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# Posh and Tawdry: Rethinking E.J. Bellocqs' Storyville Portraits

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*Posh and Tawdry:  
Rethinking E.J. Bellocq's Storyville Portraits*

Christian Waguespack

BAFA University of New Mexico

Thesis

Submitted for partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

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**Posh and Tawdry:  
Rethinking E.J. Bellocq's Storyville Portraits**

by

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**Bachelors of Arts in Fine Arts, University of New Mexico**

**Master of Arts, Art History, University of New Mexico, 2015**

**Abstract**

In this thesis I examine the contextual framework in which New Orleans photographer E.J. Bellocq's *Storyville Portraits* have been placed, and resituate Bellcoq's oeuvre in a vernacular context. Bellocq was a commercial photographer working in the nineteen-teens who photographed the prostitutes of New Orleans red light district, Storyville. After his death, Lee Friedlander purchased these now damaged negatives and reprinted the full plates, and in 1970 MOMA exhibited Friedlander's new prints in a formulaic, modernist fashion.

The *Storyville Portrait's* recontextualization by MOMA, converted them from commercial erotic advertisements for prostitution in Storyville to fine art photographs, raises issues of how the placement of private pictures in the fine art museum. Through aestheticizing these photographs, they also lose their values as historical document, and as some of the only remaining cultural patrimony of the now lost Storyville district of New Orleans.

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*“How can photography be restored to its own history? And how can we ensure this history will be both materially grounded and conceptually expansive, just like the medium itself?”*

-Geoffrey Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies”, 2002

## INTRODUCTION

I first came across the *Storyville Portraits* in an unconventional way. Living in New Orleans in my teens and early twenties, these photographs were everywhere. I saw them regularly on the walls of French Quarter bars, in gift shops, and reproduced on flyers for local concerts, parties, and burlesque shows. I never paid much attention to them and *never* thought of them as fine art. Perhaps had I spent more time at the art museum I would have known better. When I started working at the University of New Mexico Art Museum, the curator of photography, Michele Penhall, asked if I knew about E.J. Bellocq. Having recently returned from a trip to New Orleans, she assumed that I must know him, especially given that I am a Louisiana native interested in the history of photography. Surprised and a little embarrassed that I had no idea who she was talking about, we pulled out the Bellocq photograph that is in the museum's collection. Looking down at this image of a young dark haired woman (Fig. 1) who is wearing a paisley wrap and holding her bouquet of flowers I was struck with a surprise best articulated by Douglas Crimp in "The Museum's Old/ The Library's New Subject."<sup>2</sup> Crimp calls out the modern reclassification of historic images along the guidelines of fine art photography, which privileges the photographer as artist, over the content or historic usefulness of the

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas Crimp, "The Museum's Old/ The Library's New Subject", *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1982.

images. Of course I recognize these photographs, but never thought they were the sort of thing that would end up in an art museum.

The image of this dark haired woman is just one of a number of such portraits of prostitutes from Storyville, New Orleans's notorious red-light district, taken in the 1910s by E. J. Bellocq. Bellocq's died in 1949, and the negatives for the *Storyville Portraits* were purchased and reprinted by Lee Friedlander in the 1960s. The photograph at the UNM Art Museum, along with almost every other housed in museums and galleries across the county, was a Friedlander print. Bellocq photographed his sitters in various states of dress and undress, with many of the nudes looking candid and flirtatious. These were by no means the only such portraits to be made in Storyville at the time. An enormous part of the district's visual culture consisted of photographs advertising women who worked in the district. Photographs like these were not only reproduced in marketing material such as Blue Books, but were also displayed in bars and backrooms around Storyville in order to encourage men visiting the district to go from the bar to the brothel. Through this type of photography, Storyville patrons were bombarded with images of highly sexual and 'available' women at every turn. A woman known only as Adele, who worked in the district and was the subject of several of Bellocq's photographs, attests to how common this sort of erotic portraiture was during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. When asked if she remembered if such dirty pictures were being made by other photographers, Adele recalls how, "there were so many taken, I don't know why they're so scarce."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Ernest James Bellocq and Lee Friedlander. *Storyville Portraits: Photographs from the New Orleans Red-light District, circa 1912*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970. 15.



Though plentiful during Storyville's heyday, such erotica and ephemera have not stood the test of time, and after the district's closure in 1917, and subsequent demolition in 1930, much of this material was lost to history.

Adele's account speaks to the connection of these photographs to the economic drive of Storyville, which at the time was America's largest and most notorious red-light district. Even in the most coded way, all aspects of visual culture in Storyville are rooted in this sexually driven economy. There is little reason to think that the *Storyville Portraits* did not serve that same purpose. Yet during their rediscovery in the 1960s, a very different narrative was constructed for these pictures by John Szarkowski, the curator of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art and the man who curated the first exhibition of the *Storyville Portraits*. Szarkowski's new story, suggesting that the *Storyville Portraits* were a personal artistic project for Bellocq, gained popularity and still informs many readings of Bellocq's photographs today.

I found myself intrigued as to the complex nature of these photographs' material and narrative histories and delved into the *Storyville Portraits* and the various contextual lenses that have informed the reading of these images throughout their existence. Understanding that vernacular images in the museum is not a rarity, I was particularly interested in the power that came from John Szarkowski's curatorial influence on the images and the transformative effect that he had on the way that these images were interpreted for decades after his exhibition *E.J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits*. In this thesis I examine the re-introduction of these images as fine art by Szarkowski and trace the photographs history back to the original creation and use of the Storyville Portraits.

My goals in doing so are multivalent. First, to discuss the influence of the modern art museum curator on the cultural reading of a photographic image and look at how popular trends in photography at the time informed reading of the Storyville portraits that reflect the discourse of fine art photography championed by Szarkowski at MoMA. Secondly, I explore the rich historical context that is omitted due to this influence and finally, I argue that despite the museum's effect on the reading of the images – exhibiting the *Storyville Portraits* at MoMA was key to situating and sustaining this group of photographs into the canon of photo history *and* New Orleans popular culture. While I critique the curatorial project at MoMA for how it neglected to consider the people, history, culture, and sexual economy that informed the creation of these photographs I also argue that placing them into the framework of fine art photography was integral to the continued existence of them in contemporary New Orleans's visual culture. Had they not been allowed on the walls of MoMA, the *Storyville Portraits* would have never gained the cult following necessary for them to reappear on the streets of New Orleans.

The ability of one of Bellocq's photographs to appear on a contemporary New Orleans party flyer, or on the walls of a French Quarter bar today, depended a great deal on Lee Friedlander and MoMA's preservation and popularization of these photographs as fine art. In 1970, John Szarkowski curated *E.J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits*, the first exhibition of Bellocq's work. This exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue that included an introduction by Szarkowski and an interview that he compiled from various

statements by people who know Bellocq during his lifetime.<sup>4</sup> *Storyville Portraits* came at a seminal time during Szarkowski's career, between the 1967 *New Documents* exhibition and Diane Arbus's first retrospective exhibition at the Museum at MoMA in 1972. This period saw the birth and rise of the personal documentary style in photography. In the wall label for *New Documents*, Szarkowski says, "in the past decade a new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach to more personal ends. Their aim has not been to reform life but to know it."<sup>5</sup> Regarding Arbus, John Szarkowski writes in the wall label of her first retrospective, "Diane Arbus's pictures challenge the basic assumptions on which most documentary photography has been thought to rest, for they deal with private rather than social realities, with psychological rather than historical facts, with the prototypical and mythic, rather than the topical and temporal."<sup>6</sup> It is this conceptual framework that has informed how Bellocq's photographs have come to be understood by audiences in the 60s and 70s; as a personal artistic project born of passion and personal exploration, instead of the commercial project that was their most likely point of origin. John Szarkowski suggests that, "the pictures themselves suggest that they were not made on assignment but as a personal adventure. It is more likely that Bellocq photographed the women of Storyville because he found them irresistibly compelling."<sup>7</sup> I argue that it is not the pictures which suggest their personal points of origin, but the

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<sup>4</sup> Ernest James Bellocq and Lee Friedlander. *Storyville Portraits: Photographs from the New Orleans Red-light District, circa 1912*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970.

<sup>5</sup> Museum of Modern Art, *New Documents*, 28, Feb. 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Museum of Modern Art, *Diane Arbus*, 6, Nov. 1972.

<sup>7</sup> Museum of Modern Art, *E.J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits*, 9, December 1970.

[https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/4550/releases/MOMA\\_1970\\_July-December\\_0070\\_129.pdf?2010](https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/4550/releases/MOMA_1970_July-December_0070_129.pdf?2010).

photographic trends of the era into which the *Storyville Portraits* were reintroduced. Coming in between two major exhibitions that have come to define significant photographic trends in the 1960s and 70s, Bellocq was most valuable for his role as a historical predecessor onto whom post war photographers and critics could project their values and interests. However, if MoMA and Friedlander had not made these historical images available again, they would not be able to return organically to their own historical function marketing good times in New Orleans. In the rest of the world, and even in the New Orleans art museum, they were art. But on the walls of bars like Mae Baily's Place in the French Quarter and on the small, cheap flyer inviting me to a downtown burlesque show, these photographs again came to serve their original purpose, calling both locals and tourists alike to "*Laissez les bons temps rouler!*"<sup>8</sup>

In this thesis I look at how the meanings of these photographs have been dictated by the place and time they were being used. Two distinct temporal and locational histories have informed the reading, use, and value of these pictures. I look at the space these photographs have occupied, be it the sanctified space of the modern art museum or the sexualized space of Storyville, as the primary catalyst how these photographs have been presented, as advertisement for Storyville patrons and art for museum goers, and use these two frames of reference to examine how the *Storyville Portraits* were relevant within their respective contexts. The body of images, which constitutes the *Storyville Portraits*, making up only a portion of Bellocq's photographic output, are with few

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<sup>8</sup> *Laissez les bons temps rouler!* is a Cajun term that means "Let the good times roll!" and is the unofficial motto of New Orleans, embracing the city's contemporary *joie de vivre* while also invoking its long history as a destination for pleasure seekers.

exceptions remarkably similar in composition and subject matter. Most of the photographs depict young women located in shallow space not far from the camera. Almost all are full-length portraits in which the sitters are located firmly in the center of the composition. The majority of the women display an interest in appearing candid and seem at ease in front of the camera. Many of the women are faced frontally and seem to be having a good time: smiling, laughing, or feigning a contemplative moment. Bellocq's strict adherence to a formulaic approach to composition could be likened to August Sander's cool and calculated photographs of German types. In both cases, almost all of the portraits are full length or waist-up images of the sitter positioned in the center of the picture plane. But to John Szarkowski there is nothing cool or distant about Bellocq's work. Aside from the obvious sensuality, and the fact that we are looking at the bodies of prostitutes, Szarkowski's narrative about Bellocq's relationship to his sitters; one that is all about empathy, closeness, and camaraderie, is still a dominant motif in the analysis of this body of work.

Since the *Storyville Portraits* were discovered and presented as a coherent body of contemporary art photography they cannot be completely detached from one another as a group unified at the moment of their rediscovery. Their presence as a collection (seen today as a cohesive series) has often kept them separate from the other photographs Bellocq made, and allowed them to be interpreted outside of the historical and economic factors addressed when discussing Bellocq's photographs that do not appear in the *Storyville Portraits*. The entirety of Bellocq's oeuvre is not represented in the *Storyville Portraits*, which consists of only eighty-five plates found in a drawer in his home after

his death. There are other photographs by Bellocq which were made on commission, images like president Taft's visit to New Orleans in 1909 and photographs of Steam Ships photographed for the Foundation Company (figure 18), which have since ended up in places like the Historic New Orleans Collection as historical documents of the city at the turn of the century. The discovery and purchase of the photographic content of Bellocq's desk drawer by a New Orleans antique dealer unified the group of images into a sort of accidental archive. While the rest of Bellocq's photographs were labeled by institutions like Historic New Orleans Collection or other local archives under historical categories such as 'steamships.' "church interiors." or "school groups.", the *Storyville Portraits* ended up in the art museum, under the heading "Bellocq".<sup>9</sup>

How and why these photographs remain a single collection begins with their discovery. We have Lee Friedlander to thank for rescuing these images from lingering in obscurity. When he purchased the contents of Bellocq's desk drawer from antiques dealer Larry Bornstien, these images became part of an artist's collection. This seems like an obvious fact, but it is not without consequence. Friedlander's interest in these photographs primarily came from his passion for jazz (as Storyville is often considered the birthplace of American jazz) and out of his ongoing dedication preserving various aspects of jazz history.<sup>10</sup> But once the negatives ended up in Friedlander's hands, their artistic potential as part of Friedlander's already prodigious photographic output became

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<sup>9</sup> See Douglas Crimp, "The Museum's Old/ The Library's New Subject", *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1982. 7.

<sup>10</sup> See Peter Galassi, "You Have to Change to Stay the Same", *Friedlander*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 17.

their *raison d'être*. In "Unpacking my Library: A Talk about Book Collecting Walter Benjamin suggests that collectors form a "relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value- that is, their usefulness- but studies and loves them as the scene, that stage, of their fate."<sup>11</sup> For many collectors, an object's history is more valued than its ability to actually fulfill the task for which it was made. Once Storyville was closed and Bellocq's negatives were discarded in a desk drawer they lost their usefulness. With Storyville gone, Friedlander was not interested in using these negatives to advertise the women working there. There was no point in trying to make them useful as advertisements again. Bellocq's photographs were interesting to Friedlander not for their functionality, but because of their storied history. Because of their connection to a fine artists like Friedlander, legitimized by their presence on the walls of MoMA, our response to Bellocq's photographs are predicated on their visual analogies to art.

While the *Storyville Portraits* share much in common with similar photographic projects which have been accepted into the canon of photographic history - photographers such as Atget and Arbus- they are rarely looked at alongside visual material from their own time and place, much of which is still only considered valuable as historical documentation. In this way, the aesthetics of Bellocq's photographs, along with their analogies to fine art, have worked against any meaningful understanding of how these images functioned in their own history. This has not been the case for other commercial

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin. "Unpacking My Library" *Illuminations*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968. 60.

photographers from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early twentieth centuries, whose work is discussed within the economic and historical context in which it was made.<sup>12</sup> In many ways, it was not until these objects were distanced from their original usefulness that they were able to become meaningful in the fine art museum based on their aesthetics and romanticized provenance.

When I originally came across these photographs in New Orleans, they were there to promote tourism and good times, as well as represent Storyville as a lost bit of New Orleans's history. I never gave any thought to the photographer; and the idea that they were made as a project of personal exploration never crossed my mind. In chapter one I question where the idea of Bellocq's *Storyville Portraits* as an artistic project came from and what made these photographs relevant in the 1960s. I am interested in looking at how discourses of art and photography during this decade informed the interpretation of Bellocq's work, often at the cost of ignoring historic and economic circumstances of their production and distribution. Here, I also look at how photographic materiality allowed for these photographs to be separated from their original histories. Friedlander's reprinting and MoMA's reframing produced a new presence for these objects. Because Friedlander printed the entire plate, along with all the scratches, cracks and stains that the negatives accumulated over the years, these photographs have a different aesthetic than when printed by Bellocq, who would often heavily vignette his portraits. The traces of the

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<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Batchen suggest that "Although historical accounts of photography written in the nineteenth or early twentieth century tend to include an eclectic selection of photographs, throughout the late twentieth century, most histories tenaciously focused on the artistic ambition of the medium, excluding all other genres except as they compliment a formalist art-historical narrative." Geoffrey Batchen. "Vernacular Photographies." *Each Wild Idea Writing, Photography, History*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2000. 57.



scratches and stains on the surfaces of Friedlander's prints obscure the alleged transparency of the photographic image. These surface interruptions complicate the suspension of disbelief necessary to look through a photograph at its sitter. The scratches and stains record the physical histories of each plate as much as the photograph records the sitter, and in this way, these histories become part of the subject itself. The museum setting, which worked to elicit an aesthetic response from the audience, coupled with the new focus on the photographic surface; literally and figuratively obscure the social and historical settings that originally framed these photographs. I argue that in the 1960s Bellocq was valued as a tabula rasa on to which artist and photography scholars and critics could project their own interests and values and that many of the artistic questions surrounding Bellocq's work are actually easily addressed through a historical and cultural analysis.

To illustrate this point I compare the *Storyville Portraits* to 1960s photographers like Diane Arbus as a case study for photographers whose work embodied the sort of personal documentary discourse that came to inform Szarkowski's interpretation of *The Storyville Portraits*. Both Bellocq and Arbus (who had acquired several of Friedlander's prints from Bellocq's negatives) had their first solo exhibitions at MoMA in 1970 and 1971 respectively, though Arbus's work was first seen at MoMA four years early (1967) in the *New Documents* show. I argue that the discourse surrounding Bellocq as a photographer comes straight from issues expressed in the *New Documents* exhibition, specifically in Arbus's work. I critique the contextual framing of critics like Susan Sontag and John Szarkowski in which Bellocq is constructed as a progenitor of

contemporary documentary and fine art photographers, looking at people on the fringes of societal norms (prostitutes and club entertainers being common characters in Arbus's work as well). Szarkowski's framework for talking about Bellocq is more symptomatic of artistic concerns in vogue during the 1960s and 70s than a true understanding of how Bellocq's portraits functioned in their own time. Curators like Szarkowski used the fact that the *Storyville Portraits* were separated from their historical usefulness and used them as a blank slate to create the photographer they needed to reflect their zeitgeist, instead of coming to any understanding of what commercial photographers like Bellocq were really doing half a century ago in New Orleans.

In chapter two I look at Bellocq's photographs from a historical and economic perspective to determine what factors were actually informing the use of these images. I argue against the idea that the *Storyville Portraits* were a personal project based on what we know about Bellocq as a photographer and the economy of the district in which he was working. John Szarkowski said of the *Storyville Portraits* that "the pictures themselves suggest that they were not made on assignment but as a personal adventure."<sup>13</sup> I argue against Szarkowski, and assert that based on Bellocq's other work, and the information offered by Storyville's remaining visual culture, these photographs did indeed serve as advertisement in the district and reflect the economic realities of their place and time. One of Bellocq's photographs that has come to be known as *The Raleigh's Rye Girl* is the most blatant example of the *Storyville Portraits* as advertisement, and

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<sup>13</sup> Szarkowski, 13

offers insight into the district's liquor and entertainment based economy. Contrary to popular belief it was the sale of alcohol, not prostitution, that was the backbone of Storyville's economy. This image will be compared to prints advertising alcohol, produced around the turn of the century like Privat Livemont's *Absinthe Robbet*, 1896 and advertisements for Raleigh's Rye in Storyville Blue Books.

Looking at the economic implications the sex trade in New Orleans also allows me to examine the racial component of Bellocq's photographs. Storyville, during its time, was marketed as a sexual playground where white men could pay to act out ante-bellum interracial sexual fantasies. Scholars such as Emily Landau argue that the scenario of sexual tourists coming to the district to engage in business with the women there was often racialized as a post-war recreation of the white slave trade and of the Creole custom of *Plaçage* (Creole concubinage) for which New Orleans was famous.<sup>14</sup> Bellocq was, himself, from a prominent Creole family, and was known to photograph primarily in a brothel that specialized in Creole and 'Octoroon' women. In a footnote in the catalogue for the exhibition "The Mysterious Monsieur Bellocq" mounted at the George Eastman House in 2004-2005, Curator Brian Wallis points out that "since Bellocq was himself of mixed race, it is significant that the two houses where Bellocq was known to have photographed were the only two run by octoroon (women of mixed black and white heritage) madams, Mme. Lulu White and Countess Willie Piazza".<sup>15</sup> This footnote, a

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<sup>14</sup> Emily Epstein Landau. *Spectacular Wickedness: Sex, Race, and Memory in Storyville, New Orleans*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013.  
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<sup>15</sup> Brian Wallis, *The Mysterious Monsieur Bellocq*, International Center of Photography, 2004.

seeming afterthought, is for the most part the beginning and end of any discussion of race as it relates to the *Storyville Portraits*. Though many of the women in Bellocq's photographs appear to be white, the majority would have belonged to this racial category that would have been considered at the time neither fully black nor white, or at least they would have been advertised as such. The history of 'octoroon' women in the American South informed the social and sexual politics of this group after the war. In chapter two I examine pre-Plessy v. Ferguson racial constructs among the Creole communities of the American South and their connection to sexual slavery and prostitution as well as the tradition of the 'fancy girl' to see how New Orleans's racial and sexual history informed the environment in which the *Storyville Portraits* were produced and consumed.

Looking at the *Storyville Portraits* through the lens of history and economics will allow us to talk about the relationship between sex and money in the district, and the potential of erotica as advertisement. It explains the economics behind the enigmatic mood of the *Storyville Portraits* which up until recently have been based on the persona of the artists,<sup>16</sup> not the commercial realities of the photographs. Addressing the sexual and commercial function for which these images were made allows us to examine the economy and history of the district that necessitated their production, instead of speculating on personal artistic intention. A look into Storyville's history and visual culture shows that it is not only the sexuality expressed in the images, but of the very space in which they circulated, that makes meaning for these objects in their original

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<sup>16</sup> See John Szarkowski's *E.J. Bellocq, Storyville Portraits*. 1970

context. Looking at these pictures through the lens of a local history opens the discourse up to discussions of race and sexuality, and it also offers ground for a sexualized reading of the fully clothed women depicted in many of the *Storyville Portraits* and even of Bellocq's architectural photographs. More often than not, art museums approach imagery through more poetic and humanistic readings of the images at the cost economic realities. A historic look at the sexual economy of Storyville suggests that every aspect of the district was governed by the promotion of the sex trade and sale of alcohol; there is no plausible reason to suspect that Bellocq's work was any different. Taking *Storyville Portraits* reintroduction in the 1960s as my starting point, and examining their insertion into the canon of photographic and art histories I assert that in their present state these photographs are more a products of 1960s art and culture than they are a remaining part of Storyville's visual culture. Ultimately I question what has been lost in a modern framing of the Bellocq and his photographs and look at how contemporary curators are bridging the gap between art and history in their exhibitions of the *Storyville Portraits*.

## Chapter One: Bellocq at the Museum of Modern Art

*“So much about these pictures affirms current taste: the low-life material; the near mythic provenance (Storyville); the informal, anti-art look, which accords with the virtual anonymity of the photographer and the real anonymity of the sitters; their status as objects trouvés, and a gift from the past.”*

-Susan Sontag, “Bellocq: Photographs from Storyville.” 1996

In 1970 *E.J. Bellocq, Storyville Portraits* opened at the Museum of Modern Art (see figure 2). This exhibition, curated by John Szarkowski, introduced Ernest Bellocq’s photographs, made more than a half-century earlier by the then-unknown commercial photographer from New Orleans, Louisiana, to the arts community.<sup>17</sup> *Storyville Portraits* consisted of thirty-four photographs that Lee Friedlander printed from Bellocq’s vintage negatives. These thirty-four images represented about one third of the eighty-five negatives that Friedlander purchased four years earlier from Larry Bornstein, an antiques

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<sup>17</sup> One of the Storyville Portraits was published in a book by John Szarkowski four years earlier in “The Photographer’s Eye”, and was included in an exhibition of the same name at the Museum of Modern Art. However, *Storyville Portraits* (1970) was the first time a selection of Bellocq’s portraits were shown together with any level of didactic or interpretative contextualization.

dealer in New Orleans.<sup>18</sup> Friedlander talks about this transaction in his Preface to Szarkowski's 1970 catalogue *Storyville Portraits*.

I met Larry in 1958 while listening to Kid Thomas' band in Larry's art gallery on St. Peter's Street near Bourbon, where many great Jazz Bands would come to play- a story in itself. Among his treasures at the time were the Bellocq plates, and late that night after the band had gone, Larry showed them to me. Later that year, or maybe the next, when I was again in New Orleans to listen to jazz and to photograph for myself, I asked Larry if I could see the Bellocqs again. At that time, to, he gave me a print. I left New Orleans and returned to New York with the beautiful photos very much in my thoughts. I talked of the to my friends and to museum and magazine folks who, I hoped, would become interested in the places and find a home for them where people could appreciate and see them. In 1966 I decided I would ask if he would let me either purchase the plates from him or borrow them to make good prints. He agreed to sell them and I packed them and came home to print.<sup>19</sup>

For Friedlander's these photographs was at least as much about New Orleans's history and jazz culture as it was about the photographs themselves. Unfortunately this interest was not reflected in the exhibition, which privileges the narrative of Bellocq as an artist over the circumstances in which these photographs were made.<sup>20</sup> Szarkowski's

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<sup>18</sup> Friedlander and Bornstein came to know each other through a mutual interest in preserving the history of Jazz in New Orleans. Peter Galassi points out that in New Orleans, Friedlander "befriended the people who were helping to nurture the present of New Orleans Jazz by caring for its history" and that "Friedlander's New Orleans friends included Allan and Sandra Jaffe who would found Preservation Hall in the early 1960s, and E. Lorenz (Larry) Bornstein, and imaginative character who dealt in art, real estate, and God knows what else, who owned the building that would house the hall." Peter Galassi, "You Have to Change to Stay the Same", *Friedlander*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 25. It was while Bellocq's negatives were stored at the building later to become Preservation Hall that they sustained the water damage that where not visible in earlier prints such as the one given to Friedlander by Bornstein.

