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**New Women, White Slaves
Separate Spheres and Social Anxiety in the Progressive Era**

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INTRODUCTION

WOMEN LOST, WOMEN FOUND

During the Progressive Era,¹ the dominant meaning of sexuality in the United States underwent a paradigm shift that called for different regulations and politics. Concurrently, the preoccupation with prostitution developed into a national obsession and the Progressives invested enormously in the study, portrayal and containment of this civil concern. In the years preceding WW1, the opposition to a purported international “white-slave traffic” prompted an attack on organized prostitution waged with unprecedented fervor and with an eloquent variety of motivations. This dissertation investigates how the white slavery scare can be considered part and parcel of a general attempt to recompose and repair the male social sphere from the attacks it was suffering in the form of a more and more noticeably independent female presence.

In this context, an exploration of the Progressive Era is interesting for a series of reasons. Throughout this period, for the first time in American history, developments in society and in scientific discourse made it possible to think that a culture predicated on the separation of the male/public sphere from the female/private one was not acceptable.² At the same time, it was the period in which women capitalized on nearly a century of attempts to enlarge the domestic sphere, that is, a century of practice in different forms of social maternalism which enabled some female groups to enter the public debate while discarding the idea of the domestic *tout-court*. Consequently, the Progressive Era is also considered to be the high-water mark of women’s public influence especially for the prominent community organizers, professionals, intellectuals and political activists of middleclass background. Furthermore, the impact of socialism gave visibility to women workers as well. Often of immigrant origin, these women

¹ Throughout the dissertation I have capitalized the term Progressive in reference to reformers who characterized the Progressive Era as well as to their beliefs, politics and times. The term is lowercased in reference to a general belief in progress. The epithet New Woman is capitalized while the locutions “white slave” and “white slavery” are lowercased, following the norms of most scholarly literature on the subject.

² Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History.," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (1988): 26.

actively engaged in labor rights battles but also made themselves conspicuous as consumers, as patrons of popular entertainments and as peculiarly liberated entrepreneurs of individual sexuality. In short, during the Progressive Era, a New Woman emerges—however evasive and contradictory that the phrase has proven to be—and she does so flaunting the anti-domesticity of her intents and revealing the diversity of the female category.

Tightly connected with these phenomena, and with a range of germane Progressive concerns, the agitation around prostitution became functional in passing regulations apparently meant to combat sexual exploitation, but which ended up setting standards of ethical sexuality that effectively redefined gender roles in ways redolent of Victorianism and of its paradigm of national femininity. The search for moral order epitomized in the anti-vice campaigns exceeded the boundaries of a power conflict between the sexes. In fact, through a series of juridical “advancements” it prompted the enablement of middle-class socialities in the face of the federal State; coincidentally the body of laws minted to oppose the white-slave traffic heavily reflected the racist and nativist concerns which constituted a pressing preoccupation for several Progressive thinkers and legislators. In this light, the many incarnations of the New Woman—the political activist, the intellectual and the divorcee, but also the female breadwinner, the charity girl and the urban woman of color—were chastised and reconfigured within the preposterous Manichean world that white slavery, as depicted in many novels, plays, movies, articles and legal cases, presupposed. In this world an unquestioned divide separated girls whose purity was stolen from irredeemably fallen or unnatural women, and also, the righteous American from the ethnic and racial Other.

The separation of spheres is a condition that was observed as constitutive of gender arrangements in American society as early as Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*.³ Metaphors which attributed women to the domestic domain and men to the public, have been extensively used to indicate the social relations between the sexes in the United States, although the intellectual production endorsing such tropes has traditionally focused on the female role in American culture. From the 1960s, subsequent generations of historians worked

³ Ibid.: 9.

to adjust the boundaries of this construct. Initially they defined what the female sphere was and emphasized its confining nature whereas, in a second moment, they identified spaces of agency and gender specific cultures within the female sphere. In a third phase, they endeavored to enlarge the concept outside the temporal confinements of early and Victorian America while, more recently, scholars in cultural and identity studies have worked to dispel the opaqueness of the undifferentiated female category signified by “sphere” through intensive analyses of different ethnicities and localities. As a common denominator, these approaches manifest an emphasis on, if not the primacy of, the sexual dimension of the female condition. In Progressive America, while the separation of the spheres was being significantly challenged by remarkable changes in the practices of womanhood, a renovated impetus on the part of traditional male powers promoted forms of social segregation through which women could be re-ascribed, almost entirely, to the private realm. This impulse is patent across the social spectrum in the increasing resistance to the concession of universal suffrage, in the limitation of female access to higher education and to the notable male professions, and in the unwavering custom to minimize the contribution of female workers both in the industry and in the labor movement. Arguably, the New Woman and the White Slave appear as contiguous figures in that the former overtly defied the validity of a gender segregated society while the latter, made the master symbol of eternal feminine defenselessness, reinforced the ostensible necessity for the female population to live a sheltered existence. Still, the dialectic between the enabling archetype and the immobilizing one is not exhaustively explained by the idea that the lost purity of the former could be restored through the symbolic salvation of the latter. The dynamic of agency and subjection underlying the anti-prostitution debate was in fact occurring also among women themselves and operated according to hierarchical principles which informed the understanding that women of different classes had of one another.

Among the New Women, for example, were writers and settlement organizers who empathically understood the plights of the city poor, but who still placed themselves on a level which was evolutionarily more elevated than the working classes and who, therefore, commanded the duty of control and guidance. While they were not completely responsible for fueling the white slavery hysteria, these women entered the debate without noticeably diverging

from the dominant rhetoric of victimization and finally supported restrictive measures which curtailed the legitimacy of female consent and autonomy. As a metaphor, white slavery indicated the annihilation of free will through abduction and sexual captivity; still, the battle against it became an anti-vice crusade targeting mainly young women who rationally profited from their sexuality—in the glee of adolescence or according to an economy of self-interest—and adult women who entered a life of abjection out of necessity. In supporting strong politics of protection, middle class female reformers were thus complicit in obfuscating the moral responsibilities of a profit-driven economy while misreading the developing consciousness of women of the lower classes.

Mapping the interpolation between the New Woman and the White Slave will thus illustrate how enduring female typologies were shaped by the complexity of the Progressive Era in terms of a conception of the personal—or psychosexual—and the social—or politico-familial. Moreover, this perspective also problematizes notions of the private and the public, where the private refers to the citizen of a representative democracy and the public defines a governing machine more and more involved in the regulation of the individual. In exploring how the attitude towards prostitution exposed the hinges of modern America and revealed conflicting assumptions about gender roles, the public sphere and the meaning of Americanness, this study will rely on close readings and historical analysis of a varied assemblage of texts. Novels, reformative writings, popular entertainment, sculptures and legal documents will be investigated as texts of culture in which New Women and White Slaves appear center stage, and often mirror each other, producing significant reverberations on the social discourse.

Before offering an account of the conceptual and structural organization of this study, this introduction will proceed to two preliminary tasks: to present a necessarily concise notion of Progressivism vis-à-vis the social anxiety which constitutes the background of the present work, and to outline the tropological complexity of the term “white slavery” through a survey of its fortunes and implications.

1. The Progressive Era at a Glance

1.1. The Age of “Disjunction”

The American Progressive Era was a period when the multiple efforts to supersede the “vices of gentility” and the plutocratic tendencies which characterized the previous decades unveiled the conflicts nested in the inner developments of economy, society and culture.⁴ Contradictory tendencies flourished: the panics of 1893 and of 1907 fostered extreme labor unrest that coincided with the consolidation of modern American corporate capitalism; middle-class reformers pleaded the cause of tenement life while the great waves of migration were often met with recrudescing racism; female suffrage and many shades of new womanhood emerged whereas the rhetoric of Teddyism⁵ envisioned motherhood as the only legitimate status of the female citizen. These contradictions were rooted in time long before the closing of the landed frontier in 1890 and many of the consequences, far from being resolved in the battles of the 1910s and 1920s have not yet been fully absorbed. Undeniably, during the progressive years the evolution of the United States from a rural-minded, Anglo-Saxon, production-oriented society to an urban, multi-ethnic, consumption-inclined reality met its point of no-return.⁶

This acutely unstable time pitted the tensions foregrounding modernity against a poignant longing for the recovery of an increasingly ungraspable social order. When Daniel Bell, in presenting his theoretical approach to the analysis of contemporary society, juxtaposes the view of society as a holistic web which was central to the imagination of the nineteenth century⁷ to the “vicissitudes of bourgeois life and modernist culture which came to a head in the cultural

⁴ John Higham, "The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890's," in *Writing American History. Essays on Modern Scholarship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 79.

⁵ Martha Banta, *Taylored Lives: Narrative Productions in the Age of Taylor, Veblen and Ford* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 47-49.

⁶ Mark T. Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution in the United States* (Chapel Hill: The University of Carolina Press, 1980), 6.

⁷ “If the first difficulty is with the distortion of historical time, the second is with the monolithic view of society. Central to the imagination of the nineteenth century was the view of society as a web (and in the literary imagination a spider web), or in the more abstract philosophical vein, as elaborated by Hegel, each culture, each period of history and correspondingly each society was a structurally interrelated whole, united by some inner principle.” Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 8.

contradiction of capitalism,”⁸ he introduces the notion of society as “disjunctive.” He argues that three different realms, regulated by somehow contrasting axial principles and responding to uneven rhythms of change, interact in a non-integral way and constitute the structural frame of society. It is useful here to embrace the Bell’s repartition of society into three realms: the “techno-economic order,” the “polity,” and “culture.” He defines the “techno-economic order” as concerned with the organization of production, goods and service and as guided by the axial principle of rationality in the species of bureaucracy and hierarchy. The “polity” is the arena of the negotiation of social justice and power where the axial principle is legitimacy and the implicit condition is the idea of equality. As for “culture,” Bell revisits Cassirer and locates it in “the realm of symbolic forms” where a limited array of modalities “derive from the existential situations which confront all human beings, through all times, in the nature of consciousness.”⁹ If we clarify these definitions to conceptualize the many tensions at work in the Progressive Era, we can evince that there is no simple and determinate relation among these realms, and that the figure of “disjunction” among the three incarnates the contrast between the ethos required by the affirmation of corporate capitalism and the ethos required by the “polity” in the spirit manifested by participatory democracy.

The friction located between the social structure necessitated by the economic regime and the embodied justice which should ideally sustain the polity, is not an immanent separation. The disjunction of these two realms, and the growing idiosyncrasies between the two, is a process that started in the 1830s with the beginning of heavy industrialization in the United States, developed in the regime shaped by the managerial principles enunciated by Frederick Winslow Taylor,¹⁰ and manifested itself as a nearly incurable social fracture during subsequent age of “conspicuous consumption.”¹¹ Because at the *fin-de-siècle* such disjunction was so widespread in a society painfully tackling the trio of modernity’s challenges—immigration, urbanization and industrialization—it is virtually unmanageable to include under one comprehensive label the great

⁸ Ibid.,10.

⁹ Ibid.,12.

¹⁰ Fredrick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1911).

¹¹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: New American Library, (1899)1912), 60-80.

diversity animating the Progressives. Those pivotal decades, extremely dynamic in their contestation over the nature of democracy, are in fact the object of an increasingly vexed debate among historians to the point that one commentator has predicted that “Progressivism may become just one strand in a contradictory historical moment characterized in quite different terms.”¹² While it is not the ambition of this work to enter this historiographical debate by trying to identify *the* ultimate Progressive goals and motives, throughout the dissertation reference will be made to the main Progressive social doctrines of the period in order to better frame the emergence of the New Woman and the White Slave as well as contextualize their significance.

1.2. The Response to Anxiety

The vividness of the political exchange and the openness of the contestation around social issues evidenced the radical reorientation occurring in the prescriptive system of idealized behavioral patterns that had emerged in the Jacksonian period, and shaped the American middle-class sensibility since the Civil War. Freud coined for this lore of practices the term “Civilized Morality.”¹³ As Nathan Hale describes it, Civilized Morality was the system of belief that had molded the middle-class generation born between 1850 and 1880, a generation which gained Prominence during the Progressive years.¹⁴ Understandably, the laic connection between moral purity and economic probity this ethos implied, had fed the environment in which the political leaders of the Progressive Era were brought up—the aristocratic New York family of Theodore Roosevelt, but also the poor, religious South of Woodrow Wilson, to mention the most significant. The subsiding of Civilized Morality yielded to uncertainties which were combated

¹² Judith A. Allen, *The Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 4. See also Nancy Cohen, *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossing: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1998); Leon Fink, *Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) and Eldon J. Eisenach, *The Lost Promise of Progressivism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994).

¹³ Nathan G. Hale, *Freud and the Americans : The Beginnings of Psychoanalysis in the United States; 1876 - 1917* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

¹⁴ “Civilized morality operated as a coherent system of related economic, social, and religious norms. It defined not only correct behavior, but correct models of the manly man and the womanly woman, and prescribed a unique regime of sexual hygiene. These norms were instilled by the pillars of community authority: clergymen, physicians, parents, teachers. ‘Civilized’ morality was, above all, an ideal of conduct, not a description of reality. In many respects this moral system was a heroic attempt to coerce a recalcitrant and hostile actuality.” *Ibid.*, 25.

through a short-lived but determined rekindling of moralizing initiatives: the foundation of the American Purity Alliance in 1895, for example, marked an attempt to re-institutionalize Civilized Morality in American Life; however, the short breath of this moment of affirmation showed the impossibility of controverting actuality by fighting exclusively on moral ground.

One can hardly imagine two figures more incompatible than Anthony Comstock,¹⁵ the self-appointed guardian of American Purity, and Sigmund Freud, but to a certain extent they both reflected different aspects of nineteenth-century Civilized Morality and converged on its fundamentals. In 1909, from the hall of Clark University, Massachusetts, Comstock warned against the negative effects of lewd publications on the young; only a few months later, from the same venue, Freud warned against the pathogenic potential of sexual repression.¹⁶ Despite obvious differences, the two public figures reinforced a comparable strenuous belief in the existence of a unified and responsible self which, through the exercise of will and conscience, could control unruly sexual instincts. Consequentially, they broadly implied that also civilization, progress and personal advancements were highly dependent upon the control of the sexual drive. Civilized Morality wove together in the tightest fabric a conception of sexuality dictating continence for men and ignorance for women, the self-fulfilling prophecy of industrious success, and the relegation to the realm of pathology for any socio-behavioral manifestation defying such standards. While Civilized Morality sagged under its own weight, the emergence of a well-educated, politically conscious, self-supporting New Woman reified the inexorability of its demotion. Concomitantly, the spectacle of the industrial cities' sidewalks, swarming with girls of diverse origins rushing to work in gender mixed environments and walking the streets unchaperoned, offered a scapegoat on which mounting preoccupations about changing female roles and the

¹⁵ Anthony Comstock (1844 – 1915) created in 1873 the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, an institution dedicated to supervising the morality of the public. In the same year the US Congress passed the Comstock Act, (ch. 258 17 Stat. 598 enacted March 3, 1873), a federal law which made it illegal to send any "obscene, lewd, and/or lascivious" materials through the mail, including contraceptive devices and information.

¹⁶ The Clark Conference was a decisive event in the history of psychoanalysis in America: Freud had been invited to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Clark University and he delivered his *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis* from September 7 through September 11. The lectures, a condensation of the major theories he had worked out in his first works, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *Three Contributions to a Theory of Sex*, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and *Studies in Hysteria*, were published in Hall's *American Journal of Psychology* soon afterwards.

multiplication of social evils were projected. With due distinctions, self support, sentimental independence and the abandonment of domesticity were characteristics that New Women of middle and lower classes shared. In the eyes of old-order representatives of both sexes, these sins against society could be more openly condemned when detected in women of inferior standing, subjects who were buffeted both as symptoms and causes of urban decay.¹⁷

An incident at the General Federation of Women's Clubs' 1906 convention revealed the terms in which the issue of female labor catalyzed these tensions at the time. A puzzled clubwoman rose to ask why, if conditions in factories were so bad, women wouldn't "come into our homes and work. We pay good wages, give them their room and board, and yet we have difficulties in getting enough help to run our houses!"¹⁸ As the upper classes saw things, servants enjoyed incomparable benefits and it was thus with deep resentment that the genteel press addressed the "servant problem." Working girls' job preferences seemed impudently irrational, and the only plausible explanation the help-seeking aristocracy could conceive was that anyone who would choose a promiscuous sweatshop over a respectable household had to be morally flawed.¹⁹ Underlying this conclusion was the historical association of women going unescorted in public with disorder, including public disorder.²⁰ Connecting the factory worker with the streetwalker was commonplace at the time, and even ladies who did not usually reflect on the social habits of the lower classes saw the factory as a den of iniquity. During the Progressive Era, this connection served as a symbolic shortcut which enabled nostalgic supporter of Civilized Morality to stigmatize the feminization of the public sphere, a process which was underway on many levels and which, in the phenomenon of White Slavery, was cast in catastrophic tones.

Prostitution emerged as a national menace and a civil obsession in disparate forms: in vice commissions reports, in white slavery tracts, novels, movies and plays, in the reports of boards of health, in muckraking journalism and in the concerns of the newly born FBI. What Mark Connelly calls the "progressive

¹⁷ The strategies of containment for the independent behavior of women of higher extraction are discussed in the next chapter. See the section "The New Woman and the Repeal of Domesticity."

¹⁸ Dorothy Schneider and Carl J. Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 24-25.

¹⁹ Priscilla Murolo, *The Common Ground of Womanhood* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 15.

²⁰ Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 91.

response to prostitution” was in fact a response to the anxiety in the face of incautiously empowered women, but, more broadly “prostitution became...a clearinghouse for a variety of social fears occasioned by immigration, rural decay, urban growth and corruption, industrial squalor and oppression, unchecked venereal disease...and a shift in sexual behavior patterns.”²¹

2. Morphing Slavery

2.1. Myth, Fact and Narration

This study interrogates the social configurations which motivated the enlargement of some history-old manifestations of sexual commerce into an all-encompassing apocalyptic myth. Not all scholars agree on the myth. Pathbreaking prostitution historian Ruth Rosen, although acknowledging that statistical information reveals that only a negligible fraction of prostitutes entered the professions through abduction, holds on to the potency of the expression concluding that “white slavery should not be minimized as the figment of the reformers’ imagination because it actually existed.”²² This point made, she goes on to extend the sexist subtext of the phenomenon to “the current reality of male violence against women.” Rosen’s commitment to her feminist project seems to induce the concession of a hard-fact quality to white slavery. In a similar way, although propelled by a more investigatory spirit, Edward Bristow implicitly defends the existence of the phenomenon through the evidence he produces of a slim network of procurers who lured Russian girls into American brothels.²³ However, his specific study of a Jewish fight against the traffic in women in Europe and America between 1870 and 1939 can only tangentially be ascribed to white slavery as it came to be understood in the 1910s. By that time, in fact, the crime mainly indicated the abduction of young white girls from the streets of the American cities, where “white” was generally understood in the sense of American-born—preferably of Anglo-Saxon stock.²⁴ Just like in Bartley

²¹ Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution*, 7.

²² Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982), 113-14.

²³ Edward Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice. The Jewish Fight against White Slavery 1870-1939* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).

²⁴ As Connelly observes in his survey of white-slavery tracts, almost all the tracts included discussion of the plight of migrant white slaves but the total impression that a reader would draw

Campbell's melodrama of 1880 *The White Slave*, the audience was enticed and titillated by the mere idea of a white woman in a chattel context,²⁵ so in the turn-of-the-century public arena prostitution caused more scandal if the sexual slave was "purely" white.²⁶

Should one want to pronounce on the factuality of the phenomenon, one should keep in mind that the suppression of prostitution had been, for the latter part of the nineteenth century, *one* plank in a broad platform of social purity spanning the whole gamut of maternalist concerns. David Pivar observes that, by the late 1880s, even the WCTU's department for the suppression of prostitution could not gather enough volunteers,²⁷ and that reformers started embracing a preventive rather than aggressive attitude towards the phenomenon—a tolerance which was later partly lost in the progressive approach.

In 1893, for the first time in an American context, prostitution was defined against the backdrop of race-slavery: in his *Traffic in Young Girls*, WCTU official Charlton Edholm testified that an "organized traffic in young girls is constantly going on and that worse than any race-slavery is the slavery of the brothel."²⁸ The analogy that mentioned slavery in passing, like the shadow of an old obsession eclipsed by a newly minted slavery, encapsulated a significant shift in vice-reform: the prostitute ceased to be a reformable subject. In Edholm's words, the emphasis on the organization and on the persistence of the trade makes the conspiratorial element resonate stronger than the salvation impetus, so that the prostitute could only be either rescued before corruption, or abolished as a figure.

