5. Touring the Red Lights District

In 1890, the New York Press published an anonymous pamphlet entitled, *Vices of a Big City*. The avowed purpose of this pamphlet was to chart a moral cartography of New York City in terms of decency and indecency by supplying what Luc Sante describes as a “sort of index of areas to avoid or to redeem”—specifically, the locales of prostitution and vice.¹ It made these places visible, ostensibly, for demarcation and regulation: to demonstrate the limits of decency and to help upstanding middle- and upper-class citizens avoid encounters with such indecency, which were rather commonplace in nineteenth-century New York City. In *City of Eros*, Timothy Gilfoyle includes more than one anecdote from upstanding members of society who, in taking a wrong turn, found themselves accosted by prostitutes leaning out windows, sitting on stoops, or crowding the sidewalks.² As Sante suggests, however, the “listings of whorehouses, concert saloons, dance houses” in *Vices of a Big City* were so “impressively detailed” that the pamphlet likely served as a manual for those intending to indulge in this indecency. It included concert saloons that were “crowded with women nightly, who smoke cigarettes and drink gin.”³ It included cigar stores, small tobacco shops that had just enough merchandise inside to obscure the private room in the back, where prostitutes could be paid for any number of indulgences. Naturally, *Vices of a Big City* included brothels, which were described in a rather lurid hierarchy. There were the “‘low’ whorehouses” on Water Street, between James Street and Catherine Slip, and those of a “higher order” on Cherry Street.⁴ Notably, the brothels on Thirteenth Street were “ignored by reformers”: beyond decency, yes, but just as importantly for sporting men searching for an assignation, beyond the efforts to regulate decency.⁵ In other words, *Vices of a Big City* professed indignation as a façade that obfuscated the pamphlet’s advertisement and enablement of the more licentious indulgences in New York City.

J. C. Westgate, *Staging the Slums, Slumming the Stage* © J. Chris Westgate 2014
Vices of a Big City was certainly not an anomaly. In fact, many other publications played the contradictory game of admonishment and advertisement during the late nineteenth century, including William F. Howe’s and Abraham H. Hummel’s Danger! A True History of a Great City’s Wiles and Temptations: The Veil Lifted, and Light Thrown on Crime and its Causes and Criminals and Their Haunts (1886) and James W. Buel’s Metropolitan Life Unveiled; or the Mysteries and Miseries of America’s Great Cities (1882). Behind this contradiction was what cultural historians describe as the evolving relationship of prostitution and urbanism around the turn of the century, much of which occurred in New York City. According to Gilfoyle, prostitution in New York City was a “public activity” after the Civil War: courtesans occupied “the foremost theaters, concert halls, and hotels”; streetwalkers “claimed the most celebrated avenues”; and brothels “flourished in all parts of the city.” This commercialization of sex did not sit well with many, however, and by the final decade of the nineteenth century, reformers launched antiprostitution campaigns that would continue for 30 years. The most prominent of these was led by the Reverend Charles Parkhurst of the Presbyterian Church of New York. After touring the underworld of “vice and sexual crime,” Parkhurst delivered a sermon in 1892, which condemned this “sexual plague” and helped usher “in a new era of antiprostitution reform” that included rather strange bedfellows: antivice commissions, settlement house leaders, women’s organizations, social hygienists, and social purity reformers. In 1900, the Committee of Fifteen was founded to study prostitution in New York City and, two years later, published its findings in a report entitled The Social Evil, the first of many published vice reports during the next decade. New methods for combating prostitution emerged, including police raids, abatement laws, and the founding of Night Court in 1907. These methods did not abolish prostitution in New York City or elsewhere but instead changed the nature of prostitution from a publically accessible (if not acceptable) pastime to a “clandestine underground activity.”

Although publications like Vices of a Big City reflected the language of moral reform with their delineations of decency/indecency, they were more important to the changing geography of prostitution and vice in New York City. In fact, these publications were instrumental in the establishment of one of the more sensational fashions of slumming during the Progressive Era, what might be described as “red lights tourism.” As Chad Heap demonstrates, slumming parties descended into the working-class and immigrant districts like the Bowery, the Tenderloin, and the Rialto, where prostitution and all manner of vices (from gambling to drinking to mixed-race dancing)