<sup>19</sup> From Lee Friedlander's Preface in John Szarkowski's "E.J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits, Photographs From the New Orleans Red Light District, Circa, 1912." Museum of Modern Art, 1970. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Szarkowski's catalogue suggests that "His pictures tell us, perhaps, more about Bellocq than can those who remember him only as an odd character with a camera who kept very much to himself. They reveal an artist of considerable skill and uncultivated but compelling sensibility. Seeing his pictures we are persuaded that he had knowledge of the nature of other human beings". Szarkowski. E.J. Bellocq, *Storyville Portraits*.

focus on creating an artistic mythology for Bellocq has distracted from the photographs themselves by focusing on the maker over the subject, doing a disservice to the women these photographs depict, and to Storyville's history. Much of the information given about Bellocq in the testimonials published in Szarkowski's accompanying catalogue does not hold water historically, and instead exaggerates and fabricates information to make him seem more outlandish than he was.<sup>21</sup> From the prints Friedlander made in New York, Szarkowski and Friedlander selected for this exhibition pictures that provided a broad introduction to the *Storyville Portraits*, showing fourteen nudes, nineteen clothed portraits (with outfits ranging from full formal attire to undergarments and one very strange full body stocking) and one interior scene showing parlor decor identified by some as the interior of Bellocq's apartment or studio.<sup>22</sup>

I am interested in looking at how this exhibition framed and presented these photographs within the context of contemporary art in the 1960s and 70s. I look at how *Storyville Portraits* was contextualized by examining this exhibition in comparison to MoMA's photographic program as well as artistic trends contemporary to photography in the 1960s and early 1970s. I am interested in why these photographs were able to rise to

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<sup>21</sup> Janet Malcolm, *Diana & Nikon: Essays on the Aesthetic of Photography*. Boston: D.R. Godine, 1980, 199-201,

<sup>22</sup> Susan Sontag identifies this photograph, and other like it that appeared in the 1996 extended edition of Szarkowski's *Storyville* catalogue as simply "two pictures of parlor decor," Sontag in Szarkowski's *Bellocq, Photographs from the Red Light District of New Orleans*, Museum of Modern Art, 1996, 7. Others, such as Janet Malcolm, are more direct in their identification of these images as interiors of Bellocq's domestic space. Malcolm says that "Both the old and new Bellocq books contain interior shots that Bellocq took of his own apartment," 200-201. It was Al Rose, who in 1974 identified these interiors as Bellocq's studio. Rose labels one of the interiors as "A corner of the Studio of Ernest Bellocq." See Al Rose. *Storyville, New Orleans, Being an Authentic, Illustrated Account of the Notorious Red-light District*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1974. 59.



almost canonical status within the context of post-war fine art photography almost immediately and argue the *Storyville Portraits* were so quickly incorporated into the canon of photography's history because of how they reflected cultural and artistic values of the 60s over their intrinsic historical value. This is not to say that their historical circumstances were completely ignored in this first exhibition, but the way they have been situated in the canon of art history has eschewed this historical significance in exchange for how they reflected the value they held for photographers and audiences in the 60s.<sup>23</sup> For that reason, in the second chapter of this thesis I illustrate how these photographs functioned within Storyville's unique and complex social and economic systems.<sup>24</sup> What is at stake is the history of Storyville itself, and an understanding of the sexual economies within the historic space of Storyville as they relate to these photographs. Once we understand why these photographs became attractive in the cultural and artistic environment of the 60s, we can see why it was so easy to cast aside their historical value in exchange for an affirmation of the tastes and concerns of the day.

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<sup>23</sup> Indeed, much of the text in Szarkowski's catalogue offers very useful historical insight into life in the district, but ultimately falls back on attempting to construct an artistic identity for Bellocq over accurately presenting the historical circumstances that informed these photographs production and circulation. See Szarkowski, *E.J. Bellocq, Storyville Portraits*. 8-18.

<sup>24</sup> In response to an exhibition that attempted to situate Bellocq in a historic framework, Janet Malkolm asked curator Steven Maklansky about why it was so important to him to correct previous misunderstandings about Bellocq. "Why do I care so much about that," he responded, "Do you mean other than a historian's need to get the facts straight?" Malkolm, 201. Though I am inclined to agree with Maklansky about the merit for reexamining history for its own sake, I approach this project not only as a historian but as a Louisianian. Malkolm responded to Matlansky by asking, "Yes. How does it affect the photographs?". Resituating these photographs in a historic and local context does change the way we look at the photographs. Understanding who images worked in the sexualized space of Storyville it allows us to see how a clothed woman and an interior photograph can be read as erotic, and how nudes can speak to a complex history of race within a sex based economy, as well as become synonymous with alcohol. I will touch on all of this in chapter two but for now I bring this up to establish a grounds for opposition to the 1960s view of Bellocq's photographs.

During the 1960s John Szarkowski's leadership and vision defined MoMA's photographic program.<sup>25</sup> Szarkowski served as the Director of Photography at MoMA from 1962 to 1991. Hand-picked by Edward Steichen to serve as his successor, his first several years at MoMA were spent completing a number of Steichen's final projects.<sup>26</sup> Szarkowski's tenure at MoMA was arguably one of the single greatest forces defining photographic taste in America during the second half of the twentieth century. "Szarkowski's thinking" wrote Miriam Horn in the *U.S. News & World Report* in 1990, "has become our thinking about photography."<sup>27</sup> Early on in his career Szarkowski wanted to get away from using photography as a social instrument and focus more on photography as an autonomous medium worthy of contemplation and appreciation in and of itself. This approach to photography as art was not to cordon off 'art photography' from the rest of the medium's applications but instead to elevate photography in all its manifestations.<sup>28</sup> In this way, he showed photographs by both established art photographers alongside vernacular and unknown photographs, believing all of them worthy of appreciation on an aesthetic level.<sup>29</sup>

The photographs Szarkowski chose for *Storyville Portraits* from the larger body of images avoided repetitious display of portraits of particular sitters or photographs that

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<sup>25</sup> A.D. Coleman, "MoCA Catalogue Essay: Arbus, Friedlander, Winogrand at Century's End" MoCA Catalogue Essay: Arbus, Friedlander, Winogrand, 2000

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Miriam Horn *American Vision: The eye of John Szarkowski*. *U.S. News & World Report*. February 12, 1990.

<sup>28</sup> In *The Photographer's Eye*, Szarkowski asserts that "The study of photographic form must consider the medium's "fine art" tradition and its "functional" tradition as intimately interdependent aspects of a single history". John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York, 1964.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

were made during one sitting. For this show he chose to select prints from negatives that were intact and free from serious damage, with a couple of notable exceptions.<sup>30</sup> Despite this, Szarkowski did not seek to hide the fact that the plates from which these photographs were printed suffered major damages that affected the formal cohesion of the contemporary print. Plates number one, twenty four, and thirty, (figures 3, 4, and 5) in the catalogue which accompanied the exhibition all show large black fields that efface parts of the image (usually the corners) and show evidence of overexposure of the photographic paper due to significant chunks of the glass negative breaking.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, plates number eight, eighteen, and thirty-three (figures 6, 7, and 8) all show traces of significant water damage and flaking of the emulsion.<sup>32</sup> Plate thirty -three (figure 8) is printed from a negative so badly damaged that it becomes difficult to make out the subject.<sup>33</sup> I will return to further discuss the significance of showing the traces of the damaged plate on the contemporary print below.

For now, I focus on the didactic material that accompanied the exhibition and provided the limited information available about the photographs, Bellocq, and Storyville to the viewer. A slim catalogue, written and compiled by Szarkowski with Lee Friedlander's assistance, was published in conjunction with the exhibition *Storyville Portraits*.<sup>34</sup> The catalogue still serves as the primary source about Bellocq's work with

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<sup>30</sup> See John Szarkowski, "E.J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits, Photographs From the New Orleans Red Light District, Circa, 1912." Museum of Modern Art, 1970. plates 1, 8, 10, 18, 19, 24, 27, 30 and 33.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

little to no new information produced by MoMA since.<sup>35</sup> This book, published January 14, 1971 reproduced all thirty-four photographs in the exhibition in no discernible order. The sequencing of images in the catalogue did not follow the order of images in the actual exhibition and the book does not present the photographs by any sort of sub-genre: nude, studio portrait, etc. However, given Lee Friedlander's tendency to be a heavy-handed editor in regards to his own work and publications it is possible that he had more to say in the book's design and layout than the exhibition layout, which would explain the disconnect between the show and the book.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps he had a say in which images made it up on the walls at MoMA and which did not. A.D. Coleman points out that of all of the photographers in Szarkowski's *New Documents*, Friedlander "produced by far the most tightly redacted oeuvre—editing and sequencing all of his monographs himself."<sup>37</sup> It is very likely that the sequencing in the catalogue for *Storyville Portraits* had at least as much to do with Friedlander's own artistic vision as it did Szarkowski's design preferences.

Two short texts accompany the images in the *Storyville Portraits* catalogue. The first is a transcription of a letter from Lee Friedlander to Bill Russel<sup>38</sup> a musician and jazz historian from New Orleans. The letter traces Friedlander's interest in Bellocq back to

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<sup>35</sup> Malkolm explains that "When twenty-six years later, a new edition of Bellocq's photographs was announced, one naturally expected that more information was forthcoming. But the new book, though it adds eighteen images to the original thirty-four, as well as a fine essay of appreciation by Susan Sontag, simply reprints Friedlander's note and Szarkowski's dialogue." 197

<sup>36</sup> see Peter Galassi, "You Have to Change to Stay the Same", *Friedlander*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 2005.

<sup>37</sup> A.D. Coleman, "MoCA Catalogue Essay: Arbus, Friedlander, Winogrand at Century's End" MoCA Catalogue Essay: Arbus, Friedlander, Winogrand, 2000.

<sup>38</sup> Szarkowski, *Storyville Portraits*, 3

1958 and his friendship with Larry Bornstien, and tells how he came to purchase the negatives. It goes on to outline some technical issues Friedlander had with printing the plates and the reasoning behind some of the printing choices he made, as well as thanking those involved in providing background information on Bellocq's life. A reflection on Friedlander's artistic production shows how the photographer often focused on form over content. In the words of A.D. Coleman, "Friedlander seems genuinely detached from his nominal subject matter, concerned principally with picture-making problems and strategies. People in public, generic statuary, nude women, and cacti appear as relatively arbitrary and, indeed, interchangeable raw material in his process; what he had to say about them as such seems almost irrelevant, and one would not turn to any of his interpretations thereof for information regarding those subjects."<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Friedlander often seemed for the most part uninterested in Bellocq's biography, or the history of Storyville except as it related to his interest in the history of jazz in New Orleans. Peter Galassi talks about how, "In 1958, [Bornstein] showed him a group of glass-plate negatives, portraits of prostitutes made by Ernest J. Bellocq in New Orleans's legendary Storyville district shortly before World War I. It wasn't only the music that needed to be rediscovered and preserved."<sup>40</sup> Aside from a desire to participate in the preservation of a bit of jazz history, Friedlander's primary interest in these photographs seemed to be the challenge of creating new prints from these old and damaged negatives.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Finding his conventional methods of printing unsuitable for these negatives, Friedlander researched period printing methods to discover how he believes Bellocq would have made prints from the Storyville negatives. Friedlander discusses this in his preface to Szarkowski's catalogue,

The second text in the exhibition's accompanying catalogue is a bizarre fabricated interview about Bellocq's personal life and professional practices. The text was as meticulously curated by John Szarkowski as the exhibition itself. Szarkowski constructed this interview from a collection of testimonies from people who knew Bellocq when he was alive.<sup>42</sup> Though the passage reads as if the speakers are in conversation with one another, in reality Szarkowski pieced together fragments of separate testimonials to read like a dialogue. In this case it seemed that Szarkowski was the one interested in Bellocq as a photographer. Prefacing the interview is a brief introduction by Szarkowski providing abbreviated biographical information about Bellocq, and outlining the nature of the following dialogue that never actually took place. The text reads:

E.J. Bellocq was a commercial photographer who worked in New Orleans before and after the First World War. A plausible guess might be that his working life reached from about 1895 through the first four decades of the twentieth century. The thirty-four pictures reproduced here are selected from a group of eighty-nine plates of Storyville prostitutes- which were discovered in Bellocq's desk after his death. The negatives were made about 1912. As far as is known, they constitute only a fragment of his work to have survived.<sup>43</sup>

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saying that "I soon found I could not use my conventional method of printing, as the plates did not respond well to bromide paper. The tonal range was too limited even on the softest grade. Some research led me to a printing technique popular at the turn of the century called P.O.P (printing out paper) which has an inherent self masking quality. In this method the plates were exposed to the P.O.P by indirect daylight for anywhere from three hours to seven days, depending on the plate's density and quality of daylight..." Szarkowski, *E.J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits, Photographs From the New Orleans Red Light District, Circa, 1912*. Museum of Modern Art, 1970. 3. Peter Galassi expands on this narrative; "since no prints by Bellocq were known to have survived, he had no choice but to follow his own instincts. Even on the softest grade of conventional paper, his trial prints were far too contrasty, so he visited the library at the George Eastman House in Rochester New York to study technical manuals of the period." Galassi, 35.

<sup>42</sup>Szarkowski, *E.J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits, Photographs From the New Orleans Red Light District, Circa, 1912*. Museum of Modern Art, 1970. 4

<sup>43</sup> John Szarkowski, *E.J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits, Photographs From the New Orleans Red Light District, Circa, 1912*. Museum of Modern Art, 1970. p.4.

Here, Szarkowski did the best with what he had to work with in terms of historical and biographical material. What is printed above is essentially all that is known about Bellocq to this date. But even here, a great deal is left up to speculation. The Szarkowski identification of Bellocq as a commercial photographer serves his perception that any photograph made by any person could function as art.<sup>44</sup> Szarkowski goes on to say this about the constructed interview that accompanies the first catalogue of Bellocq's work:

The following discussion never took place as printed here. It is rather a synthesis of four long conversations recorded by Lee Friedlander in 1969, plus excerpts from a letter from Al Rose to Lee Friedlander, dated July 12, 1968. The source materials have been heavily edited, intermixed, and changed in sequence. I believe, however, that the participants' meaning have been accurately preserved.<sup>45</sup>

The constructed interview is important because it serves as the source of (mis)information still surrounding E.J. Bellocq's life today. The above text also casts some doubt on Friedlander's own personal interests in photography. Though Friedlander claimed that he was not interested in Bellocq the person, he is responsible for setting the groundwork for any further biographical work on the photographer.<sup>46</sup> Though he claimed to be disinterested in Bellocq as a person, he still went to great pains to research the photographer's biography. In the end, much of Friedlander's work on these photographs was geared towards technical aspects of printing, instead of more historical research such

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<sup>44</sup> John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*

<sup>45</sup> John Szarkowski, *E.J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits, Photographs From the New Orleans Red Light District, Circa*, 4

<sup>46</sup> In an interview with Nan Goldin, Friedlander confessed "I am not interested in the man, I am interested in the pictures." See Nan Goldin. "E.J. BELLOCQ: "'Bellocq Epoque' – Nan Goldin on Photographer E.J. Bellocq" (1997)." *AMERICAN SUBURB X*. Art Forum, 4 May 2013. Web. 30 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.americansuburbx.com/2012/05/e-j-bellocq-bellocq-epoque-nan-goldin-on-photographer-e-j-bellocq-1997.html>>.

as looking to identify some of the women pictured in his plates and it was Szarkowski who played the largest part in the construction of Bellocq's artistic identity.

### **Writing E.J. Bellocq**

There has been an overwhelming compulsion among critics, scholars, and historians to establish a biographical bases for reading Bellocq's work that is in line with an interest in the deformed, (Bellocq was described in Szarkowski's text as a hydrophilic dwarf) and the marginalized in the 1960s.<sup>47</sup> Such a focus on the identification and peculiarities of the artist may have been an attempt to separate these photographs from being *just* historical illustration, by establishing Bellocq as an auteur, someone with a special talent for getting close to his notorious subjects and a peculiar personal background to match. In Szarkowski's book *Looking at Photographs* the short text that accompanies Bellocq's photograph of a woman reclining in a chair wearing a full body stocking (Figure 9) does not directly speak to this or any of Bellocq's photographs at all. Instead he talks about the lack of available information on the personal history of Bellocq, briefly ruminates on what makes a good portrait, and ends with Friedlander's contribution to these photograph's discovery.<sup>48</sup> This approach is echoed in the text of the

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<sup>47</sup> These publications include John Szarkowski, *E.J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits, Photographs From the New Orleans Red Light District, Circa, 1912*. Museum of Modern Art, 1970 and the 1996 edition *Bellocq, Photographs from the Red Light District of New Orleans*, Museum of Modern Art, which contains Sontag's introduction, Jonathan Green, *American Photography, A Critical History 1945 to the Present*. 1984. Harry N. Abrams Incorporated, New York. particularly the chapter "The Sixties and Subject". Nan Goldin. "E.J. BELLOCQ: "Bellocq Epoque" – Nan Goldin on Photographer E.J. Bellocq" (1997). Kozloff, Max. "Retrospection and Clairvoyance: Portraits of the Early Twentieth Century." *The Theatre of the Face: A History of Modern Portrait Photography*. 1. Publ. ed. London: Phaidon, 2007 and Janet Malcolm. *Diana & Nikon: Essays on Photography*. New York, N.Y.: Aperture, 1997. particularly her essay "The Real Thing".

<sup>48</sup> John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York, 1964. 68.



catalogue that accompanied Bellocq's first exhibition. In this catalogue, in which each photograph from the exhibition is reproduced, it is curious that not one photograph is discussed or analyzed individually in the text. That is because the speakers are more preoccupied with constructing the mythology of Bellocq as the deformed outsider at home in the brothels of New Orleans.<sup>49</sup> Any careful analysis of the individual images becomes a moot point, as they are primarily only needed as illustration of the lascivious nature of what is perceived as Bellocq's personal project. Instead, this redirects the discussion away from a historical significance of these images and towards constructing a persona for Bellocq that would appeal to the 1960s reader.<sup>50</sup> The few times they are mentioned, the photographs are talked about as a whole, with no individual picture singled out for discussion. The fact that no single subject photographed is picked out for identification and analysis is made even more strange by the presence of the testimony of a woman named Adele, who worked in the district and who was allegedly the subject of several of Bellocq's photographs.<sup>51</sup> Having access to such a resource, I find it curious that neither Szarkowski nor Friedlander would have taken the opportunity to have her identify herself or see if she was able to identify any of the other women in these pictures.<sup>52</sup> Why

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<sup>49</sup> John Szarkowski, *E.J. Bellocq Storyville Portraits*, 8-18

<sup>50</sup> Two of the best explanations for Bellocq's popularity come from Susan Sontag in the verse from her introduction to the expanded version of the catalogue for *Storyville Portraits*, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, (Susan Sontag, "Bellocq: Photographs from Storyville", 1996) and a passage that I examine below by Johnthan Green in "The Sixties as Subject", *American Photography, A Critical History 1945 to Present*. 119

<sup>51</sup> John Szarkowski, *Storyville Portraits*, 8-15

<sup>52</sup> At least one of Bellocq's subjects is fully identified in Al Rose in *Storyville New Orleans, Being an Authentic, Illustrated Account Of the Notorious Red-Light District*. The caption under Bellocq's photo reads "a prime attraction at Minnie White's place at 221 North Basin Street was Marguerite Griffin who could not only handle the conventional duties of a Storyville tart but also knew the lyrics of countless bawdy ballads. Note the wall hangings: the The pillow above her head reads 'Daisies won't

does Adele tell us nothing about the photographs, only information about Bellocq?<sup>53</sup> Though this seems like a tragically lost opportunity today, it is perhaps not so strange given that the main objective of all the rest of the text on the Storyville portraits was tenaciously focused on writing about Bellocq himself. For this reason, it is likely that Adele was not asked about the particulars of each photograph, who the women in them are, or anything about her own personal history outside of her relationship with Bellocq. We must also keep in mind that this text comes from a heavily edited group of interviews, and that it is entirely possible that Adele had spoken more about the history of these photographs and the women they depict, and that this information was not included by Szarkowski in the final text.

The desire to reconstruct Bellocq's biography was so strong that John Szarkowski was driven to piecing this text together from a variety of disjointed sources. A press release from MoMA published December 9, 1970 states "Mr. Szarkowski edited, intermixed and rearranged the source material with a view toward accurately preserving the participants' meaning."<sup>54</sup> In allowing Szarkowski to determine the participants meaning such an essay becomes highly suspect, and the viewer can only assume that the real meaning preserved can only be Szarkowski's. The vast majority of what we know about Bellocq's life and career comes from a handful of people who knew him (albeit on

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tell." The risqué signs read, left to right, "Oh! Babe, please come," "Oh! Dearie, I gave U much pleasure" (affixed to a Mardi Gras pennant dated 1910). and "Dearie, U ask for Marguerite." This photograph was not included in the 1970 exhibition, but is reproduced in the 1996 edition, suggesting that it was one of the negatives purchased and printed by Friedlander.

<sup>53</sup> John Szarkowski, *Storyville Portraits*, 8-15

<sup>54</sup> John Szarkowski, *E.J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits*, Museum of Modern Art, Press Release No. 129. December 9, 1970. 1

a very superficial level) before his death, quoted in Szarkowski's catalogue. Even then, the stories are often conflicting and anecdotal at best, with little to no primary sources such as letters, journals or diaries to back them up.

Most of what is written about Bellocq serves to construct the image of a tragic New World bohemian, the Toulouse-Lautrec of New Orleans, with Storyville as his Montmartre and Mahogany Hall as his Moulin Rouge.<sup>55</sup> If the constructed narrative about Bellocq is even partly true, several similarities still exist between him and Toulouse-Lautrec. Both were francophone artists who came from aristocratic families and who subsequently fell from grace, both were said to be miniscule in stature and suffered some sort of deformity, and both were best known for the prostitutes that populated their artwork.<sup>56</sup> Susan Sontag, who never met Bellocq, drew all of her description of him from Szarkowski. Sontag describes how Bellocq, allegedly, "spoke with a 'terrific' French accent- shades of Toulouse-Lautrec- hydrophilic and dwarf like."<sup>57</sup> However, it would not do justice to any critical history of Bellocq and the Storyville Portraits to take these comparisons as a given. Many of these misconceptions have since been disproven. A portrait of Bellocq from 1898 (figure 10) shows no sign of the hydrophilic dwarf, but

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<sup>55</sup> Sontag likens Bellocq to Toulouse-Lautrec in her Introduction to the 1996 MoMA catalogue of the *Storyville Portraits*, Susan Sontag, "Bellocq: Photographs from Storyville", 1996. 7. and Malcolm echoes this in "The Real Thing". 199.

<sup>56</sup> Bellocq's french accent is talked about in the constructed interview in Szarkowski's 1970 catalogue. New Orleanian photographer Dan Leyrer says "he was French you know and he had a terrific accent" Szarkowski, *Storyville Portraits*, 8. This is echoed by Sontag as quoted in the text above. Susan Sontag, *Bellocq: Photographs from Storyville*, 1996. 7. The very first line of Bellocq's biography printed in the catalogue for *Diane Arbus, Revelations*, introduces Bellocq as being "born into an aristocratic Creole family in New Orleans." Jeff L. Rosenheim, "Biographies", *Diane Arbus, Revelations*. 307.

<sup>57</sup> Susan Sontag, *Bellocq: Photographs from Storyville*, 1996

instead a rather dapper upper-class gentleman. In an essay written by Nan Goldin in response to the release of a new book on the *Storyville Portraits* compiled by Lee Friedlander and Mark Holborn she also takes the sensationalized styling of Bellocq to task.<sup>58</sup> Upon questioning Lee Friedlander about Bellocq, he directed Goldin to the then curator of photography at the New Orleans Museum of Art, Steven Maklansky. At the time, Maklansky was doing extensive research on Bellocq in preparation for an exhibition of his work that focused on a historical contextualization for these photographs. Maklansky discredits the idea that Bellocq was deformed or in any way peculiar. Goldin points out that

On the basis of an image of Bellocq published in a turn-of-the-century magazine, Maklansky contends that the description of him as physically abnormal is exaggerated, and that he was indeed a debonair young man with a moustache who did not look so different from the photographer played by Keith Carradine in *Pretty Baby*. Rex Rose, whose research Maklansky drew on when compiling his exhibition, found Bellocq's hospital records, which describe him at seventy-six, not long before his death in 1949, as a "normal, well-developed male."<sup>59</sup>

Despite the fact that the idea of Bellocq as the tragic outsider artist has been discredited, the misconception has been used to establish him within the canon of art history by drawing comparisons to the tragic story of Diane Arbus and other marginalized characters on the 1960s. This perception played a large role in his recuperation and relevance in the 1960s and 1970s. Bellocq's retooling as the American Lautrec could be seen as little more than a transparent ploy by those who stand to gain

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<sup>58</sup> Nan Goldin, "Bellocq Epoque" – Nan Goldin on Photographer E.J. Bellocq" (1997), *AMERICAN SUBURB X*, 10.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

from Bellocq's incorporation into the art cannon through sensationalism. But it is important to understand what was going on at this time that would prompt such a response.

### **Bellocq's 1960s**

The late 1960s and early 1970s were marked by the tumult of the Vietnam War, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the civil rights movement, and Stonewall Riots among many other things had left much of American culture as what Susan Sontag would describe as a society "eager to be troubled."<sup>60</sup> As a time of turmoil and uncertainty for many Americans the subject matter of art and photography in the 60s reflected this unease and images of violence, alienation, perversity and people on the fringes of society rose to prominence. Jonathan Green suggests that the most iconic and important photographs of this era "come out of the war, the civil rights movement, the student confrontations, and the assassinations" and that the subject matter of photographers during this decade was "the unseemly, the outcast, the dangerous, the forbidden, the exotic and the bizarre."<sup>61</sup> At the same time Sontag points out how, "since the 1920s ambitious professionals, those whose work gets into museums, have steadily drifted away from lyrical subjects, consciously exploring plain, tawdry, or even vapid material."<sup>62</sup> This accounts for the ease with which Bellocq's subjects were embraced in the art museum. With no captions or living artist to set a context for these images, artists and scholars of

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<sup>60</sup> Susan Sontag, "America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly". *On Photography*, 1971, 33.

