Work/Cited Episode 10 Transcript

Kate Cordes: Welcome everyone, welcome again. I'm Kate Cordes, the Associate Director for Reference and Outreach at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, and this is Works Cited, a program series that showcases the latest scholarship that's supported by the rich collections of the New York Public Library. We focus on a behind-the-scenes look at how the finished product was inspired, researched, and created. In this episode, we have Melanie Locay, Associate Manager of the Center for Research in the Humanities, and she is joined by Amy Sohn, The New York Times best-selling author of 12 books, including novels Prospect Park West, Motherland, and The Actress. Her latest book is The Man Who Hated Women: Sex, Censorship, and Civil Liberties in the Gilded Age, which was published in July of this year with Farrar, Straus and Giroux, and it can be found at all your favorite book shops. I'll drop the link in a second where you can purchase that. A bit about the run of show today, our guests will speak for about 30 minutes, and then we'll open up the conversation. Please use the question-and-answer function rather than the chat function to share your questions and comments. Questions can be submitted throughout the talk. If you want to remain anonymous, please click that option before submitting your question. If you like the chat during the conversation, please free. Just remember to switch your chat audience over to panelists and attendees so everyone can take part. And before we jump into it, I'd like to ask you to take a few seconds to fill out a quick poll that will help us with these series, and with that, I will pass it over to Melanie.

Melanie Locay: Thank you so much, Kate. Amy, thank you again for being us. I'm super excited for our conversation, so let me move here to our first slide and talk about the cover of the book a bit, which I was telling you that I really love, and I love the aesthetic. The image that we're looking at of Emma Goldman, who was one of the eight sex radicals that you explore in the book. This is her mug shot photo, which doesn't immediately scream like a mug shot as we know them in our current time period, so I wanted to ask you if when you saw this image you knew that was something you were going to feature prominently if you could speak to that.

Amy Sohn: There's a very famous mug shot of Emma Goldman later in her life that I feel like you might remember like being on, you know, college dorm walls and that kind of thing. The reason I wanted to use this one instead and just got so excited when I found it was this was taken in 1893. Emma was in her late 20s [inaudible] in 1869, she was in her 20s. And this was actually taken in Philadelphia. She had been accused, as she was many times in her life, of incitement to riot, and it was -- the charges were for something that had happened in New York, but she was traveling in Philadelphia, and they got that shot, and what I loved about it was a couple of things. The hat is just so Gilded Age.

Melanie: Yes.

Amy: And the bowtie -- it speaks to -- I don't know enough about 19th-century fashion, but on some level it reminds me of almost like women in early Wall Street in the 1980s used to wear bow ties because they like had to distinguish themselves from the secretaries --

Melanie: Yeah.

Amy: -- but they didn't want to -- And so it's just both so --

Melanie: That's a great comparison.

Amy: It's so badass and at the same time so feminine, and then the designer, the book designer, was able to find an article about her I think from a different time period. And if anyone's interested just in terms of the themes of the design, the designers specifically mentions someone named Paul Rand, who was an amazing modernist designer of the 50s and the 60s.

Melanie: Thank you. Thank you for speaking to that, and obviously it's a mugshot, so she's serious, but there's a defiance in the way when her face is angled to the side that I really like. So man of the hour, unfortunately, many decades, Anthony Comstock, who these women bravely took on many, many times, faced prison and still went back at it. If you could speak of it to that?

Amy: Yeah, so a little brief biography of Anthony Comstock. I think he was probably around in his 50s when this was taken. He was born in 1844 in New Canaan, Connecticut, then a very agrarian town. He was a Congregationalist Christian, deeply influenced by his mother's religious beliefs and would say many times over his life that she was the largest moral influence on him. When he came home from school at 10 years and 10 days old, he found his mother dead of what was then called flooding, which was a postpartum hemorrhage following the birth of Anthony's younger sister, Harriet, who -- the records are conflicting, but I believe -- was her sixth -- Polly Lockwood Comstock's sixth child, and his mother's death was absolutely devastating to him. We can get into later, you know, what the meaning is that she died of childbirth, died in the course of giving birth to a child, but his brother, Samuel, fought for the Union Army in the Civil War and died at Gettysburg, and Anthony decided to follow him there at 19. His service was largely peaceful, but a couple really pivotal things happened. One, he saw a lot of pornography that was being passed around by fellow soldiers. Two, he didn't make many friends because he would pour out his whiskey ration instead of just giving it to someone else. It's one thing not to drink your own whiskey, but to pour it onto the ground, my gosh.

Melanie: Deprive others, right? Yeah.

