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Reflective Essay

As I began to think of research topics at the beginning of this past autumn quarter for the History Honors program, choosing something that related to gender and sexuality was my top priority. I was also interested in Victorian Britain, and with the guidance of my advisor, Professor George Behlmer, I was able to find a topic of research that perfectly encapsulated my interests: the repeal of a series of bills from the 1860s known as the Contagious Diseases Acts. The Acts targeted prostitutes, a group predominantly composed of working-class women, and their repeal was brought on by the protests of early feminists, who were largely middle class, meaning that this topic would allow me to examine gender, sexuality, and class in the context of Victorian Britain. However, there was a specific angle that I want to approach this project from. I had learned in a previous class that in early gay subcultures in both Berlin and New York, there were strong connections both in culture and community between gay men and female prostitutes. As I began my research, I kept a keen eye out for any similar connections I could make as I examined Britain. Luckily, my attentiveness paid off – in the epilogue of one of my secondary sources, I discovered that the activism that had led to the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts also led to the passage of a law called the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which largely focused on regulating female prostitution, but also contained a clause known as the Labouchère Amendment which criminalized male-male sexual behavior to a far greater extent than the existing law against sodomy already had. It wasn't exactly what I had been looking for, but it was certainly a connection worth pursuing, and with hard work and diligent research, the rest of my project fell into place.

Thanks to the UW Libraries Research Guides, I was able to find online access to a wide array of primary sources. The two types of primary sources that contributed to my research the most were parliamentary debates, available online through UK Parliament, and newspaper articles located through the British Periodicals collection on ProQuest. The Gerritsen Collection was also enormously helpful in finding relevant periodicals, as the collection contains primary sources that specifically relate to women and feminism. Nevertheless, even feminist periodicals were only representing the voices of politically active women, which translated in the vast majority of cases to middle- to upper-class women. Though my project focused on female prostitution and male-male sexuality, I did not have sources that contained actual voices from these marginalized groups. The subjects of my research were being spoken for in my sources, rather than speaking themselves, and as is the case with history that focuses on the marginalized, I had to be acutely aware of this as I analyzed my sources.

Though I had access to many primary sources, this was not an easy project to research. Victorian ideas about morality and propriety meant that the subjects I was specifically looking for – female prostitution and male-male sexuality – were heavily censored and written about in euphemistic and often counterintuitive ways. This meant I had to be clever about the keywords I searched for when exploring different databases, due to the euphemistic nature of Victorian discourse. For example, the “contagious diseases” referred to in the Contagious Diseases Acts are venereal diseases, also sometimes referred to as “enthetic” diseases. Forgetting any one of these terms as I searched through collections could prevent me from finding crucial evidence. Further, while reading between the lines, I had to consider not only what the stated opinions of journalists and members of Parliament implied about Victorian society more broadly, but also

how Victorian society would have influenced those stated opinions in the first place. For example, when looking at the records from Parliament, there was hardly any debate before the measure further criminalizing male-male sexuality was included in the Criminal Law Amendment Act. On the one hand, this lack of debate can be seen as a reflection of Victorian hostility towards male-male sexuality on the part of members of Parliament, making the further criminalization of male-male sexual behavior uncontroversial. On the other hand, it can also be argued that M.P.s were silent on the issue not necessarily because they themselves were hostile to male-male sexuality, but because they did not want to be seen defending what was considered by society to be immoral, which could be damaging to their reputation. The same principle applies to periodicals as well; newspaper articles would have been influenced not only by what journalists and editors truly believed, but also by what would have been seen as acceptable to put in print. To get useful information from my sources, I had to go over them with a fine tooth comb and consider them from many angles, accounting for the many ways that my sources were shaped by controversy.

I can't help but be enormously proud of what my research turned out to be. It's a story about women entering the political sphere and organizing around early feminist principles in defense of working-class female sex workers, some of the most vulnerable people in Victorian society – it's everything that would have seemed frivolous and unimportant before the advent of women's history, and I can't help but revel in that. I'm proud that I was able to use this story to analyze ideas about queer sexuality, when queer history is still struggling to be recognized as a respectable and worthy field of study in its own right. To me – and hopefully, those who have read my thesis will agree – the story of the Contagious Diseases Acts and the Criminal Law

Amendment is hugely important to both women's history and queer history, and I'm immensely grateful that I had the opportunity and the resources to be able to explore this topic.