<sup>61</sup> Green, "The Sixties as Subject", 119

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

the 1960s and 70s were free to project these values and concerns onto Bellocq's photographs and frame them in ways that were fashionable at the time. In this way, the photographs came to serve Szarkowski's construction of Bellocq as the troubled outcast. This allowed the *Storyville Portraits* to be a timely exhibition that reflected the needs and interests held by audience of the day, and established a framework to construct Bellocq's biography and personal idiosyncrasies as a viable lens through which to make meaning in these photographs.

Many of the trends in photography that made *Storyville Portraits* relevant for photographers in the 1960s were defined in Szarkowski's groundbreaking *New Documents* show, which opened February 28, 1967.<sup>63</sup> *New Documents* brought together Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand, three photographers who arguably defined the aesthetic and concerns of 1960s photography. The thread connecting these three was their new approach to social documentary photography.<sup>64</sup> Szarkowski was interested in the way that these photographs were able to explore the social fabric of 1960s America without making overt social commentary. This exhibition arguably set the tone for photography from the late 1960s on and perhaps best established Szarkowski's taste regarding photographic content and practice, defining a new generation of

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<sup>63</sup> Among these themes are the 'redirection of the techniques and aesthetics of documentary photography to more personal ends', moving photography away from its use as a tool for social reform "in the service of a social cause", work that "betrayed a sympathy- almost and affection-- for the imperfectness and the frailties of society". These ideas served as the guiding force for the discourse, and at times often-blattant disregard for historical factuality, which defined Bellocq's photographs in the 1960s and 70s. See the press release for John Szarkowski's *New Documents*, The Museum of Modern Art, 1967. [http://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/3860/releases/MOMA\\_1967\\_Jan-June\\_0034\\_21.pdf](http://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/3860/releases/MOMA_1967_Jan-June_0034_21.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*

photographers. Without the *New Documents*, Bellocq's insertion into the canon of the history of photography in the United States may never have happened. At the very least, we would not have viewed these photographs, or Bellocq's biography, in the same way. Szarkowski's desire to show new photographers who "directed the documentary approach to more personal ends"<sup>65</sup> is exemplary of how Bellocq's work has been talked about, even if in reality this may not have been the case. The interest in Bellocq in the 1960s and 70s was defined by the approach to photography championed in *New Documents*, namely: the idea of the cool detached documentarian, one who records what he sees without judgment or social agenda. Likewise, his work shares several key connections with at least two of the photographers in the exhibition, Lee Friedlander and Diane Arbus. The most obvious connection is to Lee Friedlander who found, purchased, and produced the prints in *Storyville Portraits*.

Though Friedlander discovered and was an advocate for the *Storyville Portraits*, they do not recall his photographic work so much as they do another artist in the exhibition, Diane Arbus. A number of striking similarities exist between Arbus and Bellocq that make for fruitful comparison. Perhaps most notably, they both worked with people who have been considered marginalized members of society, and for both, when they did photograph "normals" those people are made strange either by the compositional elements of the photograph or their inclusion among a body of work dominated by a perceived outsider perspective. The composition of both these photographer's work is

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<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*

remarkably similar. The aesthetic often employed by both Arbus and Bellocq is comparable, with a central figure facing forward presenting him or herself to the camera. They were both established within the canon of photography's history at MoMA by John Szarkowski in the late 1960s and both made their living through commercial ends. Both were talked about and often framed within their minority cultural background. Susan Sontag hinges a considerable amount of her interpretation of Arbus's work on her middle class Jewish heritage.<sup>66</sup> Likewise, Bellocq is regularly framed by his Creole, Francophone heritage.<sup>67</sup> Highlighting his French background (even though he was by birth American) could also served to eroticize his photographs, highlighting the connection between the *Storyville Portraits* and 'French pictures', a vernacular term for any sort of erotic pornographic images.<sup>68</sup>

In both Arbus's and Bellocq's case most of their work would have been seen through commercial venues during their lifetimes. While she was alive, the majority of Arbus's photographs would have been seen as press photographs or spreads for personal interest stories in magazines. In response to the limited scope (eighty images) of the work reproduced in the 1972 Aperture monograph *Diane Arbus*, Doon Arbus and Marvin Israel

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<sup>66</sup> Sontag suggest that Arbus's fascination with the dark side of American culture was "a revolt against the Jews' hyper-developed moral sensibility", and compared her to Warhol in that "Warhol, who came from a working-class family, ever felt any of the ambivalence toward success which afflicted the children of Jewish upper middle classes in the 1960s. To someone raised as a Catholic, like Warhol, a fascination with evil comes, much more genuinely than it does someone from a Jewish background." Susan Sontag, "On Photography", p. 44-45.

<sup>67</sup> The very first paragraph of the catalogue accompanying *Storyville Portraits*, New Orleans photographer Dan Leyer, is quoted recollecting "My uncle and the stagehands all called him *papá*. Not *papa* now, *papá*, cause he was French you know." Szarkowski, *Storyville Portraits*. 8. In the Biographies section in the back of the catalogue for *Diane Arbus: Revelations* the very first line of Bellocq's short bio describes how he was "born into an aristocratic Creole family in New Orleans, Louisiana." p. 307.

<sup>68</sup> Szarkowski, *Storyville Portraits*, 12.



remind us:

Diane Arbus started taking pictures in the early 1940s- landscapes, still lifes, nudes, anything considered at the time an appropriate subject for a photograph. In 1956 she began numbering her negatives in sequence and, during the next fifteen years, contacted more than 7500 rolls of film and made finished prints of more than a thousand different pictures. That material included early 35mm projects on Coney Island, movie audiences, the female impersonators of the Club 82, and also commercial work for magazines, commissioned portraits, and a few late extensive projects. Scarcely any of these photographs appeared in the monograph... Diane Arbus looked to magazines as the sole means of earning a living taking pictures, which was not merely gratifying but essential.<sup>69</sup>

The above further links Arbus and Bellocq in regards to how only a small portion of their work was considered acceptable the fine art museum. Both were prolific commercial photographers and took on a number of diverse projects. The *Storyville Portraits* were only one among the numerous projects Bellocq was known to have photographed. Along with his regular work photographing shipping equipment for the Foundation Company, news photographs of events like President Taft's visit to Tulane University, and photographs of Catholic buildings and school children, he also took on what is considered to be a social documentary project recording New Orleans's now disappeared Chinatown.<sup>70</sup> Despite these other projects, Bellocq's name has become synonymous with Storyville. Despite the variety and volume of photographic production attributed to both Bellocq and Arbus, only a very small fraction of their work was acknowledged as fine art my museums in the 1960s. While Bellocq worked during a time when it was virtually unheard of for a commercial photographer to be sought out by an art museum, Arbus was

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<sup>69</sup> Arbus, Diane. *Magazine Work*: Exhibition Held at Lawrence, Kan.: Spencer Museum of Art, January 22 - March 4, 1984; Minneapolis, Minn.: Minneapolis Inst. of Arts, May 5 - June 24 1984; Lexington, Ky.: Univ. of Kentucky Museum, Oct. 28 - Dec. 30, 1985. Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture, 1984.

<sup>70</sup> Szarkowski, *Storyville Portraits*, 14.

leery (to the point that Frederick Gross suggests she was ambivalent) about her work being shown in a museum context.<sup>71</sup>

It is not out of line to look at Arbus separately from the other two photographers in *New Documents*. From the start she was always somewhat separated from the two men in the exhibition. In the gallery at MoMA she was spatially separated from Friedlander and Winogrand, with one gallery to herself and a shared space for the other two photographers. Frederick Gross suggests that, “Arbus’s work retains a vestige of empathy for the subject in the form of a visible dialogue, whereas Winogrand’s and Friedlander’s does not.”<sup>72</sup> I do not agree that Arbus is necessarily so much more emotionally invested in her subject than her male counterparts. A separation of her work from Friedlander and Winogrand’s based on formal concerns is more understandable. Her preference for a square format and use of interior or shallow space to make images that immediately read as portraiture contrast with the other two photographer’s use of rectangular orientation and the street-as- studio. Likewise, in his article “Straight Shooting in the Sixties”, Jonathan Green discusses Friedlander and Winogrand as the inheritors of the American documentary tradition. Green positions the two male photographers in *New Documents* as successors of Walker Evans and Robert Frank.<sup>73</sup> Arbus is only mentioned as accompanying the two in *New Documents*, though none of her

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<sup>71</sup> Frederick Gross, *Diane Arbus’s 1960s: Auguries of Experience*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. 2012. 110-112.

<sup>72</sup> Gross, *Diane Arbus’s 1960s: Auguries of Experience*, 107.

<sup>73</sup> Jonathan Green, “Straight Shooting the in the Sixties”, *American Photography, A Critical History 1945 to the Present*. 1984. Harry N. Abrams Incorporated, New York. 105.

work is discussed. This omission is hardly unusual considering that the genre of street photography was long held to be a macho boy's club.<sup>74</sup> The separation of Arbus work from Winogrand and Friedlander based on genre is a more convincing explanation for her segregation from the two men in *New Documents*. Nonetheless, in no small part due to her gender, Arbus' work is often defined in terms of her psychological relationship with her subjects whereas her male counterparts are appreciated for their curiosity and formal innovation.

The conception of Arbus as empathetic and intensely connected with her subjects on a personal level is more a product of the mythology that has surrounded her than what was actually the case. However, this interest in the personal relationship between the marginalized sitter and photographer is a recurring theme in discussions of Bellocq's photographs as well, and likely comes from the critical discourse surrounding Arbus. There has been a great deal of critical writing regarding Arbus's relationship with her subjects, much of which was fueled by Arbus herself.<sup>75</sup> Particularly pertinent is that she would get to know her sitters very well. A fruitful example for comparison may be drawn between Arbus's *Transvestite at her birthday Party, N.Y.C, 1969* (figure 11) a photograph made after *New Documents* but around the same time that *Storyville Portraits*

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<sup>74</sup> For more on gender as it applies to Street photography, see Patricia Vettel-Becker *Shooting From the Hip: Photography, Masculinity, and Post War America*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. 2005. 65-68. Of Particular interest, Vetterl-Becher notes: "The street is a masculine arena, a setting of much intimidation for women, from low-level harassment like wolf-whistling to physical manhandling and rape. Consequently, a woman photographer could never stalk the urban streets with the same freedom as could a man." 68.

<sup>75</sup> See Diane Arbus and Marvin Israel. *Diane Arbus*. 40th Anniversary ed. New York: Aperture Monograph ;, 2011 and Diane Arbus. *Diane Arbus: Revelations*. New York: Random House, 2003

was being curated, and one of Bellocq's photograph, (figures 12) . A comparison between the work of these two photographs shows how much of Arbus's aesthetic may have come from Bellocq's work as well as how both of their work has often been misread by relying too much on the artist's personal mythologies as source material.

Arbus's photograph is an interior scene in which the sitter (a sex worker named Vicki), in the title only identified as a 'transvestite', reclines on her bed in a negligee looking off to the side with a smile on her face, as if she is laughing. The photograph was taken inside her apartment. The humble interior is decorated for the sitter's birthday party with a few balloons, and a cake sits on the bed in front of her, suggesting that there is no table, only the bed and the couple pieces of furniture on the frame. The figures smiling face looks up and to the side, her mouth open wide exposing a missing tooth. She appears very comfortable, completely unselfconscious as Arbus snaps away.

The relationship between Arbus and her sitters that allowed for her photographs to have such an unguarded feel often comes from years of getting to know the people in her pictures. As the story goes, Arbus first met Vicki in 1966, three years before this photograph was taken. The event recorded in Arbus's photographs is Vicki's birthday party, which was attended by Arbus, a 'whore friend' of Vicki's and her pimp.<sup>76</sup> Arbus was allegedly afforded the opportunity to make this photograph because of her long friendship with the subject, and the candid expression that Vicki displayed in both of

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<sup>76</sup> *Diane Arbus: Revelations*, 198.

these photographs also comes from her comfort in the photographer's presence.<sup>77</sup>

Whereas Friedlander and Winogrand supposedly displayed a cool detachment their subject matter, Arbus's work was only made possible because of the access she was given to otherwise private parts of people's lives, because she ingratiates herself to many of her sitters.

In Bellocq's photograph (figure 12) the unidentified sitter is leaning forward in her chair, smiling exuberantly and looking straight at the camera. She is located in an interior setting, sitting near a covered mantel. Though we cannot know if this is the interior of her bedroom or not, the setting does seem in some way domestic. The stack of books with what appears to be a plate on top, as well as the frames leaning on the mantel with the verso facing forward suggest that the setting is an informal one. Given the woman's identification as a prostitute, this is likely the interior of an upstairs room at a Storyville brothel. The woman's cheerful expression and the domestic setting suggest that this photograph is the result of privileged access provided by a personal relationship between the photographer and the sitter. However, if Bellocq was working as a professional photographer, photographing prostitutes as advertisement he would have easy access to these settings. Likewise, as the interior rooms of brothels, these setting are designed to appear domestic, though their availability is actually semi-public. Several writers have speculated that Bellocq was given this access because of the relationship he

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<sup>77</sup> This idea that the photographer is able to gain privileged access to their sitter because of their own insider status is reflected in the discourse on Bellocq's relation with his sitter. It is often suggested that the 'empathetic' quality in many of the *Storyville Portraits* come from the model opening up in a special way, which is often attributed to his alleged deformity. For more see Szarkowski's *E.J. Bellocq, Storyville Portraits*. as well as Kozloff and Green's "Sixties as Subject".

built with his sitters.<sup>78</sup> He is often depicted as asexual, and often described his interactions with the women as very polite and completely respectable and that his interest in these women came from a camaraderie he felt with them.<sup>79</sup>

I argue that the sympathetic reading of Bellocq's relationship with his sitters reflected dialogue that surrounded Arbus's work that was popular at the same time that Bellocq's persona was being constructed. In much the same way that Arbus's tragic suicide 'legitimized' her closeness to the 'freaks' and 'sexual deviants' that inhabit her photographs, Bellocq's alleged peculiarities, that he was a shy, asexual, hydrophilic dwarf, aided in forming his close relationship with the 'outsiders' that inhabited Storyville. In both these instances, Bellocq and Arbus become victims of their own mythologies. The reading of these images reflect more the personal mythologies surrounding the photographer than what was actually happening in these photographs. In Bellocq's case, the prescribed intimacy with his sitter is more convincingly a result of her professionalism as a prostitute than his interpersonal skills. For Arbus, this image is actually the last time she ever encountered Vicky and though Arbus had a handful of encounters with her, they were superficial at best and hardly amounted to a close personal connection by any stretch of the imagination.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> See Szarkowski, *E.J. Bellocq, Storyville Portraits*, 14-15, Jonathan Green suggests this access comes from Bellocq's perceived deformity, "Undoubtedly, it was his physical deformity that allowed such seemingly non judgmental communication and camaraderie with the demimonde." Green, 127.

<sup>79</sup> Szarkowski, *E.J. Bellocq, Storyville Portraits*, 15.

<sup>80</sup> Diane Arbus and Marvin Israel. *Diane Arbus*. 40th Anniversary ed. New York: Aperture Monograph ;, 2011. 13-15

Bellocq's work reflects photographic trends in the 1960s more than it does any real historical understanding of Bellocq's actual circumstances. In "The Sixties as Subject" Jonathan Green identifies the dominant themes of sixties photography as ruthless: alienation, deformity, sterility, insanity, sexuality, bestial and mechanical virulence and obscenity" and identifies the icons of the sixties as "the dwarf, the freak, the prostitute,..."<sup>81</sup> With this in mind, it is easy to see how their respective subject matter and personal mythologies would make photographers like Arbus and Bellocq poster children for the sixties. Tellingly, in this essay, Bellocq is the only historical photographer mentioned. He is also one of only a handful of photographers talked about specifically as embodying the ideals of the sixties. Green asserts that Bellocq belongs to the canon of sixties photography in part due to his alleged physical oddities.

Though the women pictured by Bellocq appear without physical defect, we are continually aware of the historical fact that Bellocq himself was described as being misshapen and dwarfed. Undoubtedly it was his physical deformity that allowed such seeming nonjudgmental communication and camaraderie with the demimonde. It is an old twist of fate that a dwarf photographing prostitutes in the early part of the century should provide the most sensual photographic portraits of women for the freaky, liberated sixties.<sup>82</sup>

Bellocq's inclusion among the canonical freaky sixties photographers hinged on a lie allowed to flourish because of the lack of substantial historical information about Bellocq's life and work. In fact, that there was so little verifiable information about Bellocq the person proved more of a aid than a hindrance to his popularity and rise to

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<sup>81</sup> Jonathan Green, "The Sixties as Subject", *American Photography, A Critical History 1945 to Present*. 119.

<sup>82</sup> Green, 127

canonical recognition. The dearth of information allowed him to be constructed into the ancestor that photographers of the 1960s needed him to be. For Green, his freakishness allowed him to share common ground with other social outsiders, prostitutes. That Green would think that a turn of the century prostitute would for some reason feel more comfortable with a dwarf at the camera is a dramatic reversal of Arbus's photographic subject matter.<sup>83</sup> Bellocq becomes the aristocrat that Arbus spoke about when she said, "most people go through life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They've already passed their test in life. They're aristocrats."<sup>84</sup> Green asserts that the "archetype of the sixties was the deformed person."<sup>85</sup> Though the reconstruction of Bellocq's life and biography through *Storyville Portraits* at the end of this decade, the troubled photographic community of the sixties got the archetype it needed. This came at the cost of historical accuracy critical examination of the *Storyville Portraits*, turning them into a burlesque work of fiction.

### **Photography in the Art Museum**

The recuperation of Bellocq's photographs creates an interesting problem in regards to how dissemination and materiality affect issues of authorship and meaning. It is not only historical circumstances, but also material ones that separate the post war presentation, discussion, and materiality of Bellocq's photographs from their historical context. It is important to keep in mind the vast difference between the material histories

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<sup>83</sup> For more on Diane Arbus' interest in Freaks as subject matter, see Rosemarie Thomson. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.

<sup>84</sup> Arbus, *Diane Arbus*, 3.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 120



of Bellocq's prints from the early part of the 20th century as compared to the prints made by Friedlander from the late 1960s as the two physical manifestations create completely different contextual frameworks for the images. The actual photographs that hung at MoMA never circulated in Storyville. The traces of the cracked and dirty surfaces denies the viewer the suspension of disbelief necessary to indulge in one of photography's more treasured traits, its alleged transparency.<sup>86</sup> In distancing the viewer's access to the women in the pictures, the photographs become less about the subject and more about the medium. The viewer is constantly reminded that they are not looking at women, they are looking at pictures. These formal interruptions visually aid the transformation of porn into art. The matting, framing, and placement of these photographs prompts a formal contemplative, rather than visceral, response from the viewer. They were hung on the museum wall in a way that demands careful aesthetic consideration that they would never had received in their original vernacular context. All of these formal and presentational concerns transform these photographs from erotic to aesthetic objects in the gallery space. Lee Friedlander was not simply copying Bellocq's photographs when he reprinted them; he created a brand new body of work, the artistic and aesthetic content for which is vastly different than the vernacular context for the original Storyville portraits.

The material conditions of the photographs in *E.J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits* at the same time seem to highlight and defy the notions of print connoisseurship that Christopher Phillips suggests MoMA was highlighting in order to place photography on

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<sup>86</sup> Geoffrey Batchen asserts that "The transparency of the photograph to its referent has long been one of its more cherished features." See Batchen, *Photography's Object*, "2.

equal footing with the other fine arts.<sup>87</sup> On the one hand, the care and craft that went into each individual print was meant to assign value to the contemplation of the photograph itself, not just the depicted subject. This craft assigns authorship to Lee Friedlander, as in many ways the arguments used to establish photography as a fine art can be applied to Lee Friedlander's work with these photographs. The establishment of the photographers' choice of this subject matter combats the argument that it was simply a mechanical reproduction of nature, or that mechanical reproduction was paramount to the artistic process. The same could be said for Friedlander's interest in the Storyville portraits. The fact that he selected these plates over other the countless other discarded negatives floating around in antique shops and flea markets ascribes authorship to Friedlander because of his choice of subject matter. Furthermore, the fact that the objects Szarkowski displayed were not only chosen by Friedlander, but also printed by him further separates them from Bellocq. The simple fact is that the objects that hang in museums and galleries today did not exist during the 1910s. Additionally, the way that Friedlander's prints look is very different from the way they would have when printed by Bellocq's hand. Two photograph taken by Bellocq of interior mantels and desktops (which I discuss at length later in this thesis), which are crowded with photographs and prints, show how a handful of the *Storyville Portraits* were originally printed and presented. In these photographs, we see that they were made in line with early twentieth century conventions of vernacular photography, with a heavy vignette around each sitter. Friedlander's contemporary prints

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<sup>87</sup> Christopher Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography." *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1982. 16.

look very different because they do not include the heavy-handed postproduction visible in these earlier prints.

Typical of Friedlander's approach to photography as a series of formal problems to be solved, one of his chief concerns in regard to the Storyville Portraits was the best way to go about printing new photographs from the old negatives. Friedlander went to great pains to research period printing techniques that he believed would yield the best results from glass plate negatives. In his preface to the original *Storyville Portraits* catalogue, a letter to Bill Russel, he talks at length about the technical processes and issues involved in reprinting these pictures from Bellocq's negatives.

I soon found that I could not use my conventional method of printing, as the plates did not respond well to bromide paper. The tonal range was too limited even on the softest grade. Some research led me to a printing technique popular around the turn of the century called P.O.P. (Printing Out Paper) which has an inherent self-masking quality. In this method the plates were exposed to the P.O.P. by indirect daylight for anywhere from three hours to seven days, depending on the plate's density and the quality of light. Then the paper was given a toning bath of gold chloride type. Fixing and washing were done in the usual manner but with great care, in that P.O.P. emulsion is especially fragile.<sup>88</sup>

It is not know if Bellocq actually used P.O.P as his preferred printing method. Though Friedlander defends his use of P.O.P on historical grounds, the decision to use this medium was in the end an artistic choice. The time, craft, and care that he put into making these prints is well in line with Szarkowski's and MoMA's interest in reviving old notions of print connoisseurship with regards to photography as fine art in the museum and marketplace. With photography's introduction into the art museum the

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<sup>88</sup> Szarkowski, *E.J. Bellocq, Storyville Portraits*. 1970. The Museum of Modern Art. 2.

transformation of the photograph from an infinitely mechanically reproducible image to a skilfully crafted artistic product was used to invest the prints displayed museum with individual value beyond the subject matter it depicted. The thing became as valuable as the referent. This sort of care and attention afforded to each individual print is a drastic rejection of the approach embraced by MoMA's former curator Edward Steichen. Steichen exhibitions were defined by wall mural sized (see figure 13) reprints of photographs and recall conventional magazine layouts, emphasizing photography's power to communicate with the masses over its artistic ambitions. Christopher Phillips says of Steichen exhibitions: "Under Steichen, the typical gallery installation resembled nothing as much as an oversized magazine layout, designed to reward rapid scanning rather than leisurely contemplation." He went on to say, "such exhibitions never raised the question of the artistic status of any branch of photography."<sup>89</sup> The fact that Steichen's presentation of wall size photo murals and images mounted as in a magazine layout and the fact that the photographer was rarely credited for his photographs, exacerbated its mass-appeal approach. Various aspects of Steichen's curatorial practice negated the value of the fine print. Often, images were mounted on non-archival backboards with no protective glass covering and, shows would regularly be 'traveled' to new venues by shipping off cheaply printed pictures so that various locations (not too conceptually unlike sending out magazines).<sup>90</sup> In this environment, the sort of

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<sup>89</sup> Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography", 16.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

appreciation and cult following that the *Storyville Portraits* has since been afforded would have been unattainable.

Though neither Bellocq nor the *Storyville Portraits* have very much to do with Edward Steichen, it is important to understand what traditions and norms John Szarkowski was pushing against and where many of his own curatorial practices were coming from to really get a feel for how Bellocq's photographs came to be framed in the 1970s. Szarkowski's curatorial approach could not be more different from his predecessor. Incorporating both fine art and vernacular photographs Szarkowski's typical layout privileged the individual print and was designed to foster the 'leisurely contemplation' that Steichen's curatorial approach eschewed.<sup>91</sup>

A photograph by James Mathews (figure 2) of the installation view from *Storyville Portraits* illustrates how the presentation of Bellocq's photographs in the museum space was defined by Szarkowski's curatorial preferences. Because Friedlander printed the whole plate, all of these photographs are the same size. They are all matted and framed in the same way, hung in a line, equidistant from one another, with the straight visual grid interrupted only by the few horizontally formatted prints placed next to the more standard portrait compositions. Here, as in the accompanying catalogue, the nudes and studio portraits are seamlessly intermingled. This presentation style contextualizes these photographs as aesthetic objects, privileging contemplation of the formal aspects of images.

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<sup>91</sup> Green, 46.