Amy: And he got a job working for the provost marshal, and this was kind of an administrative record keeping job. Interesting that Anthony Comstock would probably today make an amazing genealogist or a researcher. He was very, very exacting in his recordkeeping, and I believe that he had some level of OCD, which caused him to be so obsessive in his pursuits. So he moves to New York in the late 1860s -- Do we want to -- Might be the next slide. He lives in a lodging

house downtown where he is on Pearl Street. New York at the time was only downtown, and he's exposed to all of these kind of sporting men, they were called, guys that are interested in billiards, and gambling, and smoking, and drinking, and of course paying for sex because there was an extraordinary amount of sex for sale in New York at that time. One estimate has it that in the 1870s, 10% of all women between the ages of 15 and 30 prostituted themselves. So he was living in an area that was considered the artery of the obscene book trade which was Nassau Street. I spent a lot of time in the financial district, and I'm always imagining -- You know how there are those very narrow streets around there?

Melanie: Yeah.

Amy: They were filled with booksellers and what was called cigar shops. These were places where you could go in to buy a cigar, but there would be a very attractive girl working there, and she would take you up to the second floor and offer, you know, so you could pay for sex. So he was really stunned by all of this, and what happened was a colleague of his at a dry goods firm -- he had wanted to be a dry goods salesman -- told him that he had bought a book and then become diseased and debased. And we don't know whether his colleague meant that he had got -- bought this book, gone to visit a prostitute, and got venereal disease or perhaps whether he merely read the book, masturbated, and then felt bad about it because at the time masturbation was believed -- widely believed -- to lead to insanity, illness, and death. So Anthony wanted to do something about the book trade, and he started informally ratting out obscene book sellers to the cops, and realized that he was pretty good at it, and then he wanted to make money, and so he sent a letter to Robert McBurney of the YMCA. You might know the name, the McBurney Y. Robert McBurney was actually different from the other bigwigs in the YMCA at the time in the sense that he was an Irish immigrant of little means who worked his way up. But the big players in the YMCA at the time Anthony moved to New York were Samuel Colgate, whose name you might know from your toothpaste; Dodge, which was copper; Morris Jesup, who was a founder of the American Museum of National History and was a financier; and of course J. Pierpont Morgan. And because the Y was relatively nascent in the United States -- it had been founded in the United States in 1852 -- he was able to get through to these men and convince them that he wanted to do something about obscene books. They formed a committee, which eventually became a private society called the New York Society for Suppression of Vice, and they started to pay him a salary for his aiding in arrests. And then through their enormous legislative power because they were so deeply connected to powerful men in Washington, including then Vice President Schuyler Colfax, who I believe had been at the opening of this building that we're looking at now, they were able to send Anthony to Washington, DC where in March of 1873, he passed what became known as the Comstock Law. And it was drafted with the help of a Supreme Court justice just to tell you how interconnected -- what I like to call -- the WASP elite is. He could not have gotten this done. He was a terrible writer, terrible spelling. He had no college degree and no law degree, and he never could have gotten this done without the help of these extremely well-connected men. And the Comstock Law for people who are a little confused about it was not the first federal obscenity law, but what it did was it criminalized the mailing of obscenity, and also

contraception, and information about contraception with very steep penalties and fines. And so the reason it's so crucial in American history is it was the first obscenity law to brand contraceptives, abortion information on contraceptive information as obscene -- what would come to be called obscene, lewd, and lascivious. So I think the next slide is about one of his --

Melanie: Let me ask you, Amy, about that point.

Amy: Yeah, yeah.

Melanie: It also stops with the mailing out, it puts an end to networks of being able to learn about reproductive information that maybe you wouldn't at your local town, which is something that, you know, we're encountering now. We could talk more about that, but I think that's very interesting. You point out that the differences that birth control gets now put under is this decency law but also the mailing of this information, which is huge because it stops the communication between women to learn [inaudible].

Amy: Yeah, and this was coming at a time when mail was getting faster having to do with railroads and trains and decreases in the cost of printing paper. Paper was becoming lighter, which made it easier to send and cheaper to send. And all of that was already going on in the Civil War, but it is important to me -- I think -- for people to know that advances in technology are really deeply entwined with, you know, moral movements because this is the beginning, you know, of industrialization and urbanization. He, moving to the city with these incredibly loud sounds and -- I think -- was very shocking to him, and then the only other thing I want to say about the mail is you need to think of it like today's internet in the sense of the power of the mail. This was how you got everything. Now, you could buy contraceptives at your local druggist such as syringes, which we're going to get into, but you're right. There were many people who didn't want to go in person to buy their things, and I should add that, you know, one of the most commonly mailed contraceptives was condoms, which were evolving from the 1840s and beyond due to changes in rubber manufacturing. So should we talk about this image? This is great.

Melanie: Yes, this is a great image. I also want to ask you about, you mentioned the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, so I want to ask you about using those collections at the library, but please speak to us about this image too.

Amy: Okay, so although this is later in Anthony Comstock's life, it -- he was -- it's hard for people to understand. I mean, he was a very, very well-known character within his own time. The closest recent example I could think of is someone like Jesse Helms, the way we might have once talked about Jesse Helms, made jokes about him on Saturday Night Live or something like that. So there were many, many cartoons in the mainstream media mocking just what a complete monomaniac he was and buzzkill basically and how prudish he was. His enemies called him Scarface Tony because he had a scar running down his cheek after a dirty book seller stabbed him in a carriage on the way to the Newark jail. So he was often known as

Scar-face Tony, Smutty Tony, and of course repeatedly Saint Anthony. Victoria Woodhull once referred to the YMCA as the Young Men's forgive thee -- was it? -- Young Men's Christian if you'll forgive the association Association.

