 Orange tenement across the street. They entered in and out of the basement of the tenement in throngs, he said. Through the shadowy dark he attested that he witnessed a woman wearing men's clothes and smoking a pipe next to another woman dressed in proper clothes. Countless white men intermittently made their way to the privy outside and back into the basement. With his frustration escalating, Blackall concluded his rant with an account of the Black woman he saw linking arms with a white man as they both entered the basement. He swore she was the "Man-Monster" he had seen in the papers years back, who possessed the anatomy of a male but took on the clothes and characteristics of a woman to seduce men and take their money (H.R. Robinson 1836).<sup>2</sup>

"Do you think John Donahue is operating a brothel?" asked Gordon. John Donahue rented the basement at 12 Orange Street and was known for renting out the space to others. The idea of him renting out the basement to prostitutes and other brothel-workers certainly was not an unfounded one. Around this time, "almost two-thirds of the forty-three blocks surrounding the Five Points housed prostitutes on at least one occasion" (Hill 1993, 190). Several brothels operated up the street near the Five Points intersection, and several more operated at various

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<sup>2</sup> The person referenced here is Mary Jones, a Black, gender nonconforming prostitute. There is no evidence that Mary Jones worked at the 12 Orange Street brothel, but she is inserted into this story to conceptualize and imagine a gender nonconforming/queer prostitute who worked in this brothel (see chapter 2, "Using the archaeological imagination," and chapter 3, "A burgeoning queer subculture..." and *Figure 3*).

establishments in Five Points. Even the theatre housed prostitutes (Hill 1993). But Gordon and Blackall's section of Orange Street was different, more respectable, and quieter than other areas of Orange Street and the Five Points neighborhood (Yamin 2000, vol. II). So, while the operation of a nearby brothel may have been unsurprising, one as loud as 12 Orange was not acceptable, nor was it acceptable that this brothel seemingly tolerated amalgamation ("race-mixing," particularly in relation to sex/procreation), gender nonconformity, and same-sex relationships. They both had read about this sort of establishment in the sporting press, but they never imagined they would be neighbors to one. Something had to be done, not only for Blackall to get some rest, but to preserve the respectability of their side of Orange Street, and thus the respectability of Gordon's shop.

The two men agreed to meet at the Sixth Ward<sup>3</sup> (Five Points) police station, at the corner of Franklin and Orange Streets. Justice Matsell heard their complaint, and therefore had legal grounding to bring the inhabitants of 12 Orange to justice. In fact, Justice Matsell had personal motive to act on this complaint. In 1842, the sporting press directly called on him to target "the brutal sodomites of New York" who were turning parts of the city into a "second Palais Royale" (*The Whip and Satirist of New-York and Brooklyn* 29 January 1842; Cohen, Gilfoyle, and Horowitz 2008, 192-194).<sup>4</sup> In hopes of legitimizing himself and his police crew, Justice Matsell gathered a crew of officers and planned a raid that would take place the following night.

### *The perspective of "insiders"*

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<sup>3</sup> In nineteenth century New York City, a ward was the smallest political unit. Moving south on the map of the city, the number of each ward increased consecutively, with the First Ward being the northernmost ward in Upper Manhattan (these details are repeated in chapter 4).

<sup>4</sup> Between 1780 and 1870, The Palais Royale was a "queer space" in central Paris (Sibalis 2002, 117).

The next morning, July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1843, began differently for the inhabitants of 12 Orange Street. The men and women who worked in the brothel (yes, the neighbors were right) as servants, housekeepers, cooks, or prostitutes opened their eyes to a dark basement. They lit a float lamp to carry with them as they made their way around the bedroom that had no windows. They got dressed in clothes that would bring no attention to them on the streets in the daylight, meaning men wore “men’s clothes” and women wore “women’s clothes,” for they knew the consequences if caught defying gender norms in broad daylight (*The New York Herald* 12 October 1844). Walking into the common room of the basement, otherwise known as the barroom, a small amount of daylight peaked through the only window in the entire basement (Peak 2006). Before heading out for errands, the staff who had children said goodbye and sent them to play with their dolls or figurines, or they brought them with to the market to purchase alcohol and meat from vendors for that night’s meal: salmon, with finger foods like olives and capers as appetizers, and wine (Yamin 2000, vol. II).

After errands, the staff ate a meal consisting of inexpensive cuts of meat that other working-class men and women of Five Points ate. That day they ate rabbit and squirrel stew, a meal that the cook commonly made when she lived rurally, before moving to New York City (Milne and Crabtree 2000). The scent of the meal cooking permeated the poorly ventilated basement. After the meal, the staff began preparing for the arrival of their guests, men and women of the middle-class who lived in Upper Manhattan. They cleaned up around the basement, storing away all items that they did not wish to display: children’s tea sets, medicinal ointment pots, and evidence of working-class life, such as ordinary dishes. A housekeeper cleaned the stove using a cleaning product called “blackening” so that the cook could begin preparing that night’s meal. The scent of salmon replaced any lingering scent of stew. The staff

set the table with expensive ceramic dishes, bowls, soup plates, twifflers, and teacups. They restocked the demijohn with wine and cleaned the tumblers and wine glasses. They placed flowers in decorative flower pots around the basement, and dimly lit the dark basement with oil lamps to create ambience and blur the less appealing parts of the basement. Prostitutes washed up, brushed their hair, doused themselves with perfume, and adorned themselves with jewelry (Yamin 2000, vol. IV) Some of the female prostitutes dressed in men's attire, while some male prostitutes dressed in women's attire. Perhaps this was a personal choice, or perhaps they knew their patrons would be enticed by their self-display as it made them feel more comfortable in their own expressions of gender and sexuality.

As the day turned to night, the patrons, white, middle-class men and women, began traveling to the brothel from Upper Manhattan, where they lived in spacious townhomes on quiet streets next to parks and green space. As they got closer to Five Points in the center of Manhattan, the city felt more industrial, commercial, and alive with the sounds of nightlife (Baics 2020). Entering Five Points, they noticed unpleasant smells, exacerbated by a lack of sewer systems and waste management and the landfilled Collect Pond. On several occasions beggars and hawkers approached them, asking for money that they so clearly possessed (Anbinder 2002).

Finally, they reached the unassuming wooden tenement at 12 Orange Street, one of the oldest in the neighborhood (Milne 2000). Members of the staff who did not live at 12 Orange arrived around the same time, some accompanied by guests, their "dates" for the night. They all descended into the basement, one or two stories below ground, feeling a sense of relief as they departed the dirty and busy street and arrived at the brothel, an "oasis" in the Five Points. Upon arrival, the patrons experienced a whirlwind of scents: flowers, perfume, and the food, tea, and

alcohol served to them. In the dimly lit basement, their eyes were directed to the beautifully set table with elegant tableware, and a glowing bird cage under an oil lamp. They sat down to eat their meal and converse with prostitutes and the other guests. They took advantage of the freedom to escape the strict dining rules they experienced in their own homes by leaving the table when they wanted to, carrying with them their tumbler glass full of wine (Yamin 2005). The sound of chatter, music, and dancing, coupled with being below ground, drowned out sounds from the bustling streets and tenants above. Furthermore, the lack of windows restricted the guests' ability to see any events occurring directly outside the tenement on Orange Street.

The staff and patrons of the brothel felt detached from the outside world, not only because they could not see or hear it, but because the outside world could not see or judge them. Along with physical relief, patrons felt freer and more comfortable to express their personal proclivities, out of view of moralizing, "respectable" society. In the brothel, people from a variety of backgrounds gathered and broke through social barriers in a way that "respectable" society generally did not permit. Black and foreign-born staff of the working-class interacted with white patrons, a great horror to those of respectable society who shuddered at the thought of amalgamation (Katz 2001, 80-87). Women, both staff and patrons, could drink alcohol without fear of scrutiny for being debaucherous by engaging in such a "masculine" activity (Casella 2000, 150). Certain female prostitutes dressed in men's clothing, smoked cigars and tobacco pipes, and locked arms and danced with female guests, all of which would have been viewed as absurd and unacceptable for both parties by the rest of society. Similarly, certain male prostitutes dressed in women's clothing and courted men who may have been ridiculed for their effeminacies in appearance and manners, such as an "affected lisp and drawl" (Cohen, Gilfoyle, and Horowitz 2008, 192; *Morning Herald* 27 April 1839). While some patrons felt satisfied

engaging in romantic homosocial relations, others ventured into the assignation rooms in the back, where they could pay an extra fee for sexual services. The basement at 12 Orange Street was a brothel, but it offered much more than sex to its patrons, and it also offered more than financial livelihood for certain members of its staff. The brothel offered a sense of freedom to act as they desired and engage with who they desired, and a sense of belonging that they could not find in “respectable” corners of society (in relation to work, leisure, fraternity, or sisterhood).

The staff and patrons agreed to keep their meeting-space a secret and to only “advertise” to trusted and understanding individuals. In doing so, they could shield from others the aspects of their identity that they did not want to share for reasons of avoiding law enforcement, who frequently raided brothels and other “disorderly houses,” and a judgmental outside world. Popular press warned against daring to dress and behave in gender deviant ways (*The New York Herald* 12 October 1844). And even though the sporting press promoted a certain tolerance of brothels and prostitution, this tolerance applied only to brothels where women worked as prostitutes to please their heterosexual male clientele base (Cohen, Gilfoyle, and Horowitz 2008). The staff and patrons of 12 Orange felt a sense of safety being below ground, out of the view of window peeking neighbors. Though they could not help but revel into the late hours of the night, making noise and maybe even disturbing neighbors’ sleep, at least curious neighbors would not know the details of what occurred in the basement, nor would they know all aspects of the identities of those who inhabited and visited it, or so they hoped.

Unfortunately, the freedom, belonging, and safety that the staff and patrons of 12 Orange Street felt in in the brothel reached a bitter end on the night of July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1843. While they ate, drank, danced, and caroused, Justice Matsell sent several officers, accompanied by a posse of watchmen, on a raid of Five Points. Acting on the tip and complaint the police had received from

Edward Blackall and Robert Gordon, they burst into the basement, shedding light on its less attractive corners and revealing the fragility of the ambience created by the staff of the brothel. They also shed light on amalgamation as well as gender and sexual deviancy in the brothel. “Beasts,” they thought to themselves, feeling righteous as they captured the “imps” and urged the wealthy white patrons to go back to where they belonged. “They must have been lured here,” they thought to themselves. The captured men and women resisted arrest, getting physical and using teeth, nails, and fists in attempts to evade their fate. Some of them knew all along that this would likely happen at some point, so they succumbed to the officers who then paraded them through the streets as a stern message to others. They walked just up the street and around the corner to the Tombs, the prison on Centre Street that they would call home for the night. Those who could not accept their condition cried and yelled to no avail. The next day they awoke to a familiar darkness, and were ranged before the presiding magistrate, Justice Matsell, who sentenced the vagrants to a four month stay in the Penitentiary, where they were expected to learn to “obey the sterner commands of Public Justice” so that “in their future walk in life” they could “conform more strictly to the duties of good citizens and honest people” (*The New York Herald* 31 July 1843). But this punishment did not rid them of their character, nor of their desires.

Eventually, Leonard N. Whiting, the New York County District Attorney, issued an indictment to John Donahue for keeping “a certain common, ill-governed, and disorderly house,” on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1843 (Yamin 2005, 7). Donahue went to trial in early October. The *New York Daily Tribune* (4 October 1843) gave the disorderly house trial little coverage, mentioning in only a few sentences that John Donahue kept a “disorderly house and house of bad repute

[meaning brothel],” where “noise of music, dancing, &c is indulged till midnight – by bad characters of both sexes.”

The brothel at 12 Orange Street can be interpreted as a “queer brothel.” The gender nonconforming and queer staff transformed a “den of death,” or basement/cellar, into a lively establishment that ameliorated the negative sensory aspects of Five Points and its tenements. They also created an environment that alleviated pressures to conform to “respectable” expressions of gender and sexuality. Although staff and patrons may have felt they were in a separate world with more freedoms than the “real” world, they could not detach from their surrounding built and social environment, nor could they avoid the watchful eyes of neighbors and sting of the police. Eventually, they were forced back to reality and expected to obey the social rules they had escaped.