Such a case of re-contextualizing a historic group of photographs in an art museum space is not unique the *Storyville Portraits*. Quite the contrary, it was a major pillar of Szarkowski's photographic program and had a long history at MoMA. Predating Szarkowski, the various curators at MoMA had trouble determining what kinds of photography should be shown at the art museum.<sup>92</sup> While the Newhalls promoted fine art photography,<sup>93</sup> Willard Morgan championed snapshots and the popular photographer. Both Steichen and Szarkowski curated exhibitions of news photography that in both cases distanced the photograph from its intended usefulness in order to focus on its formal characteristics.<sup>94</sup> Although Szarkowski was by no means the first to use vernacular and historic photography in MoMA photographic exhibitions, he brought a unique approach to the photographs he displayed in his shows, highlighting aesthetic appreciation and print connoisseurship. Whereas earlier curators of photography such as Edward Steichen in the 1940s incorporated reprints of vernacular photographs in service of the overall message of his shows, Szarkowski fostered an appreciation for the form and aesthetic of the photographs themselves.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. For more on Szarkowski's approach to working with historic news photographs, see John Szarkowski's *From the Picture Press*, Museum of Modern Art 1973. In the book, a catalogue for an exhibition of the same name, Szarkowski says "The present book, and the exhibition from which it derives, are based on the premise that many of the most original and compelling new photographs describe events of minor historical significance, and that the formal and iconographic character of such pictures has made a significant contribution to the development of the modern visual vocabulary." 2. Here, as with his approach to the *Storyville Portraits*, Szarkowski is explicit that he is not interested in the historical significance of the images he displays as much as he is their relevance (actual or imagined) to artistic trends of the time.

What made Bellocq unique among many of Szarkowski's other vernacular recuperations was the identification of the maker, and the potential to rewrite his history as an artist. In addition to the idea of repurposing historical photographs in the museum space, the material concerns of showing a photograph at MoMA that was redefined in terms of scale and printing process is not unique to *Storyville Portraits* either. This trend can arguably be traced back to before Edward Steichen's tenure, and is more typical of Newhall's approach to displaying photographs in the art museum.<sup>95</sup>

However, there are several key differences between these earlier exhibitions and Szarkowski's presentation of Bellocq's photography that speak more directly to the moment that Szarkowski was defining through his curatorial work. Most glaring is that Steichen's exhibitions were often all about narratives of universality and unity among humanity.<sup>96</sup> For Steichen the master narratives of the exhibition are much greater than the sum of the individual photographs or photographers (indeed, much of the time photographers went uncredited). With Szarkowski, it was all about discovering aesthetic qualities within photography. For the artists that interested Szarkowski, photography in service of a grand social narrative fell out of fashion. Szarkowski was interested in photographers like Bellocq, Atget and Arbus, because of what he perceived as their practice of recording life, while not presenting political or ethical statements.

### **Materiality and Reproduction**

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<sup>95</sup> Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography", 27.

<sup>96</sup> Green, 47.

Szarkowski's focus on print connoisseurship allows for a closer look at the significance of materiality and surface in the *Storyville Portraits*. As we know, Lee Friedlander reprinted Bellocq's negatives indiscriminately, making a print from each negative he acquired, no matter its condition. He did not differentiate too strongly between negatives in fine states of preservation and those that show signs of severe damage and deterioration. Though several negatives potentially sustained damage at the hands of the photographer or some other unknown figure who deliberately and literally defaced them by scratching out the faces of several sitters, here I am referring specifically to those negatives where the emulsion has flaked away over time, those which acquired water damage from hurricane Betsy in 1965 and those where the glass had broken and shattered. Many such negatives are so damaged that the traces history has left on the plates has become as important as the subject matter itself.<sup>97</sup> There are a number of plates so badly damaged that the subject matter is almost illegible. Yet Friedlander still took the time to make quality prints from these negative. What is the message behind a photograph so badly damaged that you cannot read its referent? I suggest photographs like these, aside from being formally interesting, talk self-reflexively about their own physical histories and that the story they tell talks more about what happened to the pictures after Bellocq's death than they do about the referent they depict.

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<sup>97</sup> This is in line with common museum practices regarding conservation and preservation of objects, which privilege maintaining an objects present state or, according to collections management best practices "the principle goal should be the stabilization of the object". Rebecca A. Buck. "Ethics for Registrars and Collections Managers." In *MRM5: Museum Registration Methods*, 398. 5th ed. Washington, DC: AAM Press American Association of Museums, 2010. P. 398



In the catalogue accompanying *Photography's Objects*, an exhibition about photography's material presence held at the University of New Mexico Art Museum in 1997, Geoffrey Batchen discusses the importance of addressing the photograph itself, in addition to its referent. Batchen begins:

The transparency of the photograph to its referent has long been one of its most cherished features. All of us tend to look at photographs as if we're simply looking through a window onto some outside world. This is almost a perceptual necessity—in order to see what the photograph is of, we must first repress our consciousness of what the photograph is. As a consequence, in even the most sophisticated discussions of photography, the photograph itself—the actual object being examined—is usually left out of the analysis.<sup>98</sup>

The damage these plates have sustained helps to fight the transparency that Batchen talks about there. Directly addressing photographic transparency is often a tricky thing to do. What are we really talking about when we talk about a photograph, the image or the object? How does the way a photographic object exists in the world affect the way we read it? Earlier I discussed John Szarkowski's seminal book "The Photographer's Eye", in which his first criteria for photography's quintessence is "the Thing Itself." What Szarkowski is referring to is photographic transparency, its link to the subject but with Batchen's words mind, the contemporary reader may approach this as meaning the photograph itself. When speaking about the thing itself in the case of Bellocq's photographs, I do so in order to highlight their photographic materiality. By photographic materiality I mean both the formal aspects of the composition that redirect the viewer's eye to the photograph's surface (as opposed to allowing the viewer the illusion of looking

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<sup>98</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Photography's Objects*. University of New Mexico Art Museum. 1997. 2.

‘through’ the photograph at the subject matter), as well at the photographic object specifically. The photographs that hung on the walls of MoMA and continue to populate museums and galleries to this day, made by Lee Friedlander, are full plate reproductions printed directly from negatives regardless of the amount of damage the plate has sustained, or the remaining legibility in the plate. We can see evidence of the illegibility caused by damage to the photographic plate here in this image of Friedlander’s prints from two plates that were obviously photographed during one sitting (Figures 1 and 14). One of the most striking visual elements of many of the *Storyville Portraits* are the abstract forms caused by wear and water damage from hurricane Betsy in 1965, the flaking of the emulsion and the cracking of the plates. To ignore these prominent visual elements, arguably some of the most memorable signature qualities of these images, would be to fall into the myth of the photograph as a transparent window into another reality. Of all visual media, photography is most at risk of seeming invisible and immaterial due to the verisimilitude the medium offers. The imperfections in these plates break this spell of transparency and force us to see and acknowledge the photographic surface. This shift of focus comes with its own set of rewards for the viewer. In looking at the surface, instead of through it we stand to learn a great deal about the physical history of these objects as well as the nature of photographs. In each print, layers of time are compressed onto the picture surface, tracing the physical history of the negatives from exposure, to interventions by the hand of the artist, through damages incurred during a period of neglect, to when they ended up in the Friedlander’s hands. If we adjust our focus from the referent to the qualities of the photographic surface, there are hints that

shed light on the life these negative led between the time Bellocq died and the time they came into Friedlander's possession. In Figure 1, the physical traces of history are not so prominent, although they are present. On the left portion of the print, undulating variations in tone serve as a visual reminder of water damage done by hurricane Betsy. Flaking around the edges and spots and abrasions to the negative allowing for bright white dodged out spots on the sitter's forearm visually attest to the lack of interest in preservation in the time between Bellocq's death and Lee Friedlander's recuperation of these plates. But they also speak to Friedlander's disinterest in presenting these photographs in the same formal style in which they would have originally looked, even though he went to so much trouble to discover the period printing method that he believed Bellocq used. The damage incurred by Figure 1 thus far discussed is almost negligible when compared to a print of a slightly different photograph of the same scene.

In figure 14, a large portion of the plate has broken off and there is a large burned area underneath the sitter's elbow where damage to the plate has worn away a large spot of emulsion, damaging seemingly beyond any further functionality. Figure 14 is a portrait of the same girl in the previously discussed photograph, in the same setting, before the same backdrop. It is obvious through the respective photographic compositions that they were made at the same sitting. In Figure 14 the sitter is still placed in front of the same white backdrop, she still looks down at her bouquet which she holds to her chest. However in this photograph she is turned slightly more to the side, she holds her bouquet higher and to the left, thus fully covering one breast while more fully exposing the other and her lower portion is positioned more straight on towards the camera. While Figure 1

can still function as suitable portrait, it is almost impossible to look at Figure 14 and focus only on the sitter without working through the photograph's surface. A large portion of the upper left edge of the negative is missing, taking a portion of the sitter's face with it. In the print this absence reads as a large overexposed black mass in the upper part of the picture plane. Below the sitter's elbow is a large blemish which reads as a stain on the negative with radiating cracks that reach out like black veins crawling up the girl's arm and down her leg. Stains and scratches create other abstract forms above the girl's shoulder and next to her head, which interrupt the white field behind her. Overall cracking and wear along the edges suggest active decomposition making it seem as if the plate is decaying as we look at it.

All of these formal qualities are preserved, and become principal visual qualities in Friedlander's prints. What I suggest here is that it is important to take issues like this into consideration when coming to an understanding of what Friedlander was doing with these prints because their presence prompts readings of these photographs that take the lifespan of the negative into account and obscures a transparent representation of the subject. This in turn creates a barrier between the viewer and subject and makes the photographic materiality evident. Friedlander's prints of Bellocq's negatives are a far cry from how they would have looked when Bellocq made prints from them. These traces of time become vital visual elements in Friedlander's body of reprints, which serve to separate these photographs from a more mundane original function and draw the viewer's attention to the aesthetics of the image. This allows contemporary viewers to focus on the photograph as object at the cost of an engagement with the subject. This served to

illustrate the contemporary value of these images. It doesn't matter that Figure 17 is damaged almost beyond recognition, because in its new context this photographs no longer serve as a document of the subject, but instead as aesthetic objects and a photograph about photography, as well as *objet trouve*, in which the value and visual pleasure is found as much in the traces of their physical history as in their content. It illustrates that, to Friedlander, and to a contemporary audience, the sitter is not the key subject of the print, instead it is the photograph's physical history that I find most intriguing.

Interestingly, images like these illustrate how the less transparent the picture surface becomes due to damage, the more obvious the actual physicality of the photograph becomes. Such formal interruptions remind us that these *Storyville Portraits* are in fact contemporary to the 1960s and '70s because the traces of the damage inflicted over time are written on the surface of the print. These marks that distance the viewer from being able to look through the allegedly transparent photographic window onto the subject also reminds the viewer of the distance in time that separates the photographic object they are looking at from the historical subject matter it partially depicts.

### **The Brothel's Old/ The Museum's New Subject**

Historical framing and reproduction of the *Storyville Portraits* has facilitated a shift from content (sitter) to surface (object) and thus the *photograph* as subject, as opposed to the women depicted in them. The shift in focus from the subject of the photograph to the photograph's essential qualities is not only manifest in their formal qualities, but reflects an ongoing trend at this time of reordering visual information in a

way that privileges medium and thus artist over subject and information. In “The Museum’s Old/ The Library’s New Subject” Douglas Crimp describes the shift in values symptomatic of the sort of institutional reordering that made the *Storyville Portraits* a viable subject for an art museum exhibition. In this essay Crimp talks about the resurrection of the cult of the artist as creative genius and what this has come to mean for the role of historical photography in institutions like libraries, archives, and museums. Once valued for the information they provided in regards to their referent, Crimp calls out how historical photographs have been reclassified along the guidelines of fine art photography, with a focus on the photographer as artist, as is the case with the *Storyville Portraits*. The use of photography as a fine art is, of course, not new to the 1960s, but the parameters for photographs selected for contemplation were greatly expanded by John Szarkowski. Crimp writes, “Szarkowski is the inheritor of a department [at MoMA] that reflects the modernist aesthetic of Alfred Stieglitz and his followers. But it has taken Szarkowski and *his* followers to bestow retrospectively upon *photography itself* what Stieglitz had thought to achieve by only a very few photographs.”<sup>99</sup> What Crimp is describing here is Szarkowski’s presentation of vernacular photography for the purpose of aesthetic contemplation, as a sort of ready-made art object. In the case of historical photographs made by known cameramen, this led to the elevation of the workaday photographer to the level of artist often at the expense of the photographs’ original meanings or functions. Crimp suggests that historic photographs like the *Storyville*

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<sup>99</sup> Douglas Crimp, “The Museum’s Old/ The Library’s New Subject”, *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1982. 8.

Portraits, once re-contextualized in the art museum, “ will no longer primarily be *useful* within other discursive practices; it will no longer serve the purpose of information, documentation, evidence, illustration, reportage. The formerly plural field of photography will henceforth be reduced to the single, all-encompassing *aesthetic*.”<sup>100</sup> He discusses how historical photographs “are thus to be reclassified according to their newly acquired value, that value that is now attached to the “artists” who made the photograph.”<sup>101</sup> This allowed for exhibitions like the *Storyville Portraits* to reconstruct Bellocq’s identity as an author within the canon of art photographers. Crimp articulates how, “what was once housed in the Jewish Division under the classification “Jerusalem” will eventually be found in Art, Prints, and Photographs under the classification of “Auguste Salzmann.” Egypt will become Beato, or du Camp, or Frith; Pre-Columbian Middle America will be Désiré Charnay...”<sup>102</sup> Within this systematic re-categorization, *Storyville* and *Prostitution* has become “E.J. Bellocq.”

Further illustration of this conceptual trend can be seen in the John Szarkowski’s *The Photographer’s Eye*. Published in 1966, the same year Friedlander purchased Bellocq’s negatives and four years before *Storyville Portraits* opened, this represents Bellocq’s earliest appearances at MoMA. One of Bellocq’s portraits, labeled “Bellocq ? New Orleans, c.1905” (Figure 9) included in the subcategory “The Thing Itself”. This exhibition and catalogue divided into five subcategories, (“The Thing Itself”, The Detail,

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<sup>100</sup> Crimp, “The Museum’s Old/ The Library’s New Subject”, 7.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 7.

The Frame, Time, and Vantage Point) looked to establish photographic form and determine the quintessential traits of the medium as a modern artistic visual language. This first section, ‘The Things Itself’, is about the slippery relationship of the photograph to its referent, a concept for which one of Bellocq’s portraits is held up as an illustration. In the caption accompanying this photography, the only information to clue the viewer to what they are viewing, the subject matter of the photograph seems to be ignored. Instead what we have is “Bellocq?, New Orleans”. At this early stage in the discovery of the *Storyville Portraits*, Bellocq still seemed to be only the possible maker of this photograph. That is, his claim to authorship was still questionable. However it is interesting that the bit of information called into question is the photographer’s name, while the subject matter is left vague.<sup>103</sup> Yes, this photograph was found in New Orleans and the woman pictured here most likely lived and worked there. However, at the time it was known that these photographs came from Storyville, and that this woman was in all likelihood a prostitute who worked in the district. It is strange, then, that the captioning for this photograph does not speak to the more specific information we know about the woman pictured within, particularly in a section dedicated to the *subject* of particular photographs. Instead, the captioning makes the photograph more about Bellocq than the

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<sup>103</sup> This is atypical of the captions in *The Photographer’s Eye*, in the entire book the identity of only one other photographer is called into question: Charles J. Van Schaick, and his photograph of a Woman and Plant, from around 1897, property of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Interestingly, Van Schaick shares a common history with Bellocq in that many of his photographs, vernacular records of life in rural Wisconsin, illustrated the book *Wisconsin Death Trip*, a semi-fictional sensationalist account of madness and tragedy among the people of rural Black River Falls, WI. This book was published only three years after *Storyville Portraits* opened and consists of reproductions of photographs roughly contemporary to Bellocq’s. Michael Lesy and Charles Schaick. *Wisconsin Death Trip*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico, 2000.



woman pictured here. The woman in the photograph, and the circumstances of her life, become all but irrelevant. The photographic embodiment of the sitter isolates her from her history so that we can only learn what is self-evident.

Within the context of Szarkowski's approach to photographs in the art museum, this sort of treatment is not surprising. Szarkowski was not particularly interested in a photograph's value as historical document. In "The Thing Itself", he says, "[the photographer] learned that the factuality of his pictures, no matter how convincing and unarguable, was a different thing than the reality itself. Much of the reality was filtered out in the static little black and white images."<sup>104</sup> What is left when reality is filtered out from a photograph is not only an empty image sterilized for aesthetic appreciation, but a space to be filled by the discourse that ascribes meaning to an image. This is exacerbated in the process of retooling historic photography as art, but it all relies on what Rosalind Krauss talks about as the "discursive space" in which photographs are located.<sup>105</sup> Displaying a photograph in the art museum lends the discourse of antithetic and the person of the artist. If the same photograph were presented within a different contextual framework, like when Bellocq's photographs were reproduced in Al Rose's history of Storyville, readings of the images tend towards historical illustration.

The difference between the way the *Storyville Portraits* would have looked and functioned in Bellocq's time in contrast to the way we understand Lee Friedlander's modern prints illustrates issues of photography's discursive space. The way we talk

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<sup>104</sup> Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*. 6.

<sup>105</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Space" *The Contest of Meaning. The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1982.

about Friedlander's prints in the museum is very different than how we would a photograph in the historical context of Storyville because, as Krauss points out, "they belong to two separate domains of culture, they assume different expectation in the user of the image, they convey two distinct kinds of knowledge."<sup>106</sup> That does not mean that the picture no longer matters at all. Indeed, even when evacuated of its historical significance, Bellocq's photographs take on the mantle of a new history. From them, and from their new contextualization, we learn about the interests, fears, and concerns of photographers in the 1960s. The interest in the deformed, the profane and the marginalized becomes clear from the constructed history of the *Storyville Portraits*. From the eagerness to accept the fantastical testimony about Bellocq stature, deformity, social squeamishness, and by positioning him as a socially marginalized outsider, we learn about what sort of historical predecessor the social documentarians like Arbus were looking for.

### **Reframing Bellocq in the Art Museum**

Szarkowski's exhibition teaches us very little about either Storyville or the women who work there. Furthermore, we learn little about how these photographs functioned in their historic context. But then again why should *Storyville Portraits* have function as a history lesson? After all, Szarkowski did not set out to inform anyone about the women in these pictures, or about the function these photographs served almost half a century before they made their *début* at MoMA. These photographs, as they existed in

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 288.

the 1960s fail to convey much of their *raison d'etre* or their historical significance. They reveal little about what these photographs meant to the women they depicted. I argue that we stand to learn a great deal from *Storyville Portraits*, not so much about the 1910s, but about photography in the 1960s and '70s. Szarkowski, among others, used Bellocq and his portraits of women who worked in Storyville as a tabula rasa on which they and social documentarians of the 1960s could project the values of their time. But at what cost? What is at stake in uncritically accepting the 1960s construction of Bellocq as a strange deformed social documentarian with an ability to communicate with the working women of New Orleans's Red Light underworld on a deep personal level because of his own physical deformity is nothing less than allowing the history of Storyville itself to fade. This exhibition came at a time when some of the last living denizens of the demimonde were still alive to offer some primary source material about the district. Though this was not the theoretical direction that *Storyville Portraits* took (that decade was looking for something different, something arguably more human) later generations have recognized the historic value these photographs hold for a largely forgotten back alley of American history.

Moving away from the artistic traditions of the 60s and 70s, the continued relevance of the *Storyville Portraits* must be redefined. New approaches to these photographs look to determine what they meant during their own time. More recent exhibitions such as *The Mysterious Monsieur Bellocq* at the George Eastman House in Rochester New York, and Steven Maldansky's exhibition at the New Orleans Museum of Art in 1996 have admirably looked to situate Bellocq's photographs within a cultural and

historical context and their functions as vernacular photographs made to be consumed for reasons outside of aesthetic contemplation. In a publication accompanying one of the most thoughtful exhibitions about Bellocq today, *The Mysterious Monsieur Bellocq*, curator Brian Wallis highlights the vernacular origins of the Storyville Portraits. However, like many before him and since, Wallis correlates the look of Bellocq's photographs to the aesthetic influence of vernacular photography on modernist practice championed by John Szarkowski.<sup>107</sup> He states that, "Divorced from the specificities of historical time and place, liberated from their mundane commercial purposes, these photographs have been heralded primarily for their style, deemed consistent with the aesthetics of high modernism."<sup>108</sup> After taking to task the shortcomings of an interpretation of vernacular photography based on aesthetic concerns, he takes his analysis of these photographs a step beyond their aesthetic sensibilities, looking at their historic circumstances as object.

Wallis goes on to examine the function Bellocq's photographs may have served in Storyville by looking at the history and visual culture of the district. He suggests, as I also will in the next chapter of this thesis, that they were probably produced for commercial ends, and draws his conclusions from visual information available within the photographs themselves. In regards to an interior photograph of Bellocq's (figure 15), in which Wallis identifies some of Bellocq's own photographs, mounted the way he intended them to be seen, heavily vignettted with the backgrounds completely obscured, Wallis takes to task

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<sup>107</sup> Brian Wallis, *The Mysterious Monsieur Bellocq*, International Center of Photography, 2004. 7.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

the stark formal differences between the way Friedlander presented these pictures and the way they would have actually looked during Bellocq's time. In this way he calls attention to the way that Friedlander, in printing the whole plate, makes Bellocq's photographs appear much more avant-garde than they actually were.

But perhaps most importantly, Wallis takes his interpretation outside of the picture, and addresses the significance of these photographs as historical documents. Wallis states, "Yet, Bellocq's intention is only one of many potential readings of his pictures, and the survival of his full-plate negatives reveals much about the reality that contradicts his own prints. For in the tawdry background details- the iron beds, the wall pennants, the bare washstands- these pictures offer a rare portrayal of the everyday lives of working-class American prostitutes."<sup>109</sup> Many publications on the District reproduce various plates from the *Storyville Portraits* without directly addressing the photographs themselves. I would argue that Wallis' exhibition elevates these photographs beyond mere historical illustration. What Wallis is actually doing in establishing a historical and vernacular reading of the *Storyville Portraits* which is illustrating photography's ability to speak and work as social document.<sup>110</sup> This approach to reading historic vernacular photographs emphasizes the value of art and visual culture beyond its aesthetic qualities. It is this approach that I take as my starting point for the second section of this thesis, in

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>110</sup> For another example Wallis's approach to the politics of vernacular photographs in the art museum, see Brian Wallace, "Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes." *American Art* Vol.9, no. No.2 (Summer 1995) (1995): 38-61. Accessed February 29, 2008.

which I look at the *Storyville Portraits* alongside historical visual culture of Storyville and suggest how these photographed functioned within this original context.

## Chapter Two: A Historical Reading of the *Storyville Portraits*

*“How can photography be restored to its own history? And how can we ensure this history will be both materially grounded and conceptually expansive, just like the medium itself?”*

-Geoffrey Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies”, 2002

When Storyville was established in 1897 as America’s first legally sanctioned red-light district, a unique economy of sex, liquor and advertising had become the law of the land and informed every aspect of life in the district. This is the environment Bellocq was working in and his photographs have to be evaluated with this context in mind.

Storyville was very much a place of business, argued to be a well oiled machine.<sup>111</sup>

Every aspect of life in the district revolved around selling sex and making money, and there is no reason to think that Bellocq’s photographs would be any different.<sup>112</sup>

Advertisement was the cornerstone of Storyville visual culture. This unique economic

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<sup>111</sup> See Gary Krist, “The Sin Factory” ,*Empire of Sin: A Story of Sex, Jazz, Murder, and the Battle for Modern New Orleans*. New York, N.Y.: Crown Publishers, 2014. 142-156.

<sup>112</sup>Shannon Lee Dawdy. "Sexualized Space, The Colonial Leer and the Genealogy of Storyville." Trans. Array *The Archeology of Colonialism, Intimate Encounters and Sexual Effects*. Barbra L. Voss and Eleanor Conlin Casella. First Edition. Cambridge, New York,: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 271-289. , “Storyville was a place where sex transactions and other transactions flowed metonymically one into the other.” 278.

environment provided opportunities for overtly advertising prostitution in ways that were uncommon in the rest of the country.<sup>113</sup> Contrary to popular belief, the establishment of the Storyville district did not open the doors for prostitution in New Orleans. Instead, Storyville's creation was designed to confine the already booming business of prostitution to one small area of the city and was based on late-nineteenth-century conservative attitudes regarding public women.<sup>114</sup> The citizens of New Orleans were uncomfortable sharing their streets with the "boarding houses" that sheltered many of the women who were forced to relocate to the District (figure 17). Storyville ironically got its name from the conservative Alderman Sidney Story, who successfully spearheaded the designation of the District as a means to clean up lewd activities on the streets of the city.<sup>115</sup>

During its nearly 20 year run, Storyville developed a unique economy built on the sale of sex (particularly interracial sex) and alcohol that is reflected in its visual culture and self promotion. The roots of Storyville's unique sexual economy can be traced back to Louisiana's colonial past on through the antebellum period and the Jim Crow era and

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<sup>113</sup> Pamela D. Arceneaux in "Guidebooks to Sin: The Blue Books of Storyville" tells us that at the time "Storyville was the only such [red-light] district to advertise itself in its own press with any degree of regularity." 397.

<sup>114</sup> Landau suggests how the defence of white womanhood went hand in hand with racial segregation in New Orleans. "the same historical actors and cultural forces that desired racial segregation also brought Storyville into existence and, ironically, the octroon prostitute to prominence within it. While white residents of New Orleans sought to clarify the borders of their own respectability and police their immediate environs, government officials and businessmen similarly desired to clear public space for legitimate, and profitable, endeavors. They sought to remove vice and prostitution from main thoroughfares and developing shopping districts. Storyville emerged from this effort." "...For many white New Orleanians, the very notion of a 'respectable' city required not only the removal of vice and disorder from public view, but also the creation of an exclusively 'white' public square". Landau, 13.