Melanie: That's fantastic.

Amy: Yeah, so in terms of the NYSSV -- I guess I kind of skipped over that. After the Comstock Law was passed federally, this New York Society of the Suppression of Vice which had been a committee of the Y -- of the New York YMCA -- privately incorporated under the state of New York. And so they -- Anthony -- was always a secretary. He wrote -- I believe he wrote most of the reports. They would put out these annual reports, and one of my first eureka moments -- you know, Melanie you've me for about five years I think from even before I started writing in the Allen Room -- one of my first eureka research moments was that the New York Public Library had all of the annual reports of the New York Society of the Suppression of Vice. I believe they are digitized and not physically in the library now, but these reports give an incredible narrative of what kind of activities the society was up to, who its contributors were, so you can see this who's who of Gilded Age elite names, and --

Melanie: But they can be called upon -- pardon me -- they can be pulled also. Even though the things -- they're digitally accessible, a researcher can -- as you did -- can request them and work with the physical as well.

Amy: Yeah, and what's incredible is one of the first reports, you open it up, and this pamphlet falls out of it that says private and confidential, and it's a specific report on what the Y should do about the obscene book trade in New York at the time. And then related to that his arrest logs which he kept as secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, the Library of Congress has all of those, which also include kind of a sampling of a -- some photographs of some obscene material. And I was able to get those through the Library of Congress and read them all on your microfilm so that I got for the eight women that I write about -- they're almost all in there, not all eight, his description of the crime. He called them all free lovers under religion. He would just ask them their educational level, and if he scorned it, he would just write common for educational level.

Melanie: [inaudible] with his educational background [inaudible].

Amy: He may even have dropped out of high school or some researchers that think that. So, yeah, let's move on to --

Melanie: I think the --

Amy: No, no, you start.

Melanie: One of my colleagues in Manuscripts and Archives that you work with, Tal Nadan -- So

I was looking at what we have in Manuscripts and Archives, and I thought this was a good example of if you think the Barbara Goldsmith papers -- I don't know if you'd be familiar with the person -- but you wouldn't think right off the bat this is where I'm going to draw research for what I'm doing on Victoria Woodhull. And so this is an example of -- in our collections there are things -- speak with a curator, search, because we have these great treasures that maybe wouldn't immediately that you would think, oh, this is something where I'm going to find -- So I was hoping if you could speak to working with this collection, and there's an interesting thing about this that it cites how Barbara Goldsmith was mapping her research. And I was curious if that's something that if we, years from now, having the Sohn papers, we'll be able to do something similarly [inaudible] with this.

Amy: I'm going to try. I know there's a lot of competition to [inaudible] NYPL. Just really interesting that it mentions that because they are not easy materials to go through because they're sort of the inner workings of the researcher's mind. So as opposed to a primary source that has a date on it, where you can begin to develop your own chronology, there are documents like her trying to get her mind around the different facts and doing a chronology of Victoria Woodhull's life, her sister's life. She includes interviews with Alexander Sanger, who I believe was a son of Margaret Sanger, so it's really quite far-reaching. It's not just about the Claflin sisters, and it did -- I got to tell you, spending hours poring over those materials, all I could think was I wish I had a research assistant because some of them were like notes from her to her assistant. Where's my assistant?

Melanie: If you could tell us a little bit about Victoria Woodhull now that I've introduced this?

Amy: Okay, so, wait, can I see the next slide? That'll help me get in that --

Melanie: Of course, yeah, no.

Amy: It'll help me get in the -- [inaudible]. Okay, so this is incredible. So right around the time Anthony Comstock moves to New York, which we think was 1867 or 1868, Victoria Woodhull and her sister, Tennessee Claflin, move also to New York, initially to Great Jones Street. And Victoria and her sister had been -- they've grown up in Ohio -- and had been clairvoyants from a very young age. Their father, Buck Claflin, made a lot of money off of them, and they were a big controversial family, you know, engaged in these kinds of things that I'm fascinated by when you look at 19th-century history, hucksterism, spiritualism when people were very, very desperate to commune with the dead to be able to say that, you know, your Uncle Johnny had visited them, and this is what he wants to say to you. But they were really a product of their time, which was kind of pre-imposed Civil War capitalizing off of Americans' need to connect with the dead and also quack medicine. At one point, Tennie, the younger sister, had an elixir called Tennie's Magnificent Elixir or something, so it's with that kind of shady, colorful background that they moved to New York, and they moved to New York because their father wanted them to meet Commodore Vanderbilt. He had this idea that they should get into business with him and could make money off of him, and so they began -- Tennessee appears to have had an affair with him

