

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by Dr. Caroline Sequin, assistant professor of history at Lafayette College, to discuss the intersection of racial politics and commercial sex. Dr. Sequin is the author of a new book, *Desiring Whiteness: A Racial History of Prostitution in France and Colonial Senegal, 1848 to 1950*. So you're looking at this through the lens of colonialism and how these racial politics impacted the commercial sex practices and regulations.

CS: That's right. I'm a historian of France, but I've read a lot about the United States, as well as about the history of other empires, such as the British Empire. And something that has always struck me was how in those post-emancipation or colonial societies, the state would use the domain of the intimate in order to police race and racial relations in general. So, for example, in the United States, there were anti-miscegenation laws, which were laws that banned marriages across racial lines that were adopted in the wake of the abolition of slavery as a way to maintain this idea of white racial purity and white supremacy. In the British Empire, we see various policies adopted as well to prohibit concubinage between British colonists and colonial subjects. Strangely, in the French context, those laws did not exist. And that might seem odd because, starting in the mid- to late 19th century, intimate relationships across racial and colonial boundaries were increasingly discouraged. But in the French context, laws against interracial marriage could not have passed because of France's adherence to this notion of republican universalism, this idea that citizens had the same rights, regardless of their race, among other identity markers. And so, in other words, laws in France were supposed to be race-blind, at least in republican France.

In practice, however, just taken from my own experience growing up in France, I could definitely tell that both people and the state were not indifferent to this question of interracial intimacy. And so, for my dissertation, I set on finding out more about the ways in which different forms of interracial intimacy were experienced, policed, and represented in the century following the abolition of slavery in France and in Senegal. And so I was planning originally on focusing on various forms of intimacy that would have included marriage, concubinage, sexual violence, as well as prostitution. But once in the archives, I started first by looking at policies and laws surrounding the regulation of prostitution. And I quickly realized that focusing on prostitution on its own was going to help me to get to this question of the articulation of race and sex. And so, this is when I narrowed down my topic, which became this book in which I argue that the regulation of prostitution served to police racial relations and preserve this myth of white Frenchness in the country that claimed to be race-blind.

AT: So I know, coming from a US context, there's very much this hyper-sexualization of non-white women in general. So we see this in the fetishization of Asian women, or "spicy Latina." But what's interesting when we're looking at people of African descent is that both men and women were presented as hypersexualized. So this was used as an excuse for white men to rape Black women, but also used as justification to do a lot of awful things to Black men in the name of "protecting" white women and their virtue. So, obviously, I can't speak to France, but I'm guessing there were similar mindsets coming into play here.

CS: So, that's right, we find similar representations about women of color being over-sexualized, which helped to explain why white French men had sex with women of color in the colonial context. So, the same gendered and racialized anxieties and representation existed in France as in the United States during this time period. And so, I was very much expecting to find that the regulation of prostitution in the Senegalese context mirrored what was happening in other imperial contexts or in the United States, where the bodies of women of color were made sexually to white men in brothels. And to some extent, this was true in the second half of the 19th century, where we see that after the abolition of slavery in 1848, the first prostitution policies were created in parts of Senegal in order to supposedly control the bodies of formerly enslaved women, and to, in particular, subject them to various gynecological exams to make sure that they were free of sexually transmissible diseases. And that's because colonial authorities believed that these women would inevitably fall into prostitution, not only because of their supposed low morals, but also because they hadn't learned how to

provide for themselves. And so, now that they were free, they would resort to prostitution as a means of survival. And so, there were those pretty widespread fears that those women would propagate sexually transmissible diseases to the rest of the population. And so, as such, there was this strong motivation to create new prostitution policies that would help to restore a supposed social and moral order in the colonies. So, this story, I don't think is unique to the Senegalese context. I think that's one that has been told by other historians in other places. What really differentiates Senegal from other places is what happened in the 20th century, where I did not find as much concerns as I expected about the activity of African sex workers in the colony. Instead, the focus shifts on the creation of those brothels in the early 20th century, which were essentially white-only brothels in Dakar.