*Why is this narrative important?*

This narrative is a story based on real people, real events, and real material and historical evidence. What makes it different is that it is a story that archaeologists have yet to tell in relation to nineteenth century brothels: one that recognizes the possibility of a “queer brothel.”<sup>5</sup> The archaeologists who excavated the remains of the 12 Orange Street brothel read the material and historical evidence associated with the establishment through the Western lens of heteronormativity (Yamin 2000, vol. II). They also neglected to investigate the built environment of the brothel and the sensory experience of the cellar of this wooden tenement. Identity, built environment, and sensory experience are important elements to consider when trying to

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<sup>5</sup> Yamin and Seifert’s (2019) *The Archaeology of Prostitution and Clandestine Pursuits* is a recently published book that provides an overview of prostitution in U.S. cities through archaeological case studies. Male prostitution is not mentioned in the book and its referenced studies, and neither is the possibility of gender nonconformity and queerness in historic brothels.

understand the lived experience of people in this past. Another important aspect of lived experience are the projects that people undertake daily. Archaeological material can be analyzed to uncover the daily practices of people in the past. In this research, I analyzed historical and material evidence to understand the daily lived experience and practices of the marginalized staff of the brothel: Black and immigrant men and women who did not conform to traditional ideas of gender and sexuality. The theoretical lenses that guided this research and led to these insights are queer theory and sensory archaeology, which are explained in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2: Queer and Sensory Archaeology

Examining the archaeological record from queer and sensory perspectives led to interpretations that traditionally have not been considered in the archaeology of historic brothels and prostitution. This non-traditional narrative is given priority in this research. The goal is not to say that other narratives are “wrong,” but instead my research objective is to consider alternative credible and plausible narratives and argue that as historians and archaeologists we should not automatically assign Western heteronormative values on the past. The historical and material evidence should be read critically to interpret identity and lived experience rather than assuming these aspects of past people’s lives. When the brothel is explained through these lenses, we also gain a fuller understanding of the functions that brothels served in the mid-nineteenth century for staff and patrons, and the ways that the community and police tried to pull social “deviants” back into the confines of “respectable” society that they had escaped.

### *Queering the past*

This research applies a feminist-inspired queer theory to interpret material and historical evidence of the identities of the staff and patrons of the 12 Orange Street brothel. The distinguishing factor of feminist research in archaeology is that it is transformational and seeks to reconfigure archaeological practice (Johnson 2019; Kus 2002). Therefore, one way that this research is feminist is in its focus on sensuous, rather than exclusively rational, experience as motivators for behavior. The section of this chapter titled “Sensory archaeology” explains this in greater detail, but, in short, sensory archaeology can be considered feminist-inspired because it recognizes that people do not always act in rational ways as presumed by different approaches in

archaeology (i.e. economic archaeology), but instead may act on sensations, feelings, and emotions. These motivations may be influenced by their personal identities.

Queer theory is grounded in feminist thought as it defines “queer” as anything which is “at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (Halperin 1995, 62). In academic research, heteronormativity and binary notions of gender are generally presumed as “fact,” though shifts in this thinking have occurred since the advent of queer theory in the late 1980s (Halperin 1995). To move past static notions of gender and sexuality, queer archaeology challenges heteronormative interpretations, or assumptions, of the past. According to Dowson (2000, 163-164), “Queering archaeology has to confront the presumption of heterosexuality as the norm inherent in archaeological interpretation.” The result of queering archaeology can be the production of “unthought-of pasts” that “allow subordinate groups a voice in constructing their pasts” (Dowson 2000, 165).<sup>6</sup> Oftentimes, these subordinate groups share multiple marginalizing identities. Therefore, queer theory is not only interested in sexuality, but the intersections of sexuality, gender, race, and class to understand how the unique experiences of the marginalized are created (Blackmore 2015; Moen 2019).

In this project, queer theory guided the background research and the examination of the material and historical evidence associated with the brothel. For example, for the background research, historical newspapers from mid-nineteenth century New York City were searched for evidence of male prostitution in brothels. Several instances were found, which indicates that prostitution and same-sex relations may have been more common in brothels than generally assumed in archaeological research. Furthermore, the background research of this project found that women likely participated in the brothel subculture as patrons, not just prostitutes. These

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<sup>6</sup> At a time when U.S. states are passing legislation (“Don’t Say Gay” bill) that ban schools from educating on LGBTQ identity and history, I believe that queer archaeology can make a difference.

possibilities were considered in my analysis of the material and historical evidence associated with the brothel, rather than presuming that only heterosexual transactions took place in these brothels as most archaeological research of historic brothels in the United States posits.

Queer theory was also applied to add nuance to understandings of gender in the 12 Orange Street brothel. This is an approach that other archaeologists have recently taken. Walley (2018, 5), for example, examined non-binary gender in Inuit archaeology with the goal of “carving out new spaces for individuals whose identities have gone unrecognized in scholarship and provide new ways to understand the complexity of gender systems through time and space.” In relation to this research, historical newspapers from mid-nineteenth century New York City were searched for terms such as “masquerading,” “man in woman’s clothes,” and “woman in men’s clothes.” These searches showed that females in mid-nineteenth century New York City did not always present as women, and males did not always present as men. Some women, for example, “masqueraded in men’s clothing, smoked cigars and indulged in other unfeminine conduct” (*The New York Herald* 12 October 1844). Individuals such as Mary Jones, typically referred to as the first known Black trans-woman in New York City, worked in Five Points brothels, likely as a prostitute (Gilfoyle 1994). This evidence is considered alongside the historical document “Clearing the Five Points” (*The New York Herald* 31 July 1843) in chapter 4 which hints toward the identities of the inhabitants of 12 Orange Street to explore the possibility that “cross-dressing,” or gender nonconformity in general, occurred in the brothel.

In conclusion, this research employs a feminist-inspired queer theory to challenge the binary, heteronormative interpretation of the brothel at 12 Orange Street as one that consisted of only female brothel-workers who presented as women and tended to male patrons (Yamin 2000, vol. II; Yamin 2005). Informed by historical evidence, archaeological data from the brothel

assemblage was analyzed for markers of gender and sexuality, while considering aspects of race and class to investigate the intersectionality of these social dimensions within the brothel. The archaeology of sexuality and gender has come a long way since the advent of queer theory and its application in archaeology. This project reflects these shifts and attempts to contribute to methodological practices in queer archaeology and the archaeology of sexuality.

*A note on language and terminology for sexual orientation and gender identification*

Universal terms for what we understand as “cross-dressing,” “drag,” and “transsexuality” today did not exist in the mid-nineteenth century. Similarly, terms for what we understand as “homosexual,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “gay” did not exist in the mid-nineteenth century (Shockley, Davis, Lustbader, and Dolkart 2018, 14-15). This means there are complications when applying these terms to people who lived during this time as we do not know how they would have identified. Therefore, these terms are generally avoided in the rest of this paper. “Gender nonconforming” is one identity descriptor used in this project as an encompassing term that pertains to any behavior that does not align with dominant or normative notions of gender and how a person “should” behave, dress, speak, and socialize. In many instances, the expectations of how a person should behave is based on their sex. A “gender nonconformist,” then, can be defined as “someone who adopts gendered traits that are stereotypically associated with members of the opposite sex,” such as a female who wears “masculine” clothes (Lester 2002, 4). “Queer” is another identity descriptor used as an encompassing term that pertains to any behavior that does not align with dominant or normative notions of sexuality and who a person “should” have romantic or sexual relations with. People who are queer deviate from the “ideology of heteronormativity” (Voss 2000, 184). Although today “queer” is a word that

denotes gender and sexual nonconformity, I use “gender nonconforming” when specifically referring to gendered behaviors or ideas for clarity when distinguishing between gendered and sexual identities and behaviors. Furthermore, although these terms would not have been used in these ways in the nineteenth century, I am applying them because they are encompassing rather than reductive markers of identity. For example, in the case that a woman in the nineteenth wore “men’s clothes,” we do not know if this is because they identified/wanted to identify as a man *or* identified as a woman but preferred men’s clothes. To avoid mis-identifying this person, I would classify them as “gender nonconforming” because while the exact reasons for their behavior are unknown, they made a conscious choice to dress in a way that did not adhere to nineteenth century gender norms and expectations.

### *Sensory archaeology*

Queer and sensory archaeology are combined in this thesis to understand why certain groups of people chose to work at and visit the basement of 12 Orange Street when it was in full swing. Focusing on sensory experience, including sensations and emotions, does not discount the financial motives of working as a prostitute (see chapter 3), but contributes another layer to our understanding of their lived experience, and the lived experience of the brothel.

Sensory archaeology is a recent development in archaeological research that aims to explore past lived, multi-sensory experience (Hamilakis 2014). From this perspective, senses in the five-sense schema and other sensory aspects like expectation or emotion are interpreted from archaeological material like artifacts, food remains, and substances. The way that humans interacted with and interpreted these materials are important for interpreting sensory experience. Each person generally *experiences* sensations in a universal way, but it is important to recognize

that each person, or group of people, interprets and reacts to sensory experience in a socio-historically specific way (Luiz 2019; Hamilakis 2014). For example, although the working-class brothel-workers and middle-class patrons experienced the sensations of the brothel in a similar way, their interpretation of and reaction to the experience differed. Eating an expensive meal like salmon may have meant something different to the brothel-workers than patrons. Still, there may be commonalities in sensory experience, such as feelings of social belonging within the “queer brothel.” Context is another important factor to consider when interpreting sensory experience from archaeological material. In relation to the brothel at 12 Orange Street, the brothel, situated in a dark basement, “came alive” at night when clients arrived (*The New York Daily Tribune* 19 June 1850; *State ex rel. Blackall et al. Donahue* 1843). This informs interpretations of sensory experience because the visual sensory aspects evoked from an oil lamp, for example, must be understood in the diurnal and spatial context of the lamp’s use.

Assemblages of practice are middle-range tools that can be used to discern past multi-sensory experience from archaeological remains (Antczak and Beaudry 2019). Assemblages of practice differ from traditional understandings of archaeological assemblages that are based on archaeological collections of *similar* artifacts. Similarity is commonly assessed based on the context in which artifacts were found, but assemblages may also be defined by material class or artifact function. Assemblages of practice may resemble “function,” but the main difference is that artifact function is action-based while assemblages of practice are project-based. A knife, for example, can be identified based on its function of cutting. In some cases, archaeologists find it useful to group multiple knives recovered at a site into an assemblage based on their shared function. In relation to this research, a knife would be grouped with other things used in conjunction to accomplish the project of meal preparation, such as a whetstone. Therefore,

assemblages of practice are collections of artifacts that represent a group of entangled *things* used *together* to accomplish certain projects of everyday life, like preparing a meal, decorating the home, and tending to personal hygiene (Antczak and Beaudry 2019; Luiz 2019). The definition of *things* is encompassing because it refers to dynamic collections of material, constantly changing physically and/or in relation to their perceived meaning and value (Antczak and Beaudry 2019). From this perspective, humans, such as prostitutes and middle-class patrons, tenement cellars, and stoves all qualify as things. So, while assemblages of practice are in part created from artifacts, the things that artifacts represent are not the only things involved in creating assemblages of practice. Humans, included in the definition of *things*, and even sensory aspects, like expectation, are also entangled in assemblages of practice as they are crucial to prompting and accomplishing projects. “Meal preparation” is an example of an assemblage of practice analyzed in this paper. In the context of the brothel at 12 Orange Street, the execution of the project of meal preparation depended on a working stove, the expectation of middle-class clientele’s patronage, middle-class foods like salmon or veal, purchased from a vendor, and a person to cook the food. The sensory aspect of expectation is enmeshed in the “entanglement,” or the interdependent relationships of things, of meal-time because the purchase of salmon depended on this expectation. Other sensory aspects, such as the smell of food cooking, can also be interpreted from this assemblage.

Assemblages of practice are representative of the material turn in archaeology because they place things on the same level as humans in their ability to affect change (Antczak and Beaudry 2019; Hodder 2014). Entanglement is one theoretical lens that can explain such change. The interconnected nature of entanglements posits that change in one aspect of the entanglement affects the rest (Hodder 2014). For example, meal preparation depended on the purchase of

expensive foods from vendors. If these vendors did not have foods that appealed to middle-class tastes, like salmon, available to sell, the possibility arose for a temporary change in the entanglement of meal preparation. The staff of the brothel, in this hypothetical scenario, may have had to serve a “working-class” meal to their expected middle-class clientele that night, to their clientele’s disappointment. In this research, entanglement also relates to the way that the brothel was enmeshed within the neighborhood and its social relations. Though the inhabitants of the brothel may have felt as though they were in a separate world, this was an “illusion” because the outside world could still hear the operations of the brothel and gossip about their observations. The concept of entanglement is applied in chapter 5 to explain why the brothel at 12 Orange Street shut down, and why it could not fully “detach” from society despite attempts to escape its strict rules and judgements.

Antczak and Beaudry (2019) argue that the analysis of assemblages of practice, from a sensory perspective, is suitable for historical archaeology. Historical archaeology examines societies that left behind material remains as well as historical records (Allison 1998). These sources can include documentary, textual, and visual data, all of which can be used by the researcher to make connections to the archaeological evidence to strengthen interpretations of past multi-sensory experience. For example, indicators that clientele arrived at the brothel at night are strengthened by the “disorderly house” indictment cases that discuss the “nightly revelries” of the brothel, lasting into the late hours of the night (Hill 1993; *State ex rel. Blackall et al. Donahue* 1843). Other historical sources indicate that nineteenth century tenement cellars were very dark (*The New York Daily Tribune* 19 June 1850). Analyzing the “setting the lighting” assemblage of practice, which includes things like oil lamps, in this context provides insight into the impact of lit oil lamps on vision in the brothel at night. Oil lamps likely provided just enough

dim lighting for staff and clientele to see and move around the brothel, creating an ambient mood.

