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HUMA 884: Montreal Sex Worker Histories and Palimpsest  
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## Montreal Palimpsest: Curatorial Statement

As a former stripper investigating sex work-based palimpsests in the built environment, the 1980s intrigue me particularly. It is the period that preceded the decade in which I danced in Montreal, and vestiges of the era were scattered about the clubs where I worked: the giant fiberglass legs that once framed the entrance of The Chateau du Sexe at 972 Saint Catherine West were casually splayed in a corner of our dressing room. At Babydolls next door lived the cruddy remains of a plexiglass shower, a testimonial to the impact of the film *Flashdance* (1983) and its iconic bucket dump scene. Even before I was introduced to the term palimpsest, I understood spaces of sex work to be fabulous embodiments of this. Selling sexual fantasy requires constant vigilance for new erotic trends. As clubs hustled to stay relevant, remnants of former crazes frequently lingered. These decisions seemed to happen with little forethought for disposal, only a keen eye to the money to be made.

These traces are less and less obvious in Montreal as sexual entertainment trends change yet again, and entire clubs are razed and replaced by stores, condominiums and restaurants. They remain embedded in our own sex working bodies, though, which often hold histories invisibly. Being an out sex worker carries negative social, legal and institutional consequences<sup>1</sup>. As Dwight Conquergood argues, “subordinate people do not have the privilege of explicitness, the luxury of transparency, the presumptive norm of clear and direct communication, free and open debate on a level playing field that the privileged classes take for granted” (pg. 34, 2013). Through the website *Montreal Palimpsest* and its upcoming tours and talks, I openly declare my complicity with women who have done sex work in this city. Moreover, I aim to model a more ethical, creative and constructive paradigm of engaging with our histories. Andreas Huyssen’s argument that, “trauma cannot be the central category in addressing the larger memory discourse” resonates with this project. My colleagues are often frozen in states of discontent, such as in the show at Centre d’Histoire de Montréal, *Scandal! Vice, Crime and Morality in Montréal, 1940-1960*, where mug shots of arrested prostitutes and madams were a centerpiece. These criminalizing images forever hold sex workers in segregating ordeal. *Montreal Palimpsest* seeks to situate sex workers as an essential part of the city’s entertainment profile, not simply synechdochic strategies for vice<sup>2</sup>, and an

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<sup>1</sup> As a sex worker with an advertising profile on the Internet, I am banned from entering the United States.

<sup>2</sup> As Dr. Shauna Janssen can attest, a visit to the Archives de Montreal in June of 2018 provided valuable insight into this. Strip-club and sex work media are filed under crime. Contrary to this

inconvenient presence when we are present. It seeks to reveal that the negative social, institutional and legal mechanisms that make it difficult for sex workers to be visible in the living present are often the very things that make our pasts so touristically captivating.

In investigating the consequences of these mechanisms, the project provides a critique of what I call “Ruined Tourism.” This is a term I have adapted from ruins tourism, which is the desire to visit sites of decay, neglect and in many cases, human trauma. “Ruins,” Laurie Beth Clark argues, “have interested Western culture since antiquity,” with “literature as early as the seventh century BCE that romanticizes ruins” (pg. 84, 2015). Ruined Tourism may be most succinctly described as the cultural fascination with sites that have been used by populations with spoiled identities (Goffman, 1962). The bodies of sex workers are socially and juridically constructed as spoiled, therefore there is an imbedded fascination with locations where they have been active. Dozens of cities across the globe feature “Red Light Tours”. Ephemera from strip-clubs are coveted.



Fi. 1. “Cabaret Chez Zap.” Vintage strip-club sign at The Done Well Bar on Dundas Street in Toronto, 2018. Photo by David Arellano.

Lurid strip-club signs once used to tempt clients (often the subject of anti-porn feminist protests at the time, as the project uncovered) are now employed as alluring spoiled-status-by-proxy at hipster bars. Yet this fascination does not extend to actual sex worker bodies in the present moment, where they are most often perceived as a nuisance, and as corporeal geographies that “spoil” the environments they move through. As a Montrealer, I am aware of the appeal of our city’s salacious

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framing are the advertisements themselves, which appear in the entertainment sections of all newspapers.

past. My goal is to connect this past to the present by providing a living archive. I hope that this archive stimulates conversation between women who worked in the locations I investigate, providing a fuller picture of life in them and connecting them to women who continue to do sex work in Montreal.

Borrowing from Clark's work analyzing the "revival of interest in ruins," that "has focused on the ruination imbricated in modernity" (pg. 84, 2015), the project will continue to examine how touristic interest is generated around sites that are "ruined". Sara Safransky speaks of "the distance between the bodies of privileged explorers and poor residents whose experience of urban decline is not the thrill of decay but frustration with daily struggles to meet basic needs" which also "recalls geography's own historically vexed relationship with exploration and the settler colonial project" (pg. 241, 2014). Vital to *Montreal Palimpsest* moving forward is the centering of sex workers in the historical present. Meaning that we are not just present in our city's history, but that history has made us who we are in the present, and how we may trouble that. *Montreal Palimpsest* will be mindful of contributing "to a misreading of the landscape that fails to account for existing (live) residents and their experiences of urban decline" (Safransky, pg. 241, 2014). It will interrogate the demand for broad stroke trauma narratives as the only meaningful symbols of authenticity. An ethical Ruined Tourism cannot exist without discussions of the current climate of sex work and the ongoing stigmatization of sex work. We must examine our complicity in this when we require that sex work only exist in the past. We must unpack the connections between "the imaginary of ruins" (Janssen, pg 24, 2009) and "the imaginary of the ruined."

Shauna Janssen argues that "a consideration of ruins and how they resonate in the urban landscape, how they are represented, reframed and reused needs to be interdisciplinary" (pg. 23, 2009). *Montreal Palimpsest* observes this assertion in its pursuit of "ruined spaces". Currently, its primary site of investigation is 9695 Saint Laurent, which housed Nick's Palace from 1982 to approximately 1996. Nick's Palace is known to many Montrealers of a certain generation as Nick's Sex Aquarium, for the very reason that it hosted a large transparent aquarium in which dancers bobbed erotically. Though I remember Nick's myself (mostly from gleeful conversations about the very notion of a "sex aquarium"), I first came across legitimate information about it in the context of this investigation in advertisements in the *Journal de Montréal* from 1982. Advertisements have proven an incredibly useful tool in the process of mapping strip-clubs in Montreal, as they provide salient details such as address and events hosted. These small details give a colourful picture of what was booked at the club and by extension what was considered sexy and exotic. A late night television ad also provided an alluring picture of the club's attractions (hifichet, 2011).

A visit to the site in June of 2018 showed palimpsestic evidence of the club.



Fig. 2. “Votre Table Sur Demande.” From a panel outside 9695 Saint Laurent, former location of Nick’s Palace, 2018. Photo by Alex Tigchelaar.

Though the location hosted another strip-club after Nick’s I would argue that this sign is from Nick’s, and not Baby Blue, which took its place. Ads from the Nick’s period (early ‘80s) all state that, “she will dance at your table on request.” By 1996, virtually all clubs outside of the downtown core were featuring lap dances, not table dancing.

Finally, *Montreal Palimpsest* connects clubs and other spaces of sex work activity to the larger urban community, providing maps of the surrounding neighbourhoods, speculating on clientele based on local businesses, and engaging current sex workers in creative archiving methods. It conducts ongoing investigations into the current sites and its tenants, discussing the history of the site with those now employing it. By doing so, *Montreal Palimpsest* aims to situate sex workers as the citizens, workers and neighbours they are, connected not just to Montreal’s past, but its present and its future.

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