when he was, I think, about 80, and she was in her 20s, and they would tell him where to invest his money, the stock market. And it was all -- it's a great example of two women who moved to New York at a -- kind of drawn to this city for some of the same reasons that Anthony was repelled by the city because it really was the locus of sex on the one hand and wealth and power on the other. Of course, there were many, many impoverished New Yorkers also, but it has a lot of similarities to the way we live now in the sense that there was extreme class division. And so these ladies wanted to get rich quick and get rich off the rich New Yorkers, and they succeeded brilliantly at it. They wound up opening their own brokerage house on Broad Street, which was the first woman-owned brokerage house in the country, although women could not actually place trades at the time; they had someone do it for them. And shortly after that, they founded Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly which was a free love newspaper that contained everything from quack medicine ads, to the communist manifesto, to George Sand. And the cartoon on the right is referring to a famous speech that Victoria gave in which she said that she was a free lover. And the reason they're connected to Comstock is because in their newspaper, they published an exposé of an affair that Henry Ward Beecher of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn was said to be having with his married acolyte, Theodore Tilton's wife, Libbie, and everyone knew about this. But what's fascinating and so modern about it is they wanted male hypocrisy to be exposed, and they felt that rich, famous, and religious, and political figures were not behaving consistently with their spoken beliefs and that they needed to be exposed. And so this article was considered obscene because there was a reference to -- it was considered obscene for kind of complicated reasons, and Anthony wanted to go after them, but he found that the existing federal obscenity law -- this was in 1872 -- did not include newspapers. And so what's really quite astounding is that the Comstock Law that was passed in March 1873 specifically included newspapers to enable him to go after newspapers in the future.

Melanie: Oh.

Amy: And so there were years and years of trial delays and, yeah. So they -- My colleague -- See, I have such a weird trajectory, Melanie, because I started out at New York Press writing a column about basically my sex life below 14th Street, and I --

Melanie: I hear you were the Carrie Bradshaw.

Amy: I was the --

Melanie: When I moved to New York, I heard you were --

Amy: -- Jewish, penniless Carrie Bradshaw, but I made so many interesting friends in the world of sex and burlesque in the course of writing my articles, and I think that that -- and one of them is here today. And what I'm proud of is I had this openness to engaging with these subjects that I think came out of interviewing so many over-the-top kind of people, and that really infused this writing, this curiosity of, you know, when people are writing and talking about sex, what are they really talking about? And it is interesting to me because it's a proxy for talking about feminism

and many other -- and power -- and things that I care about. So this is a perfect example here. Won't go into the entire case, but in the late 1870s, a woman named Sarah Blakesley Chase who had been educated as a homeopathic physician in Ohio moved to New York with her daughter -- she was a single mother of a 10-year old daughter -- and started speaking in liberal circles around things like limitation of population growth. She also gave lectures at places like the Packer Institute in Brooklyn Heights and the Williams Ferg Lyseum [assumed spelling] on sex and anatomy, and she would do these for single-sex groups. This was a very common thing at the time. They were called women physiologists. And they did this often with the support of the church. You know, in the church setting, you're learning about anatomy. Now, you're not learning, you know, the most explicit things, but they're trying to help young people. And after one of her talks, she sold this woman a vaginal douching syringe, and it looks like what happened was that the woman was trying to use it as a contraceptive. Failed, became pregnant, and went to someone else -- not Sarah Chase -- and got a botched abortion and suffered an ulcerated uterus. Comstock then decoyed Dr. Chase by going into her home and pretending to be Mr. Farnsworth. He bought a contraceptive syringe, and she was charged by a grand jury, but they threw the case out, and it never went anywhere. And so in her health monthly which was called the Physiologist and Family Physician she and her business partner decided to sell the Comstock syringe and to use the fact that he had tried to arrest her as publicity. And another ad not in this publication but in another one, this was mimicked in other free thought and free love publications. It was just always called the Comstock syringe. And in the other publication, they said if Comstock's mother had had a syringe and known how to use it, what a world of woe it would have saved us, which I have found particularly poignant knowing what had happened to her that she had died, you know, following childbirth, which I'm sure they did not know. So this to me is a great example. Hey, there's a New York Public Library connection here. This is from -- think this ad if it didn't run in their paper the Physiologist and Family Physician, it also ran in the Truth Seeker, and the Truth Seeker is a radical publication that the New York Public Library has that was very important to me, crucial for understanding this -- what was then called -- free thought, which the closest analog today would be free speech. There were a lot of these publications that came out between the 1840s all the way into the early 1900s. Okay, Emma. So I -- just so many reasons I love this picture, but [inaudible] it really bothers me that Emma Goldman is frequently thought of only in her later years, you know, visually, and I think both the mug shot and this photo show she was an incredibly attractive woman, intense. She had pale blue eyes. She lectured in Yiddish, and German, and English. She brought people to tears, and she -- her voice was said to have this incredible emotional effect on people. She was really the leading orator of her time, and she -- I think we're talking about some other things, but the reason I included her in my book is because she more than anyone else really introduced the idea of birth control to Margaret Sanger because they were both hanging out in the Socialist Party and labor activist circles. And they met at a salon in Greenwich Village, Mabel Dodge Luhan's famed salon, and I always say in my talks that Emma was the Burney to Margaret's Hillary.