<sup>115</sup> Rose, 36.



dictate constructions of sexuality, race, and marketing sex in the district. Storyville was by no means the first time that the sex trade and New Orleans were joined in the public imagination. “If one wanted to be sarcastic,” wrote “Semper Idem” in 1936, “one could say that New Orleans and prostitution are synonymous.”<sup>116</sup> Instead, the district was the culmination and distillation of these histories writ large.

In this chapter, I analyze Bellocq’s photographs as they relate to the historic and economic factors that dictated all aspects of life in Storyville and assert that these portraits were made as advertisements to stimulate the sex trade in Storyville. I suggest that the nudes were used to stimulate sexual desire and promoted prostitution in the district, that the images of clothed women were used to advertise brothels, and that at least one photograph, *The Raleigh’s Rye Girl*, (Figure 17) functions most transparently as an advertisement for liquor, as the sale of sex and alcohol were inexorably linked in Storyville. Historians and critics often suggest that Bellocq’s nudes were a collection of private erotica. This idea comes from Szarkowski’s original interpretation of the *The Storyville Portraits* and has stuck.<sup>117</sup>

The rest of Bellocq’s oeuvre, the photographs not included in the *Storyville Portraits*, was produced in response to the economic demands on photographers at the

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<sup>116</sup> Semper Idem [pseud.], “The ‘Blue Book,’ a Bibliographical Attempt to Describe the Guidebooks to the Houses of Ill-Fame as They Were Published There. Together with some pertinent and illuminating remarks pertaining to the establishments and courtesans as well as to harlotry in general in New Orleans,” *Heartman’s Historical Series*, no. 50 ([New Orleans?]: privately printed, 1936), Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

<sup>117</sup> This supposition was originally suggested in Szarkowski’s constructed interview in the catalogue for *E.J. Bellocq, Storyville Portraits*, in 1970 and echoed in *Looking at Photographs* in 1973. For a more complete listing of authors who support this stance, see footnote 7.

time, and there is no reason to think that the Storyville Portraits were any different. During his lifetime, Bellocq worked as a “nuts and bolts” commercial photographer for a New Orleans shipbuilding business called the Foundation Company, where he photographed ships and machinery. He additionally photographed events such as president Taft’s visit to Loyola University, as well as church interiors and groups of catholic school children, among many other subjects both within and outside of Storyville. Figures 19 and 20 are examples of his commercial work. The first is a photograph of a steamship, likely commissioned by the Foundation Company. The boat is centered and in clear view as smoke billows from the smokestack, picturing it as a working machine. This photograph provides a clear record of the ship shot from the side to provide maximum detail of the ship’s design. The boat is photographed in the water, the decks crowded with passengers, attesting to its functionality and construction as a safe sea-worthy vessel. The second photograph shows a group of girls from the St. Philip Street Orphanage memorializing their first communion. They are organized into four orderly lines, all wearing white dresses and holding candles. Both of these commercial images, along with the rest of Bellocq’s other known photographs were certainly made on commission. There are few verifiable prints remaining of Bellocq’s commercial work and hardly any have ever been published. It’s curious that so much writing about Bellocq often ignore the remaining vintage prints of his work. I bring up these images, as I will other photographs by Bellocq that are not actually part of the *Storyville Portraits*, to show how looking at other facets of Bellocq’s photographic career, as well as Storyville’s

broader visual culture, can help situate the *Storyville Portraits* within a commercial context.

In an economy built on selling sex, all erotica works to directly stimulates bussiness. This is best illustrated by a quote taken from an interview compiled by John Szarkowski for the catalogue accompanying his 1970 exhibition *E.J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits*. The text in the catalogue, as discussed earlier, was compiled from interviews about the *Storyville Portraits* with a number of people who knew Bellocq during his life and who were regulars around the district. Among them was Johnny Wiggs, a cornetist from New Orleans. When asked about the photographs, Wiggs offers a personal anecdote that sheds light onto how these photographs functioned in Storyville. Wiggs says:

[Pictures of Prostitutes] were so common place; ... we knew all the people who [Bellocq] was taking pictures of. ... was this saloon on South Rampart, and above this saloon was a little room, and in this room were thousands of pictures; they look like they were made in France, of fornication and anything related to that in all possible...variations... men would drink downstairs, go upstairs and look at these pictures, and then run over to the District...<sup>118</sup>

Wigg's account shows how erotic photography like Bellocq's functioned as advertisement in the District. It illustrates the link between sex, alcohol, money in Stroyville. It is almost impossible to separate these aspects of Storyville's economy. Any attempt to come to an understanding of how the *Storyville Portraits* functioned with the district's history must take these economic factors into account. Though several authors have been willing to at least entertain the possibility that the *Storyville Portraits* were created as advertisement, none look at the economy and visual culture of Storyville to

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<sup>118</sup> Szarkowski, 76.

support this and ultimately fall back on more poetic readings of the work.<sup>119</sup> Common among readings of these photographs, Szarkowski entertains the idea that Bellocq's photographs may have been a commercial venture, but ultimately suggests that the Storyville Portraits were made for as a personal adventure.<sup>120</sup> Of course personal and commercial projects are by no means mutually exclusive, and the market informs private life as much as it does public. But a focus on the commercial aspects of Storyville's visual culture suggests that Bellocq was not acting in isolation, but was an individual actively engaged in the economy in which he worked. Szarkowski's understanding of the Storyville Portraits is one of the first, but definitely not the last, to analyze these photographs in a way that disregards the sexual economy in which they were made. Though the idea that Bellocq's photographs were a commercial venture has been hinted at over the years, scholarship has as of yet failed to look at Storyville's history, visual culture, and economy to support this supposition.<sup>121</sup> Brian Wallis, in the brochure for his exhibition *The Mysterious Monsour Bellocq*, argues that the *Storyville Portraits* were most likely made as advertisements, but unfortunately never fleshes the idea out with

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<sup>119</sup> For early authors suggesting the possibility of the Storyville portraits as advertisement, see footnote below. In addition to these sources, critics such as Janet Malcolm do not attempt to propose why the portraits were made, Malcolm admits "Why Bellocq took the pictures is not known", p. 194, but falls back on art historical subjects like Manet's *Olympia*, p.194-206, instead of looking to advertisements in Storyville for analysis.

<sup>120</sup> Szarkowski, *Looking at Photographs*, p. 68. "It is possible that the pictures were made as a commercial assignment, but this seems unlikely; they have about them a variety of conception and a sense of leisure in the making that identify them as a work done of love". Like Szarkowski, Kozloff also acquiesces that these images may have been used as advertizing, but favors a personal angle, "Though they may have been designed as a form of advertizing, it is also possible that these scenarios were an amiable acting out for a man who offered the women attention rather than paying them cash" Kozloff, p, 59.

<sup>121</sup> Among these scholars are Brian Wallis, *Mysterious Monsour Bellocq*, Max Kozloff, and Janet Malcolm.

supporting evidence or thoroughly examines the economic factors that make this the most likely reason for these photographs to be made<sup>122</sup>. To flesh out the ways in which these photographs functioned within the context of Storyville's sexual and photographic economy, I look at both the history of the district and of erotic photography during this era.

### **Remembering Storyville**

It should be noted that both the scarcity of archival information regarding Storyville and the dearth of remaining visual culture with which to compare Bellocq's portraits did not occur by accident. After Storyville closed its doors, the city of New Orleans attempted to distance itself from its tawdry history by eliminating the remaining traces of Storyville. On both public and private levels, there was little interest in preserving Storyville's history by anyone but perhaps jazz enthusiasts.<sup>123</sup>

When Storyville was closed, the area languished for several years before being demolished, making space for the future Iberville housing projects. Further compounding this, in an attempt to clean up the New Orleans' image and sever the city's ties to a

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<sup>122</sup> Only in the brochure for his exhibition *Mysterious Monsour Bellocq*, does curator Brian Wallis suggest a more historically sound reading of Bellocq's photographs, and even compares them to the work of another commercial photographer in New Orleans at the time, Frank B. Moore, who photographed many of the same subjects, including Prostitutes.. Wallis asserts that this similarity in subject matter "Although Szarkowski maintains that Bellocq took them as personal photos, it seems more probable, given the nature of Bellocq's business, that these photographs were intended as some sort of commercial speculation or assignment. It is possible that they may have been portraits commissioned by the sitters or that they may have been nude poses for "artists" or for other connoisseurs of soft-core pornography. More likely, though, is the prospect that these images were intended to illustrate a Blue Book, the series of guides to the Storyville district that appeared in about five editions beginning in 1898." Wallis, 9.

<sup>123</sup> As I noted in chapter one, Lee Friedlander's primary interest in the Storyville Portraits was as part of the movement to preserve New Orleans' jazz history. Peter Galassi, "You Have to Change to Stay the Same", Friedlander. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 29

bawdy past, much archival information was destroyed or defaced. Al Rose states in the preface to his book *Storyville, New Orleans*, that “the public library’s files of newspapers and periodicals had been vandalized, with countless issues [pertaining to Storyville] carefully clipped.”<sup>124</sup> Rose goes on to point out how the *Times-Picayune*, New Orleans’ main newspaper, disposed of all of its photographs regarding the District in 1938.<sup>125</sup> Because of this systematic cleansing, there is little physical evidence left for first-hand research. All of the architecture has long since been torn away, replaced by the Iberville Public Housing Projects in the 1930s.<sup>126</sup> Since so much of the visual history of Storyville was lost or destroyed, the value of Bellocq’s photographs as some of the few remaining historical records and circumstances of the district cannot be overlooked or undervalued.

Looking at the *Storyville Portraits* without the help of a large amount of historical documentation to inform our readings, it may be more helpful not to ask why they were made, but to look at how they may have been used in relation to the district’s other visual material. When asked by Lee Friedlander if Bellocq ever said what these pictures were used for, Joe Sanarens (a New Orleans photographer who knew Bellocq during his life) responded that, “the nudes were just for his own. All these pictures he had in a trunk at

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<sup>124</sup> Rose, ix. Though no one can say specifically who is responsible for this loss of information, the defacement of Storyville’s history seemed to come as a collective effort among the powers that be in New Orleans. When discussing the difficulty of doing archival research on the area, Rose states, “it didn’t take me long to discover why nobody had ever written a history of the area. The public library’s files of newspapers and periodicals has been vandalized, with countless issues carefully clipped, very likely by personas who had a stake in suppressing the information in them. The relevant pages in the real estate plat books in the City Hall had been ripped out. In 1938, the *Times-Picayune* threw out its files of photographs. And during the early 1940s the city fathers went so far in their continuing embarrassment as to change the names of Storyville’s Streets.”

<sup>125</sup> Rose, ix.

<sup>126</sup> Dawdy, 273. For a personal account of what Storyville demolition meant to the people who frequented it, see “Johnny’s” account on p. 13 of Szarkowski’s *E.J. Bellocq, Storyville Portraits*.

home...".<sup>127</sup> Though this may have been the case for some of the Bellocq nudes, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that perhaps the *Storyville Portraits* were more commercial than personal. In an essay on erotic photography, historian Joseph W. Slade describes the Storyville nudes as "starkly empathetic."<sup>128</sup> Critic Janet Malcolm, seemingly defending Bellocq's photographs against those who would accuse him of exploitation through the male gaze says that "the friendliness of Bellocq's eye, the reciprocity that flowed between him and his subjects, could not but forcibly strike the viewer."<sup>129</sup> Max Kozloff offers perhaps the most thoughtful insight into the relationship between Bellocq and his sitters. Kozloff astutely notes that the women in many of the *Storyville Portraits* "take transparent pains to appear personable" and that "it would be farfetched to credit [Bellocq] with any insight about who these subjects were" based solely on how they represent themselves in his pictures.<sup>130</sup> The way that many of the women pictured in Bellocq's photographs present themselves to the camera, coupled with the way that erotic photographs worked to advertise prostitutes in Storyville, suggests that the subjects may have also been the patrons for these portraits.

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<sup>127</sup> Szarkowski, 11. Statements like this must be taken with a grain of salt, as the interview with Saranens was held many years after Bellocq's death and decades after Storyville's demolition. Bellocq was a notoriously closed person, and everyone who knew him stated that he was not one to discuss much of his personal business. The prominence of such photographs in Storyville would have made them seem negligible, and if they were used by some of the women as self advertisement, it may not have seemed worth mentioning to Bellocq.

<sup>128</sup> Slade, Joseph W. *Pornography in America a Reference Handbook*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2000. p 92.

<sup>129</sup> Malcolm, Janet . "The Real Thing." *Diana & Nikon: Essays on Photography* . New York, New York: Aperture Foundation, 1997. p. 194.

<sup>130</sup> Kozloff, Max. "Retrospection and Clairvoyance: Portraits of the Early Twentieth Century." *The Theatre of the Face: A History of Modern Portrait Photography*. 1. Publ. ed. London: Phaidon, 2007.p. 58-59.

The nonchalance presented by the girls in Bellocq's pictures was not confined to the women working in Storyville. Al Rose points out, "Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of photographers gravitated to Storyville, over the years, just as they did in the red-light districts of Chicago, San Francisco and other large cities, in search of uninhibited models."<sup>131</sup> Given the fact that these women's livelihood depended upon cordiality with complete strangers, and that the prostitutes who worked in any of Basin Street's many high-end brothels were widely considered to be some of the most affable women working in the nation, it should come as no surprise that they were able to seem comfortable in front of Bellocq's camera. Bellocq was not the only photographer who came to Storyville to capture this exact quality from the women working there. If these pictures were used as advertisements for the sitters as trade, it would only make sense that the subjects would want to convey the sort of good times they were selling in their portraits.

All of the woman in the *Storyville Portraits* share clear signifiers of a particular socioeconomic status. Their fashion and surroundings often suggest a fair amount of luxury. Even women who pose completely nude are photographed in luxurious, or at least comfortable surroundings. Photographs taken in areas that are not noticeably opulent are by no means representative of the squalor that the vast majority of the prostitutes who worked in Storyville inhabited. There are few derelict cribs, no back-of-the-district shanties. Only rooms and courtyards that could be afforded by higher priced girls were depicted. This fits with much photographic convention, as snapshots, fashion

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<sup>131</sup> Rose, 60.



photography, advertisements, and studio portraiture have long portrayed their subjects in ideal scenarios. It does eliminate any suggestion that what Bellocq was trying to do was perhaps a social or documentary project, but instead that he made these images with an eye toward depicting a level of glamour.

This being the case for the majority of Storyville's visual culture, it is not strange that Bellocq would not have looked to produce a more inclusive view of the District, as advertisements often seek to portray the most glamorous aspects of their subjects. Likewise, such advertisements would only reflect the portions of Storyville's populations with the money to pay for them. As a commercial photographer, Bellocq could profit little from picturing a diverse view of Storyville. Though there are significant indicators of the class and social standing of Bellocq's sitters within the *Storyville Portraits*, a comparison with another archive of the women of Storyville, the criminal archive, illuminates the homogeneous racial and class identities of the women Bellocq chose to photograph. A collection of mugshots (figure 20) from Storyville offers perhaps a more inclusive look at the women who lived and worked there, and also the sort of legal troubles and prejudices they faced on a daily basis.

The City Archives of the New Orleans public library holds a substantial collection of criminal portraiture from Storyville. Each mug shot consists of two images, as is the standard for much of this sort of criminal photography based on Bertillonage,<sup>132</sup> with the

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<sup>132</sup> Bertillonage was the pseudoscientific practice of determining a person's interior qualities based on a superficial (often racist) analysis of their physiognomy. For more on Bertillonage see Allan Sekula's "The Body and the Archive" *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1996, Peter Hamilton and Roger Hargreaves. *The Beautiful and the Damned: The Creation of Identity in Nineteenth*

woman in profile on the left and a straight on headshot on the right. The plates are each numbered to link the images to the subjects criminal records. The women in the mug shot photographs show none of the glamour seen in Bellocq's portraits. All of Bellocq's women have incredibly smooth, bright faces showing no hint of stress or hardship; however, the women who look back at us from the mug shots look, understandably, worn, rough and tired. Bellocq's women, when clothed, are well dressed in fine attire that is put together as if they were ready for a night out. The clothing in the mug shots is less glamorous, more utilitarian wear.

In *The Body and The Archive*, an essay about mugshots, Alan Sekula defines the archive as 'an abstract paradigmatic entity and a concrete institution.' Sekula argues, "the archive is a vast substitution set, providing for a relation of general equivalence between images."<sup>133</sup> Taking Sekula's direction we can conceive of the archive as any collection of photographs from which we can derive meaning and enforce power through comparison. Sekula's idea of the "shadow archive", can be seen functioning in miniature within the remaining visual culture of Storyville.<sup>134</sup> The 'shadow archive' is that body of images that provides ground against which the 'general equivalence between images' of the archive can be measured. Where as the mugshots represent a deviant population within the district, images like the *Storyville Portraits* represent a portion of the

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*Century Photography*. Aldershot, Hampshire [England: Lund Humphries, 2001. and Phillip Prodger, *Darwin's Camera Art and Photography in the Theory of Evolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>133</sup> Sekula, Allan . "The Body and the Archive" *The Contest of Meaning: Critical*

*Histories of Photography*. Cambridge , Massachusetts and London, England : MIT Press, 1996. p. 353.

<sup>134</sup> "We can speak then of a generalized, inclusive archive, a *shadow archive* that encompasses an entire social terrain while positioning individuals within that terrain." Sekula, 237.

population who are contributing to the district's economic well being and are legitimized counterparts of these criminal images. In this comparison, the Storyville Portraits provide the legitimate grounds against which the criminality of the women in the mugshots can be measured. In this comparison between the *Storyville Portraits* and the mugshots from the district we can see how the photographic economy in Storyville is a microcosm for the ways that photography comes to define power, race, and class during this era. Sekula argues, “every proper portrait has its lurking, objectifying inverse in the files of the police.”<sup>135</sup> If the Storyville portraits can be seen as the objectifying inverse of police photographs, then we see an interesting aspect about class and criminality in Storyville. It is their profession as prostitutes that criminalized the women in the police photographs. It was the social condition in which they were working outside, of the systems of protection provided by the brothels and wealth madams, that led the women in the police photographs to be pictured as criminals while the women in the Storyville portraits were viewed as objects of desire. It should also be noted that none of the women from the *Storyville Portraits* have been recognized or identified through the remaining criminal portraits. That is most likely because the women in the *Storyville Portraits* occupied a very distinct social sphere defined by their role as light skinned creole women of color (or at least women who styled themselves as such). This racial and class division has a very long history in New Orleans that set the women who worked in the Creole brothels of Basin Street apart from the women who would have worked in the lower-end brothels

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<sup>135</sup> Sekula, 346.

and cribs without the benefit of the protection of wealthy and powerful madames and who were most likely the subjects of the criminal photographs. When looked at alongside Storyville criminal archive, the lightness (both in terms of race and of the general mood of the photographs) embodied by the *Storyville Portraits* becomes apparent and suggests a body of photographs which seek to represent, to advertise, the district in the most seductive way possible.

### **Blue Books**

Scholars such as Brian Wallis, have asserted that the Storyville Portraits were most likely made to be reproduced in the District's notorious in *Blue Books*.<sup>136</sup> As few of these books survive to this day, and none of Bellocq's photographs appear in any of the remaining volumes, there is no way to know for sure if any of the *Storyville Portraits* ever graced their pages. It is certain that none of the nudes ever did, as these slim volumes never showed naked women or made any explicit sexual references.<sup>137</sup> Where these books do become valuable in making meaning for Bellocq's work is in regards to his photographs of finely clothed women and lavish interiors. Regardless of whether or not Bellocq's photographs ever actually appeared in these particular forums for

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<sup>136</sup> Wallis asserts that "Although Szarkowski maintains that Bellocq took them as personal photos, it seems more probable, given the nature of Bellocq's business, that these photographs were intended as some sort of commercial speculation or assignment. It is possible that they may have been portraits commissioned by the sitters or that they may have been nude poses for "artists" or for other connoisseurs of soft-core pornography. More likely, though, is the prospect that these images were intended to illustrate a Blue Book, the series

of guides to the Storyville district that appeared in about five editions beginning in 1898." Wallis, 8.

<sup>137</sup> "The advertisements for various brothels are among the most entertaining aspects of the Blue Books. Most couched in rather coy terms, these ads seem tame now. Vulgar or explicit descriptions of the women or the activities offered at each house are never employed. The words "whore" or "prostitute" never appear. Instead, the magnificence of the house, the array of charming, well-bred, and pretty entertainers, and the devotion to providing visitors with a good time is repeated again and again." Arcineaux, 402.

advertisement, looking at this aspect of Storyville’s visual culture offers some insight into how otherwise tame images, the likes of which make up at least half of the *Storyville Portraits*, become sexualualzed in Storyville’s economy.

These *Blue Books* were the primary and best known venue for advertisement in the district. They were a guide to the bars and brothels of Storyville, made available to those disembarking from the south station on Basin Street and making their way to the District. “Blue Books”, Dawdy says, “were Michelin-like guides to the services and amenities of New Orleans’ underworld’, paid for by advertising.”<sup>138</sup> *Blue Books*, like Bellocq’s oeuvre, only include the most high-end houses and women, if for no other reason than that they were the ones who could pay of advertising. In these books “those listed were the crème of the demimonde. Prostitutes working in cheap one-or-two room cribs were not included.”<sup>139</sup>

The Blue Books where published out of the top floor of Lulu White’s bar, adjacent to Mahogany Hall.<sup>140</sup> They primarily focused on the lavish architectural interiors of the brothels that paid for advertising and listed the women who worked in Storyville and where to find them.<sup>141</sup> This focus on architectural reproduction and lavish interiors is pertinent to Bellocq’s images for two reasons. For one, Bellocq was the photographer for many of the interior illustrations of Mahogany Hall<sup>142</sup> (figure 24), as well as other well

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<sup>138</sup> Dawdy, 274.

<sup>139</sup> Arceneaux, 399.

<sup>140</sup> Arceneaux, 400.

<sup>141</sup> For a more complete discussion of architecture as advertisement in Storyville, see Al Rose, 73-96, as well as Dawdy, 274. Arceneaux, 403,

<sup>142</sup> See Al Roese, Malcolm, “The Real Thing” 202. and Goldin, “Bellocq Epoch” p.5 .

known brothels like Willie Barrera's at 341 Bain Street (figure 30), which suggests that the architectural photographs in addition to the pictures of the women in these brothels were used as advertisement. The sort of interiors that Bellocq photographed (see figures 24 and 30) are exactly the sort of photographs reproduced in *Blue Books* (figure 28 and 31). In these photographs, what appear to be a domestic interiors become highly sexualized by their placement in the *Blue Books*. The interior as sexualized space comes in part from the fact that no nude women nor sexually explicit material was published in the *Blue Books*. These bedrooms, neat and unoccupied, tease and stimulate the viewer's imagination of what has, and potentially will, go on there. The empty boudoir becomes a stand-in for explicit sexual activity, and like pornographic photography, does not replace the act but instead promotes it. As such a strong part of Storyville's visual lexicon, viewers would read such interiors as sexual in and of themselves. This reading is enhanced for readers by photographs of nude woman placed in these settings (the insertion of the female figure taking these interiors from teasing erotica to more hard-core sexual implications). The second implication that these photographs have for Bellocq's larger body of work is that a focus on a sexualized interior space in Storyville's visual lexicon suggests that the depiction of the brothels' lavish interiors was an important part of the composition for many of the more risqué portraits in addition to displaying pleasant places to have sex for Storyville partons. The *Blue Books* were full of photographs and short texts advertising the women working in Storyville and the brothels

that housed them. In Storyville's visual culture, fine architecture was synonymous with top dollar prostitution and, because of books like these, visitors would have quickly become familiar with this visual device.<sup>143</sup> The architecture present in the background of many (roughly 15) of Bellocq's portraits hints at the status of the woman pictured. Even if this was not Bellocq's intention (more likely than not he included the background in the composition because it was not important to him if it was visible, or he intended to crop it out) such an architectural record is useful for contemporary analysis as it gives some context to the environment in which these women lived, and serves as an important indicator of class in the *Storyville Portraits*.<sup>144</sup>

Some of the *Storyville Portraits* prove particularly challenging in that they don't appear to function as erotica or advertisement by modern standards. But looking more deeply at how Bellocq's formal studio portraiture both fits into, and may function separately from, Storyville's larger visual culture of prostitution would suggest that the clothed portraits and nudes served very similar functions in the district. The *Storyville Portraits* show about as many fashionably clothed women as they do nudes. The presence of these women, who are not depicted in any overtly sexual way, has led some critics to question if all the women in the *Storyville Portraits* are actually prostitutes or women who worked in the district.<sup>145</sup> Like Bellocq's photographs of seemingly domestic interiors, the language of advertisement in Storyville helps us see how these otherwise

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<sup>143</sup> see footnote 42.

<sup>144</sup> In remaining images of Bellocq's prints, he heavily vignetted the images, completely obliterating the background.

<sup>145</sup> Janet Malcolm, for instance, talk about how she "paused at a picture of a prostitute with her clothes on, and it occurred to [her] to wonder whether she actually was a prostitute" Malcolm, p. 197.

banal photographs would have been read as sexually charged in the context of the district. Advertisements in the *Blue Books* help to see how such photographs (like Bellocq's figure 1 and 12) fit into Storyville sexual economy (when compared with the women depicted in figure 29). Because the Blue Books did not reproduce images of overt sexuality, the images reproduced in them appear quite tame but becomes sexualized because of the underlying subtext that these women are sexually available. Flowery language describing the amicability and accomplishments of women advertised in these books thinly veiled the actual message, that these women were available and that these books were selling sex.