In the case of this modern slavery, the conspicuously absent black element undergoes multiple transformations, which lead to the "mythologization" of

from the text was an emphasis on the threat to American-born girls. Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution*, 116-202.

²⁵ Lisa, the light-skinned Kentucky slave, turns out to be actually a full-blooded white Southern woman equipped with a birth-certificate to prove it. Bartley Campbell, *The White Slave and Other Plays*, ed. Napier Wilt (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941). For an interesting parallel with the legal case of 1851-1867 *Morrison v. White*, in which a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Louisiana slave girl sues her purchaser after running away see Walter Johnson, "The Slaver Trader, the White Slave, and the Politics of Racial Determination in the 1850s," *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 1 (2000).

²⁶ As Keire observes, the plight of immigrant prostitutes put on the markets by their own countrymen was addressed not out of sympathy for the victims, but rather with the intent of discrediting ethnicities where kinship ties were not protective of the integrity of their youth. Mara L. Keire, "The Vice Trust: A Reinterpretation of the White Slavery Scare in the United States," *Journal of Social History* 35, no. 1 (2001): 8.

²⁷ David Pivar, *Purity Crusades. Sexual Morality and Social Control 1868-1900* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973), 85.

²⁸ Charlton Edholm, *Traffic in Girls and Florence Crittenton Missions* (Chicago: 1893), 9.

slavery for anti-prostitution purposes. Borrowing Roland Barthes's vocabulary on modern myths, we can contend that chattel slavery is maintained as a sheer "form," but that its meaning is made latent in the core, and distorted on the surface.²⁹ Barthes postulates that the original meaning of a complex sign provides the "nourishment" of the myth, "an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation."³⁰ Furthermore, he specifies that the "fundamental character of the mythical concept"—namely its amenability to be appropriated—comes forth exactly when history is drained out of the form and absorbed by the new concept.³¹ In the light of this reasoning, white slavery has all the semiotic features that Barthes ascribes to modern myths: it is a mode of signification in itself that appropriates the meaning of a former concept, it has a historical foundation and it consists of different forms of representation that support the mythical speech.³² Historians such as Mark Connelly and Frederick Grittner, who base their study on the notion of white slavery as myth, elaborate exactly on these latter representations and trace a genealogy that harkens back to captivity narratives and "conspiratorial visions" inherent in the American imaginary.³³

As for its historical contingency, white slavery emerges from a long process in which the contradictions of liberal capitalism, the Progressives' investment in the effectiveness of State initiatives and the worries of threatened whiteness merge and consolidate in a copious body of white slave narratives which start to circulate around 1909.³⁴ Scott Herring describes this genre as a spin-off of "slumming literature," a category going back to Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (1845) and counting illustrious representatives in the British tradition.³⁵

²⁹Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, (1957) 1972), 118-19.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 119.

³² Ibid., 110.

³³ Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution*. Frederick K. Grittner, *White Slavery. Myth, Ideology and American Law* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990).

³⁴ The beginning of the white slavery scare can arguably be dated to 1909. Towards the end of the year one of the most influential articles which inaugurated sensationalism as trademark of the anti-vice campaigns appeared in McClure's Magazine penned by muckraking journalist George Kibbe Turner. George Kibbe Turner, "The Daughters of the Poor: A Plain Story of the Development of New York City as a Leading Centre of the White Slave Trade of the World under Tammany Hall," *McClure's Magazine* 34, no. November (1909).

³⁵ In enumerating the American followers of Sue's feuilleton novel, Werner Sollors lists both authors who wrote in English, such as George Lippard (*The Quaker City or The Monks of Monk Hall*, 1844) and Ned Buntline (Edward Zane Carroll Judson: *The mysteries and Miseries of New*

Herring contends that “the genre was ingrained in the U.S. cultural imaginary...so much so that it fragmented into tramping tales, detective fictions, philanthropic reform tracts, and...modern sexological studies of homosexual bodies.”³⁶ This consideration, valid for slum literature in general, requires more context when applied to the specific treatment of prostitution in long fiction. As Laura Hapke suggests, it is useful to identify those authors who, in the waning decades of the nineteenth century, enlarged the possibilities of the tenement novel by treating the prostitute not as a marginal type included for the sake of local color, but as the protagonist of book-length endeavors.³⁷ Pioneers of the prostitute novel in the late nineteenth century were Joaquim Miller, Edgar Fawcett, Harold Fredric and Stephen Crane—the latter the only one whose reputation has stood the test of time.³⁸ By the early twentieth century, increased interest in the problem of prostitution prompted the extensive treatment of the theme and general tenement fiction was superseded, in the preferences of the audience, by white-slavery narratives. Reginald Wright Kauffman’s novel, *The House of Bondage* (1912), was the best-selling work in the genre and reached the fourteenth edition in only two years.³⁹ Unfortunately, despite the extensive investigative effort that the author had put in researching his subject, his white-slave novel insisted on the prostitute as a researcher or a soapbox orator. The novel thus ended up sanitizing the very woman that Kauffman claimed to depict truthfully and eventually validated the *idées fixes* of the Progressive Era.⁴⁰

York: A Story of Real Life, 1848), and others who wrote in German and in Italian (Heinrich Börnstein and Bernardino Ciambelli). He also indicates Harriet Beecher Stowe as a writer who “followed Sue’s strategy of revealing to the readers a hidden world, providing them with panoramic views of American slavery.” Werner Sollors, “Immigrants and Other Americans,” in *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 582-83.

³⁶ Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld. Slumming, Literature and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 4.

³⁷ As Heinz Ickstadt observes, “the novel, from William Dean Howells...to Frank Norris, is aware of the city, of industrial and immigrant life as a new, if unknown world experience,—at the same time that it keeps it under symbolic control.” Heinz Ickstadt, “Exploring the Abyss: The Discovery of the Social Underground in Late-Nineteenth-Century American Fiction,” in *Faces of Fiction: Essays in American Literature and Culture from the Jacksonian Period to Postmodernity*, ed. Susanne Rohr and Sabine Sielke (Heidelberg: Winter, 2001). Amy Kaplan similarly remarks that it is a typical strategy of the realist novel “to construct new forms of social cohesiveness” and to “contain social difference” rather than to “jar readers with the shock of otherness.” Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), 23-25.

³⁸ Joaquim Miller, *Destruction of Gotham* (1886); Edgar Fawcett, *The Evil that Men Do* (1889), Harold Fredric, *The Lawton Girl* (1890); Stephen Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893).

³⁹ Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution*, 115.

⁴⁰ Other writers who created, with less success, fiction centered on prostitution were Frank Norris

According to Hapke, only the social protest writer David Graham Phillips challenged late-Victorian ideology by elevating the streetwalker to financial success and refusing to moralize about her life.⁴¹ For these reasons his *Susan Lexon: Her Fall and Rise* (1911) was heavily censored for the final edition.

In this context, a purportedly non-fictional literary genre—the white slavery tract—flourished by capitalizing, not on prostitution in general, but on the specific theme of the white-slave traffic. These narratives, varying in length from the pamphlet to the gothic tome, enjoyed great popularity from 1909 to the beginning of World War I, and one can count at least twenty two of these works written by authors whose names are, with rare exceptions, now forgotten.⁴² The Canadian-born Methodist Rev. Ernest A. Bell, a former missionary who founded the anti-prostitution center Midnight Mission in Chicago, authored one of the white-slave tracts which had the widest circulation: *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls* (1910).⁴³ Chicago attorney Clifford Roe, besides being extremely active in prosecuting white-slave traders and securing national anti-vice legislation, carried out his crusade in the literary realm and became the nation's most prolific writer on the theme.⁴⁴

More than any other written genre, these works expressed and consolidated the anxiety over white slavery. Quite interestingly, although the plotlines included some discussion of immigrant white slaves, the main emphasis was on the American-born girl. Central to these tracts, was the relationship between the

(*Vandover and the Brute*, 1894-1914), Walter Hurt (*The Scarlet Shadow*, 1907) and Estelle Baker (*The Rose Door* 1911). There was in addition a very limited production of American pornography which featured the prostitute but, given the constraints of the genre, it did not constitute a contribution to the discussion of prostitution as social issue. Cf. Laura Hapke, *Girls Who Went Wrong: Prostitutes in American Fiction, 1885-1917* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1989), 4-5.

⁴¹ Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* is not included in Hapke's study because, technically speaking, she is a kept woman and not a professional prostitute.

⁴² Some exemplary works: Jean Turner Zimmermann, *American's Black Traffic in White girls* (1912), Robert J. Moorehead, *Fighting the Devil's Triple Demons* (1911), Mrs C.I. Harris, *Modern Herodians or Slaughterers of Innocents* (1909) E. Norine Law, *The Shame of a Great Nation* (1909) Virginia Brooks, *My Battles with Vice* (1915). Cf. Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution*, 202.

⁴³ The book sold over 70,000 copies within the first seven months and more than 400,000 copies in total. Brian Donovan, *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender, and Anti-Vice Activism, 1887-1917* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 63. The previous year Bell had published *War on the White Slave Trade* (1909).

⁴⁴ In addition to his numerous journalistic essays Roe published a number of book-length tracts which united fiction and documents: *Panders and their White Slaves* (1910), *Horrors in the White Slave Trade* (1911), *The Great War on White Slavery* (1911), *The Girl Who Disappeared* (1914).

migration of country girls to the cities and the ruinous influence that urban life had on them. This theme was infallibly treated according to the structure of the melodrama with its intensified effects and sensational overtones but also, following John Cawelti's definition, with the specific purpose to reinforce the "essential rightness" of a traditionally oriented moral order.⁴⁵ Considering the ventures undergone by slavery as a trope in its transformation from black to white, one could argue that a certain melodramatic mode informs the whole process. If the melodrama tends to straighten the "complex ambiguities and tragedies of the world"⁴⁶ to reinstate the hero that most represents the moral assumptions of a given period, then, in its general significance, white slavery can be said to reinstate the collective white hero of genteel America as paladin of innocence and social justice.

2.2. A Genealogy of White Slavery

The White Slave had not always been an abducted woman. According to David Roediger, Britain rivaled the U.S. in producing, since early in the nineteenth century, a discourse that regarded white hirelings as slaves. The metaphoric term "wage slavery" actually originated in Britain in the 1810s but it was the antebellum U.S. labor movement which most powerfully endorsed the criticism of wage work as slavery.⁴⁷ "Slavery of wages" came into use alongside "white slavery" in the last half of the 1840s after controversial antiabolitionist and labor activist Theophilus Fisk uttered the term for the first time in a public speech. For a while, the expression "white slavery" was favored by Democratic politicians, but the purloined metaphor soon proved problematic also, among other reasons, because of the recalcitrance of free workers to cast themselves as if in bondage. By 1860 the term gave way to expressions such as "free white labor."⁴⁸ Thus, although the disconnection of slavery from chattel and its the association with whiteness had

⁴⁵The two typical endings featured in the tracts (reunion with the family of origin or tragic death) seem to confirm this reading. On the notion of melodrama see John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance. Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 44-47.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁷ Roediger indicates Cunliffe for further discussion: Marcus Cunliffe, *Chattel Slavery and Wage Slavery* (Athens: Ohio, 1979). Cf. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness. Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 27.

⁴⁸ Robert W. Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract. The Rise and Fall of American Slavery*, New York 1989, 354-69. As quoted in *Ibid.*, 81.

started with labor struggles which continued well beyond the 1900 mark, by the end of the century, the locution that conflated bondage, paid labor and white bodies was used in common parlance only to indicate organized prostitution. As historian Mara Keire observes, British reformer Alfred Dyer was the first to separate, in his account of 1880, “the sexualized metaphor from the particularities of European prostitution and made ‘white slavery’ a term that anti-prostitution reformers could readily employ in Asia and the Americas.”⁴⁹

The *First International Congress on White Slavery* took place in London in 1899. The delegates of twelve nations, including the U.S., met and discussed the topic which, in the UK, had been keeping reformers busy for over two decades. The real sensation which popularized the notion of white slavery was made in 1885 when, in the course of an investigation on child prostitution in London, William Stead purchased a thirteen-year-old girl as demonstration of how widespread the social disease was.⁵⁰ The 1899 Congress had been organized by Stead’s assistant who thereby managed to extend the definition of white slavery to any form of prostitution abetted by a third party.⁵¹ British Purity reformers thus valorized on the international stage the second transformation of slavery adopted as a “modern myth.” The draining of blackness out of slavery gave birth to a supple signifier which could serve a new signified and rekindle indignation in distracted audiences, so that the atrocities accumulated in the colored genealogy of the word could spotlight the dramatic potential of modern forms of bondage. Slavery, stripped both of its middle-passage legacy, and of its more recent pro-labor connotation, became an exclusively white and female condition.

With regard to their British counterpart, the American reformers, in that phase, still expressed a somewhat different sensibility. American delegate at the

⁴⁹ Keire, "The Vice Trust," 7.

⁵⁰ In 1885 William Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* and Bramwell Booth of the Salvation Army worked to expose the growth in child prostitution. Stead purchased the thirteen year-old daughter of a chimney-sweep and published the account of his investigations under the famous title *A Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*. Stephen Robertson interestingly observes that, among the other effects, “the scandal spurred the British Parliament to raise the age of consent from ten to sixteen years, a move that directed the attention of American reformers to the state of the law in their country. Efforts to bring about a similar increase in the age of consent in state and federal law spread throughout the country in the late 1880s, spurring twenty-four states to amend their laws by the end of the decade. Although such campaigns waned in subsequent years, reformers were continuing to win increases in the age of consent as late as 1918.” Stephen Robertson, "Age of Consent Law and the Making of Modern Childhood in New York City, 1886-1921," *Journal of Social History* 35, no. 4 (2002): 784.

⁵¹ Edward Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance. Purity Movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1977), 171.

International Congress Henry Chase in fact reported to the European audience that “we have in the United States of America...no organized system of White Slavery.”⁵² Chase did not probably intend to minimize the issue that American Purity reformers had constantly tackled, but the atmosphere in the U.S. did not yet allow for a consideration of “fallen women” as helpless captives. Chase was the spokesperson for an attitude informed by awareness, but not yet by urgency; suffice it to think that, in 1902, the first major Vice Commission of the twentieth century, the New York Committee of Fifteen, issued a report which contained only a passing reference to forced prostitution and never used the term white slavery.⁵³ However, also in the United States, chattel slavery was slowly being turned into a usable sign and its dramatic force was channeled to call attention to issues unrelated to the black cause. To use Barthes’s vocabulary, slavery, whose meaning was distorted in the presence of the original sign, was undergoing an “alienation.”⁵⁴

2.3. An Implicit Defense of Whiteness

Displaced to the mythical realm, the alienated concept acquires a sort of ubiquity, becoming at once “intellective and imaginary, arbitrary and natural.”⁵⁵ The “alienated” usage of race-bondage had not overwritten but rather stirred the sexual unconscious of slavery; more precisely, it unchained the accumulated memories of violence and prejudice through which the black body had been sexually coded and its gendered expressions had been imprinted in the white imaginary. Between 1830 and 1860 the comparison between wage labor and chattel slavery was voiced in a fashion that was as insistent as it was embarrassed. While chattel slavery obviously stood for denial of liberty, blackness symbolized a peculiar form of degradation. As Roediger puts it, “racism, slavery and republicanism combined to require comparisons of hirelings and slaves, but the combination also required white workers to distance themselves from Blacks even while the comparisons were being made.”⁵⁶ Genteel factory women in particular

⁵² The White Slave Trade, *Transactions of the International Congress on the White Slave Trade* (London: 1899, 156-154) As quoted in Grittner, *White Slavery*, 53.

⁵³ See *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁴ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 123.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 66.

seemed to find the term loathsome, and all the more so because of the silent association with the sexual exploitation inherent in the plantation economy.⁵⁷

The endorsement of a slavery discourse in the context of female factory work tended to interrogate the notion of propriety in a way that male work did not. Two apparently distant examples can highlight this subtext. When, in the 1840s, reformer Orestes Brownson called female factory workers the “white slaves of the North,” his definition expressed less his condemnation of the manufacturers as northern “slave holders” than his pity of girls persisting in a “mentally stultifying, physically unhealthy, and morally ruinous” activity which made them virtually unmarriageable.⁵⁸ Almost seventy years later, labor organizer Clara Lemlich adopted the same analogy in her article “Why Waistmakers Strike.”⁵⁹ Among other things she lamented: “They [the bosses in the shops] yell at the girls and they ‘call them down’ even worse than I imagine Negro slaves were in the South.”

Lemlich’s peculiarity during the New York strikes of 1909⁶⁰ was to convey the grievances of the working women through a language of feminine style which not only claimed political entitlement but also personal dignity.⁶¹ As historian Daniel Bender remarks, the memoirs of female and male workers suggest that the American garment industry of the Progressive Era was ridden with everything from “salacious bantering” to explicit sexual demands. The analysis of these behaviors offers a glimpse into the consolidation of shop-floor hierarchies through abuses which women of the time did not have sufficient language to denounce. Allusions to inappropriate language, as in Lemlich’s case, were often coded condemnations either of sexually based insults or of verbal—and often physical—harassment.⁶² “To work like a slave” might as well have been common

⁵⁷ Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 196-198, reprinting Clementine Averill’s Letters from a Factory Girl to Senator Clemens (1850); Foner, *Factory Girls*, 25, 33. As referenced in *Ibid.*, 85.

⁵⁸ Julie Husband and Jim O’Loughlin, *Daily Life in the Industrial U.S. 1870-1900* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), 118.

⁵⁹ Lemlich, Clara, “Leader tells why 40,000 Girls Struck,” *New York Evening Journal*, November 26, 1909, 3. Nan Enstad clarifies that, although Lemlich is listed as the author of the article, a preamble explains that she told the story to a reporter. It is still the best available source produced by a striking worker herself. Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*, 234.

⁶⁰ The strike referenced is the New York “Uprising of the 20,000” of 1909: thirteen weeks during which over 20,000 employees in the shirtwaist trade (75 percent of which were young women, mostly of immigrant origin) quit the sewing machines to protest the ridiculous wages and unbearable conditions.

⁶¹ For Lemlich’s use of the idiom of working class ladyhood and her emphasis on aesthetic self-fashioning see Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*.

⁶² Harassment, as Bender suggests, could also be seen as one example of shop-floor sexuality, many forms of which were profitable and promising for a serene marital future. Yet, sexual

parlance,⁶³ yet, it is clear in both these cases that “slavery” is used as a marker meant to form, in the mind of the audience, the picture of an unacceptable transmutation: the metamorphosis of southern Negroes into white girls who were sexually endangered, morally challenged and socially ruined.

In Brownson’s depiction the surface of pietism is a veneer through which a disturbing connection is perceivable: these girls look all the more wretched because they are excluded from the possibility of endogamically merging into the good ranks of society, a condition which likens them to black slaves. In Lemlich’s wording, slavery is parenthetically situated between a verb pertaining to fantasy (“I imagine”) and the concluding temporal unit of pre-emancipation America (“were”). The resulting operation is the superimposition of lady workers, who are suffering in the present, onto what Lemlich phrases as a solved problem of American society—at least grammatically so. In such denunciatory contexts, both an external observer like Brownson and a direct toiler like Lemlich, adopted slavery as a trope which did not entail a sympathetic understanding of the black cause. On the contrary, they practiced an oppositional rhetoric that functioned according to a dynamic of “strategic self-othering.” Kobena Mercer defines such mode as “a logic of reversal that overvalorizes the identification with racial otherness...[as] expressive of disaffiliation from dominant self-images.”⁶⁴ In a similar way, Lemlich’s use of the trope of slavery suggests the encoding of an antagonistic subject-position in relation to the norms of her own society: the metaphoric reference to the South signals a strategy of disaffiliation that capitalized on the “emancipatory” thoughts of antebellum Christian advocates and abolitionists.

harassment was a practice “which transformed workplace heterosexuality in a sphere of power that, in some cases, blurred class contestations” insofar as bosses and coworkers alike, often in tacit alliance, perpetrated it. Daniel E. Bender, “Too Much of Distasteful Masculinity,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, no. 4 (2004): 96.

⁶³ Roediger points out that the expression “slaving like a nigger” was a “pattern of usage common in American English, since the 1830s. “Not only was *nigger work* synonymous with hard, drudging labor but to nigger it meant “to do hard work”, or “to slave”. “White niggers” were white workers in arduous unskilled jobs or in subservient positions.” Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 144-145. Also see Julie Husband, “‘the White Slavery of the North’: Lowell Mill Women and the Reproduction of ‘Free’ Labor,” *Legacy* 16, no. 1 (1999): 11-21. Laura Hapke, “A Shop Is Not a Home: Nineteenth Century American Sweatshop Discourse,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 2, no. 3 (2001): 49.