Assemblages of practice are one tool used to understand the multi-sensory experience that this space offered to its patrons. Identity is another lens through which past multi-sensory experience can be interpreted. Understanding who inhabited the brothel can strengthen interpretations of the emotional aspects of the space, such as feelings of social belonging, confidence, or comfortability. Applying the assemblages of practice approach with aspects of identity analyzed from a queer lens contributes to the understanding of the lived experience of peoples who typically did not leave behind intimate accounts in the historical record. The most detailed nineteenth century accounts of gender nonconforming and queer brothel-workers and patrons come from the moralizing perspectives of outsiders, such as the press. By understanding the daily practices of these peoples (staff and patrons) and interpreting the sensations and emotions they may have felt in the brothel, we can gain a more practical view into their lives and humanize peoples who were referred to as “beasts” when they were alive (*The Whip and Satirist of New-York and Brooklyn* 29 January 1842).

### *Using the archaeological imagination*

In many ways this research is an act of story-telling, meaning it is one narrative interpretation of a time, place, and group of peoples who did not leave personal accounts of their identities or lived experience. The benefit of story-telling is that it can help us “arrive at a deeper understanding of past events by humanizing them” (Voss and Schmidt 2000, 163). However, our interpretations may not be entirely accurate, meaning the narrative told in this research should not be read as “fact” but as one interpretation of a nineteenth century brothel, through the lenses

of queer theory and sensory archaeology. The decision to convey the results of this research as a narrative description of a typical day at the brothel from the perspectives of neighbors, inhabitants, and clients (chapter 1) is inspired by the ideas of several archaeologists. According to Antczak and Beaudry (2019, 102), one must use the ‘archaeological imagination’ (Shanks 2012) to reconstruct past multi-sensory experience. Joyce (2002) argues that much of archaeological research is an act of story-telling, and that the way archaeologists tell stories matters. The narrative approach “brings to life” the experience of the brothel for the various identities of people who inhabited the space, and it allows for the multi-sensory experience of the space to be understood in a way that is not necessarily possible or accessible with data tables and graphs. In other words, lived experience cannot be “pinned down;” it is subjective, nuanced, and complex, and neither the historical record nor the archaeological record is free of limitations when it comes to reconstructing past lived, sensory experience. Still, as historians and archaeologists we can tell convincing and interesting stories of the past that are based on multiple lines of evidence.

### *Setting the stage of the narrative*

The theoretical lenses of queer and sensory archaeology guided every aspect of this research, from the analysis of the historical and material evidence to the background research from which these pieces of evidence were collected. These perspectives provided insight into the identity of staff and patrons, and their lived experience in the brothel. Before getting into the details of identity and lived experience at 12 Orange Street, the brothel must be situated in its context: a tenement cellar in Five Points, a working-class immigrant neighborhood in Lower

Manhattan, at a specific time (early 1840s) when a queer subculture was developing alongside a lurid sporting culture.

### Chapter 3: A Queer Perspective on a New York City “Slum”

In the early nineteenth century, decades before the middle-class branded Five Points as a “sink of depravity” due to the prevalence of violence, poverty, and prostitution, this same class of people lived in the neighborhood (*The New-York Daily Tribune* 27 April 1843). Five Points, or the Sixth Ward, partly surrounded the Collect Pond, a notorious dumping ground for toxic waste from nearby businesses, such as slaughterhouses, in the early nineteenth century. Eventually, the city filled in the pond in 1811, establishing Five Points as a neighborhood on top of a landfill. Around this time, middle-class white people born in New York/the United States and England began to settle in Five Points. As the landfill began to emit noxious methane gas and cause the foundations of houses to shift, many of these inhabitants left the district during the early 1820s, when Irish, Italian, Chinese, German, and Eastern European Jews immigrated to the neighborhood seeking economic opportunity. Five Points also housed a large number of free Blacks in the early nineteenth century until a decline in the mid-1830s, when racist riots ensued and forced the Black community to migrate, alongside other factors such as “rising rents” and a “competitive job market” (Milne 2002, 139). The Irish immigrant population largely perpetrated these riots that resulted in Black homes and businesses being burned down. By 1845, the African American community “made up less than 6% of the total residents” of Five Points, “half of what it had been 15 years earlier” (Milne 2002, 139). Around this time, the remaining African American community in Five Points could be found on Orange Street, as “pockets of free-black households” settled near the African Mutual Relief Society (Milne 2000, 358). Polish and German Jews also “clustered their homes and secondhand clothing shops” on Orange Street in

the mid-nineteenth century (Milne 2000, 358). By the mid-nineteenth century, Five Points had come to house a predominately foreign-born population (approximately 95%) (Milne 2000, 358).

### *Life in the “slum”*

As immigration accelerated in New York City in the early- to mid-nineteenth century, so did competition among working-class men for jobs and decent wages (Yamin 2005, 4). With patriarchs struggling to find work, families in Five Points rarely paid their rent on time, and their rent was costly in relation to the quality of their living quarters (Anbinder 2002, 104). Tenants paid \$8.50 per month to live in dilapidated wooden tenements with poor ventilation, exposure to the elements, and crowdedness due to families often sharing only one or two rooms. Some tenants boarded in the basements, or cellars, of tenements as the rent may have been cheaper, but they ran a risk in doing so. Due to a lack of drainage and sewer systems prior to the turn of the mid-nineteenth century, these basements often flooded with dirty water, garbage, and effluvia from nearby outhouses after heavy rains (Anbinder 2002). The low wages of available work often left families with barely enough money to pay the rent let alone food and other necessities (Anbinder 2002). Women may have worked to contribute to the family-income, but “respectable” work was mostly restricted to domestic servitude which, for some, only paid one dollar per month (Sanger 1858, 491).

As Five Points became known to New York City as a struggling, poor, immigrant neighborhood in the mid-nineteenth century, middle-class society became increasingly interested with what they viewed as a “degraded object of fascination” (Anbinder 2002, 3). Journalists, social reformers, missionaries, and writers visited Five Points and wrote of their experience. Through published descriptions of violence and poverty neighborhood, they cemented its

reputation as a slum, and blamed the “failure” of Five Points on race mixing and poor morals (Baker 2001).

*Prostitution, brothel-keeping, and the law*

The prevalence of prostitution in Five Points is perhaps what fueled the moralizing attitudes of outside commentators most. During this period, “New York had one prostitute for every forty-seven females in the population,” but they congregated in immigrant and poor neighborhoods like Five Points (Hill 1993, 29). Men and women became prostitutes for many reasons, but they commonly chose this line of work because of destitution. Approximately 75% of female prostitutes did not have a husband to rely on for financial support, meaning they were either single or widowed (Sanger 1858, 473). “Respectable” work for working-class women, such as domestic servitude, generally did not offer enough money to survive, especially without a male provider. Prostitution provided the opportunity to earn approximately ten dollars per week (Sanger 1858, 601). Compared to one dollar per week working as a domestic servant, the wages of prostitution attracted women in precarious situations. These wages also attracted unemployed men who found themselves in precarious financial situations. Still, outsiders often did not recognize these factors which may have contributed to a person’s decision to prostitute themselves. From the perspective of many and in the eyes of the law, prostitutes needed to be removed from society to be reformed into “good and honest citizens” (*The New York Herald* 31 July 1843).

Moralists, social reformers, and the police aimed to reduce prostitution in New York City, and much of their attacks centered on Five Points. “Vagrancy” laws provided police one method to control prostitution. These laws targeted prostitutes and others of “ill-fame” described

by “respectable” middle-class and working-class society as immoral individuals, such as drunkards, gamblers, and even the homeless. Vagrants were subject to arrest on-sight without preliminary proof or a warrant. One 1830 vagrancy law stated that "all common prostitutes who have no lawful employment whereby to maintain themselves shall be considered vagrants and may be committed to either the almshouse or the penitentiary” for anywhere from one to six months (Hill 1993, 117). Vagrancy laws targeted prostitutes who worked on the street, while “disorderly house” laws provided a way for the community and police to control prostitutes and brothel-keepers by shutting down brothels that operated in tenements or other buildings. Neighbors of brothels could file a formal complaint to police of a brothel’s disruptive and/or illegal behavior. This gave police the authority to enter the brothel, arrest prostitutes, and gather evidence for the District Attorney to indict the brothel-keeper for operating a “disorderly house” (Hill 1993, 127-129). The brothel-keeper would then be brought to trial where they may have been convicted of the crime, such as in the case of John Donahue, the proprietor of the establishment at 12 Orange Street.

“Disorderly house” had many meanings and may have referred to a gambling, drinking, or prostitution house, or a place where all these activities occurred. In other words, individual disorderly houses may have served multiple functions. Disorderly houses that advertised themselves as brothels may have offered their patrons a place to purchase sexual services as well as socialize, dance, drink, and dine. Although their functions may have differed, the common denominator shared by all establishments deemed by the law as “disorderly houses” is that they displeased neighbors and/or the police. Police sometimes induced or coerced neighbors to make formal complaints so that they could legally proceed with shutting down a disorderly house (Hill 1993, 128). These complaints can be found in disorderly house indictment records. Complaints

often described disorderly houses as “disturbances to the neighborhood,” which may have meant that they displayed loud, lewd, or otherwise “immoral” behavior, or that “foreign” characters of “ill-name and fame” were seen entering the establishment (Hill 1993, 129). In this paper, the disorderly house at 12 Orange Street is referred to as a brothel because prostitution occurred there, but it should be recognized that this may not have been the primary or sole function of the space.

*What was a Five Points brothel like? The historical perspective.*

The most detailed primary source that describes a Five Points brothel is William Sanger’s *History of Prostitution* (1858). William Sanger wrote this book in cooperation with the New York City Police and under the direction of George Matsell, the Justice who heard the complaint about 12 Orange, sentenced the prostitutes to the penitentiary, and later became the police chief of the Sixth Ward. With the goal of decreasing prostitution in the city, Sanger (1858) interviewed 2000 female prostitutes who worked in New York City and ended up in the penitentiary at Blackwell’s Island (home to social “deviants”) to understand why they chose this line of work. Sanger (1858) also visited brothels all over the city, including Five Points, and described different classes of these brothels (*Figure 1*). Sanger (1858) described a third-class brothel as the type that prevailed in “less fashionable,” working-class and immigrant neighborhoods of New York City, such as Five Points (Yamin 2000, 317). He described these brothels as located in the basements of tenements, with brothel staff predominately consisting of three to four foreign-born female prostitutes, “seldom exceeding that number,” mostly from Ireland and Germany (Sanger 1858, 562). According to Sanger (1858), the proprietor of these establishments was typically a man who ran the barroom, served wine to clientele, and handled the money. Prostitutes took their

clients to bedrooms in the back of the house when business commenced “in the evening” and “discontinued at midnight” (Sanger 1858, 562). Although their rents were low, they had very little personal space as the basement was “generally the extent of their accommodation” (Sanger 1858, 561). Though drinking “openly carried on,” order was “well maintained” in third-class brothels (Sanger 1858, 560-562). These brothels attracted men of the working-class, or those on the fringes of the middle-class, such as store clerks. According to Sanger (1858, 500), third-class brothels differed from first-class brothels which attracted an “aristocratic class” of *wealthy*, middle-class men (bankers, lawyers, brokers) with “lavish displays of luxury.”

First Class	Second Class	Third Class	Fourth Class
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attracted “aristocratic class” of clientele with lavish displays of luxury</li> <li>• Drunkenness and “obscurity” were rare</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Attempted the same standard” as first class, but not as lavish</li> <li>• “Less aristocratic class” of clientele</li> <li>• Drunkenness and “obscurity” more common</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3-4 foreign-born prostitutes lived/worked in the basement of a tenement</li> <li>• Front barroom run by the male proprietor of brothel</li> <li>• Served wine</li> <li>• Order was “well maintained”</li> <li>• Respectable clientele (working-class)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Notorious for drunkenness and obscenity</li> <li>• Did not offer additional services that other brothels offered (i.e. meals, live music)</li> <li>• Attracted non-respectable working-class men</li> </ul>

Figure 1: Sanger’s (1858) classes of brothels.

Nineteenth century brothel guides are another source that provide insight into Five Points brothels. They indicate that certain Five Points brothels put on a respectable face and appealed to middle-class respectability to primarily earn this class’ patronage, contrary to Sanger’s (1858) characterization of brothels in working-class immigrant neighborhoods (Hijar 2018). White middle-class men purchased subscriptions for and referred to brothel guides that provided information about the various brothels in the city so that they could locate the “respectable brothels.” According to the guides, respectable brothels were “well conducted,” “orderly,”

“private,” “quiet,” run by “well-mannered young ladies,” and comprised of white middle-class male clientele (Hijar 2018). White men wanted to know this information so they could avoid violence, robbery, and amalgamation, all of which occurred at non-respectable brothels according to brothel guides (Hijar 2018). In one guide from 1839, a “very respectable” Orange Street brothel is mentioned, suggesting that middle-class men did not shy away from Five Points when seeking sexual services, and that they likely enjoyed their experience in these brothels (Figure 2).