### **Liquor Advertisements**

In Storyville, the sale of sex and alcohol were synonymous. Contrary to popular belief, Storyville's primary source of capital was not prostitution but liquor sales. Images designed to sell alcohol constituted the majority of advertising promoting Storyville. According to Emily Epstein Landau, "aside from the advertisements for houses of prostitution, the most common ads in the Blue Books were for liquor and liquor distributors. This reminds us of something important about Storyville: that the liquor industry had a keen interest in promoting prostitution and pleasure in New Orleans."<sup>146</sup> The most popular and widely advertised spirit in Storyville was Raleigh Rye, 'For Men of Brains.'<sup>147</sup> Rye has a very important place in New Orleans' cultural identity. In addition to being one of the premier producers of revenue in Storyville, it is also the main

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<sup>146</sup> Landau, 114

<sup>147</sup> Landau, 114



ingredient in the Sazerac cocktail, widely believed to be the world's very first cocktail and to this day the signature drink of New Orleans. For anyone visiting the district, this image of a woman with a bottle of Rye would have immediately signified good times in the Big Easy.

Given that Storyville's economy was based on selling sex and alcohol, any image that would promote sex or alcohol consumption offers direct economic benefit to the district.<sup>148</sup> This is illustrated in the above quotation by Johnny Wigg.<sup>149</sup> A man would go out to drink, and many bars would display pictures like Bellocq's that men would see and be inspired to head over to the brothels in Storyville. In this way, all erotica was at the same time advertisement. However, there are particular photographs that work as advertisements in more specific and conventional ways. Take, for example, what is arguably Bellocq's most famous photograph, known as the Raleigh's Rye Girl (Figure 17). This photograph is compositionally similar to the rest of the *Storyville Portraits*, with the figure located in the center of the composition. Bellocq's characteristic tight spatial arrangement and shallow depth of field force the eye quickly and directly to the central sitter. This is, of course, an important design aspect in advertisement. The woman in the photograph sits in a simple wooden chair, legs crossed, leaning jauntily with one elbow supporting her weight on an elaborate side table. That is not to say that such a pose is unique to this image, plates number 12, 21, 35, 39 and 51 (in Szarkowski's catalogue)

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<sup>148</sup> Shannon Dawdy suggests that "Storyville was a place where sex transactions and other transactions flowed metonymically one into the other". 273. Landau, "Liquor sales and prostitution often go hand in hand," 149.

<sup>149</sup> see quote on page 4 (make sure you alter for final draft!) of this thesis. Quote From Szarkowski, *E. J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits*, 12

all share a remarkably similar composition. But several details suggest that something else may be going on here. The sitter is dressed rather skimpily with her hair piled on top of her head and fixed with a large bow. She is wrapped with a loose fitting white top, which appears to be nothing more than a shawl draped over her body and held up somewhat precariously by her left shoulder. To cover her legs she wears pricey striped stockings. Al Rose points out that “striped stockings were expensive and could only be afforded by the high priced bawds of Basin Street.”<sup>150</sup> This is another sign of the prominent display of class common in many of Bellocq’s portraits. Her top is pulled up so we catch a glimpse of her upper thigh as she crosses her left leg over the other. She is lit with natural light that comes from the ceiling-to-floor windows on her far left, which a common features of New Orleans architecture, particularly in the more expensive Victorian and Spanish colonial builds located along Basin Street at the front of the District.

The room is decorated with several prints and photographs, which could give the interior a domestic feeling, but they are not in focus and fade into the background. A clock, some small trinkets, what looks to be a tomato, and a large sensual art nouveau statue share the table next to the sitter with a bottle of Raleigh Rye. The bottle of Raleigh Rye is placed conspicuously with the label facing forward and legible.<sup>151</sup> The implied line formed by the sitter’s arm draws our eye from the bottle to the woman’s pensive face. The sitter is completely absorbed in the situation, looking not at the camera, but

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<sup>150</sup> Rose, xii.

<sup>151</sup> Rose, xii

instead to a shot glass she holds at face level in her right hand. On her face she wears a dreamy smile as if she were contemplating how much she is about to enjoy her beverage. Raleigh Rye was a favorite drink of Storyville-goers of the time, was a key ingredient in the original Sazerac Cocktail, and had become as synonymous with the district as Absinthe was to bohemian Paris. Like Absinthe in Paris, Raleigh Rye was regularly used to advertise good times in Storyville.

Prints by Henry Privat-Livemont and Henri de Toulouse Lautrec, among many others, employ a similar composition that equates the semi-nude female body with the consumption of luxury liquor, correlating both women and alcohol with good times. Livemont's *Absinthe Robette* of 1896 (figure 21) is a large color lithograph showing the profile of a woman from the hips up. She, like Bellocq's Raleigh Rye Girl, is draped in sheer, gauzy fabric, and is completely absorbed in the act of admiring the drink that she hold up and looks at longingly. Though there is no bottle of absinthe, the spoon and sugar balanced on top of her glass is a sure indicator of what is inside. The motif is carried throughout the rest of the composition through the overall absinthe-green tone, and, of course, the text over the figure's head reading "Absinthe Robette," all with characteristic art-nouveau designs.

I do not make this comparison to suggest that Bellocq's composition comes directly from Privat-Livemont's designs, though this is not to say that he was not interested in the art-nouveau visual language that Privat-Livemont used for his posters. The photograph of the interior of Bellocq's home or studio shows a wall of art-nouveau-style French beauties. This has been pointed out by a number of scholars and critics as

the source of Bellocq's aesthetics. This, however, would be putting the cart before the horse. That Bellocq would have been interested in French aesthetics is not unique to him. At the time, New Orleans was known as the Paris of the New World. In questions of architecture, language, food and culture New Orleans and the rest of Louisiana share a special connection with France that the state still enjoys today. It should come as a surprise to no one that a New Orleanian, particularly of Creole descent, would be drawn to the French aesthetic. The French connection is twofold, in that the kinds of pictures that make up the Storyville Portraits would be colloquially referred to as "French pictures". In the context of Storyville, as with all economies based on the sex trade, such "French pictures" are not limited to their ability to stimulate people privately, but also to market sex more broadly.<sup>152</sup> Given that Storyville's economy was based on using sex to sell liquor, erotic photography and liquor advertisements are linked, and this comparison highlights a common style in turn-of-the-century liquor advertisements.

Storyville was unique to New Orleans and in many ways was one of the most recognized signifiers for the city. The popularity of Raleigh Rye, coupled with the image of a prostitute situated in distinctively New Orleanian architecture firmly connects the city's identity with vice. Though both the woman and the Rye are selling the city, the setting for this image, if indeed displayed around Storyville, worked to bring in revenue for both the bars and brothels. In this context, it becomes difficult to say if Bellocq's sitter is being used to advertise the drink, or the drink is being used to advertise her.

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<sup>152</sup> H  nard, 3.

## Race and the Economics of Storyville

Race and the sexual economy of New Orleans have been intertwined since the colonial period.<sup>153</sup> Joel Williamson notes in *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* that “in New Orleans the continuing interchange between blacks and whites, sexual and otherwise, reached the highest and most fascinating level. In his study of the city, John Blassingame found that the pervasiveness of miscegenation became the most unique feature of race relations in antebellum New Orleans.”<sup>154</sup> Because of this tradition of racial mixing the relationship between race, class, and sex in Storyville can be tricky to understand today. On the one hand, like the rest of the South, New Orleans and Storyville were racially segregated. All Rose argues:

Socially, the District fell into the pattern of racial segregation quite naturally: it was *legally* segregated, for the one thing, in the sense that white and black prostitutes could not live or work in the same house and blacks were not permitted to patronize any of the mansions, even those staffed by black women, or to consort with white women in even the lowest of cribs, and such segregation had already become the ‘accepted’ pattern for the city as well as from the whole<sup>155</sup>

Whereas Al Rose wrote the history of a strictly segregated Storyville, Emily Landau among many others,<sup>156</sup> complicates any idea of clear racial division based on black and

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<sup>153</sup> Shannon Dawdy suggest that it is “impossible to understand Storyville without understanding New Orleans’s colonial past”. She argues that “The ller that colonial adventurers cast on this port town and its residents fed certain social and economic formations. These formations have in turn reproduced the colonial leer, now known as the tourist gaze. These gendered economic transactions and the attendant colonial leer- a particular form of affective perception- transformed New Orleans from a gridded, flexible *space* (Tuan 2001) in the early French colonial period to a sensual creole *place* in the territorial period- or a destination and a landscape filled up with meaning.” See Dawdey, 273.

<sup>154</sup> Joel Williamson . *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1995. 23.

<sup>155</sup> Rose, 67.

<sup>156</sup> Shannon Lee Dawdy suggest that “New Orleans’ reputation as a place with a lax sexual code was thoroughly entangled with its reputation for a lax racial code.” 278. Gary Krist points out that “The rest of

white arguing for the role Storyville played in undermining ideas about sex and segregation held during the time. Landau talks about how Storyville was well known as a destination in which tourists and locals alike could play out antebellum interracial sex fantasies.<sup>157</sup> One of the most wealthy and famous madames in Storyville, Lulu White (Figure 22 & 23), the self-styled ‘Diamond Queen of the Demimonde’ made her fortune marketing interracial sex. She was the owner and operator of Mahogany Hall (see figure 24), considered at the time to be one of America’s most luxurious and opulent buildings. This was one of the two brothels in which Bellocq was known to have worked, producing architectural photographs for advertisements as well as photographing some of the women who worked there. White was most famous for identifying herself and the women that worked for her as ‘Octoroons’, specifically meaning one eighth black, but more colloquially referring to a light skinned person of mixed race. Though I am not interested in proving or disproving the legitimacy of White’s ethnic background, I bring this up as an example of how class in the district and the promotion of Storyville’s identity was dictated by the perception and marketing of race.

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New Orleans may have been subject to the hardening Jim Crow regime of Strict black-and-white separation, but in Storyville, for the right price, white men could relive the fantasy of the city’s more racially fluid past.p. 114.

<sup>157</sup> Landau suggests that “Storyville capitalized on the fantasy of male dominance in an era of anxiety and flux...Storyville was one of the many sites during this period where the [crisis in masculinity in America]was reworked into new meanings for American manhood, where whiteness and maleness were refigured. The feelings of loss and displacement, humiliation and impotence, that lingered from the defeat of the Confederacy; the anxieties about the postbellum world, a world turned upside down by the new status not only of black men but of white women in the public sphere; xenophobia and status anxiety provoked by the new immigrant populations in industrializing cities; and the blood-boiling anger from dispossession, displacement, and depression- all might be suspended in the alternative reality presented in Storyville. Forbidden sex, including sex across the color line, was Storyville’s stock-in-trade, and the district’s guide books made it clear that so-called octoroons constituted a special class of sexual experience, much as light-skinned female slaves had been doubted during those days”. See Landau, 110.

For much of its history, racial segregation was not as binary as it was in the rest of the South.<sup>158</sup> Though segregation was an oppressive force in Louisiana, the color line was not drawn so clearly between black and white. Though the historic case *Plessy v. Ferguson* attempted to cement the color line, binary identities of ‘black’ and ‘white’ failed to adequately account for the complex racial identities of New Orleans’s Creoles of color. As Landau describes:

Homer Plessy was a member of New Orleans’s Creole of color community, a community that rooted its prestige in ancestry and free forebears; the case that bears his name originated in New Orleans as a challenge to racial segregation and the “color line,” and marked an end of sorts to a long tradition, dating back to the earliest days of American rule. In that case, Plessy’s personal history and community heritage were reduced to a crude racial designation: he was an “octoroon.” At the end of the case, even that designation was rendered obsolete: “one drop” of “black blood” made him “colored.” The only significant distinction then was between “white” and “black” no longer between “light” and “dark.” Yet in Storyville, in the immediate aftermath of the Supreme Court decision, women from all over were marketed as “octoroons.” Lulu White, the “Diamond Queen,” was the most prominent among them. “Octoroons,” the feminine-gendered, publicly perceived (in white society) remnant of Homer Plessy’s prior identity continued to draw business to the district for its twenty-year existence.<sup>159</sup>

The madams of Storyville latched on to New Orleans’s mixed raced traditions as a way to market Storyville to national and international clientele looking to indulge in interracial sexual fantasies. Storyville continued to put forth and profit from this octoroon status for

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<sup>158</sup> For more on the history and politics of mixed raced people both in Louisiana and the rest of the nation see James Hugo Johnston. *Miscegenation in the Ante-Bellum South: Part of a Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Division of the Social Sciences in Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1937. F. James Davis. *Who Is Black?: One Nation's Definition*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State UP, 1991. and Joel Williamson . *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1995.

<sup>159</sup> Landau, 46.

two more decades.”<sup>160</sup> Mary Landau frames the nuances of these racial politics as primarily a matter of gender, that “The same ‘drop’ of ‘black blood’ that relegated men like Homer Plessy to the second-class train cars elevated women like Lulu White to her first-class bordellos in Storyville.<sup>161</sup> This tradition of marketing sex around race has a long history in New Orleans. Storyville, as a playground for interracial sex fantasies, was framed in a way that allowed longstanding histories and stereotypes of creole sexuality to continue. The allure of Storyville for outsiders hinged on the stereotype of the “tragic Octoroon”, the internal economic structure was reflected in a longstanding tradition among New Orleans’s creoles of color known as *Plaçage* (French for ‘Placement’) and “Quadroon Balls”.<sup>162</sup> Williamson points out that “as in Latin America, there was a steady surplus of white males and mulatto females in the city. So common was mixing among the elites of both races that it came to be institutionalized in ‘quadroon balls.’”<sup>163</sup> These

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<sup>160</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> For a full discussion of *Plaçage* and interracial concubinage in New Orleans see Dawdy, 282. Landau 60-76, Alecia P Long., *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920*. Louisiana Pbk. ed. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2005. p7. “Prostitution was the backbone of the city’s culture of commercial sexuality, but it did not exist in a vacuum. Thus readers will be introduced to alternate kinds of sexual arrangements that had important economic aspects, particularly the practice of concubinage, the condition of living together in a long-term, committed relationship without benefit of marriage. Readers may also be unfamiliar with the word *plaçage*. Although it was largely an antebellum phenomenon, *plaçage* referred to formal and sometimes even contractual arrangements between white men and women of color in New Orleans, which spelled out the financial terms of the relationships; such arrangements were often made by the mothers of women of color. Like concubinage, the word *plaçage* described a relationship that resembled marriage in significant respects but did not have the legal sanction of the state.” Williamson describes that Quadroon Ball and the process of *Plaçage* as follows, Quadroon balls “were regular and public affairs at which wealthy and cultured white men formally courted prospective mulatto mistresses. When the man had made his choice, he met the woman and her parents to offer an arrangement, a ‘*plaçage*’, in which he agreed to maintain the woman in a certain style and provide for any children who might be born into this union. If his offer was accepted the woman was established in a household of her own, less than a wife but more than a concubine.” Williamson, 23.

<sup>163</sup> Williamson, 23



balls were the prototype for how the most high-end brothels in the district functioned, including most famously Lulu White's Mahogany Hall. "Quadroon Balls" were one of the clearest manifestations of the established racial hierarchies that defined New Orleans' class divisions at the time. Creole people of color occupied an uneasy space in between black and white, and as a community they often saw themselves as too good to marry into 'black' families, but were unable to legitimately pursue a white suitor. Like Storyville, these balls were "yet another sex market for light-skinned women of color."<sup>164</sup> At these balls, affluent white men would come to mingle with upper-class creole women of color and were only a small part of an older and larger creole tradition of "*plaçage*."

This sort of racially based sexual economy, of course, had its roots in slavery and more specifically the trade in "fancy girls", young light skinned creoles of color sold to white slaveholders, for which the slave markets of New Orleans were famous.<sup>165</sup> This photograph of a young girl named Rebecca (Figure 26) illustrates the other side of the life of many young creole girls in New Orleans during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This carte-de-visite was made in 1862 to be sold to northern abolitionists to fund the establishment of schools for free people of color in Louisiana.<sup>166</sup> Rebecca, here labeled as a "Slave Girl for New

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<sup>164</sup> Landau, 60. Mary Naill Mitchell offers several accounts of travelers encountering 'fancy girls' at slave auctions in her essay "Rosebloom of Pure White, Or So It Seemed", *American Quarterly*, Volume 54, Number 3, September 2002, pp.396-410, Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>165</sup> A bibliography for the "Fancy Girl" Auctions is Emily Epstein Landau's chapter, "The Quadroon Connection", *Spectacular Wickedness*, p 51-76. Alecial P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon*, p.10-11.

<sup>166</sup> Rebecca, "was one of five children and three adults freed at the City of by union Major General N.P. Banks in 1863" Mitchell, 369. "Banks was appointed a Board of Education in March of 1864 to direct the establishment of freedpeople's schools." Mitchel, 403. See Donald R. Devore and Joseph Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools: Public Education in New Orleans 1841-1991. Lafayette La: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1991. 57.*

Orleans” was sold as a ‘fancy girl’ rescued by Union Major General N.P. Banks and brought north to be toured around and held up as an anti-slavery symbol as well as a source of revenue to fund schools for free people of color in the south.<sup>167</sup> Below Rebecca’s portrait are the words “oh! How I love this old flag!”. Her positioning, wrapped in the American flag, kneeling with hands clasped looking up as if in prayer, is within the conventions of abolitionist visual propoganda. Photographs like this were marked toward abolitionist, usually upper class female reformers, to appeal to their sense of altruism. Many Northerners felt a strong moral and religious conviction against slavery to which photographs like these cater. It pictures the North as the savior of slaves like Rebecca, while at the same time making her more relatable to the white abolitionists due to her light skin. Whereas imagery depicting dark-skinned slaves often showed them being educated by abolitionists, images of light skinned slaves focuses on their virtue, a value that is at stake of being forever stripped from them by their position as “fancy

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<sup>167</sup> “By December 1863 much of Louisiana was occupied by the Union Army. Ninety-five schools serving over 9,500 students-- including almost half of the black children in Louisiana-- where running in its auspices. But keeping these schools up and running would require ongoing financial support. Towards this end, the National Freedmen’s Association, in collaboration with the America Association and interested officers of the Union Army, launched a new propaganda campaign. Five children and three adults, all former slaves from New Orleans, were sent to the North on a publicity tour. A drawing of them was printed in the 30 January 1864 issue of the popular Harper’s Weekly, bearing the intriguing caption: “EMANCIPATED SLAVES, WHITE AND COLORED.” The authors of this campaign were pursuing a surprising, and quite effective, strategy for arousing sympathy for blacks--they portrayed them as white.

Accompanied on their tour by Col. George Hanks of the Corps d’Afrique (the 18th Infantry, a corps of colored soldiers), the group posed for photographs in New York and Philadelphia (Metropolitan Museum of Art). The portraits were produced in the format of *cartes de visite* albumen prints the size of a calling card, and sold for 25 cents each. The proceeds of the sale were directed to Maj. Gen. Nathaniel P. Banks in Louisiana, where the money would be “devoted to the education of colored people,” as the verso of each photograph explains. Of the “Emancipated Slaves from New Orleans” series, at least 22 different prints remain in existence today. The bulk were produced by New York photographers Charles Paxson, and Myron H. Kimball, who took the initial group portrait later reproduced as a woodcut in Harper’s Weekly.” See Celia Caust-Ellenbogen “White Slaves”

[http://trilogy.brynmawr.edu/speccoll/quakersandslavery/commentary/themes/white\\_slaves.pdf](http://trilogy.brynmawr.edu/speccoll/quakersandslavery/commentary/themes/white_slaves.pdf).

girls”. Mitchel suggest that the “fancy girl” embodies the history of racial mixing the city New Orleans. Mitchell illustrates the link between Rebecca’s white skin, and interracial sexuality in the south that is manifest in photographs like these that is as true for Rebecca as it was for the women in Storyville:

There photographs presented a female body that existed for the viewer somewhere between the real and the imagined, and in this respect where much like pornographic photographs of the nineteenth century. With the invention of photography , pornographers let the direct gazes of *real* women return the stares of the male spectator rather than those of fictionalized or painted figures. Like pornographic photographs, images of white-looking slave girls did not replace fantasies of beautiful mulatto and octoroon women enslaved and violated but rather encouraged them.<sup>168</sup>

Rebecca would have been of the same racial group as these women pictured by Bellocq, light skinned girls who looked white but socially were classified as being of mixed-race. Mitchell argues that in photographs of white looking children labeled as slaves, much like the women in Bellocq’s photographs who look white but were marketed as ‘octoroons’, “a white northern audience could have read in her white skin a history of “miscegenation,” generations of it, resulting from the sexual interaction of white masters with their female slaves”<sup>169</sup> In the historic and economic context of Storyville, viewers would have the chance to go one step further and insert themselves into this historic interracial sex fantasy by purchasing the body of a “mulatta” woman who physically embodied New Orleans’s history of racial mixing that Storyville actively promoted. Northerners who purchased and circulated these photographs where further ennobled

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<sup>168</sup> Mitchell, 395.

<sup>169</sup> Mitchell, 395.

because they viewed themselves as saving these girls from a life of sexual slavery. The moral outrage against “white slavery” that was emblazoned by the circulation of photographs like these of Rebecca and her siblings brought the existence and sexual objectification of light-skinned creoles to national attention. It was this same moral outrage that fueled the desire for creole women in the popular American sexual imagination that made Storyville’s marketing of interracial sex so popular and successful.

It is in the wake of traditions like “fancy girls” and *plaçage* that the brothels of Storyville, and their infamous marketing of creoles of color, blossomed and flourished. British social reformer Harriet Martineau suggests that, “The Quadroons of New Orleans are brought up by their mothers to be what they have been, the mistresses of white gentleman.”<sup>170</sup> Emily Landau argues that Storyville became the twentieth century manifestation of these antebellum traditions of a racially based sex trade in New Orleans.<sup>171</sup> The high-end brothels of Basin Street were designed to emulate the lush Quadroon Balls, where the madames took the place of the mothers and pimps for young light-skinned creole women of color. It is for this reason that the light skin of the women pictured in the Storyville portraits is so deceiving to a contemporary audience. Though they look to be white, the actually racial circumstances that defined these women’s lives were more tied to marketing than to their ethnic background. It is precisely this sort of information that is in danger of being lost when historical photographs are aestheticized and divorced from their original circumstance, and why it is important for the *Storyville*

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<sup>170</sup> Martineau, *Society in America*, 326.

<sup>171</sup> Landau, 5.

*Portraits* to be examined within the context of their own historical framework. The marketing strategy of Storyville that headlined interracial brothels and “octoroon” girls obscures a straightforward racial reading of the Storyville portraits and ties the complex racial identity of Storyville into the long history of New Orleans’s sexual economy that defined the district.

### **Class and Crib-Girls**

Historian Shannon Lee Dawdy in her article “Sexualized Space, The Colonial Leer and the Genealogy of Storyville” speaks to the economic and class disparity that divided the district by pointing out that, “during its heyday, Storyville was home to some of the most elegant brothels in the United States, as well as backstreets full of dilapidated houses cut up for 50-cent cribs. It was a dense, specialized development. Dawdy’s account of how on the 1909 Sanborn, sixty-five ‘female boarding houses’ were listed on just three of the city squares in the neighborhood gives some insight into the concentration of brothels and working women in the area.”<sup>172</sup> Dawdy’s illustration of the density and vast class inequality within the boundaries of Storyville makes it apparent that Storyville cannot be conceived of as a homogeneous whole, but instead as a microcosm of larger society that suffered the same class inequalities as the larger city in which it was situated.

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<sup>172</sup> Dawdy, Shannon Lee. "Sexualized Space, The Colonial Leer and the Genealogy of Storyville." Trans. Array *The Archeology of Colonialism, Intimate Encounters and Sexual Effects*. Barbra L. Voss and Eleanor Conlin Casella. First Edition. Cambridge, New York,: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 271-289. .247.

*Storyville Portraits* do not reflect of the sort of class-based and racial segregation that went on in Storyville, suggesting that they were not intended as any sort of objective record of the area, but instead were designed to sell a certain image of the District. If Bellocq's photographs were all that remained of the district, it would be easy to conclude that Storyville was an area filled with higher-end, pretty,<sup>173</sup> white women. This sort of subject matter is not what one would expect from a social documentarian, but exactly the sort of representation found in advertisements.

For the most part any documents of the realities of life in the 50-cent cribs, or portraits of dark-skinned women are absent. However, there are at least two notable exception where one of Bellocq's sitters have been located in one of these 50-cent cribs, but they do not reflect the reality of life for sex-workers in these conditions.<sup>174</sup> Instead, they seem to glamorize the subject. The woman in figure 26 is identified by her surroundings as a crib girl.<sup>175</sup> Here we see a young naked woman reclining atop a white sheet in the frame of a window or doorway. Her breasts are exposed, with one leg raised to cover her genitalia, and her arm resting casually on that same leg. Her smiling, round face looks directly into the camera. Behind her we see the faint outline of a cheap iron

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<sup>173</sup> In Szarkowski's catalogue Johnny Wiggs talks about how atypically attractive all of Bellocq's sitters where, or where made to appear. Wiggs says "looking at his photographs, those are really the only pretty whores that I've seen in my life. Some of them were very pretty, and this something that I never ran across in my life, was a pretty whore. I mean, that I knew of. Maybe I've seen some on streetcars, and, you know, busses, and they may have been. I wouldn't know that. But I mean in any of those places, I've never seen anything that resembled beauty." See Szarkowski, *Storyville Portraits*, 15.

<sup>174</sup> Wallis has discovered two such pictures, but only one is reproduced in Szarkowski's books. Wallis, 6.