⁶⁴ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle, New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 301.

In a referential sense, both Lemlich and Brownson were looking for an idiom through which they could denounce a more encompassing degradation than the barbarous working conditions alone could provoke. They thus pledged the poignancy of their cause by recurring to the analogy with slavery, confident that the unspeakable association it would produce between the condition of “girl” and that of “slave” would stimulate their audience’s emotions to the highest degree. The significant difference distinguishing Brownson’s from Lemlich’s “appropriation” is that Lemlich is a subaltern subject herself, and that she does not speak from the paternalistic positions typical of the various “Christian gentlemen” or gentlewomen “who are always to be found in the front ranks of every crusade.”⁶⁵ The relatively uneducated labor organizer could rearticulate “slavery” from her particular standpoint because “throughout the modern period, the semiotic stability of the nodal system in racist ideology had been undermined and thrown in a state of dialectical flux”.⁶⁶ With Lemlich we reach the point in this dialectical process where one can produce self-representation by means of inversion, that is, by giving way to a form of imitation in which one identifies with the devalorized term of the black/white binary, but stops short of making such a gesture a verbal act of self-abjection.⁶⁷ To Lemlich, slavery is an “alibi”⁶⁸ whose value she refers to only symbolically.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, in a time when minister and professor Arthur T. Abernethy⁷⁰ pursued a full-scale presudoscientific study to demonstrate the racial kinship between Jews and African-Americans—and consequently their mutual status as debased humans—a move like Lemlich’s also hinted at a kinship of unfair oppression uniting African-Americans and Jews, while simultaneously warding off her own specificity, both ethnic and social.

Within this logic of concurrent association and distancing, also male immigrants of diverse descent who did not fully participate in the socio-symbolic

⁶⁵Emma Goldman, "Traffic in Women," in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, (1911) 1969), 181-82.

⁶⁶Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 294.

⁶⁷ For those who want to follow more thoroughly the wide and ambivalent matter of the Jewish attitude towards slavery see the bibliography in Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 253.

⁶⁸ I use “alibi” here as discussed by Barthes, *Mythologies*, 123.

⁶⁹ Lemlich actually does not make any reference to the African-American community that, by 1909, was already conspicuous in New York and whose life conditions—small elite excluded, were probably as deplorable as the new immigrants’.

⁷⁰ The reference is to the book titled *The Jew a Negro* (1910) as mentioned in Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*. 42-43, 251

realm of whiteness, apprehended slavery as a sort of residual taboo emanating a sacred fear of identification—less with chattel, than with blackness. The turn-of-the-century discussion on wage slavery did not necessarily dismiss the seriousness of chattel slavery, but it certainly purported claims to full whiteness on the part of immigrant workers which cast their black counterparts far beyond the pale of solidarity. The idiom of white supremacy adumbrated in part of the labor cause becomes apparent in the numerous frightening depictions of the “black strikebreakers,” a category that, most famously in Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, is represented in opposition to organized labor and discredited through what Eugene Leach labels “mob stigma”⁷¹ and, again, through a rhetoric of exceptional sexual incontinence.⁷² In short, if the usage of the trope slavery for labor or sexual exploitation was efficient in voicing ineffable outrage, it needed, when predicated on white subjects, to be recast with the notion of continence for men and purity for women.

The redefinition and the contextual defense of whiteness was not an enterprise limited to the world of labor. Its salience was fostered by different factors—prominent among them the American imperialist adventure. Already in the 1950s, the salient nativism scholar John Higham was pointing out that “the reaction from imperial euphoria brought back the vague fears of the nineties about the Anglo-Saxons’ stamina.”⁷³ The entry of Philippinos and other people of color into the population increased the degree of complexity along which society perceived skin-color hierarchies. This new configuration also allowed some

⁷¹ On the black strikebreaker see Eugene Leach, “Chaining the Tiger: The Mob Stigma and the Working Class, 1863-1894,” *Labor history* 35, no. 2 (1994).; Mark Noon, ““It Ain’t Your Color, It’s Your Scabbing,”” *African American Review* Fall (2004), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2838/is_3_38/ai_n13794922/, Eric Arnesen, “Specter of the Black Strikebreaker: Race, Employment, and Labor Activism in the Industrial Era,” *Labor History* 44, no. 3 (2003). and Michael J. Duvall, “Processes of Elimination: Progressive Era Hygienic Ideology, Waste, and Upton Sinclair’s *the Jungle*,” *American Studies* 43, no. 3 (2002).

⁷² “The ancestors of these black people had been savages in Africa; and since then they had been chattel slaves, or had been held down by a community ruled by the traditions of slavery. Now for the first time they were free—free to gratify every passion, free to wreck themselves...so whiskey and women were brought in by the car-load and sold to them, and hell was loose in the yards...and with the night there began a saturnalia of debauchery—cenes such as never before had been witnessed in America.” Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Signet Classics, (1906) 2001), 313. The sense of disorder associated with the black strikebreaker borders on fears of miscegenation conveyed through allusion to sexual potency and venereal infection: “young white girls from the country rubbing elbows with big buck Negroes” and “the nameless disease of vice were soon rife; and this where food was being handled which was sent out to every corner of the civilized world.”

⁷³ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land. Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, (1955) 2007), 146.

groups—most famously the Irish the Italian and the Jews—to legitimate their claims to whiteness in a way that was, up to then, not possible. As Higham put it, the nationalist feelings generated by the Spanish-American War enabled “the guardians of white supremacy to discharge their feelings on new foreign groups.”⁷⁴ The victories of 1898, spread all over the country a revived jubilant anglo-saxonism so that, not entirely coincidentally, “the period of overseas expansions coincided with a general tightening of the race lines” in the Southern States. In other words, from “the crucible of the empire” a certain homogenization reverberated towards the mainland. As Matthew Frye Jacobson observes, some press commented in 1898 that it was “partly by juxtaposition to the ‘small black morsel’ of Hawaii that the Celtic community in the United States became so comfortably ‘Caucasian.’”⁷⁵ About a decade later, before a House committee, it is from the voice of a Texan congressman that, not only the Irish, but all the members of the “light-haired, blue eyed” nations of Europe are declared “Pure Caucasians” and therefore inherently deemed capable of self-government.⁷⁶

The convergence of race and fitness for self-government encroaches on class distinction in such a way that the Progressive Era “witnessed a fracturing of whiteness into a hierarchy of plural and scientifically determined white race.”⁷⁷ The mosaic of Caucasianism featured abundant internal divisions, often mimicking the old parameters that ideologically separated whites from blacks. Once color alone ceased to be an accountable descriptor, class markers and “fitness” for self-governance assumed prominence, and the old master-slave narratives were revisited in order to define, or abolish, new fine differences. As Jackson Lears intimates, “the rising significance of race” deepened its roots in the socio-economic realm as part of a broader impulse to seek certainties.⁷⁸ Among these longed-for certainties, one can indubitably count the ideal of female purity that the white slavery hysteria seemed both to mourn and to re-establish. The

⁷⁴Ibid.,169.

⁷⁵Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 204.

⁷⁶ Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 171.

⁷⁷ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 7.

⁷⁸ More specifically Lears suggests that “modern racism provided...solidity to personal identity, in a secularizing market society where most forms of identity were malleable and up for sale.” Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation. The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 93.

domestic Victorianism underlying this social desire was far from merely nostalgic. Revisited in the light of American imperialism, it pointed at the structural opposition signified in the separation of spheres which envisioned, according to Amy Kaplan, not the domestic as opposed to the public, but rather the domestic as opposed to the foreign: “When we oppose the domestic to the foreign, men and women will become national allies against the alien, and the determining division is not gender but racial demarcation of otherness.”⁷⁹ From this perspective, like the sentimental novels of the 1850s showed a connection between women and domesticity “defining the contours of the nation and its shifting borders with the foreign,” so the different treatments of prostitution in the 1910s exposed the intricate means by which the discourse on female purity generated and relied on images of the foreign.⁸⁰

3. The Chapters

This study is intended neither as a reiteration of the debate on the mythological nature of white slavery, nor as a survey of white slave literature, or as a taxonomical elaboration of female types in the Progressive Era. It is rather a work of cultural history in which the significance of two female paradigms of the period, the New Woman and the White Slave, is explored through the Progressive attitude towards prostitution, a multifaceted response which articulated growing anxieties concerning issues of personal, social, political and racial nature. This exploration covers different materials arranged and analyzed to show how the trope of slavery, once severed from its Middle Passage legacy and applied to white subjects, became functional in transferring the paternalistic belief that black people were unfit for self-governance first on the working and immigrant classes and, during the period of the white-slavery scare, on American-born women—regardless of their class. At the same time, I underscore how the creative force of the white slavery metaphor overflowed from the social to the legal realm, thus compounding the fleecy matter of the myth into juridical precedents and legal subjects. In the hands of the law the archetypal enslaved body, male, black, held in chain by a never prosecuted white villain, officially acquires the features of

⁷⁹ Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998): 582.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*: 582, 91.

the sexually captive white woman whose ethnic or dark master is dutifully charged, tried and sentenced.

In chapter one, I provide an account of womanhood in the Progressive Era by tracing patterns of change from the Victorian period to WWI. In particular I revise the critical interpretations of the Victorian Cult of True Womanhood as defined by Barbara Welter in the mid-sixties and continue with a discussion of social Maternalism from its beginnings in the early temperance movement to the reception of its legacy on the part Progressive female reformers. The survey is organized so as to emphasize the changing implications of the ideology of domesticity from the signals of internal erosion already adumbrated in Victorianism to the overt repeal of the domestic associated with the figure of the New Woman. In addition to deploying the dominant understanding of this female archetype and the threat to the status quo represented by newly enabled women, the chapter supplements the traditional catalogue of middle-class New Womanhood with working class examples of modern femininity such as labor activists, independent earners, informal prostitutes and the initiators of the art of treating.

In chapter two, I conduct my analysis in the field of literature with a reading of Alice Wellington Rollins's novel *Uncle Tom's Tenements* (1888), a novel which has so far received scant critical attention and which provides an eloquent example of how the superimposition of chattel slavery and immigrant wage slavery was accomplished in the literary and social imaginary. Rollins's adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's sentimental novel exploits abolitionist themes and rhetoric to pledge the cause of the tenement dwellers. Her Irish immigrants, eerily reminiscent of Stowe's negroes, suffer the consequences of irresponsible capitalist greed and seem to be vowed to moral decay. Particularly compelling is Rollins's focus on the sexual vulnerability of female immigrants, a condition she illustrates revealing acute social sensibility as well as bourgeois qualms vis-à-vis female morality and the status of the ethnic Other.

Chapter three centers on the rhetoric of reform and develops some of the public implications of private reform initiatives. Jane Addams's white-slavery writings are analyzed with particular attention to her analogy between the abolition of slavery and the anti-vice campaign of the 1910s. More specifically, I read her language of protection and guidance in relation to the generational

struggle underpinning the reformers' attitude towards the young generations of urban dwellers. The emergence of the concept of adolescence, the affective relation to the innocence of the nation encapsulated in the notion of childhood and a certain iconographical infantilization of the female body are invoked to explain reformative modes of tutelage and prevention which problematically entailed the issue of control. Furthermore, I interpret the proliferation of powerful private committees that propounded the forceful sanitation of the political machine, as well as of society's vices. These groups are discussed within the context of a general impulse, on the part of specific socialities, to compete with the State in the regulation of the private sphere.

In chapter four, I dwell on legal discourse as the field in which the private concerns voiced by certain anti-vice reformers shaped a powerful and lasting legislative agenda. Through the emphasis on adjudication and legislature I wish to illuminate different implications of the search for moral order as they inform the illustrative white-slavery trial of 1910, *People v. Belle Moore* and the White-Slave Traffic Act of the same year. Traversed by interlocking debates on gender, sexuality and race, the legal case consolidates the conjunction of whiteness and innocence in the figure of the sexual slave, while the metaphoric slave-holder turns from ethnic to mulatto. This covert dynamic, taking place against the background of the slumming underworld, foreshadows the preoccupations with miscegenation, the erasure of female sexual consent and the re-segregational impulse which surface in the passing and early enactment of the White-Slavery Act.

The tropological continuum relating chattel slavery to white slavery hinges on the hypertrophic characters of the black man and the white woman, and only leaves residual traces of the other two actors, the white man and the black woman. In this quadruple ballet, ethnic and racial boundaries are redrawn and, in the new language of the modern age, the sexual policing of the color line betrays the anxiety of whiteness under siege. Although in my account of the story, the smudged footprints of the two latter actors sometimes come to the fore unexpectedly, this work principally focuses on a Janus-faced configuration of womanhood—predominantly, though not exclusively, white. The New Women and the White Slaves populating every chapter in this study are sometimes in direct contraposition, sometimes act in solidarity and sometimes inhabit each

other's subconscious, but together they substantially inform and exceed the "woman's sphere," teetering inside and outside its ever shifting borders.

FROM “TRUE” TO “NEW”

PATTERNS OF CHANGE IN AMERICAN WOMANHOOD

1. Have We Ever Been Victorian?

The recent scholarship addressing the shifting sexual regimes of the previous *fin-de-siècle* has irrevocably complicated the trajectory of sexual history in the United States. Investigations of late Victorianism surveying its now acknowledged variety of socio-sexual practices have worked with the notion of “transition” as a figure for the watershed between the nineteenth century ethos and the subsequent more modern mores. Such transition has been explained as an acquisition of sexual liberalism fostered by interdependent social factors, such as industrialization and the erosion of the patriarchal family, and precipitated by the impact of immigrants and industrial workers, groups who rose to the social surface bringing about different understandings of sexuality. This thesis is interestingly rendered in *Intimate Matters*,¹ a widely read book that aligns itself with attempts, not infrequent among historians, to make sense of the proliferation of sexual orders of the late nineteenth century through the oppositional categories of “mainstream” and “exception.”² According to this logic, Victorianism is the mainstream ideology which dominated the Gilded Age, while all groups not directly addressed by its predicaments—the working-class, people of color, immigrants—can be accounted for as exceptions. As Catherine Cocks convincingly argues, this procedural mode, although productive, entails the risk of caricaturing a complex social field and reducing a significant change to the optimistic tale of disembodied progression from repression to liberation.³ Furthermore, although the idea of a twentieth-century watershed is

¹ John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 172-73.

² Catherine Cocks, “Rethinking Sexuality in the Progressive Era,” *The Journal of Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5, no. 2 (2006): 93.

³ *Ibid.*: 112.

indispensable, existing research, such as Helen Horowitz's extensive *Rereading Sex*, has disputed the idea of a repressed Victorian era by illustrating a wide panorama of contrasting sexual cultures competing against each other for public approval.⁴

The dissatisfaction with wide-sweeping historiographical solutions only confirms that the general mechanism of sexual change at the turn of the century contains levels of complexity which not only enrich the range of variables as new research is produced, but also regard the internal stratifications of every single regime—including the dominant one not. In this sense, the awareness that the tenets of Victorian female etiquette were, in fact, restricted in their application to a distinct set of women, does not make their analysis less necessary. If the white, urban, Protestant middle class did exercise hegemony over other Americans in the arena of sexuality, then it also promoted institutional and cultural formations which drastically affected people outside their cohort. In other words, exactly because some of the power discerned at the heart of “the true woman's sphere was always the power of some women over others”⁵ the investigation of the complexity of the Victorian True Woman and her filiation with the Progressive New Woman, becomes compelling. As a result of the interdependence between the female groups designated by and the ones excluded from the dominant ideal, the plural emergence of more liberated demeanors in the Progressive Era traversed economic, political and also racial contexts.⁶

⁴ Horowitz maintains that what is mainly understood as Victorian sexuality boils down only to the body of admonitions and prescriptions produced to discipline what she terms “vernacular Sexuality”. She re-reads the sexual discourse in nineteenth-century America as a complex “four-way conversation” and discerns these four voices in four respective frameworks. The first is American vernacular sexual culture, a largely “oral tradition outside the literate discourse of religion, science and law” based on humoral theory and carrying a strong erotic edge. The second framework is Evangelical Christianity and its deep distrust of the flesh, a framework whose strength grew through lay efforts to support and spread Sunday schools, Bible and missionary societies. The third framework is connected to the new literature of sexuality which, beginning in the 1830s, assumed the term “reform physiology” to designate the efforts to describe the reproductive organs and their functions and to prescribe healthful ways of living. At an outer edge Horowitz identifies the fourth framework in the new sensibility that placed sex at the center of life, celebrating sexual experimentation, “complex marriages” and a total surrender to the reproductive impulse. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 4-9.

⁵ Tracy Fessenden, “Gendering Religion,” *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 1 (2002): 165.

⁶ In *Beyond Separate Spheres* Rosalind Rosenberg also located the beginnings of modern studies of sex difference in the Progressive Era. See Kerber, “Separate Spheres,” 26.

Especially in the light of the theoretical and empirical work of the past few decades,⁷ a thoughtful approach should resist the opposition between repressed Victorians and liberated moderns. The formulations often employed in the depiction of Victorianism as the era of absolute sexual repression are generally based on questionable assumptions that Michel Foucault famously disputes in his *History of Sexuality*. One of the oldest fallacies in the repressive argument takes the signs of a certain repressive attitude as evidence of the complete obliteration of sexual discourse. This idea is virtually unsustainable in the post-Freudian era, when the notion of active repression of a sexual regime is associated less with its erasure than with its dissemination in the symbolic realm.⁸ More to the point, in discussing “the repressive hypothesis,” Foucault questions the nineteenth century family being a monogamic conjugal cell. Quite on the contrary, he saw it structured around a “network of pleasures and powers linked together at multiple points” which made the family into a complicated regulatory apparatus exceeding the dynamics of reproduction and inhibition.⁹ Empirical research, produced even before the Foucauldian thought gained its full sway in American historiography, demonstrated how women found in the subtleties of such apparatus chunks of usable discourse which they morphed into an unexpected counterlanguage.

For example, scholars who investigated specific groups and localities documented how, at the height of the Victorian ethic, symptoms of female sexual assertiveness within dominant arrangements were producing alterations in the social dynamic between the sexes and foreshadowed women’s future

⁷ See Sharon Ullman, *Sex Seen: The Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America* (Berkeley: 1997).; Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). and Sharon Wood, *The Freedom of the Streets: Work, Citizenship, and Sexuality in a Gilded Age City* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). locate the cities of Sacramento, Portland, and Davenport within mobile circuits of labor, commercial amusements, and newly emerging ideas about sex, sex work, class, and gender. On cross-class relations among women, see Ruth Alexander, *The “Girl Problem”* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998) and Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girl: Unmarried Mothers and the Socialization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). These bibliographical indications are referenced in Cocks, “Rethinking Sexuality in the Progressive Era,” 107.

⁸ “It is quite possible that there was an expurgation...of the authorized vocabulary. It may indeed be true that a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor was codified...At the level of discourses and their domains, however, practically the opposite phenomenon occurred. There was steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex-specific discourses, different from one another both by their form and their object.” Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction Vol.1* trans. R. Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 17-18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

advancements both in the private and in the public domain.¹⁰ In the same way, modern interpretations of sentimental fiction highlighting the gender-variety of the practitioners of this politically powerful genre,¹¹ analysis of the visual representations of female ideals,¹² as well as studies deliberately countering dyadic models of power arrangements in antebellum America,¹³ have demonstrated that the female/private and the male/public spheres were never completely separate but rather osmotically, albeit asymmetrically, connected.

In this light, the transition from the desexualized “True Woman” of 1800 to the more liberated “New Woman” of the turn of the century denotes a phenomenon that is intrinsically resistant to a comprehensive general theory, and whose symptoms are often scripted within manifestations that appear confining. The rise of sexual modernity emerges from a plethora of diverse patterns, which, in their dominant configuration, remain inevitably white and middle-class. The way in which this hegemonic ideal adjusts itself also responds to the pressure exerted by alternative female socialities—differences of origin, color or occupation—identified by the middle class as utterly alien. Thus, in the endeavor to unearth the multiple roots from which the New Woman developed, some conceptual labels of Victorianism need to be retained and re-rubricated. An understanding of the Victorian “feminine mystique” can illuminate the genealogy of the feminine typologies which appeared during the age of Civilized Morality as well as help us focus on the peculiar currency that feminine sexuality gained very early on in the century.