And so, in the 1910s, we see the first of such business being created, and there would be others that would pop up in the interwar period. And basically, they were staffed with white French women who came from continental France, and their labor was reserved exclusively to white colonists. And so, that meant that African men were not allowed access to these brothels. And that's in part because sexual intercourse between white women and Black men was perceived as a severe threat to colonial rule. It undermined this idea of white women's respectability that was so essential to this idea of white respectability. And so, in a sense, when Black men or men of color in general had sex with white women, whether or not she was a sex worker, they kind of inverted the existing gender and racial hierarchies that typically upheld colonial rule. And so, it was important to authorities at the time, as well as French colonists in general, that such pattern of interracial intimacy did not develop within those brothels. So those concerns about interracial sex between white women and men of color were exacerbated in the context of metropolitan France, in part because so many men from different parts of the empire would make their way to continental France during the First and the Second World War. And so, here we see that concerns about men of color's hypersexuality would lead to the implementations of brothels that were supposed to cater to those men's sexual needs during their stay in France.

AT: Well, it's interesting when we're talking about the First and Second World Wars because on a previous conversation about women in the military, we were talking about how there was this assumption by some people that, and these were white women, but there was this assumption by some people that the women who were going there to cook and do admin work and work in communications were just going to end up being seduced or that they were sex workers or whatever. And so this idea that we were sending women to war was only concerning to those people in the context of, "oh, but what if they're having sex?" So this hypersexualization idea, obviously, as you're saying, transcends race barriers. But one of the things that you look at is specifically how this interracial intimacy was such a cause for concern and how that impacted things.

CS: Absolutely. So the two World Wars brought new concerns to the fore. Before the First World War, interracial intimacy was common in the colonies, but it mostly happened between white French colonists and African women. And that's in part because there were very few white women in the colonies, which were perceived as an unsafe place for white women until about the turn of the 20th century. Because one thing that's important to understand here is that it was widely believed at the time that men had sexual needs that were, essentially they were biological and they needed to be relieved. So if morals no longer tolerated interracial sex, then other sexual avenues had to exist for these men. And so these assumptions apply to all men without distinction of race, although Black men were perceived to have even greater sexual urges than white men. These beliefs caused a great deal of anxiety in the First World War as an unprecedented number of men from all parts of the French Empire, so from Algeria to Senegal, Vietnam, Madagascar, and the French Caribbean, were enlisted in the war to serve as soldiers and workers on continental France. And during their time in France, a lot of those men, and especially those who worked in wartime factories where they rubbed shoulders with French women, ended up developing all sorts of intimate relationships with French women, from transactional sexual relations to more sustained forms of romantic relationships. So as I mentioned before, those relationships across racial borders were far more controversial than those that had predated, pre-existed

in the colonial context because they happened between a white woman and a man of color. One of the things that civil and military authorities quickly agreed on is that it was urgent to contain the supposed sexual needs of those men from different parts of the empire during the First World War. And they came to this conclusion that in order to preserve the purity and the morality of French women in general, it would actually be in everyone's interest to make sure that those men could access brothels, even if at the time most of those brothels were staffed by white women. So it means that interracial sex was going to happen within those brothels, but it was seen as a better alternative than the formation of more long-lasting romantic relationships between white women and men of color who could have led to the formation of multiracial families. And so starting in the First World War, we see that military officials really went to a great length to facilitate colonial subjects' access to brothels. So they would either create brothels specifically for those men, or they would escort men to the nearby brothels. They would negotiate the price of a pass, price of a sexual encounter with a sex worker, with the brothel keeper, and all of that, so that they could limit the number of intimate interracial relationships that developed outside of the brothels. And so those policies would continue, again, in the context of the Second World War, when there's another significant wave of colonial subjects from different parts of the empire that are enlisted to support the wartime effort.

AT: And so I'm curious here because there's this interesting juxtaposition of protecting white women's virtue from Black men, even when the white woman is a sex worker with all of the biases that would have been at play there. But I'm curious, if white women were coming into this situation, were they choosing sex work over marriage? Because obviously with that gender disparity, they probably could have married, I would think, if they chose to. So were they brought over specifically as sex workers, or was there some other reason that they were not marrying? Like, was it an independence question where they had more freedom as an unmarried sex worker? What was going on there?