<sup>175</sup> Landau, Rose and Wallis all reproduce these images and identify them (because of the background) as a woman in front of a Crib. Likewise, the placement of the nude woman in the doorway of a Crib reflects the actual advertisement these women would employ, sitting naked or robed in front of their rented space flashing the men who walked by the entice them to come spend some time and money with them.

bed that comes out through the darkness of the small room behind her. Cribs were small single rooms, large enough to hold a bed and wash basin, opening to the street.<sup>176</sup> They would be rented out to individual prostitutes to work in and were intended for women who could not find steady work in the larger brothels. Because of this, these women did not have the legal protection of monied madams, who could enforce security within their own house and pay off police. Crib work was much more dangerous and less prestigious. However, even among the cribs, there was social and racial stratification. Cribs closer to Basin Street, in proximity to Mahogany Hall and other big-money brothels, were more expensive due to the fact that they were in more desirable locations. A woman working in a crib off Basin could expect to make as much as ten times the amount of money for one “trick” as someone working in the same environment further back in the District.<sup>177</sup>

Given the evidence that many of Bellocq’s subjects worked in or near Mahogany Hall,<sup>178</sup> and that the woman in figure 26 appears to be a pretty, healthy white woman, there appear to be few signs of real financial or social oppression in this image. The woman’s hair is styled and she wears a bubbly smile on her face. “Crib girls” commonly advertised themselves by standing in the doorway of their crib in various states of dress

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<sup>176</sup> Rose, 74.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Malcolm, 202, “Two photographs in the show- one of a bedroom in Mahogany Hall, whose Eastlake bed with a crisp white coverlet and starched white pillows, marble top dresser, and lace-covered side table make it indistinguishable from master bedrooms or guest rooms in the most staid of Victorian houses; and the other of a hallway in the same whorehouse, whose columns, chandeliers, and polished wood floors evoke the lobbies of apartment houses of the Upper West Side- provide interesting footnotes but were wisely excluded from the book” Malcolm, 202. Goldin, p.5 “Many believe that the pictures were taken at Lulu White’s Mahogany Hall (the wallpaper in some of the photos apparently matches that from White’s Whorehouse.” Godlin, 5. and Wallis, *Mysterious Monsour Bellocq*, p.10.

(or undress) to entice passersby.<sup>179</sup> In this photograph, the subject appears very comfortable working from her crib. The composition looks to be an awkward attempt at a candid image. She sits on her sheet, her head turned to the side as if to casually beckon the viewer in for a good time. The bed in the background reinforces the end purpose of the whole composition. The image almost romanticizes the notion of the “crib girl” by utilizing a subject who shows no signs of the hardships of crib work and who was not subjected to the segregation and poor conditions that the vast majority of crib workers faced. This is most likely a photograph of one of the upper-end crib girls, the kind who could charge around a dollar a “trick”. In this case, even when not taking the women who worked in upper-end brothels as his subject, Bellocq is still only representing a “higher” class of women in the District.

This disinterest in the living conditions and social issues in Storyville is a far cry from many of Bellocq’s contemporaries who photographed other notorious districts around the country with hopes of effecting change. The *Storyville Portraits* are nothing like the social reform photographers of the time such as Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine.<sup>180</sup> What is particularly important in these cases is how they used the images they made for

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<sup>179</sup> Gary Krist, *Empire of Sin, a Story of Sex, Jazz, and Murder and the Battle for Modern New Orleans*, p.112

<sup>180</sup> Kozloff speculates that “the outer world had a pejorative view of women in that profession [prostitution]; they were stigmatized as a matter of course, and treated roughly in any brush with the law. Had Hine been on the scene he would have regarded them correctly as victims marginalized by prejudice, but it is unlikely that he would have made their plight a topic for reformist press. Rather than taking a stand on their exploited reality, Bellocq’s work is complicit with their make believe.” Kozloff, 59. The alleged complicity on Bellocq’s behalf is not at all surprising if we take these photographs as advertisement for the district.



social reform. Unlike Riis in *How the Other Half Lives*,<sup>181</sup> Bellocq was not interested in exposing the substandard living conditions that a great majority of the women in Storyville experience.<sup>182</sup> The *Storyville Portraits* are closer in many ways to Atget's documents of old Paris, particularly portraits of the prostitutes back in France. Bellocq's seeming disinterest in Storyville's politics and social issues reflects his interests as a commercial photographer whose day job was to record objects and events without casting judgment or effecting change.<sup>183</sup>

A cursory glance over this body of images reveals a collection of very light-skinned women. Photographic technologies highlight lighter skin tones, the high contrast printing of these photographs tends to blow out the flesh, eliminating any subtle tones and making the apparent whiteness of the women all the more glaring.<sup>184</sup> The dark curly hair and eyes and consistent body type of almost all of the women in Bellocq's photographs add to the overbearing homogeneity of the images. This archive is not necessarily representative of the realities of life in Storyville. For this reason, it would make sense that even Bellocq's photographs of the most downtrodden subject matter in the district would not address any real social concerns, but instead ignore poverty and rough living conditions in an attempt to market even the lowest class the sex trade in Storyville. Even here, Bellocq's pictures present a Storyville where good times are had

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<sup>181</sup> Jacob Riis. *How the Other Half Lives*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890.

<sup>182</sup> Kozloff, 59.

<sup>183</sup> This approach to image making, coupled with outsider content is what made him so popular to late 20<sup>th</sup> century photographer, as will be discussed in the previous chapters of this thesis.

<sup>184</sup> See Richard Dyer, *White*. London: Routledge, 1997. 103-106.

by all. His ability to make even crib work seem appealing and even fun and easy going is indicative of what has been described as symptomatic of his close human relationship with his sitters, but what in reality is only the good work of even a moderately skilled advertiser.

### **Erotic Images**

In his essay, “Archiving Sexuality: The Photographic Collection of the Kinsey Institute,” James Crump describes Bellocq’s oeuvre as “championed” by the art world and so “distanced” from the sort of erotic photographs held at the Kinsey Institute.<sup>185</sup> Crump aligns Bellocq’s photographs more closely with an artistic project, Brassai’s *Paris de Nuit*, than with the archive’s holdings of vernacular erotic photography. This distinction is more a result of Bellocq’s contemporary “fine art” framing than the photographs’ original object function as private pictures or commercial studio portraiture.

In her book *Art/Porn*, art historian Kelly Dennis analyzes the crisis in representation that early erotic photography presented in relation to the female nude as fine art. Dennis suggests that “in photography, the pornographic nude supplants the traditional nude and even twits the viewer about high art’s increasingly dubious status in the age of its technological reproduction.”<sup>186</sup> Many of Bellocq’s photographs, and

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<sup>185</sup> The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction is a research institute associated with the University of Bloomington and holds the largest single collection of erotic and pornographic photography. In his book *A Hypersexual Society: Sexual Discourse, Erotic, and Pornography in America Today*, Kenneth C. W. Kammeyer credits Kinsey with bringing sex into the realm of credible studies in American Universities and Colleges. Kenneth C. W. Kammeyer, *A Hypersexual Society: Sexual Discourse, Erotica, and Pornography in America Today*. New York, NY: Plagrave Macmillan, 2008. p 90-92

<sup>186</sup> Kelly Dennis, *Art/Porn: A History of Seeing and Touching*. Oxford: Berg Publishers Ltd :, 2009. 60.

indeed much erotic portraiture of the time, lifts its composition and subject matter from the classical nude. Though this compositional device may have eased the insertion of Bellocq's oeuvre into the space of the art museum, focusing on such formal similarities that these photographs share with many fine art nudes of the past overlooks important contextual and functional information that informs a more nuanced and critical readings of the *Storyville Portraits*, such as the photographs' function as advertisement and the role that erotic images played in Storyville's economy.

A useful comparison can be drawn between one of the *Storyville Portraits* (figure 5) and a photograph from the Kinsey archives (Figure 32) which is used to illustrate Crump's essay. In Bellocq's photograph we see a young woman sitting nude on a stool next to a bed. Her arms are placed to her side, body turned slightly, and head raised looking directly at the camera. All she wears is a mask covering her eyes and nose. Here the subject is again a seated, masked woman. In both of these photographs the masks suggest that these photographs are not concerned with the identity of the woman but with the body as object. In Bellocq's photograph the sitter's arms are at her side exposing her bare breasts, in the other image the sitter's leg is lifted making her labia the central focus of the picture.

Though they may seem exotic because of their lascivious content, these sorts of pictures are highly conventional and informed by the formulaic compositional conventions of erotic photography that go back to the beginnings of the medium and beyond. Masking the face is a common and recurring trope in erotic photography, serving to strip the sitter of his or her identity and redirecting the focus to the body. This makes

the subject of the photograph the body as object, instead of a portrait of a recognizable person. This is of additional importance to Bellocq's nudes as it addresses one of the most often discussed formal elements of his photographs, the scratched out face. I suggest that removing the subject's face on the actual photographic plate is another form of post-exposure masking. The focus on the genitalia in the photograph from the Kinsey Archives illustrates a primary omission on Bellocq's part of any genitalia or overt sexual activity. Dennis reinforces the idea that photography makes clear that the 'nude' in painting had omitted any articulation of genital or pubic hair.<sup>187</sup> With this in mind, it is easy to see how otherwise erotic photography like Bellocq's fits so well in the modern art museum. It is a compromise between pornographic photography and the classical nude.<sup>188</sup> The *Storyville Portraits* are not so sexually that they have been separated from the tradition of the female nude. However, with the inclusion of pubic hair in some images, these nudes become erotic enough to remind us of the sitter's profession. It is in their reprinting, the physical separation of these images from their history, that they are again sanitized and made familiar for the modern museumgoer.

In drawing a formal comparison between these two images, it could be argued that I am falling into the same pattern as those who seek to aestheticize these vernacular

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<sup>187</sup> "It is photography, so the story goes, that invents the 'beaver shot.' thereby making newly explicit what painting had effaced. "Beaver Shot" itself is a twentieth century term, signifying the quite explicit display of labia and clitoris. But etymology and use remind us of the association of 'beaver' with fur or beard, significations pointing to the particular innovation of early pornographic photographs the nineteenth century: what the photographic nude introduced at the moment. . . was pubic hair." Dennis, 60. See also Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Legs of the Countess," October 39 (winter 1996), 98.

<sup>188</sup> Historically speaking, a distinction between what is 'erotic' and what is 'pornographic' may be problematic. Historian Walter Kendrick points out that "Victorians neglected to distinguish 'pornography' from the candid, the realistic, and the erotic" Walter M. Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*. Berkeley, Calif.: U of California, 1996. p.68

erotic photographs through direct formal comparison with a now-established “fine art” photograph. Catherine Zuromskis asks, “once aestheticized, what can the found, vintage snapshot really tell us about the vernacular culture of photography?”<sup>189</sup> The answer is very little. Once aestheticized these images are left as only “pretty pictures,” without cultural context or the functional significance that these images originally served. Through this comparison I intend to use the above pairing not to bring this erotic photograph into the context of a modernist aesthetic, but instead to highlight the vernacular context of Bellocq’s photograph. Additionally, I intend to offer examples of the material presence that many of the Storyville portraits would have had during their own time.

Zuromskis asserts, “any truly vernacular history of photography must take this social life of the snapshot into account.”<sup>190</sup> Though the *Storyville Portraits* are not snapshots, this approach to vernacular photography is essential to understanding what these images meant in their original context. I suggest the original social life of the *Storyville Portraits* saw them serving as erotic advertisement, using sex to sell the allure of Storyville. Though many of Bellocq’s photographs are more titillating burlesques than overtly pornographic images, their erotic qualities illustrate the social role of sex in photography and advertising in Storyville. When Adele, a woman who formerly worked in the district, and who claims to be the subject of several of Bellocq’s portraits, was asked about pictures similar to Bellocq’s more risqué images taken by other

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<sup>189</sup> Zuromskis, 106.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

photographers, she points out how, “there were so many taken, I don’t know why they’re so scarce.”<sup>191</sup> In the same interview between several people who knew Bellocq during his lifetime, the question of how photographs of prostitutes circulated in Storyville was brought up.<sup>192</sup> Perhaps the most valuable piece of information to come from Szarkowski’s interview with Johnny Wiggs, a cornetist from New Orleans, quoted below:

[Pictures of Prostitutes] were so commonplace; I mean, we knew all the people who [Bellocq] was taking pictures of. There were a vast number of people there, you know. It was at this time there was a saloon, maybe you’ve heard of this, there was this saloon on South Rampart, and above this saloon was a little room, and in this room were thousands of pictures; they look like they were made in France, of fornication and anything related to that in all possible...variations... You never saw anything like this. And they tell me men would drink downstairs, go upstairs and look at these pictures, and then run over to the District...<sup>193</sup>

Wiggs offers valuable insight into the way physical photographs were used in Storyville, both to advertise individual women and to promote sex in general. Though Bellocq’s photographs specifically may not have been present on the walls of this back room, this account teaches how pornography circulated and was seen in New Orleans, and how many of Bellocq’s more risqué photographs may have been used. As stated earlier in this paper, erotic photographs, which today may be expected to be private, played a very public role in stimulating Storyville’s economy. In any economic system based on sex, all erotica functions as advertisement. It is also important to remember that Bellocq was, by profession, a commercial photographer who worked on assignment for

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<sup>191</sup> Szarkowski, 15.

<sup>192</sup> Szarkowski, *Bellocq: Photography from Storyville, the Red-Light District of New Orleans*. 75.

<sup>193</sup> Szarkowski, 76.

various businesses in New Orleans. It is most likely that these images were also made on assignment, and were used to market Storyville business.

## Conclusion

### Pictures in Pictures

Here we have two photographic interior scenes that picture a collection of photographs in which some of the *Storyville Portraits* appear. Above a small roll top desk in the first photograph (see figures 15, 35, & 36) there is a collection of female nudes as well as other prints and photographs of women. We looked at this still life of prints, statues, and photographs earlier in regards to how Art-Nouveau style, which was very popular at the time, influenced Bellocq's composition. In this image vintage prints of some of his Storyville portraits are clearly visible as they would have existed in a contemporary context (Figure 35 shows a vintage printing of one of the *Storyville Portraits*, figure 36). On the mantle, almost lost in a sea of female faces, are two cropped portraits from some of the more formal Storyville negatives, presumably printed and framed by Bellocq himself. It would be very easy for these photographs to go unnoticed considering their relative small size compared to the other prints. One of these photographs shows a young woman wearing a luscious white fur shawl, beaded satin top, and pearl necklace and shares a double frame with a woman holding a doll and sitting in front of a doorway. Though this photograph, too, looks like it could easily be by Bellocq, the girl with the doll does not appear in any record of his photographic work. The two women gaze at each other from their separate frames and are further separated by a small statuette of a nude woman, posing seductively, which casts a shadow on the mouth and shoulder of the young sitter. The image is printed in line with standard photographic



conventions of the time, a three quarter profile figure, framed from the waist up, in bright sunlight, placed before a black portable backdrop.

A cursory glance at these photographs would suggest that they may be pictures of women with whom Bellocq had a personal relationship. After all, this sort of careful framing and pride of place on the mantel is indicative of the way we treat pictures of loved ones. But perhaps this is not the case. Though this looks like a conventional personal photograph, perhaps of one of Bellocq's friends, lovers, or family members, the context in which it exists suggests another possible reading. This image too, could well have been used as an advertisement for the Storyville brothels. Advertisements for specific women in Blue Books or other guides of the area most often reproduced headshots such as these, as opposed to full nudes. Likewise, these photographs are not surrounded by other family photographs, but more images of eroticized women, that more likely give some insight into the formal conventions of Bellocq's compositions.

I suggest that the less risqué photographs on this mantle piece may well have been photographs of Storyville prostitutes that Bellocq made for use in self-advertisement and that this collection of photographs may be a record of his work for clients rather than a group of friends and family. That being said, there is no reason that, in this case, these two categories of friend and client should be mutually exclusive. Many photographers often form friendships with their models. A good portrait hinges on cooperation between photographer and sitter, and at least one of Bellocq's models (Adele) talked about what a pleasure he was to work with. Furthermore, as Wigg points out, most of the people who worked in Storyville, Bellocq included, all knew each other. So, while I suggest that this

is most likely a collection of photographs originally done on commission as promotional headshots, their placement also suggest that there are also a sort of community gallery of the girls Bellocq had worked with. Bellocq could have used this collection of photographs to market himself as a successful photographer for the prostitutes in the district just as the women in the pictures may have used them for their self-promotion.

If we can compare the presentation of these photographs during their own time with their presentation at MoMA (figure 2) it becomes apparent how photographic materiality, framing, and arrangement affect the reading of these images. On top of Bellocq's desk the photographs are seemingly intimate, but in reality they are most probably commercial. The photograph by James Mathews of the installation view from the first exhibition of the *Storyville Portraits* at the Museum of Modern Art illustrates how these photographs have been repurposed and aestheticized in the museum space. Because Friedlander printed the whole plate, all of these photographs are the same size. They are all matted and framed in the same way, hung in line, equidistant from one another. This presentation style negates any sense of intimacy and contextualizes these photographs as aesthetic objects. The way these photographs were reprinted by Friedlander and presented at MoMA separated Bellocq's photographs so significantly from their original context they have become completely new body of work. Perhaps most relevant to the physical conditions concerning the contemporary manifestation of Bellocq's images, and photography more broadly, Walter Benjamin points out how, "For

him [the collector] not only books but also copies of books have their fate.”<sup>194</sup> And the same is true for photographs. The prints that hang in galleries, are reproduced in art books, and sit in museum collections are not Bellocq’s prints but Friedlander’s, and Friedlander’s contemporary prints versus Bellocq’s vintage (and now unattainable) prints have a very different aesthetic value and history from one another. The images may be similar, but the photographs themselves are very different and new, more a product of the 1960s than the 1910s. These examples show the gap in aesthetics and taste between Friedlander’s prints and Bellocq’s own. I am sure that the prints found in the photographs of Bellocq’s apartment have been noticed by most people interested in Bellocq’s work, but am not surprised that they are seldom talked about in this context.<sup>195</sup> These hidden prints serve as a foil to the construction of Bellocq as a turn-of-the -century artistic outsider and place him firmly in the realm of conventional commercial photography. These older images illustrate the fact that the Bellocq we know today may be as much an artist creation of Lee Friedlander’s as any of Friedlander’s own photographs.

As I have shown over the course of this thesis, meaning in photography is framed by context. Moreover, that the reuse of historic photography in the art museum creates a completely new frame of reference and new bodies of knowledge. Though often aestheticization in the art museum strips historic photographs of their meaning and history, this action also opens these objects up to reflect their contemporary circumstances. While *Storyville Portraits* spoke more to the artistic concerns of the 1960s

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<sup>194</sup> Benjamin, 61.

<sup>195</sup> Wallis, 12-16.

and '70s, reading these photographs within the context of Storyville's history shows that through returning Bellocq's work to its own history, these photographs can teach us about how circulation of erotic images fit within the larger economy of the district.

I conclude with a final pair of photographs in which one of the *Storyville Portraits* is framed within another photograph. The *Storyville Portraits* appear in the background of photographs by Lee Friedlander (figure 37) and Diane Arbus (figure 38). In considering the ways these two photographs, along with the aforementioned images by Bellocq himself of his own photographs appearing in period interiors, are shown within these varying representations, framed in different ways, circulating in different spaces, these photographs in many ways sum up the history of how the *Storyville Portraits* have lived in the world. In their appearance as supporting actors in the photographs by Friedlander and Arbus, we have two transparent instances of how the *Storyville Portraits* becomes tools for social documentarians of the 1960s to construct their own artistic identities.

As discussed above, in Bellocq's interior photographs there are least a couple of his own photographs are framed amidst a collection of sexualized women. Here, Bellocq could be displaying his own photographs alongside these other images to assert a correlation in style. The women in the other pictures are all sensual, some nude and very much of the art-nouveau style popular at the time. Though the presentation of his own photographs most closely resembles the conventions of family portraiture, given what we know about these women and the sexual context in which the pictures were produced, it is more likely that he displays his own photographs with these erotic pictures to

underscore the implicit sexual undertones of the *Storyville Portraits*. Here, the context, of the images within Storyville's sexual economy come to define their purpose, and their conventional, commercial qualities come reflect Bellocq's status as a working commercial photographer.

Likewise, the photograph of Diane Arbus' collage wall could offer some insight into how Bellocq's photographs function in his own collage. In Bellocq's photograph of his mantle, by incorporating his own photographs with others he defines how they fit into the taste and conventions of that time and place. Like Bellocq, Arbus has mixed several of her own photographs with pictures that have inspired her style and conceptual approach to photography. Arbus intermixed one of the Storyville portraits (see figure 7) with photographs she made and a collection of new pictures. The subject matter of the collective group reflects Sontag's discussion of people "eager to be troubled".

This photograph talks as much about the historical moment as it does about how Arbus saw her role as a contemporary photographer. In a letter to Robert Benton, art director of *Esquire* Diane Arbus wrote, "I was looking for some club that would be good for the upper in the sense of respectable reaches...like the D.A.R. (Daughters of the American Revolution)...or a society for the suppression of something or other like vice or sin... Brady once photographed the D.A.R. and it was, in the French sense, formidable...meanwhile, please get me permissions, both posh and sordid."<sup>196</sup> Here, Arbus sums up her own artistic interests. A preoccupation with the sordid, groups

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<sup>196</sup> Letter from Diane Arbus to Benton, undated, ca. October 1959, quoted in *Revelations*, 144.

involved with vice or sin, all suggest how Bellocq's work, a promotion of the sordid and of institutionalized sin, fit well into her criteria for suitable subject.

Bellocq's photograph serves not only as artistic inspiration for Arbus, but also as a reflection of the predominant conceptual and ethical concerns among photographers of the time. This photograph, taken in 1969, one year before *E.J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits* opened at MoMA, helps frame Bellocq's work within the context of artistic and photographic environment in the 1960s. Sontag commented on how "So much about these pictures affirms current taste"<sup>197</sup> For Arbus, Bellocq's photographs represent the subject matter that was posh in the 60's, by virtue of their tawdry origins. Arbus best illustrated this by collapsing Bellocq's photograph with her own work and other images that define Arbus's artistic at the time. In this way, Bellocq becomes a tool used by Arbus to construct her own artistic identity

In this self-portrait by Lee Friedlander, the photographer situates himself in front of one of his prints from the Storyville negatives. This particular type of self-portrait, made by holding his camera arm's length from his face and snapping a photo, was a recurring theme throughout Friedlander's career. A chronological perusal of this body of work shows Friedlander age from an awkward youth into an old man. Though his physical appearance changes, his format does not. He masters this style of portraiture early on, and was skilled in framing these portraits just so, without the benefit of a viewfinder. These portraits, made through his career, serve as periodical reflection on the

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<sup>197</sup> Sontag, *Storyville Portraits*, 1970. 7.

life of the artist. They show him on vacation, with various women, alongside celebrities and other famous photographers, among a variety of diverse situations and subject matters. These proto-selfies work to construct a persona for the artist and afford him a level of authorship over his life and history. In photographing himself with one of the *Storyville Portraits*, he is asserting his place within these photographs histories. In Friedlander the artists looms large, and the photograph is relegated to the background. Indeed, it could easily go unnoticed if one was not looking for it (not unlike the role the *Storyville* portraits have taken within Friedlander's artistic career). However, we cannot overlook the fact that without Friedlander's intervention we would not have these photographs today. Though his work these photographs have become as much a product of his own artistry as they are Bellocq's. His intervention into the history of these photographs saved them from obscurity and, in that act, also did a great service to the history of New Orleans.

The presence of these pictures within pictures reveal the power of looking at the material histories of photographs. These images all show the same pictures (the *Storyville Portraits*) used in very different ways. This small collection of photographs is in itself a survey of the historiography of the *Storyville* portraits, recordings their diverse presentation and uses. The same pictures, be they framed on a *storyville* mantelpiece or in Friedlander's home, hung on the walls of MoMA or tacked up on Arbus' photo wall show a malleable history, which each photographer making the images into what he or she needs them to be. But it is exactly because of their malleability as images without caption, status as art, and their usefulness to artists of the 60s that we have these today.

Likewise, their framing as art has allowed a reading that transcends their use as historic illustration. The *Storyville Portraits* have served as inspiration for numerous fine art photographers. But they have the ability to exist and exert meaning both within and outside of the art museum. Even on the walls of May Baily's Place, these images rarely fail to captivate. They appear on bar walls, party flyers, and often on the covers of books about Storyville and prostitution<sup>198</sup> In each instance, their location, and their space, define their power. In the museum they reflect the era that afforded them new relevance and are active players in the tableau of 1960s photographic history. In Storyville, they were part of a visual culture that called countless men to sin and vice all in the name of a good time. It is only because of Friedlander's intervention that these images have been allowed to come full circle in history, and come back to work in the streets of New Orleans. Without his work, it probably would not be possible for a young man to walk the streets of New Orleans only a few years ago, and be invited to a Burlesque performance, or beckoned for a drink, by the long gone denizens of Storyville, as I once was.