¹⁰ For the study of localities see Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: Norton & Co., 1984).; Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).; and Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere in New England", 1780-1833* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

¹¹ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs. The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word. The Rise of the Novel in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint. The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

¹² Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

¹³ Lora Romero, *Home Fronts. Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

1.1. The Cult of True Womanhood and Its Resignification

Writing in the mid-1960s, historian Barbara Welter reinforced the centrality of the metaphor of the separate spheres and enriched American women's history with an enduring nineteenth-century stereotype which she called the "Cult of True Womanhood."¹⁴ The essay, distilled from a thorough exploration of nineteenth-century literature that covered etiquette manuals, novels, sermons and journals, offered the formula that, through endless chains of quotes and academic cross references, cast Victorian femininity under four adamant headings: piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness.¹⁵ The notion of a woman's place was thereby not only codified but carefully constructed as a quasi-pastoral and intensely religious environment inhabited by a selfless, prolific paladin. This female exemplum would defend her "greatest (intimate) treasure" and her home alike by acting as the dislocated morality of her husband, busy in the pursuit of wealth and progress. Although brave and solid, this woman was trained to be content with her lot and to acutely perceive her inborn dependence, so that she would accept oppression in the form of protection.

The clarity of Welter's style and the straightforwardness of her argument made her seem like the propagator of a supposedly transparent window into women's experience. Even though many scholars discerned the complications of the ideal she recorded and linked it to a larger sociopolitical context, the dominant image which was retained from her study featured a Victorian woman helplessly "bounded by kitchen and nursery, overlaid with piety and purity, and crowned with subservience."¹⁶ As a consequence, already in the 1980s the word "cult" had dropped out of professional historians' usage. Still its challenge remained, and even today Welter's article fosters discussion about how much a set of boundaries expected to be observed by women only pertained to an ideology imposed on them and how much of it led to a culture created by women in reaction to the same.¹⁷ In the last decade much has been done to provide Welter's seminal text with a deserved fresh read and the token description it often

¹⁴ Linda Kerber intimates that Welter was influenced to a certain degree by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and that her essay was a "frank attempt to do for the nineteenth century what Friedan had done for the twentieth." Kerber, "Separate Spheres," 11.

¹⁵ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966).

¹⁶ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985), 13.

¹⁷ Kerber, "Separate Spheres," 17.

warrants has proved to be, even today, an intriguing basis for a discussion on Victorian womanhood.¹⁸

A survey of the addressees of the prescriptive corpus Welter considered reveals the patriarchal relations that required and produced the cult. The impetus for the cult's establishment came from upwardly mobile men who needed to instruct an internal defender to the "single locus of sexuality" at the heart of every household, that is, the "utilitarian and fertile" parents' bedroom.¹⁹ The focus on the specifically coercive aspects of this domestic mystique allowed Welter to articulate the darker side of the cult suggesting, for example, that it was embraced by those women who had the most opportunities—probably the same women to whom exclusion from the middle class represented a social and personal tragedy. The cult appeared to be designed as a deterrent against the wordly curiosity of women who were sensitive to education and art; who read magazines, sermons and cookbooks; who were so literate as to produce a few stanzas on demand for impromptu consumption. In brief, the cult spoke to women who were amenable to intellectual life and might develop the potential for criticizing the separation of spheres. Operating as a prosthetic device which "gear[ed] intellect to the hymen,"²⁰ the cult served to limit the unwanted effects of external stimuli and to safely "stabilize" the female role in society. Contained and controlled within the private sphere, women could be projected in the form of a symbolic adornment meant to decorate the dominant culture. As Freud had pointed out, the discipline of sexuality for the sake of work and cultural achievement set apart the middle and upper classes from the lazy, idle rich as well as from the promiscuous, alien poor.²¹ In this light, the perfectly chiseled True Woman was a flawless carnation on the lapel of the emerging bourgeoisie, a badge of prestige and moral self-legitimation for the leading classes of the new world.

One of the main critiques raised against Welter's article was that she pursued the ways in which a quite specific category of women came to stand for "the woman" as seemingly universal. In this sense the author reproduced the anxiety and the single-minded intent of her sources: the cult—or better the bible-

¹⁸ Leila Rupp, "Women's History in the New Millennium," *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 1 (2002).

¹⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 3.

²⁰ Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 153.

²¹ Hale, *Freud and the Americans : The Beginnings of Psychoanalysis in the United States; 1876 - 1917*, 26.

toting crowd which produced the documents used by Welter—unquestionably submerged differences among women, and very knowingly so. The resulting ethos would not have appeared as distinctly constitutive of a morally superior class had it accepted divergent female typologies. Predictable deviations from the norm, in fact, were already sanctioned as unnatural exceptions to be relegated to the realm of beastly sub-humanity. As the sources warn, unmotherly women embodied a threat to the survival of humanity while fallen ones gave themselves to madness or death; independent ladies were deemed tamperers with the laws of the Universe, while irreligious ones incarnated “the lowest level of human nature.” The peremptoriness of these admonitions resonated during the Progressive Era in the notion of “race suicide,” in the many literary deaths befalling unchaste women and in the ferocious retaliations perpetrated against female rights activists.

The emphasis on religion produced a precise correlation between this specific notion of womanhood and the “exceptionalist” mould of American culture. The cult, in fact, made wide usage of the label “(true) religion” regardless of the specificity of different denominations. As Tracy Fessenden observed, the primacy of “true” religion was smoothly attributed to Christianity in the species of Protestantism.²² By fastening female nature and religion together, the cult merged the natural, the feminine and the Christian in a quintessential unity. This superimposition put a transcendental seal on women’s exclusion from the secular, but also, more subtly, supported the identification of Protestantism as “the” American religion, thus reinforcing a specific hierarchy in the ever-expanding confessional marketplace.

The continental Victorian ideal, as adopted by the American middle class involved a self-fashioning of American identity, substantiated in Truth. As the adjective “True” preceding the noun “woman” became a synonym for “American,” so the cult became an instrument of assimilation which governed an intricate range of inclusionary and exclusionary criteria. The naturalization of this regulatory construct constituted such an enduring imprint as to shape, to a great extent, future female recalcitrance to pursue forms of enablement which overtly deployed inclusive perspectives in term of secularism, political activism and ethnic origin. As Carl Degler theorized in *At Odds* (1980), the doctrine of

²² Fessenden, “Gendering Religion,” 165.

domesticity so informed even women's activism that it made women more likely to support with fervor causes such as temperance, prostitution abolition and the entry of women in the teaching profession whereas it made them skeptical, for example, of suffrage.²³

Within this interpretive framework, the Cult of True Womanhood reveals its salience as a political project touching on issues of socio-economic control, national identity and gender segregation. In structuring the worlds of the private and the public, the home and the workplace, the family and the professions, the cult maintained class- and race-based hierarchies while justifying women's exclusion from participatory democracy.²⁴ Its ideological impact operated through the notions of naturalness and unnaturalness and, in the light of the Foucauldian lesson, the advantages gleaned from the inscription of "true womanhood" onto the female body are easily understood.²⁵ As Mary Poovey noticed when she wrote that "linking morality to a figure immune to self-interest and competition is integral to economic success," the cult "preserved virtue without inhibiting productivity"²⁶—an eloquent arrangement with regards to the principles animating the burgeoning bourgeoisie.

Was there, behind submission, a certain reward that the women who accepted the promise of domestic happiness and its circumscribed authority could turn to their advantage? The compensation for the implementation of the four virtues was a currency of no little price: respectability. Gertrude Himmelfarb traces the concept of respectability back to Victorian England where it was not only a token of moral distinction but a function of character.²⁷ "Character," at the time, had a more specific meaning than the one concerning the attributes of a person: it indicated a letter of reference that employers wrote in order to testify to the industriousness, sobriety and honesty of their employees. It was a written testimony which constituted precious property of the worker and, as such, was carried on the body at all times so that it could be readily produced if required. The American adoption of "respectability" completely neglected the working-class

²³ Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

²⁴ Mary Louise Roberts, "True Womanhood Revisited," *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 1 (2002).

²⁵ *Ibid.*: 151.

²⁶ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

²⁷ Gertrud Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 32.

side of its origin, but maintained its efficacy. In a similarly selective way, the cult transformed dogmatic virtues into tangible values:²⁸ respectability, certified by men, was carried on the body of women who were able to use it, both in the Victorian times and later in history, to exact the interest on the tribute they paid while being kept “captives of the home.”

Furthermore, respectability was a polyglot medium that spoke transversally to women of different classes and races. By the middle of the nineteenth century, for example, white evangelical churches had largely abjured their working class and non-white origins in order to be recognized as venues of respectability for their now largely middle-class constituencies.²⁹ Studies of respectability in African-American women have shown how black women’s relations to the ideal that defined white women’s experiences were crucial to their own battle.³⁰ In much the same way, debates over women’s lives among workers and immigrants were often conducted in the light cast by the image of respectable northern, white, middle-class ladies.³¹

As respectability became a sort of armor that protected middle class women once they started accessing the public sphere, religiosity—the transcendental deterrent to female ambitions—also roved to contain seeds of emancipatory practices which became enabling devices quite in opposition with the patriarchal dictate inherent the cult. For example Evangelical Protestantism, which in the preaching of Charles Grandison Finney, the so-called Father of Revivalism, became highly popular among middle-class men, unexpectedly held an empowering message for women too: it called them directly to prepare America for Christ’s second coming. Women were therefore invested with a radical potential which, already in the 1830s, started to drive them beyond their domestic thresholds. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg documents, already in 1834 female

²⁸ The passage from Victorian Virtues to Victorian Values is ascribed to a slip of the tongue of Margaret Thatcher, of all people. Thatcher, Himmelfarb reports, was chronicled as describing the values taught by her grandmother as “Victorian values” although her Victorian grandmother would have called them virtues. The author points out that it was not until the present century that morality became so subjectified that virtues became values, a momentous transformation pitting the terminology of modernity against the teaching of classical philosophers. *Ibid.*, 10-11.

²⁹ Fessenden, “Gendering Religion,” 167.

³⁰ Nancy A. Hewitt, “Taking the True Woman Hostage,” *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 1 (2002): 159.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 160.

members of the revivalistic Third Presbyterian Church in New York City formed a society meant to denounce and chastise the inequalities of the double standard.³²

Adopting a Butlerian standpoint,³³ it can be argued that women came to inhabit figures of autonomy through subjection; such autonomy was certainly also gained by abiding by power—as in the case of respectability—but it derived more substantially from a long process of resignification of the practices imposed by the dominant ethos. The force of normalization of the Cult of True Womanhood was slowly undermined through the effects produced by the amplification and distortion of the tenets of the dogma. The semantic field in which this subversion through endorsement has been more diffusely documented is “purity”.

Whereas Foucault’s analysis of Victorian sexuality only discerned the brothel and the mental hospital as the concessions where specific subjects transferred unspoken pleasures onto the order of things which were counted, while elsewhere the “triple edict of taboo, nonexistence and silence” ruled,³⁴ other scholars, on the contrary, have accounted for the ways in which women endorsed that “nonexistence” and transmuted it into empowering instances. Since the mid-seventies, when Smith Rosenberg codified the “female world of love and ritual,” the ways in which restrictive sexual predicaments were turned into protective boundaries for hidden spaces of homosocial female bonding became a classic corollary of the notion of the separation of spheres. In the same way, the understanding of the preposterous notion of passionless as a strategy meant to defend the female body, became widely accepted through Nancy Cott’s work.³⁵

1.2. The Uses of Passionlessness and Feminine Affections

Smith-Rosenberg’s famous research has suggested that the rich world of nineteenth-century female intimacy resulted from the interlacement of psychosexual and structural forces. At the heart of this world lay intense devotion

³² Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Writing History: Language, Class and Gender,” in *Feminist Studies / Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 40.

³³ Judith Butler, “Subjection, Resistance, Resignification: Between Freud and Foucault,” in *The Identity in Question*, ed. John Rachman (London: Routledge, 1995), 229.

³⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 5.

³⁵ See in particular the classic “The Secret World of Love and Ritual” in Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*. And Nancy F. Cott, “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850,” *Signs* 4, no. 2 (1978).

between mothers and daughters, and their intimate bond served as the model for subsequent relations with other women.³⁶ The historian pictures the world of grandmothers, mothers and daughters as a relatively harmonious whole, unscathed by generational struggles which supposedly only broke forth when economic and intellectual change offered to young middle-class women some alternatives to domesticity and marriage. But until that time the world revealed by the analysis of private writings—mainly letters and diaries—rigorously unfiltered by many words, was dense with emotional strength and erotic passion.³⁷

The classic essay, which immediately raised a storm of reactions, re-interpretations, and counter-conclusions, exposed an island of non-hetero-regulated sexuality inside the Victorian framework. Recent scholarship demurs vis-à-vis the romanticism informing the utopian vision of an all-loving female world, a world whose inclusivity is doubted as much as its exclusively female prerogative. Furthermore a reading so grounded in a binaristic vision of nineteenth-century American society is today deemed “ultimately unsatisfactory because it is simply too crude an instrument—too rigid and totalizing—for understanding the different, complicated ways that nineteenth-century American society...functioned.”³⁸ For all its not being exhaustive of complex social arrangements, the window into the dimension of female mutual intimacies opened by Smith-Rosenberg is a valuable instrument for understanding the general tolerance with which many “New Women,” half a century later, could quasi openly establish life-long same-sex relationships which allowed them to eschew the bond of matrimony altogether while living and working independently of men.³⁹ Furthermore it countered the stereotype of a passionless Victorian woman in a way that, notwithstanding the almost too great emphasis on the

³⁶ Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 32. Smith-Rosenberg’s article was first published in 1975 in *Signs* with the title “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America.” It is also included in the author’s collected essays *Disorderly Conduct*, which is the source here referenced.

³⁷ As Smith-Rosenberg dates it, it was only at the end of the nineteenth century that a “medical prototype for female homosexuality” started trespassing the ridiculed limits of caricatural cross-dressing and labeled as unnatural and perverted all those women who expressed love for one another. *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁸ Cathy N. Davidson, "Preface: No More Separate Spheres!," *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998): 445.

³⁹ D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 190-91.

spaces of nurture and affection, did not minimize the impact that the double standard had on women's lives.

The double standard was the principle which institutionalized women's inferiority within wedlock and which, outside of it, acted as regulating criterion of their respectability. As Keith Thomas suggested, the double-standard derived from an economic predicament which necessitated the idea of a passionless woman as warranty of her value within the patriarchal family and represented the legacy of British laws in matter of divorce.⁴⁰ This legal body had its foundation in the patriarchal belief that the wife was a property of the husband; as a consequence women were required to confine their sexuality within the reproductive family while there was no need for men to follow equivalent restrictions. The equation between wives and household items was patent in the norm allowing a betrayed husband to sue his wife's lover for the damage suffered. As Keith Thomas has put it, such lawsuits reflected the economic underpinnings of the double standard and concretized "the view that men have property in women and that the value of this property is immeasurably diminished if the woman has sexual relations with anyone other than her husband."⁴¹ Thomas locates the emergence of the idea of passionlessness in this context as an extension of the ideal of chastity needed to protect men's property rights in women. During Victorianism the significance of this absence grew to represent "a cluster of ideas about the comparative weight of woman's carnal nature and her moral nature" and superseded a traditionally dominant Anglo-American definition of women as especially sexual.⁴²

According to Nancy Cott's historical reconstruction of the concept's development in New England, passionlessness was developed and popularized with the contribution of three phases of British opinion.⁴³ The first phase dates back to the beginning of the eighteenth century when the spokesmen for a new professional middle class began to oppose aristocratic profligacy. Reforming writers such as Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson portrayed sexual

⁴⁰ Keith Thomas, "The Double Standard," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 20 (1959): 210.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Cott, "Passionlessness," 220-21.

⁴³ "Britain led in discussions of female character and place, setting sex-role conventions for the literate audience. Since British social ideals became more influential in the mid-eighteenth century with the diffusion of Protestant energies...British "prescription" must be taken into consideration." *Ibid.*: 223.

promiscuity as a threatening aristocratic excess and opposed it to a brand of bourgeois propriety that emphasized sexual self-control and verbal prudery. The elevation of erotic continence to the high ranks of human virtues found in female, rather than male, chastity the archetype for human morality.⁴⁴ The second phenomenon that exercised great influence was the circulation of etiquette manuals which came from the British upper class. These publications would usually go through dozens of editions in Great Britain and were subsequently widely distributed among middle-class women in America during the first two thirds of the eighteenth century.⁴⁵ The authors recommended a great deal of restraint and highly demure behavior; they did not go as far as to advise that wives should be insensitive to their husbands' attentions, but they hinted at a certain "superior delicacy," a faculty which exposed ladies to a conduct dilemma. Welter noticed the same quandary in her scrutiny of the prescriptive genre in the publications of the following century. Welter illustrates with various examples the dominant idea that the purity of a woman should be "the everlasting barrier against which the tides of man's sensual nature surge."⁴⁶ This levee effect was to be exerted with no apparent pressure and mainly by means of prefiguring to the prospective offender the debasement that a woman's image would suffer in a man's opinion, if she consented to the pleas of that very man. The riddle of marriage itself provided a further ethical paradox since it was the supreme finality for which purity had to be preserved and, simultaneously, the end of innocence.⁴⁷ However, in all this, the necessity of frigidity was neither prescribed nor envisioned with certainty.

Cott argues that the implacable conflation of modesty and passionlessness took place towards the end of the eighteenth century in England at the hand of the British Evangelicals. Originally, the Evangelical didacts of the early eighteenth century considered men to be more suitable to God's purposes and preached the imperative of chastity and prudence for both sexes. Because they acquired awareness of the important impact women had as educators, and confident that

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ [George Savile, Marquis of Halifax], *The Lady's New Year's Gift, or, Advice to a Daughter* (London: Randal Taylor, 1688); Dr. John Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (London: J. Sharpe, 1822). James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women*, new ed. (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1787)

⁴⁶ Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 156.

⁴⁷ Ibid.: 158.

women were by nature particularly pious, they started to focus their proselytizing zeal on women. They took the truism of etiquette books concerning females' sanctifying influence on men and made it the motor of their collective reform project. Their insistence on the lack of ploy and affectation assumed to characterize women's good conduct provided the terms for the syllogism of the natural: if women act modestly and sexually passively, and they did so in total sincerity as their nature commanded, then their nature is to be deaf to the call of passion.⁴⁸

Other historians accord more predominance to other social actors in compounding the required modesty with suspected frigidity: Smith-Rosenberg indicts the medical profession and reports that by the 1860s and 1870s highly respected medical writers "counseled husbands that frigidity was rooted in women's very nature" and therefore locates in the medical profession the main culprit for the restriction of female desire exclusively to reproduction.⁴⁹ Christina Simmons counterintuitively argues that the whole of Victorian repression is a retroactive myth created by an unspecified group of thinkers in order to discredit some outmoded paradigms: the stern matron, the burdensome wife and the emotionally distant career woman. The aim of the operation, Simmons maintains, was to give prominence to the dubiously liberated figure of the flapper:⁵⁰ in her analysis the invention of Victorian passionlessness was the preliminary step towards the artificial inflation of the figure of the flapper, a deliberately overrated icon of newness created by those very think-tanks who aimed at dampening the rise of female influence into the public sphere and at restoring male sexual dominance as normative in modern marriage.⁵¹

Most feminist historians agree that "passionlessness was the other side of the coin which paid, so to speak, for women's admission to moral equality,"⁵² and it was a price that many were willing to pay. The upholding of passionlessness could reverse the Christian tradition of mistrust based on women's sexual treacherousness and, more importantly, foster women's power and self-respect. Actually, the transformation of woman's image from sexual to moral being was

⁴⁸ Cocks, "Rethinking Sexuality in the Progressive Era," 225.

⁴⁹ Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 23.

⁵⁰ Christina Simmons, "Modern Sexuality and the Myth of Victorian Repression," in *Gender and American History since 1890*, ed. Barbara Melosh (London: Routledge, 1993), 27.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Cott, "Passionlessness," 228.

perfected by a woman, Hannah More, who in her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) refuted the idea that women were designed for male erotic consumption and accordingly urged them to establish a strict new level of self-control.⁵³ Her educational program, although based on the belief that human nature was corrupt, revealed to women that the repression of carnal instincts united with exercises of spiritual and intellectual enhancement provided a source of power and independence from men. Along this line of thought, the construct of passionlessness became an active means through which women could alter the categories of social exclusion: by abstaining from bodily contacts with violent or intemperant men, even within marriage, women experimented ways to criticize the double standard of sexual morality and hopefully educate, or ostracize, profligate males. More generally, passionless largely symbolized the revulsion from male domination and an assertion of control in the sexual arena, although sheer denial was not enough to completely reverse patriarchal dispositions. Nonetheless, as Linda Gordon makes clear in her argument for voluntary motherhood, when it was the only available method to sidestep too frequent and dangerous pregnancies, the upholding of passionlessness could be, and was, an instrument of emancipation as well as a lifesaver.⁵⁴

Passionlessness is thus another factor which, in spite of having originated from a masculinist perspective, was resignified to become a female contribution to the creation of Victorian sexual standards. As Howard Gadlin underlined, "the nineteenth-century double standard was the vehicle for a desexualization of desire by both men and women for opposing purposes. Men wanted to desexualize relationships to maintain their domination; women wanted to desexualize relationships to limit male domination."⁵⁵ Active "desexualization" of matrimony on the part of men, that is, the promotion of ignorance in wives so that the double standard could hold safely, caused the degeneration of conscious passionlessness into enforced repression and unawareness—conditions which physically and psychologically impaired women's lives. Furthermore, Cott

⁵³ Cott observes that, in spite of the great differences distinguishing More from Mary Wollstonecraft in matters of politics and personal behavior, the two writers shared indignation with regards to the human degradation that a sexual characterization of women, in their view, entailed. Cott, "Passionlessness," 227.