CS: So I think that white women at the time didn't really make a decision between marriage or commercial sex. What was happening was that until the late 19th century, there were very few white women in the colonies, because, as I mentioned earlier, these places were perceived as dangerous for women. But with the advent of modern medicine, it became increasingly possible for Europeans to live fairly healthy lives under different climates. And so in the early 20th century, there were different campaigns established that sought to promote colonial migration to white women, where they could become the wives of colonists, and in a sense, help in their own ways with the colonial project. And so these campaigns happened at a time when intimate relationships between white French colonists and African women were increasingly frowned upon. And so white women could have provided the sexual and material needs of colonists. But these campaigns, as other historians have noted, for the most part, failed. At the same time, there were some savvy individuals in colonial Senegal who picked up on this demand for white women to serve as domestic or sexual partners. And so in the early decades of the 20th century, we see the creation of white-only brothels that catered to the sexual desires of white French colonists. And these businesses, in a sense, they provided an alternative sexual outlet for colonists who needed to satisfy their presumed sexual needs.

Now, the women who worked in there did not choose between becoming a wife or a sex worker. Rather, the majority of the women who ended up in Dakar's brothels were already involved in the sex industry in France. They moved to Dakar's brothels in the hope to improve their income and perhaps because they were looking for a change of scenery. And so in that sense, their colonial migration was part of this global phenomenon that was happening at the time where people were moving abroad in search of better economic outcome. So it was really a form of labor migration, even though moral observers at the time viewed their physical mobility as a form of sex trafficking. I think the reality was much more complicated than that, and that even though their working conditions were far from ideal in the colonies, these women were not the victims of sex trafficking for the most part, or the so-called white slave victims, as they were called at the time. Many of them knew what they would be up to in the colony and willingly migrated there for sexual labor with the help of brothel keepers

and sex procurers who facilitated their migration.

AT: And so we're basically saying that if white French men are visiting Black sex workers, that is normalizing interracial intimacy and whether or not we're concerned about them actually marrying and starting families with those specific women, you're creating a new norm and they definitely did not want that. They wanted to very clearly have those lines drawn, even when it comes to sex work as opposed to marriage and family.

CS: So I think it's actually a bit more complicated than that because the emergence of these white-only brothels was not something that colonial authorities actively promoted. I think they mostly tolerated their existence because they helped to support the racial and colonial hierarchies that upheld colonial rule. I think that these white-only brothels were the results of initiatives by French men and women in the colonies who saw an opportunity for profit by capitalizing on the sexual demand for white sex workers. This was a time when brothels were incredibly common in continental France, but non-existent in colonial Senegal, even though, as I've talked about earlier, there were prostitution policies that had been established right after the abolition of slavery that tolerated the existence of brothels. And so as those attitudes towards interracial intimacy rigidified in the early 20th century, some French people with prior experience in the sex industry, notably in colonial Morocco, where there were some pretty extensive red light districts, decided to start something similar in colonial Dakar and open the first brothels. And I think to some extent, their enterprise was successful, since it incentivized others to do the same. And so in the interwar period, there were up to five white-only brothels in the colonial quarter of Dakar, which is where French people lived. Now, authorities were well aware that these institutions existed. And I found a lot of reports written by colonial authorities who commented on them. The women who worked in these brothels were also subjected to regular medical screenings. So medical authorities who worked for the colonial states also were actively aware of this woman's activity. There were also lists of the women who worked in those brothels that were kept by police records. And we also see that the police officers who were stationed at the port at the harbor often commented on the arrival of French women from continental France who were going to work in Dakar's brothels.

And what's really interesting here is that they really tried to stop these women. And basically, as long as these women were adult women who expressed when they were stopped at the harbor upon their entry in the colony that they were willingly moving to Dakar to sell sex in a brothel, authorities did not have the means or the desire to stop them. And that's because France had made the decision to not apply some of the international conventions of the time that repressed sex trafficking to its empires. So while France signed some of those international conventions, it implemented what was called the colonial clause, where it said that they would only apply to the metropolitan context. And so I think what this decision tells me is that the French state recognized the key role that commercial sex played in the empire in terms of supporting existing racial and gender hierarchies. And so they didn't want to prevent the circulation of sex workers across borders because the labor was essential, basically, for the maintenance of colonial rule. So even though this idea of creating white-only brothels was not one that was first initiated by colonial authorities, once those are in place, there's really no effort from colonial authorities to obstruct their presence.