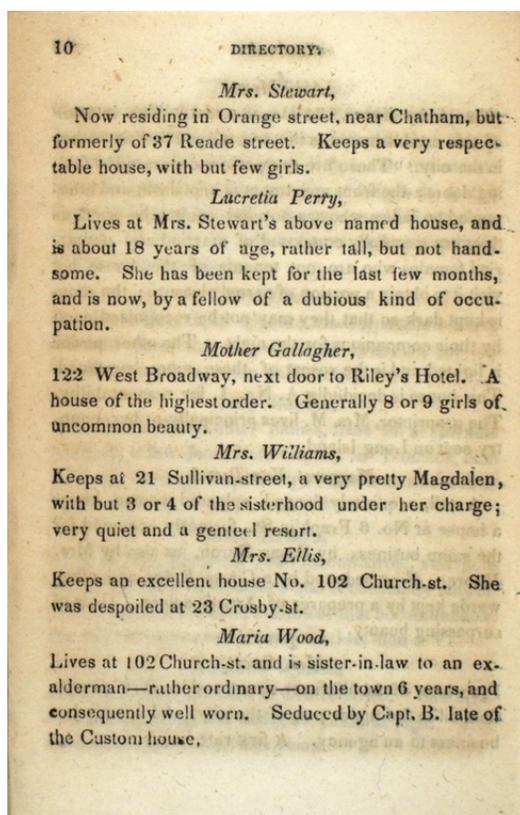


Figure 2: Interior page of *Prostitution Exposed* (New York, 1839). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts (Hijar 2018).

*What was a Five Points brothel like? The archaeological perspective.*

In the late 1990s, archaeologists working for the Foley Square Archaeology Project excavated a privy on Lot 43 of Block 160 of Five Points, the former location of the tenement at

12 Orange Street. The archaeologists interpreted one stratum of the privy as a brothel assemblage based on its material remains and TPQ of 1840.<sup>7</sup> Several objects in the assemblage, such as wide-mouthed flacons and bird cages, are uncommon in other Five Points assemblages yet common in nineteenth century brothel assemblages (Luiz 2019). The TPQ of the archaeological assemblage aligns with the disorderly house indictment of John Donahue in 1843, in which the basement of 12 Orange was referred to as “a rest for prostitutes and other persons of ill name and fame [*sic*] for the purposes of prostitution” (*State ex rel. Blackall et al. Donahue* 1843). The owner of the tenement likely cleared out the contents of the basement after this indictment, indicating that the remains of the assemblage may represent the items in the brothel just before it closed (Yamin 2005). Finally, the *New York Daily Tribune*’s (4 October 1843) description of John Donahue’s trial mentions that he “was tried for keeping a disorderly house and a house of bad repute;” “house of bad repute” typically referred to brothels. Overall, there is substantial evidence to conclude that a brothel operated in the basement of the tenement at 12 Orange Street.

The archaeological evidence from the brothel at 12 Orange Street further indicates that not all Five Points brothels matched Sanger’s description of a third-class brothel. The brothel attracted many patrons as indicated by the presence of 37 chamber pots, 105 wine and liquor bottles, and a “significantly large number of pitchers and serving dishes” in the assemblage, which suggests that more than three to four prostitutes worked there (Yamin 2005, 9-10). The assemblage also included seven wide-mouth flacons that held snacks typically served in an upper-class brothel, like “capers and brandied fruits in alcohol” (Yamin 2005, 11-14). Remains of expensive and exotic foods, like oysters and coffee, demonstrate that the brothel put on a

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<sup>7</sup> TPQ, or terminus post quem, translates to “limit after which.” The TPQ of 1840 implies that the brothel assemblage (Feature AG, AS-III) must have been deposited after 1840.

respectable face to attract large crowds of middle-class clientele and their wallets (Yamin 2005, 14). The location of the brothel in a working-class, immigrant neighborhood associated with high levels of poverty suggests that working-class prostitutes worked in the brothel. The archaeological evidence aligns with this interpretation, as well. The assemblage included cheap dishes and faunal remains found in other working-class assemblages of Five Points, indicating that prostitutes lived according to their working-class status in private but “enjoyed the accoutrements of the middle class” when on-the-job and in the presence of their wealthy middle-class clientele (Yamin 2005, 14). Overall, the material evidence from the brothel at 12 Orange Street shows Five Points brothels could attract wealthy patrons and exhibit qualities of a first-class brothel despite employing working-class staff and being in a working-class neighborhood.

Furthermore, to attract middle-class clientele, Five Points brothels did not need to appear “respectable” in all the ways that Sanger (1858) and brothel guides (Hijar 2018) characterized “respectable brothels.” These sources depicted respectable brothels as those that did not tolerate amalgamation (Sanger 1858; Hijar 2018). The 12 Orange Street brothel likely employed Black and immigrant staff of various ethnicities, while the patrons were likely predominately white. Sanger (1858) and brothel guides also depicted respectable brothels as those that supported heterosexual transactions between female staff and male patrons. The 12 Orange Street brothel likely employed gender nonconforming male and female staff, attracted male and female patrons, and supported the freedom to act on same-sex attraction. While these aspects of the brothel may not have been viewed as respectable by neighbors, the police, or the authors of brothel guides, the brothel at 12 Orange Street still appealed to middle-class patrons and operated as a financially successful establishment.

*A burgeoning queer subculture meets the brothel subculture in mid-nineteenth century NYC*

New York sporting (or “flash”) press publications of the early 1840s (fall of 1841 to the spring of 1843) shed light on the diversity of individuals who participated in the underground economy of prostitution. Sporting culture in the nineteenth century consisted of men who participated in indulgent lifestyles of gambling, drinking, and extra-marital sex (often with female prostitutes) in homosocial environments. These publications “aimed to entertain sporting men about leisure-time activities and erotic entertainments available in New York” (Cohen, Gilfoyle, and Horowitz 2008, 1). The sporting press brought to light provocative stories of prostitutes and brothels while “offering guidance to men young and old intent on navigating the new world of unrestricted pleasure and commercialized leisure in the city” (Cohen, Gilfoyle, and Horowitz 2008, 1). Customers could find these publications all over Manhattan in saloons, oyster bars, elegant brothels, and theatres. Although the term “homosexual” did not crop up until the late nineteenth century (Gilfoyle 1994, 137), New York sporting press publications like *The Whip* and *The Rack* referred to same-sex prostitute-client relationships between men in the city during this time, on the street and within the brothel subculture. The press published stories of “upper-class, older, foreign-born men” who “preyed” on “unemployed lower-class men” who worked as prostitutes (Shockley, Davis, Lustbader, and Dolkart 2018, 20). Male prostitutes may have worked on the street or in brothels/disorderly houses, sometimes alongside female prostitutes (*The New York Herald* 8 September 1842; *The New York Herald* 4 June 1847).<sup>8</sup> The sporting press described men who paid for male prostitutes as “beasts” and “foreign threats to American masculinity, being of either French, English, or Jewish heritage” (Gilfoyle 1994, 136). The sporting press also described these male patrons as effeminate in dress and speech (Cohen,

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<sup>8</sup> The term “male prostitute” sometimes referred to queer men in brothels because they adopted feminine roles and attire and did not “behave like normal heterosexual men” (Gilfoyle 1994, 370). Since the “sharp distinctions between homosexual and heterosexual behavior did not appear until the late nineteenth century, antebellum observers were quite likely describing sexual activity that was later labeled homosexual” (Gilfoyle 1994, 137).

Gilfoyle, and Horowitz 2008, 192). Clearly, these publications are rooted in homophobia, and they may not provide an accurate description of the identities of these individuals nor the nature of their relationships. After all, the sporting press presumed that their targeted audience, sporting men, preferred opposite-sex relationships. Still, these publications confirm the likely presence of “a burgeoning [queer] underground sexual subculture” that intersected with the brothel subculture in mid-nineteenth century New York City and met in other places like saloons and music halls (Shockley, Davis, Lustbader, and Dolkart 2018, 21).<sup>9</sup>

Other mid-nineteenth century newspaper publications hinted toward the queer subculture in New York City. The 1836 grand larceny trial of Mary Jones (birthname Peter Sewally, referred to in newspapers as Beefsteak Pete) provides a first-hand account of this burgeoning queer subculture of the mid-nineteenth century and its intersections with the brothel subculture in Five Points. *The Sun* published the details of the trial on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1836. Mary Jones, a middle-aged Black woman born male (*Figure 3*), was convicted of grand larceny for stealing money from a man named Haslem, a white man with whom she had likely had a sexual encounter. According to *The Sun* (1836), Jones was known to have “prowled about the Five Points and other similar (poor, disreputable) parts of the city, in the disguise of a female, for the purpose of enticing men into the dens of prostitution” (Katz 2001, 80-87). Jones’ testimony indicates that she worked in a brothel on Greene Street, where she dressed in feminine attire, cooked, cleaned, and performed other tasks that aided the operation of the brothel: “I have been in the practice of waiting upon Girls of ill fame and made up their Beds and received the Company at the door and received the money for Rooms and they induced me to dress in Women’s Clothes, saying I

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<sup>9</sup> I chose to characterize this as a “queer” subculture because queer is defined as anything that goes against the dominant (Halperin 1995, 62). These people referenced by the sporting press defied patriarchy and stereotypical notions of masculinity, as well as gender and sexual norms.

looked so much better in them” (legal transcript of prisoner’s examination, note 22 in Katz 2001). According to Gilfoyle (1994, 137), Jones’ work in the brothel likely extended to prostitution, as well, illustrating that certain forms of same-sex attraction were “linked to the brothel subculture during these years.” Even when on trial, Jones dressed in feminine attire and wore a female wig, and she continued to do so for years following the trial as indicated by other newspaper articles that mention her, suggesting a personal proclivity toward the behavior (Katz 2001, 80-87; *The New York Herald* 21 December 1844<sup>10</sup>; *The New York Herald* 13 May 1848). Others shared this proclivity, too. According to her testimony, she “had always attended parties” among other Black people who “dressed in this way,” suggesting that gender nonconformity was common in the queer subculture (note 22 in Katz 2001). In short, Jones’ testimony indicates that gender nonconforming individuals participated in the burgeoning queer subculture of the mid-nineteenth century. Some of these individuals, like Jones, worked in brothels, including those in Five Points.

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<sup>10</sup> In this newspaper article, it is described that upon arrest, officers searched Mary (“Peter”) and found a note, reminiscent of a “love letter,” from a man named Joseph Liness. In the note, Liness took an oath to “be a friend to Peter Sewalry till Death Separates us He giving me the privilege to marry the girl of my choice provided She is beyond a doubt virtuous. I also Swear to tell him everything of the least moment that transpires concerning either of us through Life and this I do voluntarily swear before God & man” (*The New York Herald* 21 December 1844).



Figure 3: Mary Jones, “The Man-Monster” (H.R. Robinson 1836). Mary Jones (birth name Peter Sewally) was a Black, gender nonconforming prostitute who worked in Five Points brothels. She was born male but dressed in women’s clothes for much of her life, much to “respectable” society’s disapproval.

Women who engaged in gender nonconformity and same-sex relationships also participated in the underground queer subculture as prostitutes and patrons. The fact that the public did not accept their behavior when displayed in public may have influenced their desire to engage with the subculture. For instance, when a “very respectably connected young lady who resided near the Battery” was caught “masquerading in men’s clothes, smoking cigars, and indulging in other unfeminine conduct,” the police warned that they would keep an eye on her, and the press hoped she would “avoid further exposure” (*The New York Herald* 12 October 1844). Gender nonconforming and queer women and men “avoided exposure” to those who did not approve of their behavior by visiting certain spaces where people accepted them and may have shared similar identities (Figure 4).



Figure 4: “Sketches of Characters, No. 11.: Females in Masquerade” (*Whip and Satirist of New-York and Brooklyn*, March 5, 1842). This sketch from a sporting press publication hints toward gender nonconformity and same-sex relationships between women in the mid-nineteenth century. Queer brothels provided a safe space for these engagements, but the sporting press still brought critical awareness to them. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society” (Cohen, Gilfoyle, and Horowitz 2008, Figure 44).

### *The queer subculture in the latter half of the nineteenth century*

The queer subculture continued to come alive and meet in basement establishments throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, becoming increasingly more integrated with society (Shockley, Davis, Lustbader, and Dolkart 2018, 21). Pfaff’s, a beer and wine cellar restaurant in the Coleman House Hotel at 645-647 Broadway that operated from the mid-1850s to the late 1860s, is the earliest *known* of these establishments. The patrons of Pfaff’s included queer, Bohemian men, such as Walt Whitman, who described the space as a “vista of cigar and pipe smoke and dim gaslight,” where “drinkers and laughers” met to “eat and drink and carouse”

as in his 1861 poem “The Two Vaults” (Shockley, Davis, Lustbader, and Dolkart 2018, 21). “The Slide,” a basement dive at 157 Bleecker Street, operated in the 1890s and attracted working-class men, and some women of the same class (Chauncey 1994, 34; *The Evening World* 4 January 1892). The name of the dive announced what it offered: “a ‘slide,’ in prostitutes’ jargon of the time, was ‘an establishment where [queer men] dressed as women and solicited men’” (Shockley, Davis, Lustbader, and Dolkart 2018, 22; Chauncey 1994, 68). Male waiters who “painted their faces” and called each other by female names “were billed as the chief attraction of the dive.” They served alcohol to their patrons who could also purchase sexual services from them or female prostitutes in assignation rooms in the back of the basement dive (*The Evening World* 4 January 1892). In 1892, the police closed The Slide, and “the proprietor was convicted of keeping a disorderly house” (Shockley, Davis, Lustbader, and Dolkart 2018, 22).