⁵⁴ Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: Birth Control in America* (New York: Penguin, 1990).

⁵⁵ Howard Gadlin, "Private Lives and Public Order: A Critical View of the History of Intimate Relations in the U.S.," *Massachusetts Review* 17, no. Summer (1976): 318.

observes, the endorsing of passionlessness for the self-preservation and social advancement of women also immobilized women through the exaggeration of sexual propriety and obfuscated the need for sources of power other than moral influence.⁵⁶

2. Make it New

The notion of female sexuality and the notion of a woman's place seem to be mutually constitutive in the progress of female consciousness through the course of the nineteenth century. This progress, plausibly traceable through a dynamic of prescription and resignification, saw the Victorian woman elaborate a sublimated version of her gender role which led her to externalize into society the biologic correlative of womanhood, that is, her maternal function. As a consequence, the domestic dimension of a woman's place widened into the domain of politics. Women's endeavors to govern the public sphere as if it were an extension of the home have been generally indicated as social maternalism, a mode of political agency which characterized the female impact on politics well into the twentieth century. Germinating already in ante-bellum America, this impulse developed throughout the following decades into the eminently political battles fostered by middle-class women. In the course of such battles—for temperance, for civil rights, for social reform—the simultaneous deployment of victimization and enablement, the call for rationalized sexuality, and the attention to politics of public health constituted the vocabulary of female contribution to public life. In mapping the identity of early 20th century new women, one can hardly elude the aspects bequeathed to them by early social maternalism in that significant female figures of the Progressive generation either continued and evolved its tradition, or, in reaction, labored to produce alternative visions meant to exceed its confinements.

Yet, together with the undeniable improvement of social conditions that this movement produced, also grew the furrow that separated the middle-class maternalist reformers from the women who were often identified as object of reform. In fact, the middleclass activists who swept a symbolic broom over the

⁵⁶ Cott, "Passionlessness," 236.

country claimed moral authority over all kinds of regulation and worked to impart restrictive precepts to the lower classes which were deemed incapable of self-government. In this way, the emergence of women onto the public sphere corresponded to an intensification of the frictions between women of different classes. Part of these tensions pivoted on the notion of morality, a set of beliefs and practices which was being reconfigured in all social stratifications. With the rise of the New Woman, in fact, the emphasis on political consciousness was accompanied by a further awareness which, being largely sexual, represented a new challenge to the status quo. And while in the middle classes Victorian passionlessness was gradually superseded by a pervasive passionateness, a parallel awakening, stimulated by the more liberal environment that mixed workplaces offered, was taking place among women of the working and immigrant class.

2.1. The Birth of Social Maternalism

According to Susan Faludi, American women's political consciousness surged in the post-revolutionary decades, when the founding fathers imposed the concept of "republican motherhood." Although this domestic ideal entailed virtual disenfranchisement, it also marked a break with the Puritan conviction that women were less virtuous than men.⁵⁷ The ideology of domesticity determined that women had different mental, moral, and sexual natures from men, and consequently different spheres of influence. Early female reformers, although accepting these predicaments, extended the definition of domestic influence well beyond the home. As Barbara Meil Hobson effectively summarizes "this assertion of women domestic influence in public policy became the wellspring of women's activism throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."⁵⁸ Already in the 1830s, women supported the early temperance movement participating into men run societies. In 1840s, the Daughters of Temperance, a society which stemmed from women's dissatisfaction with the dominance of male reformers,

⁵⁷ The concept of "republican motherhood" invited women to participate in the project of American democracy through the raising of civically virtuous (male) citizens, rather than through direct involvement in public life. The expanded moral duties of republican mothers qualified as virtuous precisely because they were severed from the compromising world of politics. See Susan Faludi, "American Electra: Feminism's Ritual Matricide," *Harper's Magazine* 321, no. 1925 (2010): 35.

⁵⁸ Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 51.

grew to count 20,000 members: this quota made it the largest women's organization before the Civil War.⁵⁹ In his study of temperance and gender in antebellum America, Scott Martin argues that temperance, a patent handmaiden of the emerging middle-class ideology, influenced proto-feminist sentiment and activism more than any other reform cause—abolitionism not excluded. However, he also contends that early female temperance propaganda branded the cultural imaginary with the figure of “the suffering woman,” a disempowering trope that hampered serious challenges of abusive marital authority and which persisted in reform discourse to the present.

In the first post-bellum decades, women's impulse towards active aggregation was rekindled and a massive network of private women's societies developed, informed by circumstances unique to the generation who came of age during the Civil War.⁶⁰ The male term “club” rapidly superseded the traditional descriptor of female gatherings “circle”—the latter an innocuous placeholder evoking needlework and cookies. Leading figures of pre-feminist temper, as for example suffragist Mary Rice Livermore,⁶¹ chose their political weapons from the tradition of a gender conscious culture which harkened back to their youth: from the predicament that women should protect their families and infuse them with moral virtues, they derived the conviction that they should also guide the state along its righteous course.⁶² Therefore, if the initial impetus to the founding of women's clubs was the desire to offer a sort of classroom-like experience in order to initiate or maintain women to intellectual activity, this eminently cultural drive

⁵⁹ Scott C. Martin, *Devil of the Domestic Sphere: Temperance, Gender and Middle Class Ideology, 1800-1860* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008), 4.

⁶⁰ The first and most noteworthy of these clubs, founded in 1868, was Sorosis. It was created by Jane Cunningham Croly in reaction to the exclusion that women suffered from most professional organizations. Croly, for example, was prohibited from joining the male-only New York Press Club dinner in honor of Charles Dickens and reacted by organizing her own club. In the same year the Boston's New England Woman's Club was founded too. Although less literary than Sorosis, it engaged in matters both of cultural and social concern. Sheila M. Rothman, *Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices 1870 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 64.

⁶¹ Born in 1820, Livermore had been reared to accept the traditional vocation of wife and mother, but she gained national reputation as organizer, speaker and fundraisers for dozens of aids societies for war relief during the Civil War. She later became an ardent suffragist and a prominent member of the newly formed AWSA, but never ceased to perpetuate the legend of women's awakening during the Civil War.

⁶² Mary Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920* (Urbana, Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 51.

was soon supplemented with “more varied responsibilities” as the diversity of the associations adhering to the Federation of Women’s Clubs demonstrated.⁶³

Of all the women’s clubs, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), founded in 1873, was the most determined to carry out the new mandate that women should organize to assist one another *and* to be of use to the world.⁶⁴ As Martin amply demonstrates, women’s antebellum temperance work provided a base for the post-war revival of female temperance activism.⁶⁵ In fact, the WCTU was established with the help of the daughters of antebellum temperance activists; this organization, in turn, politicized women in ways that generated public support for the achievement of female vote. As it clearly resounded in the words of the Union’s founder, Frances Willard, the goals of the movement were more radical than the simple purification of society which the white ribbon, the iconic WCTU’s badge, symbolized. Willard kept the scope of the movement wide and potentially subversive by describing its aims as “the blessed trinity of movements:” prohibition, the uplift of labor, and women’s liberation.⁶⁶ By 1900, the WCTU claimed nearly half a million dues-paying members and, as its motto boldly stated, its women would “bless and brighten every place” they entered, and they would indeed “enter every place.”⁶⁷ In brief, with the birth of social maternalism, the location of “a woman’s place” became a hearth so wide as to translate into a multiplicity of urban and rural institutions which proved extremely fertile for the blossoming of a collective gender consciousness.

At the municipal and state level women urged policies aimed at safeguarding the neighborhood through the demand of clean water and pure milk, better schools, kindergartens, playgrounds and public toilets for women. A network of philanthropic societies, from the Charity Organization Society to the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), set out to rescue women at risk

⁶³ In 1892 a general Federation of Women’s Clubs was formed, with some 100,000 members; by 1910 membership was almost a million. Since the opposition of Southern members meant that no African American women’s club would be accepted into the General federation, in 1895 they federated into their own National Association of Colored Women. The phenomenon carried to much evident strength that former president Grover Cleveland in 1904, paternalistically warned women against the dangerous “club habit.” Jean V. Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman: The Women’s Movement in America, 1875-1930* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003), 16, 23.

⁶⁴ Margaret Gibbons Wilson, *The American Woman in Transition: The Urban Influence, 1870-1920* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1979), 95.

⁶⁵ Martin, *Devil of the Domestic Sphere*, 6.

⁶⁶ Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman*, 21.

⁶⁷ France E. Willard, “The Work of the WCTU,” in *Woman’s Work in America*, ed. Annie Nathan Mayer (New York: Reprinted 1972, 1891), 410.

and spread the principles of “educated Motherhood.”⁶⁸ In the early 1900s, a reinforced concern for children health and welfare made women turn more pressingly to the State, so that “women’s issues became one of the routes taken to expand the state at the federal level by protecting the home:”⁶⁹ the Meat Inspection Act (1906), the Food and Drugs Acts (1906),⁷⁰ the Children’s Bureau (1912), the Woman’s Bureau in the Labor Department are examples.

Early clubs and women organizations brought to the fore the revolutionary significance of “organized womanhood,” a mode of action which oriented the newly formed link between womanhood and sisterhood towards public and political horizons.⁷¹ Mary Livermore grasped this emancipatory potential and interpreted the great participation of women into clubs and leagues as “an unconscious protest against the isolation in which women have dwelt in the past; a reaching out after a larger and fuller life.”⁷² Quite along the same line, but in retrospective, Charlotte Perkins Gilman described the club movement as “one of the most important sociological phenomena of the century...marking as it does the first timid steps towards social organization of these so long unsocialized members of our race.”⁷³

Through women’s clubs, and through the maternalist politics they put forth, stale Victorian virtues mutated into Progressive values. The virtues of the True Woman were fixed and certain, more touchstones for the gauging of individual behavior than realistic guidelines.⁷⁴ The club-ladies stripped these virtues of their transcendent shell and immersed them in collective practice: female virtues ceased to be the solipsistic exercise of ascetic, unaware spouses and became values to be imposed on the social marketplace where other standards were competing for primacy. New values entailed new duties, and the latter were taken up with the enthusiasm of freshly found personal liberty, as it was summed up in the *Woman’s Century Calendar* issued by the National American Woman

⁶⁸ Rothman, *Woman's Proper Place*, 5.

⁶⁹ Jean H. Baker, "Getting Right with Women Suffrage," *Journal of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* 5, no. January (2006): 11.

⁷⁰ The Pure Food and Drug Act was also propelled in no small part by the controversy that Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* stirred up. See James Harvey Young, "The Pig That Fell into the Privy: Upton Sinclair's *the Jungle* and the Meat Inspection Amendments of 1906," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 59 (1985).

⁷¹ Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920*, xv.

⁷² Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman*, 23.

⁷³ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (Boston Web Text, 1898), 164.

⁷⁴ Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society*. 12

Suffrage Association (NAWSA).⁷⁵ The new imperative “Not Rights but Duties,” much publicized by slogan-gifted Willard, became the formula which women used in the public pronouncements when trying to urge other women into the public sphere. The traditional understanding of “rights” did not yet enter the semantic field of enablement: “rights” were part of the legacy transmitted by birth and consolidated by status; they were considered an endowment inherent to a certain social station, a given which required no battle for recognition. Contextually, the word “rights” began to be associated with the ghost of radicalism, a connection likely to meet stern opposition or, at best, to raise ridicule.⁷⁶ These pre-feminists intelligently reverted to the socially acceptable concept of “duties” and found it the most fortifying and pliable expression that the domestic lexicon could offer. The resemanticization they operated exploited the currency of “duty” as token of female obedience and passivity, but turned it into an active exhortation to social, and sometimes civil, disobedience.

Willard liked to recall how the act of closing down a saloon affected women. In their initial effort, the ladies usually made up “a gentle, well-dressed and altogether peaceable mob.” But, much to her delight, repeated ventures turned them into an “army drilled and disciplined.” It was an army composed of “beloved home makers and housekeepers who gives us scraps and fragments of their time finding in our Union a nobler form of social interchange than the ceremonious calls and visits of the older times.”⁷⁷ The action described emphasizes exterior self-fashioning and the “drilling.” These two aspects were crucial to the formation of a somatic repertoire which ensured the unapologetic physical occupation of traditionally male social spaces. The characteristics of the female attack to the public sphere were thus laid out: the well-dressed mob which turns, through embodied practices, into a disciplined army was the military unit which defined the main radical battles for women’s rights of the Progressive Era—namely the race to the ballot and the labor agitations of the teens. From this perspective, the mid century belligerent lady was a proto-New Woman. Her early maternalist politics aided the surreptitious metamorphosis of the Victorian “Cult of True

⁷⁵ The *Calendar* listed all the main developments for women over the course of the previous century, from married women’s property right laws to the expansion of women’s education. Yet, it stated that the greatest achievement worthy of listing was the personal liberty conceded to women to do, to say, to go, to be what one pleases. Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman*, 4.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷⁷ Rothman, *Woman's Proper Place*, 67.

Womanhood” while providing, beyond the sentimental façade of home and hearth, performative practices of emancipation.

Maternalism was, in many ways, a direct progenitor of the Progressive sensibility. The female reformers who inherited different strands of its tenets—the founders of the Settlement Houses, most of the suffrage movement and, more generally, early feminist thinkers and writers—renewed its core, incorporating the concerns of modern times. In so doing they interjected new female groups, mainly of immigrant origin and working-class extraction, that were negotiating their own participation into the ways of modern America. Somehow unknowingly, these latter groups defied the unity of the notion of “woman” as it had been endorsed during the Gilded Age, and as the consolidated middle class forcefully propounded.

2.2. The Progressive Generation

The fracturing of female isolation was the first step towards the liberation of the “hostage of the home” and constituted the core of what Cott defines “the grounding of modern feminism.”⁷⁸ In this light, it is plausible to accept that, when people in the nineteenth century spoke of the advancement of “woman,” or of the cause of “woman,” they did not intend to amalgamate the differences inside the gender, but rather to symbolize the unity of the female sex.⁷⁹ Nonetheless, the emphasis on “woman” as a homogeneous category and on “mother” as a controlling mode of action have been stigmatized by historians in their restrictive connotations, and have been indicated as *the* token of women’s participation into Progressivism, thus overshadowing the real struggles that these women carried out. In this respect, historian Elisabeth Perry, has recently denounced how, in the historiographical tradition of Progressive activism, the gender issue has often been reduced to the marginal agitation for mothers’ needs on the part of naively self-proclaimed “mothers of the nation.”⁸⁰ The pervasiveness of such generalization minimizes the challenge of social maternalism to the traditional

⁷⁸ Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987).

⁷⁹ This interpretation is suggested by Cott in *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁰ Alice Kessler-Harris is reported to observe that much of the “maternalist” legislation advocated by female activists resulted in “paternalist” consequences for women, that is, restrictions that only entrenched their socio-economic subordination. Elisabeth Israel Perry, “Men Are from the Gilded Age, Women Are from the Progressive Era,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* 1, no. 1 (2002).

boundaries between private and public, men and women, state and civil society.⁸¹ Woman-led reform performed a critical function in spite of the paternalist consequences that some maternalist legislation produced.⁸² The issue of labor catalyzed some of these contradictory beliefs; for example, most early maternalists were in favor of family wage, that is, a higher pay to male workers, so substantial as to free wives of financial responsibilities in the family.⁸³ In practice, some policies did favor the contribution of direct economic help to needy wives, but similar measures did not erode the primacy of the middleclass wife as a paragon of universal femininity outside of which the familial arrangements presented by women of different class or ethnicity were thought of as exceptions

Such unresponsiveness came from afar. The bourgeois ethos from which social maternalism originated could not be decoupled from the desire for distinction both from the corrupt upper classes as well as from the abject poor. If early temperance activists targeted in great measure the drinking habits of the lower classes, in the same way many Progressives notoriously agitated against a wide range of activities, which the lower layers of society practiced as recreation, or for lack of better option. This ambivalent attitude has been recorded as a sheer effort to control the immigrant working classes, under the cover of pity; more moderate scholars, such as Perry for example, locate the problem with moral reforms in the fact that they necessarily demanded a great amount of social control, a feature incompatible with the recalcitrant potential of the lower classes.⁸⁴ Indeed, the issue of control undeniably represents the political dark side of reform, yet, one cannot avoid noticing how the efforts of many activists seemed to bespeak the equivocality of incompatible cultural codes, rather than utilitarian bad faith. The reformers' staunchness, common to the old and the new

⁸¹ See Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, "Womanly Duties. Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, 1880-1920," *The American Historical Review* 95, no. 4 (1990).

⁸² Alice Kessler-Harris called it "a series of restrictions which entrenched female socio-economic subordination." Alice Kessler-Harris, "Review of Theda Skocpol's 'Protecting Soldiers and Mothers'," *Journal of American History* 80, no. 3 (1993): 1036.

⁸³ As Linda Gordon points out, maternalists almost always accepted the strictures of the family-wage principle—that men were the ones entitled to earn enough so that women could devote themselves to the family only. Yet, Gordon notices, some maternalist instances subverted that premise since financial aid was given directly to women, not to their husbands, thereby challenging women's economical and political dependency. Linda Gordon, "Putting Children First: Women, Maternalism, and Welfare in the Early Twentieth Century," in *U.S. History as Women's History*, ed. Linda Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 65.

⁸⁴ Perry, "Men Are from the Gilded Age, Women Are from the Progressive Era."

generation and based on a polarized conception of social practices, made them unable to read the different languages that many of the groups they wanted to reform spoke back in. A brilliant woman like Lillian Wald,⁸⁵ for example, could not make sense of the strong attraction working girls had for silk underwear and misread their wearing of make up as “paint” that their employers forced them to use so that they could disregard the “jade” color the hardship of work put on their cheeks.⁸⁶

This class-inflected condescendence was now finding support in the scientific discourse based on Spensierian elaborations of Darwin’s theories. Probably due to this evolutionary narrative that was informing all strands of Progressive thought, a “modern” egalitarian attitude towards women of diverse extraction hardly took off. This was, after all, the heyday of neo-Darwinism: Francis Galton, Darwin’s half-cousin, had coined the term eugenics in 1883 and, in the early twentieth century, this class-based theory of society that aimed to improve on nature through the self-conscious control of human reproduction held the greatest sway.⁸⁷ Among social reformers, these ideas were applied to the development of the concept of civic motherhood; as a result, outstanding female thinkers who imaginatively articulated the uplifting potential of liberated womanhood, reproduced positions of reform Darwinism which inevitably reinforced racial and class hierarchies.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s extensive and controversial intellectual output embodies the richness and the dangers of the Progressives’ conversation between theories of sexuality, evolutionary analyses, and the critique of androcentric culture. Her work provides a clear example of how all these elements equally informed social maternalism and Progressivism at large. Gilman produced a wealth of reformative writings, among them *The Home*, a domestic labor tract published in 1903. In the prefatory poem “Two Callings” the maternalist

⁸⁵ Lillian D. Wald (1867–1940) was a progressive reformer of many talents, but she is most known for having founded the Henry Street Settlement in New York City in 1893.

⁸⁶ Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*. p. 49

⁸⁷ In his book *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* of 1883 Galton defined eugenics as “the science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to...judicious mating, but...takes cognizance of all influences...(25). In 1908 he captioned it as “the study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations, either physically or mentally”. Galton’s works are quoted, with interesting comments in Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century. Rational Reproduction and the New Woman*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2.

imperative is spelled out in clear, as well as problematic, terms.⁸⁸ The poem renders the half-oneiric visions of napping woman, a poetic persona who in the initial stanzas embodies the global and historical suffering of a female collective past evoked by the sound of “Duty” personified:

I shrink - half rise - and then it murmurs 'Duty!'
...
I am the squaw - the slave - the harem beauty -
I serve and serve, the handmaid of the world.

In the second part of the poem, as the woman approaches the moment of her awakening in a sort of evolutionary metaphor, we are confronted with her actually being a member of the white American leisure class, a token of female exceptionalism whose progressive maternalist mission is articulated as a call to a new “Duty,” namely the duty to reform the “human race”:

So when the great word “Mother!” rang once more
I saw at last its meaning and its place;
Not the blind passion of the brooding past;
But mother - the World's Mother - come at last.
To love as she had never loved before -
To feed and guard and teach the human race.