AT: And so when we're going back to this concept of white women's virtue needing to be protected, sometimes white people do admit that it also needs to be protected from white men. But you've noted that there was a fear among military authorities that North African troops still deployed in France would rape white women after brothels were banned in France in 1946. So they opened like official military brothels.

CS: Right. So, as I mentioned earlier, the French army really sought to facilitate colonial subjects' access to brothels during the First World War and the Second World War while they were in France. But this practice was abruptly stopped by the adoption of a law in 1946, which was called the Marthe Richard Law. And so basically, this law banned brothels in continental France and ultimately in various parts of the empire, not all of them.

And when this law was adopted in 1946, there were still not insignificant number of men, in particular North African men, who were still deployed on French soil. And so their presence in post-war France caused a lot of anxiety, especially in light of this new legal ban that made access to commercial sex impossible for these men. And so we see a lot of military officials in particular who were overseeing this population of North African troops warning about the elevated risk of sexual violence that those men were supposedly perpetrating towards white French women. And so eventually, after some negotiations with other ministries, the Ministry of War was able to negotiate the creation of military brothels in places where North African men were staying across France. And the particularity of those military brothels is that they could only be patronized by North African troops during their stay in France. And they were also staffed with women from different parts of North Africa whose entry or migration to France was facilitated by military authorities. So basically what that meant was that the French army would orchestrate the migration of North African women from North Africa to the metropole. They would provide those women with a year-long contract that would specify that the army would pay for their repatriation to North Africa at the end of this year-long contract. And the conditions of work of those women in France were pretty deplorable.

It's a little hard to find documentations about them. And I think that's not by accident. I think this history is not one that has been told much. That's not one that people really know about. And I think it is quite embarrassing for the French army to have been involved in this process, at a time when the UN has released its latest international convention that not only sought to repress sex trafficking across international borders, but also the very existence of brothels in the first place. And so we find very little documentations about this process. But there are newspaper articles that talk about those brothels and give us a sense of how difficult it was for those North African women who worked in them in the sense that they were often stuck. A lot of them didn't necessarily have the financial means to leave before the end of their year-long contract because they would have had to pay for their own repatriation. And when they did try to escape, which is what happened at least once, according to some of those newspaper articles that I read, those four women in this article that tried to run away were caught and forcibly sent back to those military brothels. Those institutions were there to supposedly protect white French women from the sexual violence of North African men. And what's striking is that the last military brothel was closed in the late 1970s.

AT: So sex work is often a complicated topic, especially when we're looking at different historical contexts where the amount of rights that any woman had would have varied widely. And so, for some women, sex work has meant freedom and independence, while others were forced into it from childhood. And being a sex worker meant that you were a second-class citizen, either explicitly or implicitly. And even today, "whore" is a go-to insult for any unimaginative misogynist who is mad at a woman, which they seem to be all the time. So in a modern context, how do you see race intersecting with the views and treatment of sex workers in a broader context?

CS: So race intersects with the views of sex workers in different ways in the time period that I'm looking at. First of all, because women of color were often perceived as hypersexual, there was this idea that they couldn't really be victim of sex trafficking. And as a result, there is a lack of archival documents, at least around the places that I'm looking at, that would help us to reconstruct the sexual exploitation of Senegalese women. All I can find are documents that talk about how there were no women of color, African women, who were so-called victims of the white slave trade. The very term, white slavery or the white slave trade, which was the term that was used starting in the 19th century and sometimes all the way to the 1970s to talk about sex trafficking, is revealing in itself. There was this notion that only white women could be trafficked to foreign places to sell sex in brothels. So that's definitely something that is at play here.

And then to get to this question of what sex work represents for those women. Does it provide them a form of autonomy or are they coerced into selling sex? It's neither one or the other. It's always kind of in the in-between. From what I can tell, the women who moved from France to go and sell sex in Senegal did not fit

into the trope of the time of the white slave trade. Most of them had already been involved in commercial sex in continental France before they left. And they knew that they were moving to the colony to sell sex in a brothel. Some of them expressed, as I mentioned earlier, to the police that stopped them when they arrived in Dakar, that they wanted to move to Dakar to sell sex, and that they were really hopeful that that move would allow them to make more money, that they might have better working conditions than they did back in continental France. In reality this aspiration for better lives within the sex industry were often misplaced. The conditions in Dakar's brothels were not any better than those that they encountered in the metropole.