### *Queering background research*

The brothel at 12 Orange Street operated in a tenement cellar in Five Points, a working-class immigrant neighborhood in Lower Manhattan, at a time when prostitution and brothel-keeping were illegal. Despite this illegality, brothels of all different kinds lined the streets of New York City, especially in Five Points. The brothel subculture was vibrant, and home to a variety of different groups of people. In certain instances, the burgeoning “queer subculture” in New York City intersected with the brothel subculture. Black and immigrant men and women in Five Points may have found financial reason as well as personal reason to enter prostitution and work in “queer brothels.” Though the 12 Orange Street brothel deviated from several characteristics of “respectable” brothels, middle-class men and women still patronized the

brothel. They may have risked their own respectability because of what the brothel offered emotionally and socially, such as a feeling of belonging within the queer subculture. For staff and patrons, engaging in the subculture in a literal underground location, rather than exposing their proclivities to the public, provided a layer of protection from the moralizing attitudes of society and the sting of the law. However, tenement cellars of the nineteenth century generally were uncomfortable places to be, and the staff of the brothel must have reconciled this (see chapter 4). In the next chapter, the historical and archaeological evidence associated with the brothel are analyzed. These pieces of evidence demonstrate that the 12 Orange Street brothel fits the trajectory of the underground queer subculture of nineteenth century New York City. These data also provide insight into the daily lived experience of the brothel for the individuals who inhabited the space.

## **Chapter 4: Archaeological and Historical Evidence of Identity and Lived Experience in the 12 Orange Street Brothel**

This chapter outlines the historical documents and archaeological data that aid in the understanding of the 12 Orange Street brothel in terms of who worked and visited there, and how the space was experienced by its staff and patrons. The brothel is first situated in time and space using maps and a timeline of events pertaining to the brothel. Then, data from the brothel assemblage is provided. The remains from brothel occupation are grouped into assemblages of practice and analyzed for markers of identity. In the following chapter, the historical documents and archaeological data discussed here will be referenced alongside my background research to address my initial research questions.

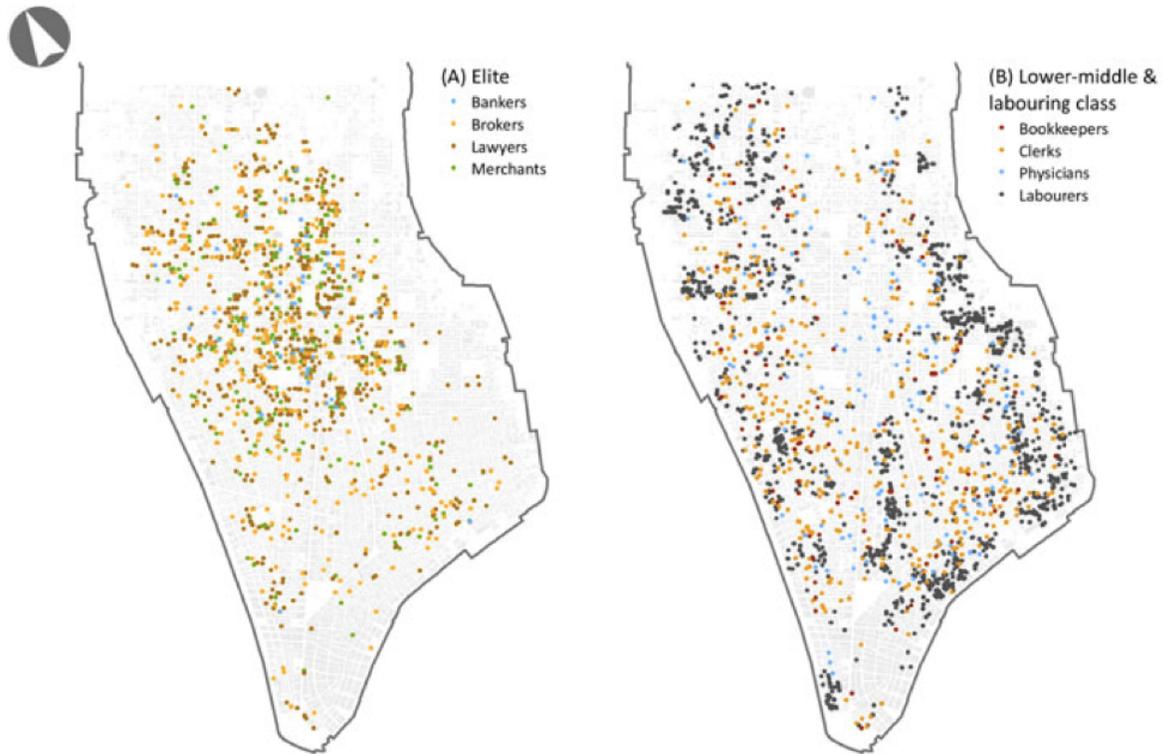
### *Situating the brothel*

The 12 Orange Street brothel was situated in Five Points, the Sixth Ward of the city in lower Manhattan. In nineteenth century New York City, a ward was the smallest political unit, and each ward elected its own officials to the City Council. Moving south on the map of the city, the number of each ward increased consecutively, with the First Ward being the northernmost ward in Upper Manhattan. Certain wards came to be associated with the lower classes and others with the upper classes. In the early 1840s, the period of brothel occupation, the Sixth Ward housed a racially and ethnically diverse working-class population.

As immigration, industrialization, and urbanization accelerated during the nineteenth century, available land decreased and housing became scarce, causing residents to “splinter into areas of widely different environmental and health characteristics” (Baics 2020, 514). The

working-class immigrant residents congregated toward the center of Manhattan or near the waterfront. These enclaves were more densely populated and thus more crowded. Crowdedness and poor sanitation, including a lack of a fresh water supply and sewage disposal, contributed to the prevalence of disease in these areas. Elite residents, those who belonged to the “aristocratic” upper- and middle-class (bankers, lawyers, brokers, and their families) that Sanger (1858) spoke of, tended to congregate away from the center of the city. They settled uptown, separate from the environmental and health hazards of the central wards, such as the Sixth Ward (*Figure 5*). In contrast to sharing a dilapidated wooden tenement with several other families, elites sprawled out in “spacious townhouses, furnished with fresh water, and sewer and gas pipes” and stayed up-to-date with all of the “latest quality standards” as they could afford them (Baics 2020, 528).

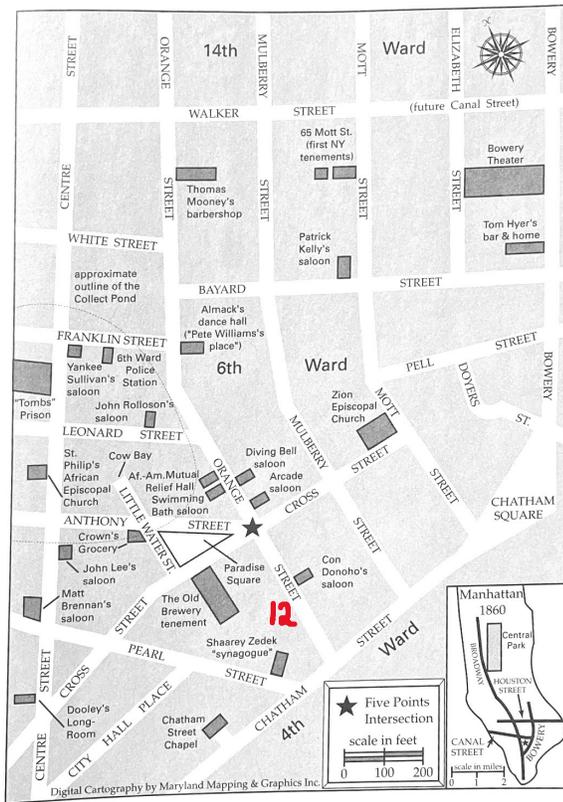
Another reason elites chose to settle uptown is because these areas were “consistently more separated from both industry and commerce,” both of which were prominent in working-class immigrant zones (Baics 2020, 527). Elite New Yorkers “strived to live in” residential-only zones so that they could stay away from nuisance activities like slaughterhouses and “preserve the tranquility of their surroundings” by keeping the hustle and bustle of industry and commerce at bay (Baics 2020, 527).



*Figure 5: Elite and working-class residency patterns in nineteenth century Manhattan (Baics 2020, 523, Figure 2). Though elite and working-class New Yorkers lived amongst each other, the elites tended to congregate in the upper central parts of Manhattan while the working-class tended to congregate in the lower eastern districts and near the river.*

Although the elites and the working-class generally lived in different areas across the city, the experience of those who lived in each zone differed based on social status or race. Even those who lived on the same street or in the same building experienced different living conditions (Baics 2020, 513). Orange Street and its surrounding blocks represented this notion. In the mid-nineteenth century, the demographics of Orange Street splintered at the Five Points intersection (star symbol in *Figure 6*), the main drag of action where the neighborhood's brothels predominated. An Irish population settled south of the intersection, while a Jewish population settled on the southern end of the street (*Figure 7*). The small-frame wooden buildings south of the Five Points intersection at numbers 10, 12, 20, 22, and 24 Orange (later Baxter) Street were some of the oldest and worn-down in the city. Foundation issues and poor construction meant

that the inhabitants of these buildings had to deal with wind, rain, and other elements in their homes. The two-story brick buildings north of the intersection were built on Orange Street in the 1830s (Milne 2000, 359). Jewish residents on Orange Street were more likely to have lived in the wooden tenements while Irish residents were more likely to have lived in brick tenements with relatively better living conditions. African Americans on Orange Street tended to live in the African Society for Mutual Relief if they were offered a place to stay, or nearby in the Old Brewery Tenement, which was often described as filthy, overcrowded, and hotbed of violence. Furthermore, the Old Brewery did not provide furniture or amenities to its tenants (Anbinder 2002). To sum up, the residents of Five Points, Orange Street, and surrounding blocks experienced different living conditions, some more difficult than others.



FIVE POINTS, 1830-1854

Figure 6: Map of Five Points 1830-1854 (Anbinder 2002) and approximate location of No. 12 Orange Street.

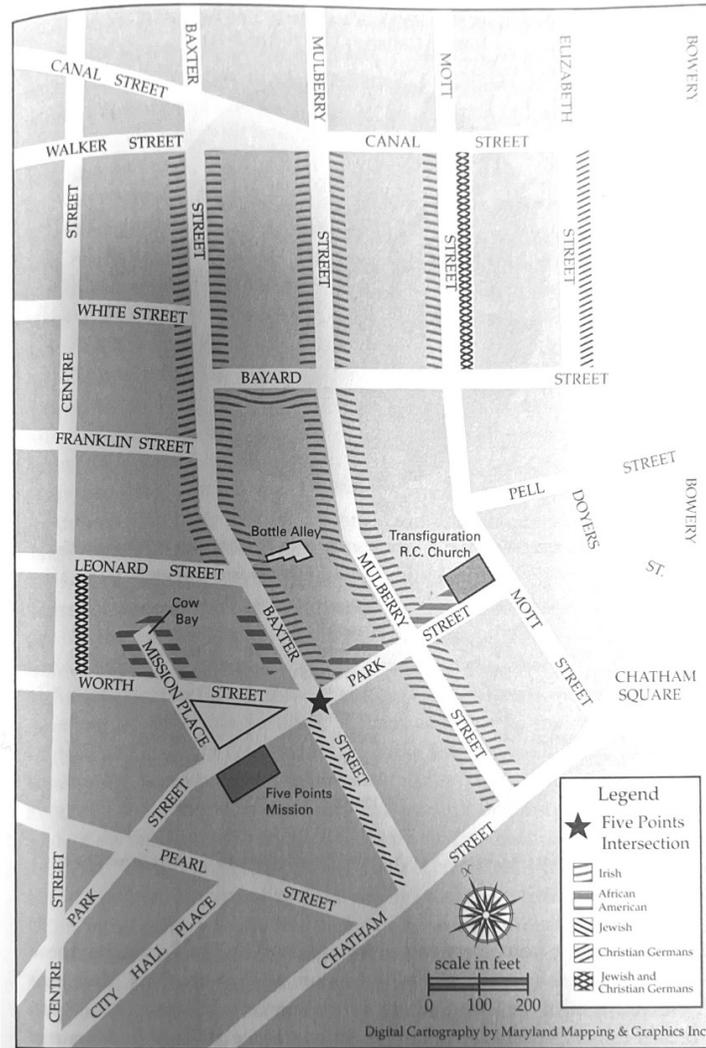


Figure 7: Five Points ethnic and racial enclaves, 1850 (Anbinder 2002, 47). An Irish population settled north of the intersection, while a Jewish population settled on the southern end of Orange (Baxter) street. African Americans lived on Orange Street north of the intersection.