In Ann Mattis’s interpretation, the “World’s Mother” is the American middle class woman invested with a maternal role which aligns her with futurity, while the “brooding” past deploys a paradigm of minority stereotypes.⁸⁹ By drawing on Dana Seitler’s notion of “eugenic feminism,”⁹⁰ Mattis suggests that this passage belies the evolutionary model declaring the genetic superiority of white middle class females and their consequent fitness for carrying out universal reform—a model rooted in Lester Ward’s matrocentric theory of cultural evolution.

⁸⁸ As Gilman’s biographer Cynthia Davis maintains, from a very early age Gilman had posited “world service to humanity” as antithetical to domestic service, an occupation whose tasks she had loathed as a girl and a social chattel which she considered designed to hamper women’s success in the world. See Cynthia J. Davis, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman. A Biography*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 36-56.

⁸⁹ Ann Mattis, ““Vulgar Strangers in the Home”: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Modern Servitude,” *Women's Studies* 39, no. 4 (2010).

⁹⁰ Dana Seitler, “Unnatural Selections: Mothers, Eugenic Feminism, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Regeneration Narratives,” *American Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2003).

According to Seidler, this particular type of mother figure emerges with new meaning and significance at the fin de siècle almost as “a fantasy of moral idealism, a symbol of a quintessential American identity, and, moreover, a privileged site of material and biological value.”⁹¹

This provocative reading of the trope of “mother” as expression of eugenic and nativist impulses reflects much of second- and third-wave feminist critique of the contradictions inherent to maternalist politics.⁹² As Gordon had observed, the transference of a supposed transhistorical female attitude onto the political plan produced ambivalent results insofar as responding to white American notions of gender differentiations.⁹³ This resistance to considering more seriously the practices and rights of alien women exposes the political unconscious of first-wave feminism, namely a yearning for sexual and economic freedom coupled with eugenic discipline.⁹⁴ Still, according to Judith Allen, the themes of race, ethnicity, eugenicism and immigration restrictivism were the direct topic of only a small percentage of Gilman’s massive production, and, more importantly, they manifested positions in contrast with Progressive Era authors who held ethnic Other as “dysgenic.”⁹⁵ For this reasons, I would tip the interpretive focus towards the anxiety which, in *The Home*, is procured by the proximity of higher and lower classes cohabiting within the bourgeois home.⁹⁶ Gilman’s language when describing the servants who attend to domestic works appears as hardly

⁹¹ Ibid.: 62.

⁹² In the first systematic book-length study of the intellectual tenets of Gilman’s contribution to the development of Western feminist theory and politics, Judith Allen frames a discussion of current evaluations of Gilman “as embarrassing compendium of elitist, racist, anti-Semitic, nativist and imperialistic discourses” in terms of presentist fallacy. Quite convincingly Allen argues that such claims are “distorted in varying degrees by presentism and a lack of attention to context and contingency.” Allen, *The Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 331.

⁹³ Jennifer Fleissner has also pointed out the risks adumbrated in a radical development of such premises as it has been shown in the trajectory of recent criticism on women writers of the Progressive Era. Recent scholarship, she argues, has rightly sought to uncover the inscription of white racial domination in their literary works, but this focus has obliterated the proportions of the struggles faced by these women. See Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Movement of American Naturalism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 100.

⁹⁴ It is worth mentioning that a constellation of images such as these could also be interpreted, in the light of Amy Kaplan’s discussion of domesticity and Imperialism, as figurations of the domestic in intimate opposition to the foreign, rather than to the public. “In this context domestic has a double meaning that not only links the familial household to the nation but also imagines both the opposition to everything outside the geographic and conceptual border of the home.” Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” 581.

⁹⁵ Allen, *The Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 335.

⁹⁶ Mattis, “Vulgar Strangers,” 288.

negotiable,⁹⁷ still it betrays the vocabulary of hermeneutic impossibility rather than condemnation. The “stranger” produces anxiety not only because she touches on the “unconceivable,” but also because, in spite of her opacity, she manages to acquire “knowledge” of middle-class privacy.

The irreconcilable idiosyncrasies which could be found in the unique brand of feminism that Gilman expressed resonate with diverse forces animating the Progressive years and reveal, once again, the centrality of “problems of translation” in the dialogue between the reformers and the reformed. While these intertwining forces and languages cannot be disentangled, their correlation to Progressive motives illuminates the rise of the New Woman, an entity who surfaced from the domestic backwaters carrying about “both possibilities and pitfalls, change and status quo.”⁹⁸

2.3. New Women and the Repeal of Domesticity

According to Ann Heilmann, the Anglo-Irish Sarah Grand, the South-African-born Olive Schreiner and the Anglo-Scottish Mona Caird “can jointly be credited with implanting the New Woman on the fin-de-siècle cultural landscape.”⁹⁹ The term New Woman was first put into popular usage in 1894, during a heated exchange in the *North American Review* between Sarah Grand and the novelist Ouida, a debate that immediately inflamed spirits on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁰⁰ Grand’s essay identified the New Woman as someone who has “proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman’s-Sphere, and prescribed herself the remedy” of full participation into public life. Attacking this pronouncement two months later, Ouida argued that the woman depicted by

⁹⁷ “Strangers by birth, by class, by race, by education—as utterly alien as it is possible to conceive—these we introduce into our homes—in our very bed chambers; in knowledge of all the daily habits of our lives—and then we talk of privacy!” Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Home. Its Work and Influence* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, (1903) 1972), 42.

⁹⁸ Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl. Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 3.

⁹⁹ Heilmann’s perceptive and rich book covers the work of these three Great Britain-based writers. While Schreiner wrote the first New Woman novel (*The Story of an African Farm* 1883) and Mona Caird, with her 1888 article on ‘Marriage’ grounded the NW’s claims in a fierce critique of the patriarchal system, Grant established and popularized the terms of the debate in the famous *North American Review* debate in 1894. Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies. Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 4.

¹⁰⁰ Sarah Grand, “The New Aspects of the Woman Question,” *North American Review* 3 (1894), Ouida, “The New Woman (1894),” in *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader 1894-1930*, ed. Martha H. Patterson (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2008), Sarah Grand, “The New Aspects of the Woman Question (1894),” in *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader 1894-1930*, ed. Martha H. Patterson (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

Grand had “no possible title or capacity to demand the place or the privilege of man.”¹⁰¹ Grand’s formulation, which stemmed from the well-tested strategy of invoking women’s higher morality as evidence of their rightful claim to social and political authority, helped feed the sensibility of feminist thinkers. Women, in fact, were becoming increasingly interested in articulating the possibilities of a multipolar woman’s movement, beyond simply caring for the country maintenance and even beyond only obtaining the vote. Once introduced in the international lexicon, the appellation “New Woman” was used in the popular press to indicate with sarcasm every vaguely unconventional female type that appeared in the industrialized nations between the Fin de Siècle and the end of WWI. The era of the New Woman roughly ends when her derivative and successor, the less politicized and more pleasure-seeking flapper, starts to dominate the popular imaginary.¹⁰² While derisive parodies of the New Woman reflected cultural anxieties over the expansion of female roles in society, literary works by female authors investigated the extent and the limitations of such changes within specific domains. On yet a different plane, quickly spreading representations in print aimed at neutralizing the destabilizing potential of her image.¹⁰³

Since part of this figure’s appeal to feminists and antifeminists alike was precisely its openness,¹⁰⁴ an assessment of new womanhood calls for a comprehensive view which acknowledges both elements of rupture and threads of continuity. Overall, the contradictory and evolving deployments of the New

¹⁰¹ Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies*, 3.

¹⁰² Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 22.

¹⁰³ The fierce caricatures of the New Woman figure in the press are numerous and well know both in the UK, especially in *Punch*, and in the USA, see for example *Puck*. As per the exploration of the intrinsic limitation of the New Woman’s personal and social freedom I am referring to the great incidence of death and despair found in much New Woman fiction written by women, a symptom, Gail Cunningham suggests, caused by the fact that “the NW writers of the 1890s continued on the whole subliminally to work within a theoretical framework which accepted the subordination of female to male terms.” Martha Cutter expresses a similar point of view when she critique the American New Woman’s inability to move beyond the binary logic of the dominant discourses. For the UK see Gail Cunningham, “‘He-Notes’: Reconstructing Masculinity,” in *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact. Fin De Siècle Feminisms*, ed. Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis (London: Palgrave, 2001).; for the USA see Cecelia Tichi, “Women Writers and the New Woman,” (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). and Martha Cutter, *Unruly Tongue: Identity and Voice in American Women’s Writing, 1850-1930* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999). As per the normalization of New Womanhood in the figure of the Gibson Girl see Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*.

¹⁰⁴ Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).p.78

Woman trope run against the definition of this icon as a monolithic personification of modernity. Her chameleon-like quality has made contemporary critics provocatively ask the question “Did the New Woman really exist?”¹⁰⁵ and indeed, as many studies suggest, in the singular she does not.¹⁰⁶ Still, the New Woman in all her incarnations (degenerate or evolved, race leader or race traitor, political activist or ivory-tower intellectual, undersexed or oversexed, mannish or hyper-feminine, rational castigator or insatiable shopper, conservative spinster or anarchist radical) represented a distinctly feminized reaction to modernity. This overdetermined inclusiveness notwithstanding, the extent to which women of the Fin-de-Siècle self-identified as New Women is difficult to quantify. While there were some prominent representatives, most of the women associated with this icon led a much humbler life and, although they earned their own living, carried their own latchkeys and stood up for their rights, they would have rarely used the epithet to describe themselves. As Talia Schaffer rightly warns, “that is a modern usage.”¹⁰⁷

Keeping in mind the frequent cautionary calls in recent literature against homogenization, as well as the plea for circumspection in the liberal usage of the epithet, it is nonetheless legitimate to outline some general features of the dominant conceptions of the New Woman, and also to incorporate in the category some groups of women who most probably did not call themselves so at the time. While the New Woman reflected “the synthesis of the personal and the political for a transformation of politics reinvoked in subsequent generations,”¹⁰⁸ she also operated the final split between the social (maternalist) and the domestic. The former, in fact, was only retained in its eminently civic and unsentimental form, and the latter was constantly questioned, destructured and undermined as source of female identity. In Christine Stansell’s formulation, “the newest of New Women” claimed “economic independence, sexual freedom and psychological

¹⁰⁵ Talia Schaffer, "'Nothing but Foolscap' and Ink: Inventing the New Woman," in *The New Woman in Fact and Fiction. Fin-De-Siècle Feminisms*, ed. Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis (London: Palgrave, 2001), 39.

¹⁰⁶ In this respect see Martha Patterson’s analysis of the important regional and ethnic variability of New Woman trope in the US. In *Beyond the Gibson Girl* Patterson configures the regional and ethnic specificity of New Woman’s writers in an interesting counterpoint vis-à-vis Tichi’s observation that “regional” was a label applied to such writers as a strategies of containment of their new womanly claims. Patterson delves into the analysis of “the New Negro Woman,” “New China” and the “New South.”

¹⁰⁷ Schaffer, "'Nothing but Foolscap' and Ink: Inventing the New Woman," 39.

¹⁰⁸ Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 3-4.

exemption from the repressive obligation of wifehood, motherhood and daughterhood—a jettisoning of family duties for a heightened female individualism.”¹⁰⁹ New Women were in fact deeply anti-domestic: in a philosophico-pragmatical way as for Gilman; with radical anarchist vehemence as it was the case for Emma Goldman; in their subtle questioning of the family structure through writing and performance as for Willa Cather, Kate Chopin and Rachel Crothers among many; and in their undivided devotion to a civic cause as for the suffragists, the settlement workers, and the labor organizers. Along with these public concerns and engagements, also rose the determination to conceptualize and explore sexuality as an irrenounceable constitutive aspect outside the restriction of the family economy. With the demotion of old time domesticity also passionlessness was replaced with passionateness, an impulse matched with the newly discovered right to abstain and to choose sexual partners in or out of marital relationships.¹¹⁰ Not surprisingly, birth control was also a distinctive New Woman theme. Contraception was equally crucial to discourses of personal emancipation—coveted by women of all classes albeit the existing Comstock laws—and to the eugenic mentality underwriting the debate on “family limitation” and race improvement.

The celebrated New Woman type created by the pencil of Charles Dana Gibson in 1894, constituted an interesting variation on the male reprimands against feminine independence and featured a hybrid of male aesthetic fantasies and harmless gendered vindications. With her statuesque features made regal by a tiny waist and softened by a large bosom and wavy hair, the Gibson Girl incarnated a racially and culturally superior being. She embodied a biologically evolved female who, although deprived of social ethics, was deemed capable to assure a promising destiny in virtue of her evident genetic soundness. Daringly athletic but unthreateningly seductive, the Gibson Girl was patently consume-oriented and used her charm to push the financial liberality of suitors and fathers to utter extremes. Yet, her erosion of patriarchy was only too functional to the necessary regeneration of male economic capital into consumer’s goods: as

¹⁰⁹ Christine Stansell, *American Moderns. Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century*. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 227.

¹¹⁰ Even the British physician and sexologist Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) announced in 1903 that the notion of women’s sexual anesthesia, as he called it, was a nineteenth century invention. Cott, “Passionlessness,” 219.

Patterson puts it, “the Gibson girl may play tennis, but she never plays politics.”¹¹¹ Gibson’s art had managed to transfigure the drive towards political change in a drive towards conspicuous consumption; his “girl” was nonetheless appropriated, even by Gilman, for the exaltation of the New Woman’s legal, social and biological progress.¹¹²

This strong and healthy outcome of supposedly rationalized social production, so serialized in her iconology as to resemble the commodities she fancied, reflected an enthusiastic vision of technological change in the government of the self and of society. Angelique Richardson maintains that several New Women were party to the “eugenization of love” and marked a shift from romance to biology which demanded the excision of passion in favor of (women) choosing a sexual partner for his breeding credentials.¹¹³ Following up to this argument, it can be evinced that the Gibson Girl thwarted the nascent libidinal individualism expressed by new womanhood and reintroduced a specific connotation of passionlessness. In fact, her infallible ability to secure the male specimen who could assure her a steady flow of goods lead her to repay the male service with the production of healthy Gibson kids. Being the linchpin of this socio-biological cycle, the Gibson Girl reinstated uncomplicated heterosexual male dominance as constitutive of the “modern” dynamics between the sexes.

By contrast, in much of the American New Woman fiction written by women,¹¹⁴ the determination of the New Woman to explore her libidinal dimension beyond the strictures of stoic sublimation or eugenic rationalization proved a painful and all the more necessary endeavor. In the diverse group of women writers who could be associated with the New Woman, some were skeptically wary of so blatant a figure and exhibited certain hostility towards the literary characters they modeled upon peremptory renditions of such a specimen.¹¹⁵ Nonetheless, also these female novelists entered the New Woman

¹¹¹ Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 3-4.

¹¹² Gilman, *Women and Economics*, 148-9.

¹¹³ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics*, 7-13.

¹¹⁴ Martha Patterson explores writers such as Pauline Hopkins, Margaret Murray Washington, Sui Sin Far, Mary Johnston, Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow and Willa Cather. Cecelia Tichi’s concise but insightful article provides an interesting survey ranging from Kate Chopin, Alice James, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather and the young Gertrude Stein. See works cited by both authors.

¹¹⁵ Tichi reports the example Miss Verney in Wharton’s *Sanctuary* (1903), a New Woman and a schemer, and of three posturing Southern belles sarcastically portrayed by Ellen Glasgow in *Phases of an Inferior Planet* (1898). Tichi, “Women Writers and the New Woman,” 593.

territory by incorporating subjects such as adultery, marital breakdown and female careerism in ways that disputed both the viability of the double standard and the concealment of female passions. The importance of the literary in articulating investigations of libidinal desire as well as in the creation of alternative femininities was confirmed by the cultural retribution that female writers expressing these tensions suffered. A blatant example is Kate Chopin, “crushed” and “struck mute” after *The Awakening* was met with audience rejection, reviewers’ hostility and public ostracism.¹¹⁶ Professional annihilation seemed, in this case, a response to the challenge that the New Woman posed to the gender arrangements of the period, an attack all the more serious because, for all her sexual impertinence, she could not be easily dismissed as a prostitute or a fallen woman.¹¹⁷

3. Rebel Girls

A New Woman neologism but with a Plebeian Edge. In *American Moderns* Stansell so defines the “Rebel Girl:” the militant working-girl type who was becoming politically visible in the great strikes of the teens and, day after day, on the city streets.¹¹⁸ Although the ultimate incarnation of New Womanhood might seem to belong exclusively to the middle class, at least as far as widespread literary portrayals are concerned, the figure was appealing to laboring women too. In Stansell’s daring rendition, the evidence of working women who followed radical causes and then mixed their lives with those of big cities’ Bohemia, blurred the distance between the “peripatetic traveling female labor organizer and the bohemian female vagabond.”¹¹⁹ If the event of such crossover was not exactly common, it is nonetheless true that female workers were not willing to accept the labor rhetoric of the wage slaves and the deserving poor; in spite of the vulnerability of their position, they prided themselves of their status of wage earners. With the hard-won, and often barely sustainable, independence that paid labor provided, also rose the tendency to find spaces of sexual independence.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 592.

¹¹⁸ The “Rebel Girl” was the title of a popular song by Joe Hill, purportedly composed for and dedicated to Elizabeth Gurley Finn (1890 – 1964) a labor leader, activist, and feminist who played a leading role in the Industrial Workers of the World a visible proponent of women's rights, birth control, and women's suffrage. Stansell, *American Moderns*, 237.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 243.

Rebel girls were sexualized figures who endorsed eroticized behavior, also in its commercial nuances, as a form of self-determination. In so doing, they manifested personal objectives which marked a departure from traditional female roles and that resonated with the repeal of passionlessness brought about by the New Woman. The developments in independent prostitution, the changes in courtship, and the emerging practice of treating signaled a challenge to generational and bourgeois authority as well as a form of criticism towards the co-opted participation in a formal cash economy.

3.1. Entrepreneuses

In the 1920s, sociologist William I. Thomas records this change with precision when he catalogues the several intermediate types who have superseded the female options of the past: “the one completely good and the other completely bad.” Thomas distinguishes “the occasional prostitute, the charity girl, the demi-virgin, the equivocal flapper, and in addition girls with new behavioral norms who have adapted themselves to all kinds of work.” In recognizing “increasing individualization” as a sign of the time, Thomas grants that all these female types are moved by the desire “to realize their wishes under the changing social conditions.”¹²⁰ Furthermore Thomas recognizes that the root of this “modern unrest” are to be found less in the derailment of ill-governed urges and excessive naïveté than in the idea of sex as capital. Their sex, he maintains, is used as an instrument for realization of other wishes.¹²¹ In this light, the development of independent prostitution emerges as the realization of the female wish to operate autonomous choices about money, commercialism, business and reputation.

As Timothy Gilfoyle has pointed out, the late nineteenth century is that moment in American cultural history which witnesses the decline of the brothel.¹²² He suggests that the dramatic increase in value of the area of the old sex districts hastened their transformation from residential neighborhoods into industrial zones.¹²³ In Gotham, madam-controlled prostitution, which kept women almost entirely within a credit economy not differently from indentured

¹²⁰ William I. Thomas, *The Unadjusted Girl* (Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, (1923)1969), 231.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹²² Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros. New York City, Prostitution and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992).

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 200.

laborers, gave thus way to the opportunity for more casual, private and diffused commercial sex.¹²⁴ However, the demise of the bawdyhouse had been anticipated by an attempt to rationalize and circumscribe the city districts allotted to vice. Although “spontaneous” red light districts existed before the Progressive Era, it was not until the 1890s that municipal authorities explicitly defined the boundaries inside which prostitutes could practice their trade.¹²⁵ Other corollary measures included heavy sanctions for practitioners operating in tenement houses, with the unspoken intention to drive them towards disorderly houses situated in specific areas.¹²⁶ All these measures did little to challenge the structural basis of the trade; in fact, a serious change came about only from 1912 on, when anti-vice reformers turned to promoting red-light abatement laws. These acts had several procedural advantages with respect to existing regulations since the injunctions could be started also by private citizens and were only heard by a judge, rather than by a jury—an remarkable simplification of the legal procedure. Furthermore, given the serious threat of property forfeit they represented, these laws targeted the whole “vice trust” behind the bawdy house: landlords, real estate agents and sublessors alike. The efficacy of these laws was celebrated already in 1917 when segregated vice districts were closed in over eight cities, including New York.¹²⁷ Still, the success boasted by the vice reformers was more appreciable in term of visibility than substantial change, since the professional prostitutes had gradually come to operate in alternative locations. Thus, while many women used their experience to restructure prostitution in town, middle class reformers were applauding the demise of the brothel as a moral victory without realizing that prostitution was becoming increasingly

¹²⁴ “The brothel ultimately integrated prostitution into the city’s tax and property structures. Like peddler, streetwalkers were unaffected by urban real estate policy, and they thereby retained nearly all their earnings. Brothels, on the other hand, gave landlords and lessees hefty profits and the municipal tax collector additional revenue...Over time, the brothel helped cement the links among Gotham’s growing underground economy, the real estate industry, and the municipal government.” *Ibid.*,166.