Melanie: Oh, that's a great, yeah, that's a great --

Amy: And also Emma Goldman while widely known for her anarchist political beliefs and for being arrested many times in conjunction with the workweek labor rights and wage equity issues is not well-known as a birth control activist, which she was, and her newspaper -- her journal Mother Earth was held up at the post office under the Comstock Law, and then she was charged several times for speaking about birth control in her talks.

Melanie: I didn't realize because I knew of Margaret Sanger and the Lower East Side what was then referred to as the East Side going to tenements and meeting with women. I didn't realize Emma Goldman was doing this as well and trained medically --

Amy: Yeah.

Melanie: -- [inaudible] you write about, yeah.

Amy: Yeah, I think someone she met in prison helped her train in Europe. Well, how are we going to do this and keep up on time?

Melanie: I know, we've got to rush through, but I wanted [inaudible] --

Amy: I'm going to give you a few like fun facts about Ida Craddock. She takes up about a third of my book, and I just absolutely adore her. She was a 19th century sexologist who claimed that all of her sexual knowledge came from sex with a ghost, her ghost husband named Soph. And she -- we know about her today because the very famous free speech lawyer named Theodore Schroeder who actually was involved with Margaret Sanger's -- several of her legal defenses -- discovered Ida and was able to preserve all of her materials, most of which are at SIU, Southern Illinois University, but some of them are at the Library of Congress, and there's this one handwritten pamphlet that you can only look at on the feesh [assumed spelling] and it's fragmentary. We may even be missing a page, but that was one of those -- and this is at The New York Public Library, I should add -- that was one of those other just complete eureka moments to be able to read her writing. That's not handwritten, but to just see that thing that -- I think this is one of the few pamphlets that the only place you can see it is in your collection. So she clashed with Anthony Comstock -- and let's see the next slide -- in three or four cities. Her business card you'll see on the upper right. Wait, go back one. [inaudible]. Calls herself Mrs. Ida C. Craddock. That's referring to being married to a ghost, and what I love about that is she really was married to this ghost, but she also was a woman -- unmarried woman on paper anyway seeking to legitimize her sexual knowledge. How can you be a sexpert if you're single --

Melanie: You don't have a husband.

Amy: -- and premarital sex is wrong?

Melanie: Yeah.

Amy: So you can see the name -- you see scientific motherhood on there. These are all euphemisms for birth control in small families. Let's see the next one. I see Kate. Is this -- are we going to get a time warning?

Melanie: We are getting a time warning.

Kate: It's just a warning, yeah.

Amy: Okay, so we can go through -- we don't even have to go through all of them. Yeah, if we want to get -- are there a lot of questions?

Kate: There's a number of questions, yeah. That would probably open up more questions.

Amy: Yeah, so this is Margaret's clinic on Amboy Street and Brownsville. Those are primarily Jewish and Italian mothers waiting to be seen and be fitted with pessaries. And then what's our last -- oh, what's not our last slide but this is from the masses with a cartoon of Anthony Comstock. Your Honor, this woman gave birth to a naked child. If anyone's interested in this cartoonist, his name is Robert Minor, M-I-N-O-R. And Tamiment Library at NYU has a really great collection of The Masses, and there's also the complete run of The Masses magazine, which is a very important sort of labor and socialist magazine is also online. And then, yeah, the last one is Emma Goldman giving a birth control talk at Union Square to a crowd that appears to be 95% men. She was later charged with distributing birth control information which she said she did not, although some of her colleagues did, and she defended herself and wound up, I think, getting 30 days in the Queens penitentiary where she taught prostitutes to read.

Melanie: It's a sea of hats. It could be like men and hat racks there that we don't, you know, [inaudible] because, Kate, when you open the questions, could I selfishly have the first one?

Kate: You may, yes.

Melanie: Thank you. One of -- I mean, so much of your book like stuck with me, and I think it's mandatory meeting for someone as passionate about reproductive justice, but you talk about that -- to quote you -- "to understand mid-19th century crackdown on abortion, one must understand it a business that had been dominated by women." And you talk about how prior to 1840, I mean, this is me terribly paraphrasing. I'm like it was pretty chill. Like it was understood that abortion was this health recourse and how you explain it that these doctors, these male doctors, if they could control and regulate abortion, they could corner the market on women patients. I understood it to mean that actually one of the main factors driving the wheels in motion to controlling abortion access was capitalism, fundamentally, because it was like, well, these women are making money off of this. These women are providing this. We need to [inaudible] --