The living conditions of Five Points residents varied within tenements, as well. Typically, the relative status and living conditions of inhabitants who lived on the upper floors was greater than those who lived in the cellars. Inhabitants of tenements usually used the upper floors as residences, and multiple families may have lived on a singular floor. The first floors of tenements were typically used as an artisan’s shop or a working-class family’s residence. The cellars, or basements, of tenements, were considered “the archetype of sub-standard housing” due to their crowdedness, darkness, and proneness to flooding, and they “typically housed the

city's poorest, many of them black, both freed and slaves" (Baics 2020, 513). In 1850, the *New York Daily Tribune* published a series of articles that focused on the conditions of cellars, called "dens of death." The *New York Daily Tribune* (19 June 1850) described the cellars as poorly ventilated, dark, "always more or less damp, often wet... noxious atmospheres." Peak (2006, 43) summarized the "dens of death" articles:

"Built one to two stories below ground level, the ceilings were often too low for a human to stand upright. The main room of the cellar apartment usually had only one window that often could not be opened. The bedrooms in the rear of the cellar had no windows at all. Poor drainage in the streets often caused flooding after a rain, the water sometimes breaking through the foundation and carrying with it mud, garbage, and excrement."

Cellars were subject to the elements, like heavy rains, that worsened the poor conditions of the basement and caused unpleasant sensory realities and water-borne disease. However, the inhabitants of some tenement cellars cleaned, decorated, and set lighting to ameliorate these conditions and appeal to a particular class of clientele, such as in the case that they ran a boardinghouse or brothel (Peak 2006, 43). The brothel at 12 Orange Street is one example of a tenement cellar that attracted middle-class clientele because of the effort of its staff to mask and improve the negative aspects of their built environment (*Figure 8*). The material remains of the brothel illuminate certain projects that the staff of the brothel enacted daily to appeal to middle-class patrons.



*Figure 8: A photograph (for an 1872 Board of Health Report) of what the tenement at 12 Orange Street probably resembled (Yamin 2000 vol. II, Figure 114).*

### *The brothel assemblage*

In the 1990s, Rebecca Yamin directed archaeological investigations to excavate the remains of Five Points that lie underneath the construction site for Foley Square in New York City. Among the remains, archaeologists excavated a privy (Feature AG) on Lot 43 of Block 160 of New York City, the former location of the tenement at 12 Orange Street (*Figure 9; Figure 10*). They interpreted one stratum of the privy, AS-III, as a “brothel assemblage” based on its material remains and TPQ of 1840.<sup>11</sup> The date of the assemblage also aligns with the disorderly house indictment of John Donahue in 1843. On July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1843, Edward Blackall, a tinsmith who lived at 12 ½ Orange Street, and Robert Gordon, a storekeeper at 10 Orange Street, complained to police justice George Matsell about a “disorderly house” run by John Donahue in the basement of the tenement at 12 Orange Street in Five Points, lower Manhattan. John Donahue operated “a rest for prostitutes and other persons of ill name and fame [*sic*] for the purposes of prostitution,” where “great numbers of characters” were “in the nightly practice of reveling until late and improper hours of night, dancing, drinking, and carousing to the great disgrace of the

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<sup>11</sup> TPQ, or terminus post quem, translates to “limit after which.” The TPQ of 1840 implies that the brothel assemblage (Feature AG, AS-III) must have been deposited after 1840.

neighborhood” (*State ex rel. Blackall et al. Donahue* 1843; *Figure 11*). Therefore, the TPQ of 1840 suggests that the owner of the tenement abruptly cleared out the contents of the basement after this indictment, meaning the remains of the assemblage likely represent the items in the brothel just before it closed (Yamin 2005).



*Figure 9: Block 160 excavations, 1991 (Yamin 2000, vol. I, Figure 5).*

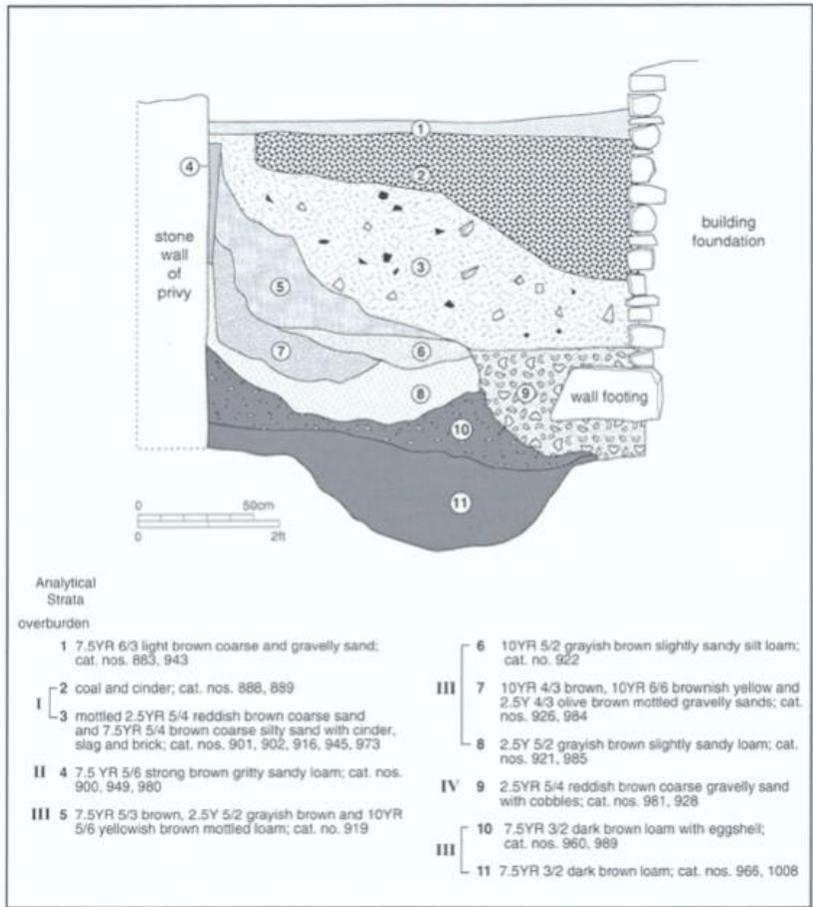


Figure 100. Lot 43, Feature AG, stone-lined privy. Profile of fill layers in western half.

Figure 10: Lot 43, Feature AG, stone-lined privy (Yamin 2000, vol II, Figure 100). AS-III is representative of brothel occupation.

Edw Blackall  
 in B  
 Wm Drake  
 M  
 July 28-1843  
 Wm Drake  
 J W Drake  
 Ubitaper  
 Edward Blackall  
 12<sup>th</sup> Orange St  
 Robert Gordon  
 41 Orange St

City of New York 1843

Edward Blackall of  
 No 12 1/2 Orange St and Robert  
 Gordon of No 10 Orange St being  
 duly sworn deposes and says that  
 the basement of premises No 12  
 Orange St occupied by John Donahue  
 is a Disorderly House, viz  
 a resort for prostitutes and other  
 persons of ill name fame for  
~~the purpose of prostitution~~, where  
 great numbers of such characters  
 are in the nightly practice of residing  
 until late and improper hours of  
 the night, to the great disgrace of the  
 neighborhood.

Subscribed and sworn to before me  
 July 28 1843

Edward Blackall  
 Robert Gordon

Wm. M. Smith  
 (Notary Public)

Warrant in 1843

Figure 11: The indictment document (State ex rel. Blackall et al. Donahue 1843). Courtesy of the New York City Municipal Archives.

Rebecca Yamin and her team hypothesized that the contents used in the barroom of the brothel, such as tableware to serve food to guests, “were deposited in the privy before the contents of the individual chambers” (Yamin 2000, vol. II, 332). The statistics from the assemblage confirm the validity of this hypothesis. The bottom layers in the deposit (layers 10 and 11 in *Figure 10*) include 83.3% of the tea- and tableware, a significantly greater proportion than the overlying deposits (layers 5-8 in *Figure 10*). Items from the upper layers 5-8, then,

likely represent “things from individual boudoirs [or bedrooms], the contents of which might have been thrown into the privy last” (Yamin 2000, vol. II, 332; “boudoir” is associated with women’s bedrooms).

In my analysis of the remains, assemblages of practice were created from the remains of Feature AG to interpret the daily projects enacted by staff and the multi-sensory experience of the brothel. This section of the chapter begins with an overview of the findings from the “brothel assemblage” (Feature AG, AS-III), focusing on the faunal and material remains. Then, the findings are grouped into assemblages of practice based on how they would have been used by staff and patrons in the daily activities of the brothel. Finally, the material remains are examined in conjunction with historical evidence for markers of identity, focusing on race, gender, and sexuality to determine who enacted these projects and inhabited this space.

### *Material remains*

Several types of material remain distinguish Feature AG (AS-III) from the other deposits in Five Points and suggest that this assemblage represents a brothel run by working-class staff that attracted large crowds of middle-class clientele. Archaeologists discovered 30 decorated chamber pots in the assemblage, indicating the brothel accommodated large crowds of people. Further evidence that the brothel brought in many patrons includes 20 pitchers, 17 serving dishes and 5 platters, 34 muffin plates, 22 twifflers, 14 cup plates (either used as coasters for teacups or for wine glasses), portions of 15 teaset, 105 wine/liquor bottles (99 for wine, 5 for beer, and 1 for whiskey), and 87 drinking vessels (66 tumblers, 11 stemware, and 10 firing glasses) in the assemblage (Yamin 2000, vol. II). The more expensive and elegant pieces in the assemblage were likely used and put on display for the purpose of impressing and serving middle-class

guests, while others were likely used by the working-class staff when not working. For example, certain tea sets were decorated in Oriental Scenery, a type of pattern common in working-class Five Points deposits (Yamin 2000, vol. II). The staff of the brothel may have used this set when serving tea amongst themselves. Other tea sets were as “elegant as the porcelains recovered on sites associated with upper-class New Yorkers,” such as a complete set of Chinese export porcelain (Yamin 2000, vol. II, 325). Wide-mouth flacons that “likely held brandied fruits in alcohol, olive oil, capers,” or other expensive delicacies served in a brothel further demonstrate the middle-class signature of the brothel assemblage (Yamin 2000, vol. II., 325). Finally, three decorative bird feeders of a type that have “previously only been recovered from middle-class sites in New York” were found in the brothel assemblage (Yamin 2000, vol. II, 327). Bird feeders like these were also found in a respectable mid-nineteenth century brothel, one that attracted middle-class clientele, at 24/27 Endicott Street in Boston, Massachusetts (Luiz 2019).

Other material items in the assemblage include those related to lighting, sewing, personal hygiene and care, and smoking and snuff. Six glass lighting components were recovered, including components from float lamps, which could be carried from one room to another. A group of sewing materials found in the assemblage, such as hooks, eyes, straight pins, thimbles, a needle case, and lace bobbins “suggest the contents of a sewing kit” (Yamin 2005, 11). In terms of personal care and hygiene, three perfume bottles, a nursing shield, three female urinals (used by women confined to bed, probably with venereal disease), 39 medicinal bottles (one used for venereal disease, others for stomach distress), a toothbrush, eyeglasses, fan parts, mirror fragments, combs, a ceramic pot labeled “AMAILLE, s.d. Vinaigrier” (presumably a douche), a syringe (may have been used for douching), and a hairbrush were found in AS-III (Yamin 2005). The assemblage also includes 118 smoking pipes, but only 43 could be identified. Of the 43

identifiable pipes, “a total of 21 different pipe styles are represented, only two of which were found in other Five Points features” (Yamin 2000, vol. II, 327). This suggests that a diverse group of people inhabited and visited the brothel at 12 Orange Street. Some pipes (i.e. no. 671) feature a thistle motif. Thistles are the national flower of Scotland under English rule, suggesting that someone with connections to “Scottish politics or national identity” may have been associated with the brothel (Yamin vol. VI, 193). Finally, two pipes featured Masonic symbols (nos. 700, layer 8, and 809), suggesting that men with connections to the fraternity associated with the brothel (Yamin vol. VI, 205).

Items related to contraception are not prominent in the brothel assemblage. Prostitutes may have used Vaseline and copper pennies as a contraceptive system. A few copper pennies were found in the brothel assemblage, but there is no evidence of Vaseline (Yamin 2005, 10). Prostitutes may have also used a douche and syringe to prevent pregnancy. One ceramic pot labeled “AMAILLE, s.d. Vinaigrier” and one syringe were found in the assemblage (Yamin 2005, 10).