¹²⁵ New Orleans’s Storyville was the most famous district created through city ordinance, its name alluding to the mayor of the time, but many other cities had legalized red-light areas. Thomas C. Makey, *Red Light Out: A Legal History of Prostitution, Disorderly Houses, and Vice Districts* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), 290-352.

¹²⁶ See the 1913 declaration on the part of reformer Lawrence Veiller quoted in Keire, “The Vice Trust,” 12.

¹²⁷ By the end of World War I, anti-vice reformers had closed the red-light districts in over two hundred cities. For a chronology of district closures. See Joseph Mayer, *The Regulation of Commercialized Vice: An Analysis of the Transition From Segregation to Repression in the United States* (New York, 1922), 9. See also Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet. A Social History of Venereal Disease in the US since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). 52-61, 70-77

visible to working-class New Yorkers specifically because it had disappeared from the view of the middle class.

A backward glance will help clarify the scenario: in 1896, The Raines Law forbade all establishment, except hotels with more than ten beds, to sell liquor on Sundays. Soon afterwards, most bars opened a back room with ten beds where suspicious ladies were more than welcome to operate. A few years later, commercial venues such as cigar stores and even soda fountains were reported to allow for casual prostitution along similar lines with the agreements between prostitutes and hotel owners. The ultimate integration of the practice into immigrant communities occurred when women prostituted directly in the city slums. In 1913, the annual report of the Committee of Fourteen¹²⁸ reflected this integration of prostitution into the commercial and housing stock of working-class neighborhoods.¹²⁹ Tenement prostitutes solicited openly, often using their earnings to support family members and striving to behave as good neighbors. Their presence was well tolerated in such neighborhood since the working class seemed to suggest certain solidarity with respect to these women's condition.

An example of how independent prostitution was considered common for girls who broke away from their families, is offered by Anzia Yezierska in her immigrant *Bildungsroman Bread Givers*. Virginal Sara Smolinsky, the author's alterego, blushes when listening to the coarse stories told by her co-workers in the laundry at lunch break. The other girls take her reaction as the improbable act put up by someone wanting to dissimulate her vicious secret life: they all know that she lives alone in a rented room, and that leaves no room for doubt.¹³⁰ What the laundresses actually knew was that, taking advantage of new residential settings, many girls resorted to practicing prostitution discreetly and only when needed, trying to make ends meet while maintaining their respectability intact. For similar reasons, many black prostitutes claimed that they would only operate with white men, so that their reputation would remain unscathed within their

¹²⁸ The Committee of Fourteen was New York's preeminent Private Vice Society and was founded in 1905 by members of the New York Anti-Saloon League as an association dedicated to the abolition of Raines Law hotels. The Private Committees are discussed in Chapter 3.

¹²⁹ Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale. Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 99.

¹³⁰ "I ask you only, why does a girl go to live alone? How their words stabbed me. "We know, kid. Can't fool us baby!" "What's his name? And she puts on airs yet like a holy one." Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (New York: Persea Books, (1925) 1999), 179-80.

own community.¹³¹ With their overt judgmental attitude, Sara's colleagues are sternly redefining the boundaries of their "approved cultural style."¹³² While going to Coney Island and witnessing, or even having, erotic adventures was deemed acceptable uninhibited socialization, meddling money with sexual exchange, no matter how discretely, raised downright contempt.

In spite of peer bias, "furnished room prostitution" was thus just a different option about how to exchange sex for cash for women who chose to do so.¹³³ The paradigm deterministically exposed by Stephen Crane and his contemporaries where sexual knowledge was fled through atonement, hysteria or suicide does not constitute a veridical portrait of the dynamics of the new century.¹³⁴ Although in a subordinate position, girls combated the extreme equation between loss of virtue and loss of life and carved out a space of personal action. The choices they made had a profound impact on the commercial economy of working class neighborhoods as well as on working class attitudes toward commercial and sexual values.

3.2. The Moral Economy of Treating

The emergence of a moral counterlanguage did not limit its influence to those women who resorted to living their sexuality bending it to the imperatives of need. Many other girls of working-class extraction, while refusing to sexually participate in a formal cash economy, fostered the change in the moral codes by accentuating conduct practices initially meant to resist the dehumanization they felt was demanded on them at the assembly line.¹³⁵ Despite the contingencies, working also gave young women self-confidence and relative freedom of movement while the urban environment provided a degree of anonymity that nobody could enjoy in the ethnic communities. This combination of factors allowed a wide category of women to re-articulate the "factory girl" category by endorsing all possible variants of licit and illicit love.

¹³¹ Clement, *Love for Sale*, 81.

¹³²Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements. Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 108.

¹³³ In reviewing the life path of one of these girls, Thomas points out that "the girl's schematization of life is farther from the brothel and nearer the strategic form of marriage recommended by the wife [the case of married woman listing the rational benefits of marriage] in document n.49. Thomas, *The Unadjusted Girl*, 125.

¹³⁴ Hapke, *Girls Who Go Wrong*, 122

¹³⁵ For a thorough discussion on "working ladydom" see Enstad, *Ladies of Labor*, 48-83.

In her analysis of shifting sexual norms in the first decades of the twentieth century, cultural historian Elizabeth Clement examines the reports produced by the prominent vice societies operating in New York.¹³⁶ Among the cases listed, she describes a suggestive episode taking place at J.J. Hym's Roadhouse in 1914, when an undercover investigator for the Committee of Fourteen makes the acquaintance of a young woman who is looking for a good time. Their brief exchange contains in a nutshell the practices and the assumptions which redefined interpersonal relations; an ethos where the barter was admitted but commercialization proscribed:

He "learned that she was familiar with sexual intercourse and accustomed to practice the same with her gentlemen friends." After they had socialized for a while and he had paid for her drinks and food, "she offered to allow me to have intercourse with her in the grass if I should take her home after a few more dances and drinks." Hoping that she might offer to prostitute and thus provide him with information about the morals of the bar, he asked her "if we could not get a room in the premises." The young woman admitted that the bar did rent rooms, but she refused to get one with him. Only prostitutes rented rooms, she explained to him, and she was not a prostitute. As the investigator described "she pointed out two women in the room whom she said were prostitutes and would go to a room with any man who was willing to pay them."¹³⁷

By choosing the wrong girl for his purpose, the investigator proves uneducated in terms of behavioral codes and he is administered a lecture in "new womanhood" and modern respectability. Like Sara's colleagues at the laundry, the girl is talkative and judgmental: she discloses her ways with gentlemen as well as her understanding of lowlife unconcerned for her reputation; on the other hand she sets herself apart from the prostitutes with whom she shares the dance floor, but whose scale of values she condemns. For the girl, in fact, freedom of choice and the pursuit of hedonism demarcate a moral horizon which she measures against the prostitutes, whom she deems contemptibly dependant from male desires and economic assets.

¹³⁶Among the variety of unpublished source that she uses, Clement scrutinizes the records of the Committee of Fifteen, of the Committee of Fourteen, of the Women's Prison Association and the Bedford Hills State Reformatory. Clement, *Love for Sale*, 305.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

A couple of decades earlier this scene would have never taken place: unlike the previous generations, girls such as this one had gained access to new forms of social life in the public arena, an experience structured, as Kathy Peiss maintains, exactly “by their entrance into the labor force.”¹³⁸ The only premarital interaction available to girls of the previous generations was courting. Traditional courtship had always served both the purpose of controlling the daughters as family property and the prevention of exogamous marriages while solidifying economic relationships. The standards of premarital sex during courtships differed according to the tradition of the ethnic groups and not always did they manage to be fully protective of female integrity.

The frequency of the crime “seduction under the promise of marriage” reflected, on the one hand, the acceptance of premarital sex among couples—at least in a working class context; on the other, it revealed the change in the discussion and legislation around the value of female innocence. At the beginning of the nineteenth century most cases were taken to court by paterfamilias; an all-male jury would then determine the economic compensation deemed equivalent to the fraudulent loss of virginity. These lawsuits, just like those addressing “seduction under the promise of marriage” were mainly protecting the economic underpinnings of chastity and patriarchal property rights in daughters. In this context, courtship sanctioned the complete passivity of the female party of the social contract and virtually eliminated all possibility for her of accessing personal—not to mention sexual—recognition.

In the late nineteenth century, however, when women began to bring up those cases themselves, the courts registered the shift in social customs by starting to uphold the notion that premarital sex was part of courtship and that failing to keep a promise was both a wrong to the fiancée and to the state. Significantly enough, many of the girls pleading their own cause were immigrants or came from immigrant families. It seems as if, in embracing of the new homeland, the paternal mandate in defending their personal interests had been transferred to the state with an extension to the protection of sentimental capital. Again, Anzia Yezierska provides a telling literary example: Sara Smolinski correlates the burden of arranged marriage to her loathed immigrant inheritance

¹³⁸ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 33.

and, confronted with her older siblings' grievous marital lives, she swears to herself that she will choose "an American-born man...who would let me be my own boss."¹³⁹ In her allegiance to a new way of living her female and daughterly status, Sara flaunts her Americanness as badge of independence both sentimental ("In America, women don't need men to boss them") and personal ("I'm going to live my own life. Nobody can stop me. I'm not from the old country. I'm American!"¹⁴⁰)

In the melodramatic structure of the novel, Sara achieves her American ideal—getting an education—by dint of fierce determination, ascetic perseverance and often endurance of deep solitude owed to her poor ability of mimicking the social and aesthetic attitude that her peers adopt. Yet Yeziarska projects onto Sara's sister, Masha, the equally important belief that appearance, rather than the contribution to the nation's cultural wealth, is at the heart of Americanization.¹⁴¹ To Masha, who "works when she has work," but who is otherwise "always busy with her beauty," the melting looks of the men she attracts are "like something to drink and something to eat."¹⁴² Yeziarska pictures metaphorically something that, for girls like the ones crowding Hym's Roadhouse, was instead very literal. These girls, rather than living on gazes and fantasies, returned those gazes and instigated a process of mutual recognition. Once acknowledged as active sexual beings, young women could decide whether and how to bend the exchange toward a material reward.

The activity in which these girls engaged emerged in the late nineteenth century with a distinct name: "treating". Despite some schematic similarities, it could not be ascribed to prostitution, not even by those detectives striving to do so. In saloon subculture, working class men had the habit of treating each other to rounds of drinks, an alcoholic ritual strictly condemned by married women who saw it as token of vicious dissipation. Between the late nineteenth century to the 1920s, unmarried women adopted this homosocial practice adjusting it toward a heterosexual pattern and did so by substituting themselves for the drinking buddy. Instead of offering the next round they offered company, female grace and

¹³⁹ Yeziarska, *Bread Givers*, 66.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 137-138

¹⁴¹ For the discussion on immigrants' embracement of American fashion as sign of Americanization see Enstad, *Ladies of Labor*, 61.

¹⁴² Yeziarska, *Bread Givers*, 4.

eventually sexual favors: they replaced the high provided by spirits with the sweet intoxication that female interaction can produce.

Popular knowledge considered women as "treating" when they exchanged intercourse for dinner and an evening's entertainment or, more tangibly, for stockings, shoes and other coveted goods. Yet, the preliminary and primary reward that girls got—and the necessary pre-condition to material negotiations—was the recognition of the effort put in fashioning a subjectivity that escaped and exceeded economic logic. The interest that girls could generate in men, went beyond the predatory patterns of mechanical sexual interaction. It was not triggered by their mere availability, but rather by the new aura conveyed by the resignification of the aesthetics of bourgeois ladydom into working ladydom.¹⁴³ Although in mixed environments the factory could occasionally allow for romantic interactions, working girls paraded their newly forged self-ideal primarily outside the factory, and their disaffiliation with the shopfloor logic continued in treating. Treating became both the acting out of a romantic fantasy—often along the lines of the dime novels which formed the sentimental education of working adolescents—and, to a certain extent, the enhancement of certain material conditions. Yet, its most peculiar and durable characteristic was a renegotiation of respectability in the public sphere of social life.

Despite radical differences in their cultures of origin, working class girls shared a very similar vision of treating and, by extension, of prostitution. The etiquette of treating refused all association with contractual arrangements. Therefore, money was targeted as the discriminatory difference vis-à-vis prostitutes. Secondly, location played a significant role, and a respectable girl would surrender only in environments evoking the youthful impetus of passion—lawns, hallways, dark corners—and not in rented rooms reminiscent of bawdyhouse customs.

Although Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" is not primarily a meditation on ethnicity and morals,¹⁴⁴ the central section of *Three Lives* offers, in the liberally used term

¹⁴³ As Dorothy Richardson's reports from a fellow worker "The ladies I'm used to working with likes to walk home looking decent and respectable, no difference what they are like other times." Dorothy Richardson, *The Long Day*, 68. quoted in Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*, 86.

¹⁴⁴ "Melanctha," the partial result of a transracial projection of confessional topics more conventionally depicted in the earlier story *Q.E.D.*, was erroneously read by early critics as an empathic celebration of Negro life. This interpretation has been refuted at least from the early 1960s, nevertheless, Werner Sollors interestingly re-situates the work into a coterminous generic

“wandering,” an eloquent metaphor condensing the yearnings, the risks and the boundaries of the practice of treating. The young mulatta’s coming of age is characterized by her constant “wandering,” an activity that rarely means sexual promiscuity alone, but seems to sum up the curiosity towards sexual knowledge, as well as the social activities surrounding congress.¹⁴⁵ While one of the protagonist’s friends, Jane Harden, is easily identified as a demi-prostitute since “she always had a little money and she had a room in the lower part of town,”¹⁴⁶ Melanctha’s numerous exchanges with men are never associated with monetary gain, but with the tokens of romantic interaction like flowers and rings.¹⁴⁷ Although the activity Stein describes is not exactly the treating methodically practiced by white working girls, the writer captures its complex constellation of enablement and vulnerability when she terms it “a strange experience of ignorance, power and desire.”¹⁴⁸ An experience that for Melanctha proves, in the end, to be self-ostracizing not because she breaks the economic rules regulating the game, but rather because she fails to abide to the rigid rationality of the heterosexual negotiations as embodied, for example, by her friend Rose. Rose, in fact, thanks to her “simple faith... and simple moral way of doing” manages to secure a legitimate husband after having taken advantage for years of the support of multiple partners. In this way Rose, rather than interiorly restless Melanctha, perfects her authority in dictating the rules of the “wandering” game and surges to the category of “girls of the better kind.”¹⁴⁹

In a working class context the custom of treating reinforced sexual difference in a new and positive configuration. Girls renounced the direct acceptance of money in a world where even men’s wages were often shaky: as a

context by stating that “*Three Lives* may...be viewed both as an aesthetic departure from the genre of the ethnic life story and as an example of it.” Werner Sollors, *Ethnic Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 34.

¹⁴⁵ Richard Bridgman, “Melanchta,” *American Literature* 33, no. 3 (1961): 353.

¹⁴⁶ Getrude Stein, *Three Lives* (New York: Penguin, (1909) 1990), 74.

¹⁴⁷ In “Melanctha” there are no allusions at the protagonist behaving like a prostitute; on the contrary, Helen, the character reflecting Melanctha in *Q.E.D.*, is more than once condemned like a prostitute by jealous Adele also when she only accepts some expensive presents. Coincidentally the change of context from the middle class milieu of *Q.E.D.* to the working class one of “Melanctha” has favored the emergence of the themes connected to heterosexual treating.

¹⁴⁸ Stein, *Three Lives*, 67.

¹⁴⁹ The notion of “better kind” occurs in the story with a high degree of ambiguity. It is seemingly related to notions of decency and, in one instance, specifically referenced to the character of Rose, yet, the racial prism of the short story adds a layer of complexity insofar as white men are also designated as of “the better classes” while, Melanctha, in order to be considered decent, is urged to drop her habit of mingling with white men.

result, men could demonstrate their masculinity as wage earners while debunking the reduction of womanhood to commodified sexual labor. Treating actually contributed to the ongoing marginalization of prostitution as a tacitly accepted activity. If up to WWI professionals had ignored charity girls, in the 1920s they began complaining that their business was being damaged. This new configuration permitted to girls the exertion of choice: a girl who treated could yield to her own sexual desire with a man she actually liked, without having to challenge stigmatizing taboos concerning female initiative. The practice also left the old excuse of persuasion behind, a conceptual device that, in order to preserve girl's intentional innocence, linguistically relegated them to an unredeemably passive status.

The existence of the clearly acknowledged category of the “teasers” actually testified to the open-endedness of the transaction and to the fact that women actively conducted their negotiations also enforcing the right to say 'no' in return to a favor. This female type was crucial in preserving the unpredictability of the social bargain just like the figure of the “inseparable lady-friend” guaranteed the girls' safety and helped manage the pressures on the part of insisting males. The augmented discretionary autonomy also allowed for that suspended tension which entices the player to continue the game, but in a context where the rules of game were not necessarily dictated by the economically stronger party. From this perspective, treating led neither to perdition nor to court. On the contrary, it symbolically reaffirmed both the masculinity of men and the femininity of women in a class where the factory logic had restricted sexual difference to a mere hierarchy of non-negotiable activities and wages.

The question whether this “treat” was completely free from socio-economic constriction, and the substratum of inequality underlying these social developments, remains relevant as the scholars who first located and studied the phenomenon never ceased to remind.¹⁵⁰ Notwithstanding its ostensible lightness, the treating exchange stood on shaky ground: having to navigate between the desire for social participation and the adherence to the cultural sanctions that discouraged intimacy, girls were exposed to situations of vulnerability. The

¹⁵⁰ On this topic, in addition to Peiss see Paul Goalby Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall. A Sociological Study in Commercialized Recreation and City Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1932). and Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift. Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

maintenance of the moral middle ground which posited itself between sexualized identity, prostitution and respectability was quite often a matter of compromise rather than unlimited freedom.

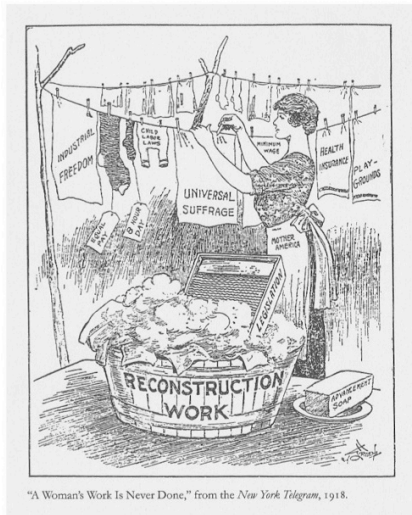


Fig. 1. "A Woman's Work is Never Done" (1918)



Fig. 2. Poster for the British Play *The New Woman* (1894)



Fig. 3. Camille Clifford, the quintessential Gibson Girl (1885-1971)



Fig. 4. Gibson's Girls from Gibson's book *The Americans* (1900)



Fig. 5. The New Woman - Wash Day

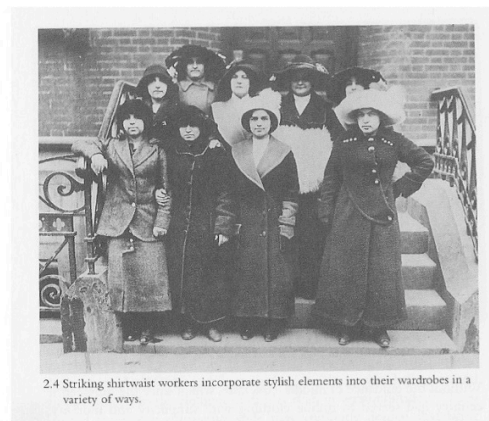


Fig.6. "Rebel Girls," Shirtwaist strikers (1909)

Fig. 2, fig. 3, fig.4 and fig.5 are sourced from the Web. Fig. 1 is sourced from *U.S. History as Women's History* (ed. L. Kerber, A. Kessler-Harris, and K. Kish Sklar) and fig. 6 is sourced from Nan Enstad's *Ladies of Labor*.