Amy: Very interesting. Yes, abortion -- I mean, two of the most interesting things I read about it,

the quotes that stuck with me are, one, it was the first medical specialty. It's the oldest medical specialty, and it's not only a medical act. It's a business. You have a constant supply, unlike other forms of surgery, your supply might go up and down, but women will always need abortions, and so the person I really have to credit with that part of my book -- and I think I do credit her in the body of the narrative and also in my notes -- is Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, who wrote a book called Disorderly Conduct in which she talks exactly about how medical specialization, medical societies, and kind of a boom in all men's medical colleges came around the 1830s, 1840s really as a way of requiring licensing for abortion practitioners which then edged out the women practitioners who were largely self-educated or homeopathically educated, which is also really interesting because it gets at different concepts of medicine and licensing. So for anyone who wants to read more about that, the New York Public Library has got about 40 copies of Disorderly Conduct in its branches.

Melanie: Thank you.

Kate: All right, we have a question from Anya. Some of the women you include in your book are well-known if not notorious, but others are not. I'm currently reading about Ida Craddock who is fascinating, ghost husband, the sex diary. How did you come across her and other less well-known people in your book?

Amy: Yeah, so a lot of it is just kind of connecting the dots. Ida I found about on the internet, not the most interesting of ways because I was interested in writing a book that dealt with women and insanity. And so, you know, it was probably some looking at hysteria and, you know, this whole long-term relationship she had with a ghost made her come up pretty easily. Trying to think, Angela Heywood is in my book. She was a free love thinker, editor, and publisher in Worcester County, Massachusetts in a town called Princeton, Mass. I think I came to her from reading a book that's now out of print by Hal Sears, which is -- I'm not going to get it right, but it has the word Sex Radicals in the title, and he wrote about Angela's husband, Ezra Heywood, who is very well-known because he was imprisoned under the Comstock Law, but Angela's story had never been told. And there's actually a photograph of her and her sisters. Her sisters were also radical. One was named Josephine Tilton. I can't remember the other one's name, but there are photographs of them in the Benjamin R. Tucker Collection at NYPL which I was able to look at, and it's great. Yeah, you just go look at pictures of radicals all day. Makes your day a little brighter. Her sisters were named Flora and Josephine Tilton, and her sister Flora was involved with a famous English leftist, and so it's so interesting with women's history. The more high profile if they were involved with men -- the more high profile the men were, then the more material there tends to be on the women. And one of the things that makes this work really hard is when you're writing about women who never married, it's tough to find archives out there.

Melanie: [inaudible] a question I had about --

Amy: Yeah.

Melanie: -- the women you found, profiled, but I'm assuming that a ton of people were caught up in -- under Comstock's Law and prosecuted, and went to jail, and how would you tell their stories from their own point of view and not like the police records, or arrest logs, and things like that?

Amy: Yeah, I mean, I was always looking for first-person, you know, letters and diaries which are such a gold standard because I want to get into their inner lives as well as their legal troubles. And as you said, beyond the fact that we didn't have court records the way we have them today at this time that I'm writing about, sometimes I would get the court record and expect it to be this absolute bonanza, and it's written in such a dry way that there's little of use there. So I'll give you one -- This is not an NYPL story, but Angela Heywood who I was talking about before I started, you know, I feel like a lot of what we do is sort of reverse engineer. I started knowing she had certain friends in leftist circles, and I realized that one of them was quite prominent and a Wellesley radical named Elizabeth Denton. And I found out that the Denton family had a collection in the Wesley Historical Society. And so through that connection, I was able to find about 30 letters that Angela had written which, you know, for someone doing this kind of work, that's a trove. I mean, 30 letters is a lot. I used almost none of it in the book, but I loved seeing her handwriting. And then Sarah Chase, who I mentioned with the syringe story, was really tricky because she has been written about in histories of contraception because this syringe case was, you know, got a lot of media attention, but no one -- she's not in any archives, and so for her story, I relied entirely on newspaper articles. She at one point married a guy. This guy married her for her money, and so the account of her bad marriage was in the papers. Remember, Melanie, you were helping me out with that? I was at one point going to try to find her matrimonial ad --

Melanie: Yes.

Amy: -- her matrimonial ad, but we hit a wall. And then there's a woman for those that are into the like obscure stuff, there's a woman I had to cut entirely named Elmina Drake Slenker, and I was able to find her personal ad. She was a Snowville, Virginia atheist who was prosecuted in Virginia and got off with the help of an New York lawyer named Ed Chamberlain who was the Bill Kunstler of his time. And I was able to find Elmina's personal ad through which she met her husband in a Water Cure Journal because I knew some of the right words to look for, and I knew the year and the date. So, yeah, women's history -- [inaudible]. What?

Melanie: I'm sorry. Talk about an obscure resource that you [inaudible], yeah.

Amy: Digitization is helpful. I would love to be able to say I don't use any sources I haven't laid my hands on, but that's just not the state of modern research anymore. It takes too long.

Kate: Question. Let's see. Did the Woodhull campaign to expose male public figures and their sexual hypocrisy have any lasting fallout or consequences, for example, how modern men suffering the same fate seem to be back in the public sphere after a short period of time?