### *Faunal remains*

The faunal remains in the assemblage further demonstrate that working-class staff ran the brothel and served expensive foods to appeal to middle-class clientele. The staff of the brothel cooked less expensive meals for themselves using cheaper cuts of meat when not in the presence of guests. Of the identifiable bone fragments excavated from Feature AG, AS III, 66% are the remains of mammals, 28% are the remains of fish, and 6% are the remains of birds (*Figure 6*) (Milne and Crabtree 2000). Domestic pets, such as dogs and cats, and commensal rodents make up 20% of the identifiable mammal remains, while the rest are comprised of moderately priced

and inexpensive cuts of beef, pork, and mutton that the working-class staff likely ate when “off-the-clock” (Milne and Crabtree 2000). When in the presence of clientele, the staff of the brothel prepared and served expensive cuts of meat, like veal and rack of mutton, which are exhibited in higher proportion in this assemblage than neighboring Five Points assemblages. The staff of the brothel likely sat and ate expensive meals like these with their clientele. Other expensive meals that were served when in the presence of guests include salmon, the most expensive type of fish on the market as it had to be important and preserved, oysters, mussels, and lobster. The staff of the brothel likely purchased their foods from local markets and shops or street vendors (Milne and Crabtree 2000).

According to Milne and Crabtree (2000, 147), the prostitutes who worked in the brothel were “unlikely to have cooked for themselves” and may have hired a cook. The cook most likely had a “rural background” as indicated by the presence rabbit and squirrel remains in the assemblage. Rabbit and squirrel bones are rarely found in Five Points assemblages as well as most urban nineteenth century faunal assemblages. They are “far more common in rural assemblages” (Milne and Crabtree 2000, 147). Certain material remains also “contrast dramatically with the urban surroundings in which they were used” (Yamin 2005, 9). Rural motifs on certain cup plates featured “cows against a woodland background” (Yamin 2000, vol. II, 325). Perhaps these items belonged to the cook. If so, the cook may have been a freed African American/former slave from a rural area in the south. Cattle herding was “one of many plantation tasks reserved for slaves,” and some slaves in the south etched their tobacco pipes with motifs of cattle and herding, showing that they felt a connection to this activity which was also prevalent in Central Africa (Breen and Innes 1980, 81-83).

An unusual faunal object found in the privy is a large, polished cowrie shell which may have been a “keepsake, curio, or a memento” (Milne and Crabtree 2000, 53; *Figure 12*). Cowries are commonly found in the Indian Ocean and parts of the African coast. During the time of the transatlantic slave trade and until the twentieth century, cowries “served as a West African form of currency” (Jamieson 1995, 49). Africans brought this symbol of wealth with them to the Americas and passed them down through generations. In one seventeenth century burial from Newton Plantation, loved ones placed a necklace of cowrie shells around the neck of an adult male, along with other goods like an earthenware pipe from Ghana (Handler and Lange 1978, 129-131; Handler 1981 as cited in Jamieson 1995, 49). Several African American burials of the antebellum period included cowrie shells as grave goods (Jamieson 1995). Due to the association of cowrie shells with African American culture during this period, the cowrie shell found in this assemblage may have been owned by a person of African descent who worked in the brothel, either as a cook, housekeeper, or prostitute (Milne and Crabtree 2000, 153).



*Figure 12: Polished cowrie shell from Feature AG (Yamin 2000, vol. II, Figure 50).*

### *Assemblages of practice*

Assemblages of practice are entanglements (Hodder 2019), meaning the things in each assemblage are related to each other based on their interdependent use by humans to accomplish

certain tasks of everyday life, like decorating, cleaning, or tending to personal hygiene. Creating assemblages of practice provides insight into the daily lived experience in the brothel, the projects enacted by staff, and the activities partaken by patrons. Sensory aspects like taste and smell can be interpreted based on how the staff and patrons of the brothel experienced the space because of these practices. In accordance with Antczak and Beaudry's (2019) methodological "guidelines" for creating assemblages of practice, I first revisited existing quantitative data (artifacts and faunal data) collected from the Foley Square Project (Yamin 2000, vol. IV; Yamin 2000, vol. II). I referenced Luiz' (2019) groupings of assemblages of practice from similar artifacts associated with a mid-nineteenth century brothel at 27/29 Endicott Street to guide my own groupings of the 12 Orange Street brothel artifacts into assemblages of practice. The assemblages of practice that I created are as follows: setting the lighting, meal preparation, meal-time, "play-time" and child-care, sewing/tailoring, "getting ready/self-care" (personal hygiene/adornment), cleaning/storage, decoration/display, and recreation/leisure (partially adopted from Luiz 2019). I created a chart to indicate the artifacts and faunal remains from AS-III that coincide with each of these assemblages of practice (*Figure 13*).

Many projects (represented by assemblages of practice) enacted by the staff, such as preparing meals and decorating, had the purpose of curating a pleasant multi-sensory experience in the brothel that ameliorated the conditions of tenement cellars, or "dens of death." Sometimes the staff used the built environment to their advantage to achieve this goal. For example, strategically setting the lighting in the dark basement allowed the staff to create a "moody" ambience. Based on the associated layers of lamps, the staff seemingly made different lighting choices in the bedrooms versus the barroom. In the bedrooms, they used float lamps, which could be carried around. In the barroom, they used oil lamps, which generally were not moved or

carried around. This allowed the staff to deliberately place these oil lamps in a way that drew attention to the more attractive aspects of the basement, such as the elegantly set table with expensive table-ware. In addition, storing away materials associated with child care and sewing maintained the ambience of the space by “separating” the brothel from the working-class neighborhood and tenement it occupied. The vision of patrons was directed to areas of the brothel that the staff wanted them to see. By curating a pleasant multi-sensory experience that masked the conditions of “dens of death” and hid remnants of working-class life, the staff successfully attracted middle-class clientele and their wallets. They created a physically comfortable space where staff and patrons could focus on leisure, social interactions, and self-expression rather than unpleasant smells or sounds. Minimizing negative sensory conditions and creating ambience culminated in a brothel environment where staff and patrons felt “detached” from the outside world, emotionally and physically. These ideas are expressed in chapter 1 and explored again in chapter 5.

<b>Setting the Lighting</b> Oil lamps Font lamps Float lamps	<b>Meal Preparation</b> Stove parts Whetstone Deep dish/pan Mixing bowl Most faunal remains (veal, pork, etc.)	<b>Meal-time</b> With guests: “Fancy” dinner dishes “Fancy” tea-sets Wine glasses/tumblers Wine bottles Serving decanter Serving caster/cruet Olive fork Flacons Pitchers Salmon, veal, etc.  Without guests: Porringer “Working-class” dishes Pork, chicken, etc.	<b>Play-time and Child Care</b> Child’s tea set Child cup Dolls and figurines	<b>Sewing/Tailoring/Upholstery</b> Darner Lace bobbin Needle case Darner Straight pin Tack Beads
<b>Getting Ready: Personal Hygiene + Adornment</b> Perfume bottles Toothbrushes Wash Bowls Hairbrush Medicine bottles Buttons	<b>Saving Money</b> American coins Piggy banks Purse/wallet parts	<b>Cleaning/Storage</b> Blacking bottle (used to clean kitchen stoves) Drawer pulls Demi-johns Toby jug	<b>Decorating</b> Flower pots Bird feeders Footed compote Furniture glass	<b>Recreation + Leisure</b> Marbles Snuff bottles Tobacco pipes Whiskey bottles Slate board

Ointment pots Chamber pots Female urinal Nursing shield				
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*Figure 13: Artifacts and faunal remains from AS-III (Yamin 2000 vol. IV) and their respective assemblages of practice. Partially adopted from Luiz (2019).*

*Identity of staff and patrons: race, gender, sexuality*

For the operation of a brothel to take place and attract great numbers of people required a staff of prostitutes, cooks, servants, and housekeepers. These roles may have overlapped for certain individuals. John Donahue rented the basement, and it is possible that he took part in the daily activities of the brothel, such as tending the bar. However, it is also possible that he played a role from afar, renting out the basement to the staff for a periodic cut of the profits. The cook planned and prepared meals throughout the day for the other members of the staff and in the evening for guests. The housekeeper cleaned up the remnants of the previous night’s revelries. Prostitutes and servants entertained and tended to their middle-class guests. Prostitutes ate meals, socialized, and danced with them in the barroom, and provided sexual services in the brothel’s private assignation rooms. In short, the staff of the brothel played a variety of roles necessary for the brothel to successfully function.

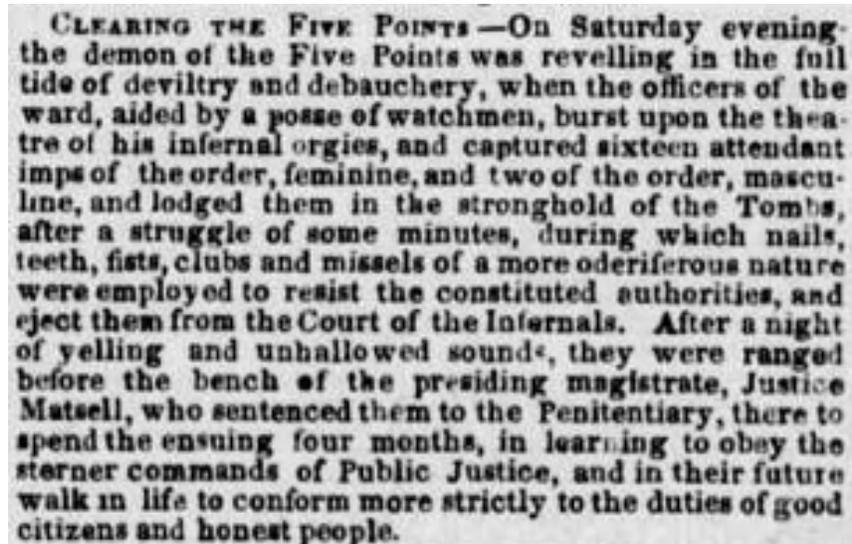
Given the demographics of Five Points in the mid-nineteenth century, it is likely that the staff of the brothel was predominately Black and foreign born. By the mid-nineteenth century, there was an estimated 90% immigrant population and 5% African American population in Five Points (Milne 2000, 358; Milne 2002, 139). The presence of a cowrie shell in the assemblage, as well as the proximity of 12 Orange to African American homes and the African American Society for Mutual Relief, provides additional evidence toward African ancestry. Other material evidence of racial or ethnic identity is lacking in the assemblage, but since Orange Street housed

a predominately Irish and Jewish population in the mid-nineteenth century, it is likely that staff of these backgrounds worked in the brothel, as well.

The racial identity of the brothel clientele appears to have been predominately white. The middle-class material culture in the brothel demonstrates that the staff appealed to this class of clientele, who, in the mid-nineteenth century, was predominately white. Other material evidence of white patronage includes tobacco pipes. Several tobacco pipes show connections to Scottish heritage via thistle motifs (nos. 671, 693) and Scottish manufacturer marks (no. 665). Other pipes are similar in form and decoration to pipes from England circa 1820-1840 (nos. 646, 655, 662, 672, 688, 689). One pipe (no. 698) was made in Holland. These pipes with connections to Scotland, England, and Holland are associated with the bedrooms and barroom, meaning some may have belonged to the brothel staff. No pipe in the brothel assemblage was manufactured in New York City/the United States as several pipes in other Five Points assemblages were (Yamin 2000, vol. VI). In short, the patrons of the brothel were likely predominately white, but they may not have been born in the United States.

Men and women likely worked at the 12 Orange Street brothel. The strongest evidence for this is an article titled “Clearing the Five Points,” published by *The New York Herald* (31 July 1843). This article described a police raid that occurred in Five Points on July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1843, one day after Edward Blackall and Joseph Gordon’s complaint about the brothel at 12 Orange Street (*The New York Herald* 31 July 1843). During this raid, officers of the Sixth Ward arrested 16 “feminine” and 2 “masculine” prostitutes. Justice Matsell, the same justice who received Blackall and Gordon’s complaint, ordered the raid and sentenced the prostitutes to four months in penitentiary, likely at Blackwell’s Island, where he hoped they would learn to “conform more strictly to the duties of good citizens and honest people” (*The New York Herald* 31 July 1843;

Figure 14). The short timeframe between Blackall and Gordon's complaint to Justice Matsell and this police raid suggests that the 12 Orange Street brothel was the target of the raid. The police obtained the "disorderly house" complaint they needed to enter the brothel, and they acted on it.



**CLEARING THE FIVE POINTS**—On Saturday evening the demon of the Five Points was revelling in the full tide of deviltry and debauchery, when the officers of the ward, aided by a posse of watchmen, burst upon the theatre of his infernal orgies, and captured sixteen attendant imps of the order, feminine, and two of the order, masculine, and lodged them in the stronghold of the Tombs, after a struggle of some minutes, during which nails, teeth, fists, clubs and missels of a more oderiferous nature were employed to resist the constituted authorities, and eject them from the Court of the Infernals. After a night of yelling and unhallowed sounds, they were ranged before the bench of the presiding magistrate, Justice Matsell, who sentenced them to the Penitentiary, there to spend the ensuing four months, in learning to obey the sterner commands of Public Justice, and in their future walk in life to conform more strictly to the duties of good citizens and honest people.

Figure 14: "Clearing the Five Points" (*The New York Herald* 31 July 1843).