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<sup>198</sup> Images from the Storyville Portraits are used to illustrate the covers of Al Rose's *Storyville New Orleans*, Landau's *Spectacular Wickedness*, and , Ruth Rosen. *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982



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Figures



Figure 1 Bellocq, *Untitled*, c.1910/ 1966



Figure 2. James Mathews, Installation view from the first exhibition of the Storyville Portraits at the Museum of Modern Art



Figure 3. E.J. Bellocq, *Untitled*, c.1910/ 1966



Figure 4. Bellocq, *Untitled*, c.1910/ 1966



Figure 5. E.J. Bellocq, *Untitled*, c.1910/ 1966



Figure 6. E.J. Bellocq, *Untitled*, c.1910/ 1966



Figure 7. E.J. Bellocq, *Untitled*, c.1910/ 1966





Figure 8. E.J. Bellocq, *Untitled*, c.1910/ 1966



Figure 9. E.J. Bellocq, *Untitled*, c.1910/ 1966



Figure 10. Portrait of E.J. Bellocq, c1912

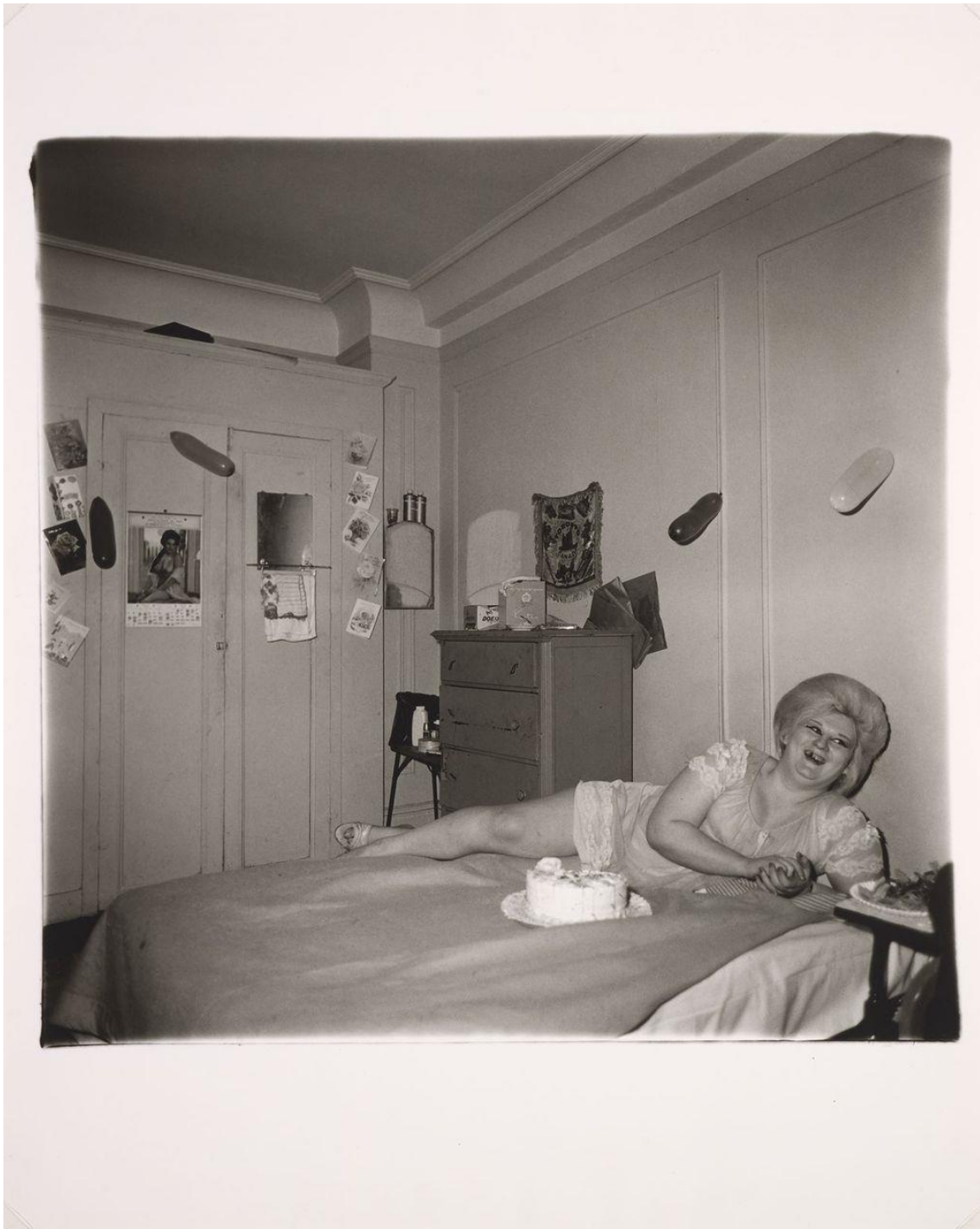


Figure 11. Diane Arbus, *Transvestite in Her Apartment, N.Y.C., 1969*. 1969



Figure 12. E.J. Bellocq, *Untitled*, c.1910/ 1966



Figure 13. Family of Man



Figure 14. E.J. Bellocq, *Untitled*, c.1910/ 1966



Figure 15. E.J. Bellocq, *Untitled*, c.1910/ 1966



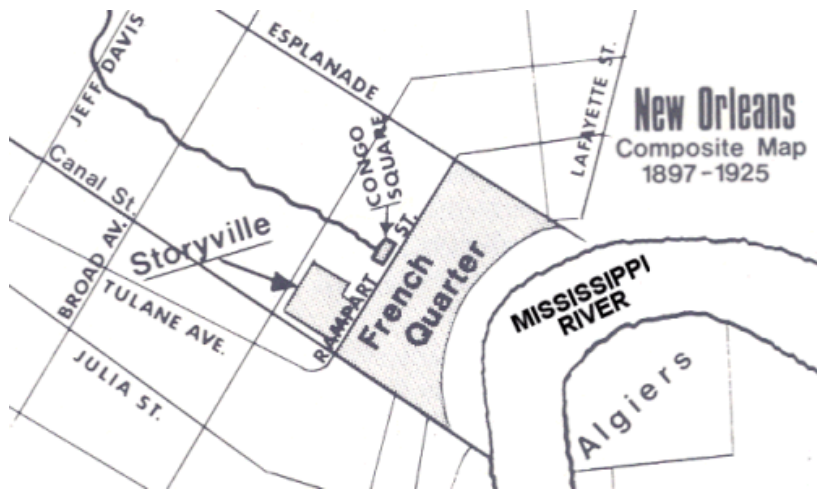


Figure 16. Map of New Orleans, Showing Storyville in relation to the French Quarter, 1897-1925



Figure 17. E.J. Bellocq, *Untitled*, c.1910/ 1966

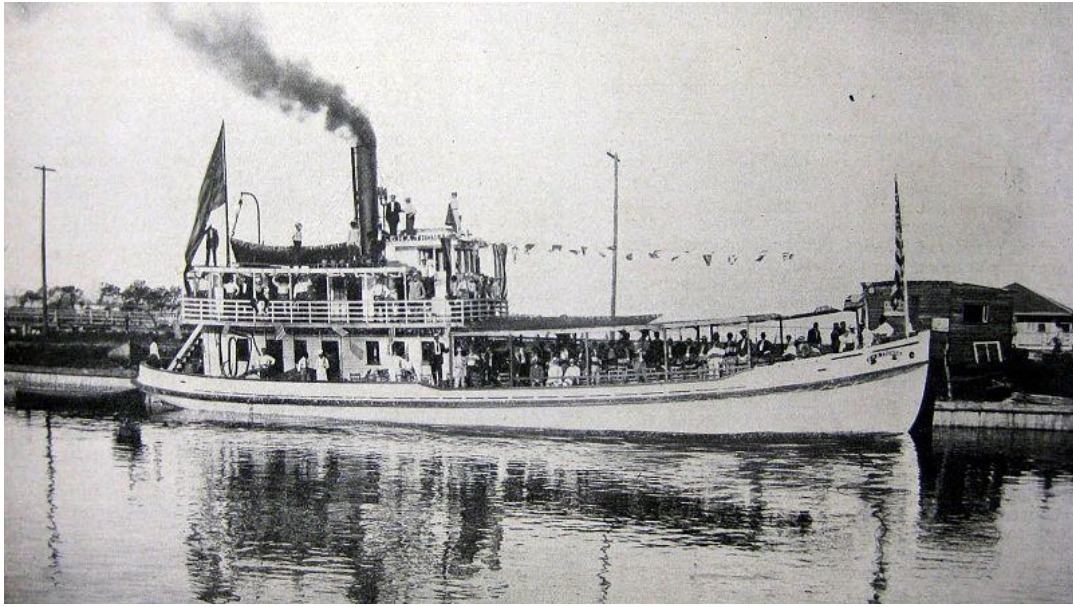


Figure 18. E.J. Bellocq, *Boat Docked at the New Basin Canal*, 1908



Figure 19. E.J. Bellocq, *Group Portrait of Catholic School Girls, New Orleans* c.1910



Figure 20. New Orleans Police Department “mug shot” of women of Storyville (Louisiana Division/ City Archives, New Orleans Public Library)



Figure 21. Henry Privat-Livemont, *Absinthe Robette*, 1896. Color Lithograph



Figure 22. Lulu White, famous Storyville New Orleans Madame, 1904

Mme.  
Lulu  
White

COR. BASIN  
AND X X  
BIENVILLE  
STREETS

Nowhere in this country will you find a more popular personage than Madame White, who is noted as being the handsomest octo-  
roon in America, and aside from her beauty, she has the distinction of possessing the largest collection of diamonds, pearls, and other rare gems in this part of the country.

To see her at night, is like witnessing the late electrical display on the Cascade, at the late St. Louis Exposition.

Aside from her handsome women, her mansion possesses some of the most costly oil paintings in the Southern country. Her mirror-parlor is also a dream.

There's always something new at Lulu White's that will interest you. "Good time" is her motto.

There are always ten entertainers who get paid to do nothing but sing and dance.

PHONES: MAIN 1102 AND MAIN 1331

Figure 23. *Blue Book* add advertising Lulu White.

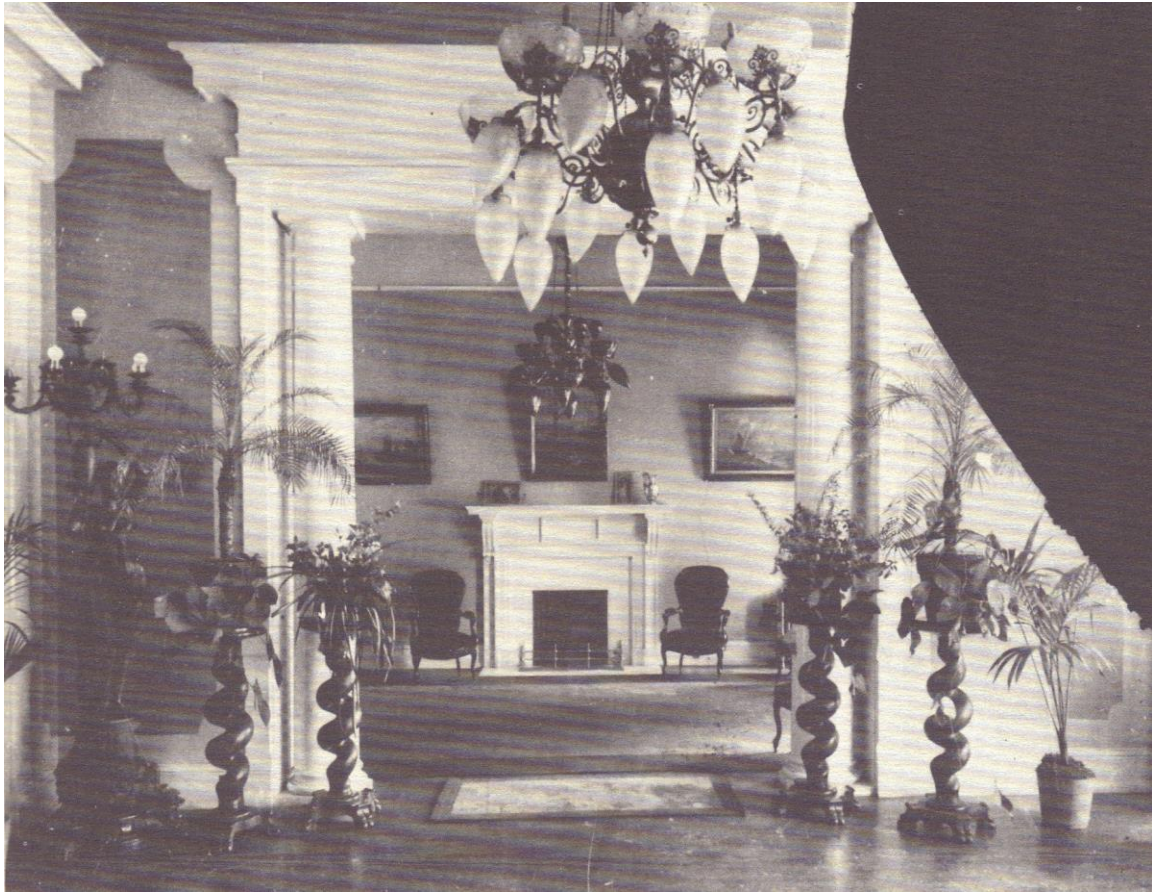


Figure 24. E.J. Bellocq, *Interior of Mahogany Hall*, c.1910/1966



Figure 25. Carte-de-Visite, "Rebecca, A Slave Girl from New Orleans"



Figure 26. E.J. Bellocq, *'Crib Girl'*, c.1910/ 1966



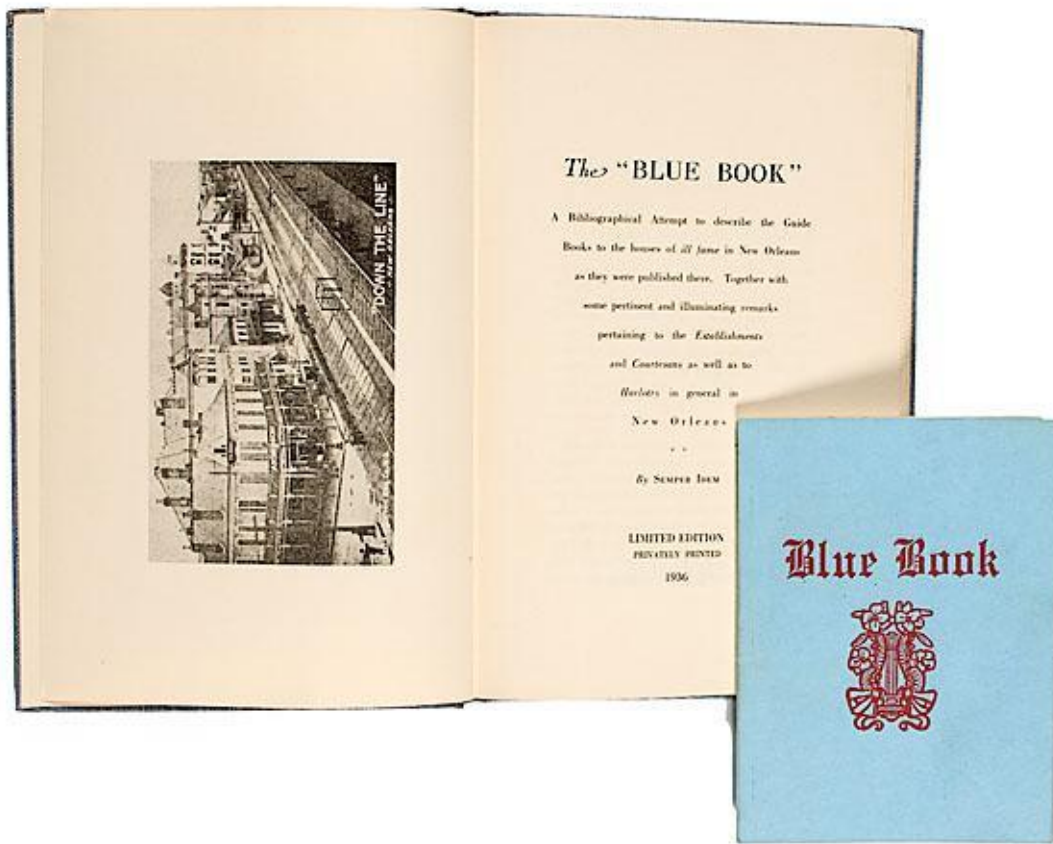


Figure 27. Facsimile of a Storyville Blue Book, 1936

**The Little Annex**

Lizette Smith, the jolly and popular mistress of the "Little Annex," is certainly a lovely woman, and one to be admired—which she certainly must be, judging from her coterie of friends.

Lizette has proven herself not only a "good fellow," but a young woman capable of conducting one of the very best establishments to be found anywhere in this country.

Recently Lizette went to great expense in erecting a new home and along with it its furnishings are the costliest French "fine" palaces in America.

She also has some of the most beautiful and select girls in the district, who know how to do things as you like 'em.

**Miss Gertrude Dix**

This palatial home was at one time the residence of Miss Hilma Burt, who was noted for keeping one of the best equipped places of its kind in this section of the States.

Miss Dix, while very young, is of a type that pleases most men of today—the witty, pretty and natty—a lady of fashion. Her managerial possibilities are phenomenal to say the least, and her success here has proven itself beyond a doubt.

Miss Dix has been with us but a short while but has won all hearts. Her palace is second to none. It is good for one who loves the beautiful to visit Miss Dix's handsome ladies—one can only realize the palace. There are no words for her grandeur of feminine beauty and artistic settings after an hour or so in the palace of Miss Dix.

Miss Dix has an orchestra in her ballroom that should be heard—all talented singers and dancers.

PHONE MAIN 299

**Miss Frances Morris**

THIS place is one of the few gorgeously furnished places in the Storyville District, located so that the most particular person in the world can reach it without being seen by anyone.

This mansion is under the able direction of Frances Morris, who is one of the handsomest beauties in the District and is a princess. Her ladies are of like type.

The success and reputation enjoyed by this establishment is due in more than surpassed under the able management of Miss Morris, who has not overlooked anything that goes to make a place famous and select.

You make no mistake in visiting 1320. Everybody must be of some importance, otherwise he cannot gain admittance.

PHONE MAIN 2318

**217 N. Basin**

**205 N. Basin**

**1320 Conti**



The Colonial Room in Mi's Pay Owens' "STAR MANSON" 1517 Iberville Street



Yes, this is the famous Mademoiselle Rita Walker. The Original belle, who some years ago set the society folks of Chicago wild about her "valuable" dance. She was one of the first women in America to dance in her bare feet. Aside from her marvelous dancing, Mademoiselle has a \$100 wardrobe which she uses for her dances. Mademoiselle is at present a guest of MISS BERTHA WEINTHAL, 211 N. Basin St., where she can be seen other marvelous dances.

**Countess Willie V. Piazza**

315  
BASIN  
STREET  
X X X

**Mme. Lulu White**

COR. BASIN  
AND X X  
BIENVILLE  
STREETS

**Miss Minnie White**

MISS WHITE is one of the finest handladies in the District, known to all as a prince of good fellows, always ready to receive you with a smile and pleasant greeting, and counts her friends by scores. She has surrounded herself with a bevy of charming girls, each one a star, who are always willing to meet you half way and make you feel that you are welcome. Once you meet them, return you surely will. Good-fellowship is the secret of Miss Minnie's success.

Miss White has recently added to her array of beautiful women some lively women, entire strangers from the far Northwest, and quoms among queens they are.

PHONE 1663 MAIN

**221 N. Basin**

Is one place in the Tenderloin District you can't very well afford to "pass up." The Countess Piazza has made it a study to try and make every one jovial who visits her house. If you have the "blues," the Countess and her girls can cure 'em. She has, without doubt, the most handsome and intelligent octeroons in the United States. You should see them; they are all cultivated entertainers.

If there is anything new in the singing and dancing line that you'd like to see while in Storyville, Countess Piazza's is the place to visit, especially when "one" is out hopping with friends—the women in particular.

The Countess wishes it to be known that while her maison joie is peerless in every respect, she only serves the "amber fluid."

Nowhere in this country will you find a more popular personage than Madame White, who is noted as being the handsomest octeroon in America, and aside from her beauty, she has the distinction of possessing the largest collection of diamonds, pearls, and other rare gems in this part of the country.

To see her at night, is like witnessing the late electrical display on the Cascade, at the late St. Louis Exposition.

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There's always something new at Lulu White's that will interest you. "Good time" is her motto.

There are always ten entertainers who get paid to do nothing but sing and dance.

PHONES: MAIN 1102 AND MAIN 1331

ADVERTISEMENTS FROM THE BLUE BOOK

Figure 28. Excerpt from Blue Book



**Victoria Hall.**

A member of Miss White's Club, as accomplished as she is beautiful, a form equal to Venus, a voice not unlike Patti. How could a more accurate description be printed, and what more could be said.



The beautiful

**Estelle Russell,**

now a member of high standing in Miss White's famous Octoroon Club, a few years ago one of the leading stars in Sam T. Jack's Créole Show, which assertion alone should test the capacity of Miss Lulu's commodious quarters every night.

Gentlemen, don't fail, when visiting Miss White's, to ask for Miss Estelle, for you miss a treat if you do not.



**Sadie Levy.**

Miss White's Octoroon Club would certainly be incomplete without Sadie. Accomplished, beautiful, and charming. We are not given to flattery, so invite you to call and convince yourself that, while there are others there is only one Sadie Levy. Born and bred right here in this city and a girl which any city should feel proud of.



**Clara Miller.**

Demure everybody's friend, can sit up all night if necessary, and handicap to put a friend on to a good thing. Why? Because it is her disposition, and who don't want to meet such a young lady! Not one with real blood in his veins. She has been in the principal cities of Europe and the Continent, and can certainly interest you as she has a host of others. When we add that the famous octoroon was born near Baton Rouge we trust you will call on her.



**Emma Sears.**

This clever girl has been justly termed the colored Carmencita, and the name has certainly not been misplaced. As a tamborine dancer she has no superior and very few equals. Tall, graceful, winning. What more can be said? Let me add: Gentlemen, a visit to New Orleans is incomplete if you fail to visit Lulu White's and ask to see Miss Sears dance, sing or play some of her own compositions on a Steinway Grand.



**"Prettie Sadie Reed."**

Such is the soubriquet Miss Sadie has gained, and properly—as pretty a form and as accomplished as could be asked for. We cannot possibly do the lady justice by the writing of her accomplishments, so gently request you to personally attend to her by a call at the famous Octoroon Club, presided over by Miss Lulu White.

Figure 29. Excerpt from Blue Book

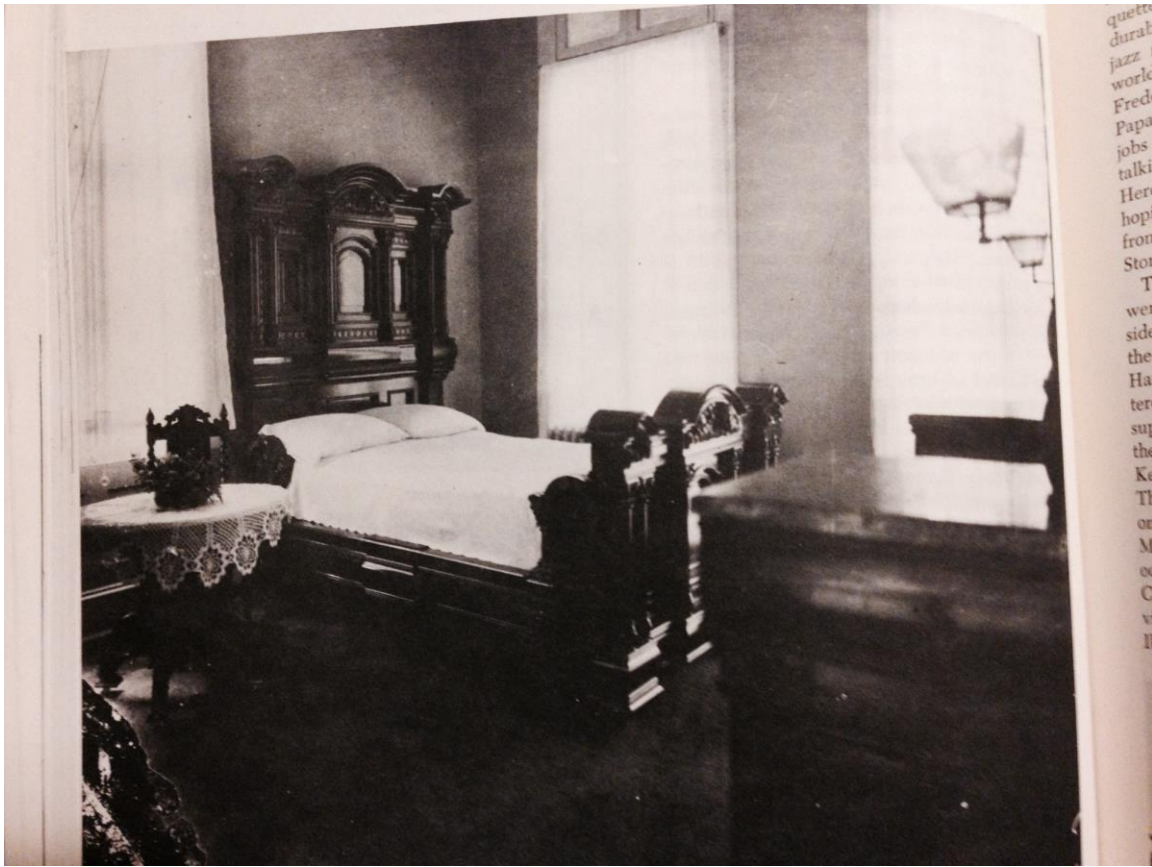


Figure 30. E.J. Bellocq, Interior of Brothel, c.1910/1966



Figure 31. Interior photograph from New Orleans Blue Book.



Figure 32. Anonymous, *Untitled*, n.d. Kinsey Archive



Figure 33 E.J. Bellocq, *Untitled*, c.1910/ 1966



Figure 34. Detail, E.J. Bellocq *Photograph of Bellocq's Desk* , c.1910 / 1966





Figure 35. E.J. Bellocq, *Untitled*, c.1910/ 1966



Figure 36. Detail, E.J. Bellocq, *Portrait of a Woman in Courtyard*, c.1910 / 1966



Figure 37. Lee Friedlander, Self Portrait



Figure 38. Photograph of Diane Arbus's Collage Wall, with Bellocq photograph.