Amy: Wow, that's a great question. I mean, I think two things. The publicity that they got over the trials. There were two. One was about Henry Ward Beecher, and the other was about a business man named Luther Challis. They published an article accusing him of participating in a gang rape -- instigating a gang rape of a 16-year old girl that he met at a masked ball. The details of the trials allowed them to put into the public discourse the things that they were accusing these men of in their articles. And under the guise of news, I think they were able to bring these guys down a notch, although of course Henry Ward Beecher was incredibly powerful and is said to have brokered some sort of deal where the sisters would leave the country, which they did. They moved to England and both married wealthy men. I think to myself a lot how scandalous these articles must have been for their time period, not just because they referred to things like hymens and gang rape, but because they were explicitly bringing down revered figures. And Victoria, I should also add, was then later rumored to have slept both with Henry Ward Beecher and Theodore Tilton, the man whose wife Beecher was having an affair with, who then became Victoria's biographer after they began their affair. And Julia Ward Howe said that Theodore Tilton's biography of Victoria Woodhull was a tomb from which no author rises.

Melanie: Can I tell you in your book when I first saw Tilton -- I thought Tilden -- one of the founding families of the NYPL, and I was like: scandalous.

Amy: Oh.

Melanie: But then I realized, no, this is a very different surname and not connected, yeah.

Amy: Yeah, yeah.

Kate: Oh, we have a question from Jo Wheldon. You mentioned changes in technology when mailing became faster and cheaper. Did you find many other people not as well-known as Comstock were trying to control the mail and other technologies for similar hyper-moral reasons?

Amy: Yeah. So, Jo, if you're interested in this -- and I know, I think you are an academic -- I was very influenced by this book called *Licentious Gotham*, which is by Donna Dennis. It's just a great, you know, anyone who enjoyed *Low Life* when it came out. Incredible portrait of basically 19th-century erotica. If you really want to see, you know, what it looked like and felt like, it's just a brilliant book. The probably most famous postal -- Anthony Comstock was never postmaster general, but John Wanamaker was later on, and the story about John Wanamaker was he banned the Kreutzer Sonata but was rumored to have done it because he couldn't get the price he wanted to have the book put in his department stores. They didn't heavily discount it enough to his liking. So he's another sort of colorful -- The whole story of, you know, the politicization of the post office is playing out today, and it was frequently a job that I think was kind of a patronage job, you know, the people that didn't really know or care about the mail were given it, so he's another one to look into. And then John Sumner, who succeeded Anthony Comstock at

the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice which later became called something like Society to Maintain Public Decency, he had a much more low-key style, and he was coming in at a time when vice hunting was increasingly unpopular, and it's just so interesting because I get -- I'm on these email lists of various sex workers groups, and this is the exact same thing that's being fought about right now. There's a campaign to abolish vice, and it just makes me think of how little has changed, and, you know, who were the people who were being prosecuted and brought in, and who weren't? And of course you have to remember in Anthony Comstock's time, the police were so -- who frequently, you know, raided brothels and that kind of thing were so deeply entwined with machine politics, so they were never really protecting the people that needed to be protected. They were also like the single largest consumers of sex was the cops.

Melanie: I was thinking about that. Everything they collected through the mail -- I'll let you get to more questions, Kate, but I'm already --

Kate: No, no, go ahead.

Melanie: -- poring over these things because so much of what you talk about, Comstock's processes, falsifying his identity and procuring things via mail. And I'm like is he -- is there an evidence room that's quite crazy, or is he poring over these things secretly?

Amy: Okay, you are not the first person to ask that. Many have tried to find -- I have a folder in my research files called Where is the Smut, and it's all of the attempts people made to get the stuff.

Melanie: Yeah.

Amy: Most of it was burned, you know, shortly after they confiscated it. There's one evocative story where toward the end of his life when he knew that he was going to be replaced by this man, John Sumner, Sumner went into the office at 150 Nassau Street and found Anthony removing -- he was destroying the plates that were used for making the obscene books, and he was said to after he, you know, somehow removed the etchings with some sort of chemical sent the remaining glass to his brother who had a greenhouse in Connecticut.

Melanie: Oh my gosh.

Amy: So the short answer is it looks like it's all lost, but there's some choice exhibits at the microfilm at the end of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice arrest logs, which are -- the Library of Congress has, and municipal archives. Great source for evidence. The collections that they have are not well organized, and they're very, very fragmentary, but I was able to find some really shocking images in conjunction with an obscenity case that they had a file on. So, you know, once in a while you luck out that the docketed cell for, you know, the court information itself will contain exhibits that are interesting, but a lot of times they've been -- the exhibits have been separated out, and all that you can find is the -- something akin to a trial transcript.

Kate: Do you have any final questions, Melanie?

Melanie: You mentioned with Comstock that he would have been an excellent genealogist. Now, earlier --

Kate: That was a dig [inaudible].