Though men and women worked at the brothel, they may not have conformed to gender norms. The *New York Herald* (31 July 1843) referred to the arrested prostitutes as "masculine" and "feminine," not "male" and "female" as typical in other mid-nineteenth century newspapers that described brothels with male and female staff (*The New York Herald* 8 September 1842; *The New York Herald* 4 June 1847). In the mid-nineteenth century, a universal term for what we now understand as "cross-dressing" did not appear in literature (Shockley, Davis, Lustbader, and Dolkart 2018), meaning it is possible that the language used by *The New York Herald* (1843) was an effort to explain something that society did not have a "name" for, similar to the way journalists referred to "cross-dressing" with phrases like "woman masquerading in men's clothes" (*The New York Herald* 12 October 1844).

Further suggesting that gender nonconforming staff worked at 12 Orange are the linguistic connections shared by this article in *The New York Herald* (31 July 1843) and an article in *The New York Herald* (9 March 1842) that described the arrest of Mary Jones, a Black, gender-nonconforming prostitute. Both articles evoke an animal-like, “beastly” image of these individuals, potentially referring to their gender nonconforming and queer identities. Mary Jones is specifically referred to as a “beast in the shape of a man” (*The New York Herald* 9 March 1842), while the “feminine” and “masculine” prostitutes employed “nails, teeth, fists, clubs and missels” when resisting arrest (*The New York Herald* 31 July 1843). Mary Jones “made fight,” too (*The New York Herald* 9 March 1842). In both articles, the police are given credit for “conquering” the prostitutes, and the prostitutes are sentenced to months in penitentiary where it was “hoped” they would be “tamed” or reformed to good, respectable citizens (*The New York Herald* 9 March 1842; *The New York Herald* 31 July 1843).

In relation to sexuality, certain objects in the assemblage suggest that at least one woman who worked in the brothel participated in heterosexual relationships. The child care assemblage of practice included dolls and figurines, a child’s cup, and a child’s tea set piece. Whether the sexual encounter that produced a child (or children) took place outside or inside the brothel is unknown. Other items that are ambiguous when it comes to sexuality in the brothel include female urinals (used when bed-ridden) and certain medicine bottles that imply at least one woman who worked at the brothel suffered from venereal disease. Whether the woman obtained the disease through sex with a man or a woman is unknown.

Despite potential evidence of heterosexuality in the assemblage, the *New York Herald* (31 July 1843) article suggests that 12 Orange housed a “queer brothel” because gender nonconforming male and female prostitutes likely worked in the brothel. In the mid-nineteenth

century, this was certainly plausible considering the intersections of the brothel and queer subcultures (highlighted by the sporting press). Much like *The Slide*, the patrons may have visited the brothel seeking to engage in romantic or flirtatious same-sex relations that could be extended to sexual transactions in the assignation rooms if the patrons desired.

The limited number of materials in the assemblage related to contraception supports the interpretation of a queer brothel. The evidence of contraception includes the AMAILLE ceramic pot (1) that stored vinegar and a syringe (1). These devices may have been used for douching, which, in the nineteenth century, was believed to prevent pregnancy. However, it is unknown whether these materials were used for contraception as opposed to other purposes. Plus, these materials are not specific to brothel assemblages. Vaginal syringes in low, single-digit quantities have also been “excavated in the context of working- and middle-class homes in the Eastern United States” (Potter and Ferrier 2006; Wilkie 2003, as cited in Eichner and Wilkie 2015, 3). If the ceramic pot and syringe were used for contraception, this evidence of contraception is conspicuously lacking when compared to other nineteenth century brothel assemblages. For example, the assemblage from a mid-nineteenth century brothel at 27/29 Endicott Street in Boston, Massachusetts had parts from at least 19 syringes (Eichner and Wilkie 2015, 3). Considering the likelihood that the brothel attracted many patrons, as suggested by an unusually large number of chamber pots in the assemblage and the indictment’s descriptor of “great numbers of people” in the brothel (*State ex rel. Blackall et al. Donahue* 1843), the relative lack of contraceptives suggests that this was not a “heterosexual brothel,” but a queer brothel.

*An escape from the outside world*

Evidence points to Black and immigrant staff, white patronage, and gender nonconformity and queer identities in the brothel at 12 Orange Street. Though the brothel offered the ability to have sex or romantic relationships with those of the same-sex in a non-traditional or “non-respectable” manner, this was not the only reason 12 Orange attracted so many people from completely different wards of Manhattan. The brothel offered an escape from the judgements of the outside world, and the ability to socialize with other people who identified with the queer subculture. The staff of the brothel created a lively environment with ambience that upheld a pleasant sensory experience, both physically and emotionally. Within this context, the inhabitants of the brothel may have forgotten or overlooked their location in a “den of death” as it must not have felt like one at all. Ultimately, neighbors and police shattered the illusion of privacy and freedom in the brothel. Dominant society felt a sense of pride when these social “deviants” were captured and extracted from society. They treated them like beasts, not only for their gender and sexual proclivities, but for their “amalgamation propensities” (*The New York Herald* 9 March 1842). These ideas are explored in relation to my initial research questions in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5: From “Den of Death” to Queer Brothel

Understanding the past is as much about the sources prioritized as it is the sources available. In this research, I analyzed newspaper articles, indictment records, and archaeological materials to answer these questions: Who were the staff and patrons of the brothel? Why did these groups of people work at and patronize the brothel? What was the lived, sensory experience of the brothel for staff and patrons? These questions are answered in narrative format in chapter 1. In this chapter, I answer them by drawing on the two theories applied in this research: queer theory and sensory archaeology.

### *The intersection of two subcultures: a “queer brothel”*

The brothel at 12 Orange Street was queer in every sense of the word as it stood in opposition to the “normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (Halperin 1995, 62). While respectable society criticized the brothel subculture in New York City, in the early 1840s the sporting press brought a sort of “acceptance” of the subculture so long as it adhered to dominant ideologies regarding gender and sexuality. The sporting press advocated for the “normal,” “legitimate,” and “respectable” brothels described by Sanger (1858) and advertised in nineteenth century brothel guides (Hijar 2018). In their publications, the sporting press spoke to white, heterosexual men and satirized those who did not fit this mold. Absorbing the ideals of white, middle-class, patriarchal society, “respectable” brothels promoted heterosexual interactions between female prostitutes with white skin and white men who wore “proper” clothes and behaved as ladies and gentlemen. At the 12 Orange Street brothel, Black and foreign-born staff mixed with white patrons. Gender nonconformity and same-sex relationships were freely displayed within the brothel.

The brothel at 12 Orange Street, then, represented the intersection of two subcultures, the queer and brothel subcultures. The queer subculture carved their own space within society through this underground meeting place where they operated within their own definition of respectability and expressed themselves freely. Their definition of respectability incorporated certain functions of “respectable brothels.” For example, the staff served elaborate and expensive meals and wine to appeal to the tastes of their middle-class guests, much like a first-class brothel. Though incorporating functions like these, the brothel offered much more than delicious foods and alcohol. The brothel alleviated pressures to conform to “respectable” ideas of gender and sexuality within the privacy of the brothel that lacked windows to the outside world. At 12 Orange, it was acceptable to dress in the clothes of the opposite sex, lock arms and be romantic with individuals of the same-sex, and have sex with people of a different race or ethnicity. While respectable society frowned upon amalgamation, gender nonconformity, and same-sex relationships, in the queer brothel, staff and patrons could engage in these things without fear.

#### *The transformation of a tenement cellar*

The gender nonconforming and queer staff of the brothel transformed a “den of death” into a lively establishment that provided a sense of detachment from the moralizing tendencies of “respectable” society and ameliorated the negative sensory aspects of their built environment. They created a space where their white, middle-class patrons felt comfortable, not only in relation to gender and sexuality expression, but also their physical experience in the brothel. The staff of the brothel conducted multiple projects throughout the day, like setting the lighting and decorating, to create ambience in the brothel. These projects upheld a pleasant sensory

experience in the brothel so that staff and patrons could enjoy themselves rather than be distracted by unpleasant smells and other displeasing conditions common in tenement cellars.

As day turned into night, the brothel came alive, and staff and patrons may have felt as though they were in a separate world. In the queer brothel, staff and patrons did not have to worry about how they were being perceived because everyone in the brothel shared similar desires and proclivities. Differences in class, race, and ethnicity did not matter as much in this context as they did in the outside world. Despite this feeling of detachment, the brothel could not have been any more entangled with the outside world. They needed the outside world to keep their world going. Brothel-staff needed to purchase their goods from vendors, who may have questioned a working-class person's ability to afford expensive foods like salmon. Though neighbors could not see the underground operations of the brothel, they could witness a variety of people entering in and out of the basement at 12 Orange Street. The brothel was enmeshed in its social and physical surroundings, and though staff and patrons had "escaped" the outside world for some time, the power of dominant society and its agents of status quo eventually invaded and exposed its façade of freedom.

Amalgamation, gender nonconformity, and queerness may have been acceptable within the underground queer subculture, but not in the dominant, "respectable" world above. These characteristics of the brothel provoked "respectable" society's moralizing tendencies. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that this brothel caught the attention of neighbors and the police, nor does it come as a surprise that John Donahue faced a particularly harsh penalty for being the proprietor of this establishment (Yamin 2005, 7).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Most "disorderly house" proprietors received only a "slap on the wrist" or "vacated their places of business when indicted which they correctly surmised would lead to a dismissal of the charges" (Anbinder 2001, 219). John Donahue was arrested, held on \$300 bail, and convicted of the crime (Yamin 2005, 7).

### *Understanding the brothel from a queer and sensory perspective*

When interpreting the data and evidence from a queer perspective, the possibility that the 12 Orange Street brothel fits the queer subculture of the mid-nineteenth century becomes plausible and credible. Understanding who worked in the brothel aids in the understanding of the brothel's function as a space where certain social barriers upheld by "respectable" society dissipated. This perspective also provides context for why neighbors and police aimed to shut down the brothel, and why John Donahue faced such a harsh penalty in comparison to other proprietors of disorderly houses (Yamin 2005, 7). The brothel operated at a time when the sporting press promoted and brought attention to intersections of brothel and queer culture. With this growing awareness, certain moralizing attitudes strengthened, and the community and police banded together to enforce their definition of respectability.

The sensory approach contributes a multidimensional understanding of the daily lived experience and practices of the marginalized inhabitants of the brothel, humanizing and bringing their story to life in ways that can be difficult to access in the historical record alone, except for a few cases (i.e. Mary Jones). This approach also contributes to our understanding of the sensuous motives for human behavior. For example, although destitution is commonly cited as a motive for prostitution (and certainly is in many cases), this may not have been the only reason that prostitutes entered this line of work. Working in brothels opened opportunities to behave and socialize in ways that respectable society did not permit. These aspects of working at the brothel must have motivated many individuals beyond just the potential financial benefits of their work.

### *Queerness cannot be erased*

Perhaps the most fitting way to end this story is with the Great Flood of August 1843. Just a week following the police raid in Five Points, this flood ravished New York City's tenement cellars, or "dens of death" (*The New York Herald* 24 August 1843). Soon after the police wiped the brothel of its staff, the flood wiped the cellar at 12 Orange Street of all remnants of the brothel. This safe space created by the queer subculture existed no longer. But this did not mean that the queer subculture did not go on. Throughout the nineteenth century, the queer subculture resisted transformations in notions of "masculinity" (Tosh 1999; see Connell 1987, 61 for discussion on "hegemonic masculinity") and various movements that policed gender and sexual behavior, such as the Second Great Awakening (Stone 2010) and nativism (Irving 1993). Mary Jones continued to express her gender and sexuality despite several arrests. Pfaff's and The Slide represent the fact that the queer subculture continued to come alive over the years. Even in penitentiaries and insane asylums, queerness could not be subdued (*The New-York Daily Tribune* 9 April 1846; *Figure 15*). Each time that the community and police shut down a queer space, new ones were created.

To put it simply: decades before there was a gay bar in New York City, there was a queer brothel. Decades before 12 Orange, there must have been some other place where queer people met. By analyzing available archaeological and historical evidence from a queer and sensory lens, we just might be able to find it and understand the lived experiences of those who inhabited it.

AMUSEMENTS IN THE INSANE HOSPITAL.—We are told that quite a scene was enacted in the insane department of the City Alms House last week, at a party given by the Steward. The lunatics were fantastically dressed, and required to perform a series of very amusing pantomimes and steps in dancing, &c. Men were dressed in women's clothes, and women in men's clothes. Our informant states that such trifling with the feelings of the relatives of the poor unfortunates, was rather too much, even for some of the more refined of the invited guests. We regard amusing recreations under proper restraints, and within appropriate limits, as among the proper means of restoratives, in well conducted insane asylums, but to make a fantastic use of them for the gratification of a party, appears to us to be carrying the matter a little too far.

*Figure 15: "Amusements in the Insane Hospital" (The New-York Daily Tribune 9 April 1846). This newspaper article may speak to what happened to the arrested staff of 12 Orange Street. It's not hard to imagine that they, too, could have ended up in an insane hospital (Blackwell's Island contained one), where one of the few ways to express themselves included orchestrating a "cross-dressing" show.*

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