And in fact, because there were concerns about white women's sexual behaviors in the colonies, it was even harder for those women to get out of those brothels because so long as they were selling sex in the brothels where African men didn't have access, that African men didn't have access to, it was easier to maintain this idea, this veneer of white prestige. But as soon as those women exit the brothel, it becomes far more difficult. And so we see that they are basically confined into these businesses that if things are not going well for them, if they're subjected to various forms of physical violence, they have very little resort to get out.

Now I have encountered two stories of women who seem to have been able to kind of climb the ranks within the sex industry itself. And so when they first appear in the archives, they're described as those white slave victims, as forcibly brought to the colonies to sell sex. And then they gradually reappear maybe a year or two later. And it seemed that this time they are managing a brothel and then move forward a couple of years later and they are owning several brothels in various parts of Senegal. There's a memoir actually, written by women who used to sell sex, who was talking about how this was the dream of a lot of women who were engaged in commercial sex in the early 20th century. It was this hope that through their sexual activity, they would gradually be able to elevate themselves from selling sex themselves to actually managing those businesses. And we do see that, you know, those who manage those brothels did pretty well for themselves. One of them in particular, I've written an article about her and then she's quite present in the book, Marie Piquemal, she and her husband are making really good money and they are driving a fancy car around Dakar during the Second World War at the time when it's not that common for people to have those cars. You see their tax records and they have quite a lot of money on their bank account. And as soon as brothels closed down at the end of 1946, they're able to invest in hotels in the area. So some women were able to make a good life out of it, obviously at the detriment of other women who were working for them. But that's really not the majority.

AT: This might sound odd, but it actually reminds me of MLMs, multi-level marketing schemes, where they show these women who are at the top and say, "look how much money *they're* making." But it's very much by being predators, essentially, towards other women, often women who are vulnerable.

CS: Yeah, I think it's a good comparison and it shows, again the very fine line between choice and coercion, because most of those women were willingly migrating to Dakar to sell sex, but under false assumptions. They were promised better work conditions. They were promised better money, perhaps more autonomy. And for the most part, they did not find that. So, yes, technically they're not trafficking victims, but they still didn't find the conditions that they were hoping for. And very few of them could really make a life out of it.

AT: So when we're talking about desirability in general, obviously these standards change over time and it can be really complicated unpicking when we apply Eurocentric standards to people of color. So for example, having smaller noses as opposed to broader noses and things like that. But today we're increasingly seeing that things that are considered attractive on white women, but which women of color may be criticized or looked down on. And so I'm particularly thinking of things like the Kardashians, Ariana Grande blackfishing, or colorism in women of color, where those who are lighter skinned are favored and yet white women are obsessed with tanning, whereas the ideal used to be as pale as possible. And so I think it's very complex when we're picking apart what we consider desirable and how that intersects with different racial traits and ideas.

CS: Yeah, I think you're right that sexual desire is something that is socially constructed and that it's informed by ideas about race. I think there was this prevailing assumption that white women were more desirable than other women of color in the time period that I'm looking at. And so what was remarkable to me was how those white-only brothels in Dakar were, kind of ironically, trying to sell the exotic by providing access to the sexual services of white women because there were so few of them in the colonies. And so when you look at the names that they would use to name those brothels, they were all reminiscent of, Montmartre for example, this neighborhood in Paris where there was the Moulin Rouge. And if people wanted to have a good time and maybe find someone to have sex with, that's where they would go. Or you find names that somehow referred to France in a more or less direct way, talking about a rooster, for example, which was a symbol of France. So they are trying to sell white women and they are banking on this idea of whiteness as desirable, in at least in this particular context. And then in the metropolitan context, in continental France, there's similarly this idea among French officials that, of course, men of color wanted to have sex with French women. And that French women were very desirable. But they also thought that the reason why those men wanted to have sex with white women was not just because of their sexual desire, but also because of the symbolic meaning of those relationships. Because Frantz Fanon, a French intellectual, talked about this idea that if a man of color could have sex with a white woman, then somehow they would be able to, it was a sort of revenge for them for the humiliation of being a colonial subject. So you see that desire is not just desiring a particular body because of the way it looks, but also because of what it represents.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.