Amy: Nope. You know what? As soon as I said that, I realized that, but I think what I meant is that kind of not stopping until you get --

Melanie: Yeah.

Amy: The work of, you have this target in mind and the research, the winding path of your research, to get what you want. I wish I were a genealogist because for anyone that does this kind of work, what we all joke about is we wish that we could just stop at the research phase and not do any of the writing because the research is so --

Melanie: That's the most exciting, to follow the chase.

Kate: It is.

Melanie: Yeah, and I -- It's funny, Kate. You're right. I didn't take it that way. What I was thinking about is in the book you say that his lineage could be traced directly to the original Puritans, and I was thinking did he find that out about himself? Did he do that research, or how did you learn --

Amy: So for that, it's the New Canaan Historical Society has all of the information on the Comstock family which includes his mother. You know, one thing about researching, again, these guys that I kind of called a blue blood elite is the genealogy component is pretty easy because these prominent families all had books about their lineage, and so connecting those dots is easy. One little genealogical -- I guess just two little things I wanted to mention. I found the cause of his mother's death in the town records in New Canaan, and this, as far as I know, is the first book about Anthony Comstock that mentions that his mother died following childbirth, so that's thanks to old town records in these big old log books that somebody took out for me. And what -- I can't remember -- Oh, the second thing is that he was able to go to New York because he had had a bunch of dead-end jobs and wasn't doing well. He was kind of like a slacker. He could never like really find -- he could never find a way to make a living for a very long time, and he ran into a friend of his mother's -- a relative of his mother's named M. Legrand Lockwood [phonetic], who was a contemporary of Jim Fisk. And if you know anything about the Gold Panic and that whole era, and this Lockwood gave Anthony the money to get to New York. So I feel like when I look back at these kinds of family connections, I realize that, yes, there were a lot of young men of little means trying to make it in New York, but he didn't get enough money to get here until his mother's wealthy family friend helped him. And so I really feel like he

needs to be understood as sort of the fall guy and messenger for a much larger group of American men who had a very specific interest in keeping women in roles as wives and mothers and nothing else. And he never could have done what he did without that -- those deep, deep, you know, New England-y, you know, social connections that he was able to make through the YMCA. I wrote an op-ed about this -- I'm trying to place it -- about the old boys network because we still see this play out today and things like college admissions and the Ivy League. [inaudible].

Melanie: And the affluent will always have access to abortions. You know, that won't be a problem.

Amy: Exactly, the striation, yeah. And also another biographical detail that I found interesting is he and his wife did conceive, but their child died very young of a -- what was called summer diarrhea which very frequently killed infants, and they never had another biological child. And, you know, it just makes one wonder to what extent that pain influenced in any way his thoughts and feelings about women's reproductive health. You would think it would make him more sympathetic.

Melanie: It drove in the other direction other women, right, that were seeing women dying of childbirth and were --

Amy: Yeah.

Melanie: -- seeing women struggling in the impoverished situations, but it put him in -- he found his calling in this other direction, as you say, being an instrument of these powerful men that wanted to place women in just this role of --

Amy: Yeah, the irony of a man with no children forcing women to have as large families as they could at risk of their own illness and death.

Melanie: Yeah, yeah.

Amy: So.

Kate: We're at time, and I want to thank you both. Fascinating presentation and conversation.

Melanie: [inaudible] your work is fantastic.

Kate: I would -- all of you here should stay tuned for a blog post which we'll have the video recording and links to resources for today's talks. You can find recordings for our previous episodes on our website along -- at our Vimeo channel which I put in the link. We encourage you all to stay in touch with us. I'm going to drop some more links here in the chat of how to stay in touch with us. Our next Work/Cited program will be on Wednesday November 10 at 1:00 pm.

We'll be joined by the Library's Meredith Mann and Debby Applegate who wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher*, who we spoke about today. We'll be celebrating the release of Debby's new book *Madam: The Biography of Polly Adler, Icon of the Jazz Age* and hearing about another infamous woman.

Amy: Love Polly Adler.

Kate: Yeah, so --

Amy: Can I -- Okay, when you're done --

Kate: Keep an eye out for the registration information. All that is coming soon, and we'll share it with you when we get the blog post up. We'll send that to all registrants as well, and again I want to sincerely thank Amy, and Melanie, and all attendees for the great discussion. This was wonderful.

Amy: Can I just -- one final shout-out?

Kate: Yes.

Amy: Thank you so much, Melanie, for helping me in the course of my five years of research. Thank you to everyone at the Schwarzman Building, and particularly I want to thank Paul Friedman for directing me to digital sources at a time when we all know it was so hard to get into libraries in person, and I was having to complete this book under extreme duress. So I'm very grateful to all of the rooms, and all of the librarians, and to Tal in the Brooke Astor Room.

Kate: Thank you so much --

Melanie: Thank you.

Kate: -- for acknowledging them, yes. Well, thank you, everyone. Have a wonderful afternoon. Bye.