HOW THE BLACK FOLKS BECAME IRISH

ALICE WELLINGTON ROLLINS

In his study of juvenile female deviance of 1923, Chicago School sociologist William I. Thomas narrativizes how stories of migration from a premodern, rural reality to a modern, urban society quite often turn into stories of “unadjusted girls.”¹ Expressions of independent behavior ranging from living alone to the practice of treating and informal sexual commerce demonstrated how a good portion of these girls were actually so adjusted as to feel entitled to actively shape their role and their visibility in the new urban environment. This visibility often attracted bias and prejudice. In practice, the objective hardships of independent living also caused many of these girls to fail in their quest for successful adjustment, or either led them to diverge considerably from accepted standards of respectability. If the departure from traditional morality met with unlucky circumstances it could materialize in life choices which bordered on entrepreneurial prostitution, or exposed urban girls to harsher forms of sexual exploitation. These outcomes, in their irreducible variety, were categorized by Thomas as forms of unadjustment and were held up to support his vision of a professionally regulated society that should eventually supersede the irreparably disaggregated traditional family. In the “captivity literature of post-frontier America,”² the same behavioral manifestations were subsumed and transfigured in the figure of the white slave—typically a chaste American country girl prey to the many ethnic procurers ready to exploit her innocence once she set foot in the tentacular city.³

¹ I am referring to Thomas, *The Unadjusted Girl*, 110. For an illuminating analysis of the problematic dichotomy in Thomas’s *The Unadjusted Girl* between the mature woman and the delinquent girl see Carla Cappetti, “Deviant Girls and Dissatisfied Women: A Sociologist’s Tale,” in *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

² “Captivity” is referred to involuntary seclusion in a brothel. Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution*, 115.

³ As Mara Keire observes, in one of the earliest Progressive-Era white slavery appeals, it was clearly stated that the procurers were chiefly “American young men,” nevertheless in white slavery

The purportedly non-fictional genre that perpetuated this format, the white-slavery tract, had been preceded by a group of novelists who, approaching the theme from different perspectives, had put the figure of the prostitute at the center of their long-fiction endeavors. A harbinger of this novelistic mode was Alice Wellington Rollins, a writer who cast the vehemence of the social critic in the aesthetic mold of the sentimental novelist. In her *Uncle Tom's Tenement*, Rollins interpreted female "unadjustment" by producing disenchanted renditions of female sexual exploitation and abjection which anticipated the mixture of naturalistic representation and social denunciation found in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* two decades later. A decade before "the epidemic of virtue"⁴ which broke out with the First International Congress on White Slavery, and two decades before the white-slavery panic hit the U.S., Rollins avoided the threadbare seduction-story formula and suggested instead the association between chattel slavery and sexual exploitation as a way to excoriate the gendered consequences of irresponsible capitalism. To make her argument more persuasive, the author appropriated an icon of antislavery discourse, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and modeled her fallen Irish heroines upon Stowe's example.⁵ In so doing, the Irish "slaves" she substituted to Stowe's mulattas were endowed with a whiteness which was, in common parlance, still a recent acquisition.

1. Uncle Tom's Tenement

A reputed poet in her time, Alice Wellington Rollins (1847-1897) published several volumes of verse, a collection of aphorisms and some children books.⁶ In addition, she was a vocal advocate of urban reform and expressed her concern for the conditions of the tenement dwellers in some journalistic pieces as well as in

tracts the ratio of blame was quickly shifted to Russian Jews and, to a lesser extent, French *maquereaux*. Keire, "The Vice Trust," 8.

⁴ Goldman, "Traffic in Women," 192-93

⁵ "In drawing attention to an existing evil not fully recognized among us, it has seemed to me more impressive as a lesson to contrast it with an evil in the past now fully realized and recognized." Alice Wellington Rollins, *Uncle Tom's Tenement* (Boston: The William E. Smythe Company, 1888), 3. Hereafter page numbers referring to the novel will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁶ Among her collections of poetry, only *The Ring of Amethyst* (1878) reached the second edition. Other titles are *From Palm to Glacier* (1892), *Little Page Fern* (1895), *The Story of a Ranch* (1885) *The Three Tetons* (1887). Some of her most famous poems are anthologized in *An American Anthology, 1787-1900*, a collection of poetry edited by Edmund Clarence Stedman in 1900.

Uncle Tom's Tenement—her only novel. The fictional strategy informing this book, which literary critic Kevin Hayes decrees to be her most important endeavor,⁷ deserves attention for more than one reason. In the first place, Rollins's adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Irish context represents a perceptible transference of the semiotics of slavery onto the immigrant masses—victims of an unregulated free market, but also intrinsically incapable of efficient self-management. Moreover, the author's attention to the sexual vulnerability of immigrant women frees the depiction of their downfall from moralizing generalizations and rather phrases it as a direct consequence of wage slavery. Since Rollins does not chronicle the activities and environments of sexual workers, *Uncle Tom's Tenement* cannot be considered a novel on prostitution *tout court*; yet, the meticulous study of the circumstances leading immigrant women to choose the path of sexual commerce, constitute an important corollary to the genre.

Rollins's apparently easy mimetic operation consciously replicates Stowe's work in many of the minute details as well as in the macroscopic features: characters taken almost verbatim from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are cast in a plotline which recalls analogous developments, explicit reformative intentions and an exhortative interpellation of the readers.⁸ Perfectly aware of having “yoked her wagon to a star,” Rollins is willing to accept any criticism directed against her emulative endeavor, as long as she can add effectiveness to the lesson she is trying to teach. This effectiveness is the communicative value she extracts from Stowe's impact, a currency that she tries to infuse, boasting humbleness, in a quite ambitious, and sensational, design. In a sense, she capitalizes on the emotional charge of slavery itself, continuing on the level of genre the semantic commerce that the labor discourse had done with smaller semantic units, such as words or phrases.

⁷ Kevin J. Hayes, "In Darkest New York," in *Maggie. A Girl of the Streets by Stephen Crane*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Boston: Bedford, 1999), 106.

⁸ Rollins's description of the rent collector Harley is particularly striking in this sense: “a short, thick-set man, with coarse, commonplace features, and that swaggering air of pretension which marks a low man who is trying to elbow his way upward in the world” (20). See Stowe's Haley: “He was a short, thick-set man, with coarse, commonplace features, and that swaggering air of pretension which marks a low man who is trying to elbow his way upward in the world” Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London: Wordsworth, (1852) 2002), 3. Hereafter page numbers referring to the novel will be given parenthetically in the text.

In Rollins's variant, Stowe's somewhat tragic quadroons and octoroons turn into "unadjusted girls" and revolutionary demi-heroines. In the same way, the three models of plantation life, which in Stowe correspond to three steps of a moral a geographical descent from the border with the northern states to the deep South, loosely correlate with three aspects of economy in the capitalist system. Rollins tackles the sphere of speculation, considered both in the stock exchange and in real estate; the sphere of factory labor, seen from the perspective of the workers as well as from the manufacturers'; and finally the sphere of unsystematic menial jobs to which a large portion of the tenement's poor need to revert.⁹

By detailing the descent of two salient female characters respectively into prostitution and into kept womanhood, Rollins shows some impatience with the unwritten rules of the genteel literary marketplace, a world in which reticence on the theme of commercialized sexuality was considerably higher than in the non-fictional domain of reform publications—fairly outspoken from the antebellum period onwards. Both in chronological and thematic terms, Rollins's treatment of prostitution in long fiction situates her in the middle ground between the reform-minded Victorian novelists and the Progressive Era muckrakers. In the 1870s both Stowe and Louisa May Alcott had enriched their novels with cameos of penitent prostitutes, but, despite the compassion characterizing their portraits, these characters played extremely marginal roles.¹⁰ In 1886, the California author Joaquin Miller, probably trying to revitalize a literary reputation that his frontier poems did not sustain for long, wrote *The Destruction of Gotham*, a deliberately provocative novel whose protagonist, the New York prostitute Dottie Lane, is a former brothel inmate reminiscent of the crazed Dickensian prostitute Martha in *David Copperfield*.¹¹ Since Miller's Dottie is constructed in accordance with mid-century canons of fallen virtue and consequent loss of sanity, we can suggest that Rollins's work, appearing two years later, is the first novel that explores the

⁹ Among these occupations Rollins features sewing, shoeshine, domestic service and prostitution. We could borrow Philip Fisher's observation concerning Uncle Tom's Cabin and maintain that also Uncle Tom's Tenement "Like the novels of Zola...link(s) its form to the economics of a sector of work with its typical figures, inevitable experiences, its primary settings and the interconnections with the basic experience and ages of life." Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 96.

¹⁰ The characters are Maggie in Stowe's *We and Our Neighbors* (1875) and Rachel in Alcott's *Work* (1873)

¹¹ Hapke, *Girls Who Went Wrong*, 29.

causes of prostitution with modern eyes and acute attention to the socio-economic mechanisms of urban life. Rollins's analysis, although incorporating the topos of ruinous seduction, does not make it the only motor of existential degradation. Her narrative gestures towards naturalism, a nascent tendency that can be perceived in the ineluctable influence exerted by environmental conditions on her characters. In this sense, Rollins significantly anticipates works defining the fictional portrayals of city prostitutes, as it is for example the case with the tenement novel *The Evil That Men Do* (1889) by the New York author Edgar Fawcett, and Stephen Crane's classic *Maggie* (1893).¹²

However, Rollins's novel remains a hybrid piece where the anti-slavery mold inevitably shapes the final products in terms of race, although race is never explicitly mentioned. In whitening Stowe's negroes and assigning them Irish names, Rollins keeps the ambiguous racial and ethnic status of the Irish on the background and seems to imply that, since slavery is "an evil in the past now fully realized and recognized"(3), one may as well turn to fight more contemporary evils.¹³ Rollins's treatment of the "complexly triangulated relationship among Anglo-Americans, Irish immigrants and African Americans" relies on her inserting the Irish-American "in the discursive place occupied by black slaves in abolitionist discourse;" a sweeping gesture that would have probably troubled Irish Americans and African Americans alike.¹⁴

¹² In writing *The Evil that Men Do*, the well-to-do New Yorker and Columbia graduate Edgar Fawcett recycled the formulaic plot of the seduced country orphan, Cora Strang, whose virtue is dishonestly stolen and whose destiny is to drift from mistress to streetwalker to murdered victim of the wicked city. Shortly after this novel, Fawcett published in the *Arena* "The Woes of the New York working girl", an essay on the causes of prostitution. *Ibid.*, 35-43.

¹³ This over-optimistic expression belies show she possibly shared, at least rhetorically, the northern conventional wisdom of accepting formal racial equality as sufficient redress for slavery.

¹⁴ This reflection is found in Colleen C. O'Brien, "Race-ing toward Civilization: Sexual Slavery and Nativism in the Novels of Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins and Alice Wellington Rollins," *Legacy* 20, no. 1 and 2 (2003).119. But a passage from Roediger's work can illuminate the problematic complexity of Rollins's operation: "If the [Irish] emigrants had antislavery and antiracist convictions in Ireland...they did not express those convictions in the New World. Irish-American instead treasured their whiteness, as enlisting them to both political rights and to jobs. They solidly voted for proslavery Democrats and opposed abolition as "niggerology". Astonishingly, for a group that easily furnished more immigrants to the United States than any other between 1828 and 1854, the Irish in New York reportedly went to the polls in 1850 shouting "Down with the Nagurs"...Even before taking a leading role in the unprecedentedly murderous attacks on Blacks during the 1863 Draft Riot in New York City, Irishmen had developed a terrible record of mobbing free Blacks on and off the job." Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 136.

1.1. Life Among The Lowly

In *Uncle Tom's Tenement*, Rollins deploys the vicissitudes of different characters around the tenement where Tom, an initially industrious and abstemious Irish immigrant, lives with his numerous family. Rollins's heroine, Cassie, is Tom's oldest daughter. Beautiful and gifted, Cassie determines to economically uplift her family by means of her honest, specialized work. After being fired from a department store for rejecting a lustful superior, Cassie witnesses the failure of her aspiration to become a stenographer since all potential employers seem to assume her romantic availability. Once she reverts to domestic work, Cassie commences her moral decline, a progress whose first step is her sexual initiation, within domestic walls, by her employer's son. Eventually, she accepts concubinage and unwed motherhood as best and only way to support herself and her helpless relatives. Cassie's story intertwines with that of two wealthy Anglo-American families: the financially threatened Selbys, temporarily interested in tenement speculation, and the solidly affluent Sinclairs, whose daughter, Effie, is so reform-minded as to consider a missionary career in the service of the tenement dwellers. Like Stowe's Shelby family, Rollins's Selby family is good-hearted but unable to fulfill the social responsibilities they superficially claim with regard to the indigent. They cheerfully buy a tenement equally animated by the income prospect and by the pseudo-philanthropic belief that the improvement of a degraded building could civilize its tenants too. Almost immediately, they are forced to sell the property to remedy some hazardous financial speculations, and, while letting go of their edifying plans, they also fail to protect the tenement denizens nearer and dearer to them: their former nurse Eliza and her son Harry. The Selbys, embodying the benevolent governance of the Anglo-Saxons, offer formal support to Eliza and to her inventor husband, but they are too distant to grasp the poverty in which the family is descending. Through their paternalistic distraction, they end up accelerating the process of decay, rather than the one of evolutionary uplift. In a relentless succession of infelicitous events, Eliza is deserted by her husband, who "goes west" after his patent has been stolen; she then has to send her son west with a mission and put her newborn daughter into an orphanage. The last time we hear of her she is working in an opium den.

The Sinclair family, where Effie embodies a progressive little Eve, is a satirical vignette of American aristocrats whose younger generations commit themselves to radical social transformation—but only as long as it does not affect the status quo. The circle around the Sinclairs includes Benham, a reform-minded journalist engrossed in civilizing a homeless Irish newspaper boy, an aristocratic widow suddenly impoverished by her husband's death, and the Damrells, a family of factory owners whose patriarch's shrewdness curb both his son's penchant for socialist "hallucinations" as well as his employees' intention to strike.

Despite some passages overly faithful to the original, Rollins' work succeeds in avoiding the superficial comparisons of the African-American history with the white immigrant experience. As Matthew Frey Jacobson contends, no one minimally familiar with the congeries of regulations and counter-regulations produced by the U.S. to govern black and white intermingling "could ever suppose that being a 'Celt,' say, was tantamount to being some kind of European negro."¹⁵ Rollins's careful evasion of such fallacy constitutes another worthy aspect of her work—especially from the perspective of her distinctive resemanticization of the abolitionist/sentimental narrative. In her operation, two main movements can be observed: the supplementation of sentimental stylistic devices with pre-naturalist impulses, and the substitution of the typological dimension with the fervor of an almost Progressive agenda, well before Progressivism gained its full sway.¹⁶

In the first place, Rollins's narrative expands the possibilities of the sentimental novel through a soft-spoken yet lucid frankness of representation

¹⁵ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*.9

¹⁶ My use of the expression "almost progressive" is meant to indicate the fine difference that separates Rollins's take on the need for reform from the approach which will become popular after the turn of the century. The Progressives proper are characterized by a strong reliance on the role of the State as primary actor in the amelioration of society—provided that its institutions are rid of corruption and its legislative output made more effective. Rollins, although welcoming state intervention when not obtrusive, firmly contends that "nothing will, in reform, take the place of individual conscientious landlordism." Landlordism is, in this case, just an example of any form of organizational agency that can administer a certain contractual power over a conspicuous mass of citizen. Rollins makes it clear that individualism—which "seems minute, but it is mighty" (213)—should translate into desirable forms of "intelligent capitalism" where money is not put into as charity but as an investment philanthropic only to the degree of being satisfied with a fair—not excessive—return and only after all the services pertaining to a responsible administration are issued. In reinforcing what seems to be a plea for "ethic liberalism" Rollins explains that the "individual" is not necessarily an individual person. But, more advisably, an individual corporation. Alice Wellington Rollins, "The Tenement-House Problem," *Forum* 5, no. April (1888).

aply grafted on *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* structural melodrama. The point of departure common to Rollins and Stowe is the accentuation of a specific social blight through the consideration of its destructive effects on the family unit—a social constituent which is deemed the repository of the natural order. In both novels, the separation of the children from their mothers is thematically amplified in order to appeal to a universally understandable manifestation of unacceptable social decay. While in Stowe that ultimate evil is slavery incarnated in the plantation system, for Rollins's the villain is a particularly predatory brand of free enterprise, epitomized in the political economy of the tenement, interestingly dubbed the Minotaur.¹⁷

As variation on the theme of female oppression, Rollins's more modern sensibility enables her to undertake a less than prude exploration of female morality and to portray the fallen women in the novel far more sympathetically than her lapidary *Forum* essay of 1887 let imagine. In the article, the difference between "the southern slave girl who was sinned against" and "the northern tenement girl who sins" is articulated as to blame a paradigmatic tenement daughter who, after wandering "to the dance-house of her own accord," becomes a "voluntary agent, ruining men."¹⁸ The essay, titled "The New Uncle Tom's Cabin," was probably written at a time in which the book composition was in its final stage and it almost functions like an introduction meant to clarify the analogy between chattel slavery and life in the tenement. Yet, in the scarce seven pages of the essay, prostitution, only mentioned as "callousness to vice," assumes far more Victorian overtones than in the novel, a work that, instead, underscores the structural defenselessness of tenement girls, rather than their ill-employed agency. When bringing up the issue of sexual exploitation ingrained in slavery, Stowe presents the reader with a mix of propriety and matter-of-factness: sexual violence is viewed as an appendage of the slavery problem, a fixture just as structural as auctions and field-overseeing, a form of subjugation apparently not involving a more personal, psychological, or only distinct, brand of violence. Rollins, quite on the contrary, makes use of her modern mentality according to

¹⁷ The metaphor of the Minotaur had been widely exploited in W. Stead notorious article "Maiden's Tribute to Babylon." This lexical choice bespeaks Rollins direct indebtedness to the sensational literature on forced prostitution whose favored tropes she conflates with the semantic field of chattel slavery.

¹⁸ Alice Wellington Rollins, "The New Uncle Tom's Cabin," *Forum* 4, no. October (1887). 223

which sexuality can be investigated in its individual as well as social dimension with an openness that makes the classic scapegoat figure of the ethnic procurer completely unnecessary.

Secondly, Stowe's transfiguration of the sentimental elements of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into illustrations of the typological genre is updated by Rollins through an attempt to project melodrama as the elective genre of social critique.¹⁹ Like Stowe, Rollins invests the sentimental mode with an uplifting mission and underscores this operation less through a theological perspective than via the promulgation of deeply felt progressive themes. In the dynamics of loss and gain attached to the substitution of the typological with the Progressive, the most effective device in Stowe's orchestration, the Bible, is foregone. Part of the authoritative appeal to her contemporary readers came to Stowe from her seriousness in illuminating her declaredly "authentic" events with the supernatural light of intense Christianity. Rollins, retaining the argument of reason that Stowe introduces on a more subdued register of her narrative, lets go of the fideistic tone present in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This operation, however justified by the changed sensibility of the reading audience, produces the immediate effect of dramatically decreasing the moral impact of the Christ-like figures of Tom and Eve.²⁰ The absence of the theological motive is filled with the progressive creed, a doctrine with proliferating social implications, if not as unshakable; from this perspective, Rollins's "lesson" supplements her master's with the beliefs of the nascent new era, as well as with its instabilities. The author discusses social Darwinism, wage slavery and labor organization; she revisits the master-slave dialectics within factory walls and directly addresses the socialists and the anarchists of her own time; she engages nativist discourses and sets aside some space for the pains of gentile new *pauvres*. Most notably she radicalizes her appeal on Irish women's behalf meanwhile prescribing standards of civic duties that apply to the nation as a whole and lambast the doctrines of Anglo-masculine supremacy.

¹⁹ For an exhaustive description of such strategy see Winfried Fluck, "The Power and Failure of Representation in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *New Literary History* 23, no. 2 (1992).

²⁰ Fluck observes that "The gradual disregard of the typological dimension of the novel is already apparent in its immensely popular stage adaptations in the second half of the nineteenth century." *Ibid.*: 332.

However, Rollins's re-telling of Stowe's work is not a simple substitution of the evils of antebellum slavery with the ones of postbellum poverty. Rollins's adaptation demonstrates her understanding of slavery not only as racially based exploitation, but also as a form of organization of labor. Consequently, the author develops some of the reflections that in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are only embryonic to voice an unapologetic critique of the patriarchal/capitalist through "lectures" on the mechanics of poverty formation as well as on the flaws of reform initiatives.²¹ Her condemnation of profit-driven operations should not however be mistaken for latent radicalism; quite on the contrary, throughout the novel Socialism is commented upon with overt sarcasm,²² and militants are harshly criticized, not in their "regard for the poor," but in their favoring "methods" for which Rollins has "no sympathy at all" (136). This eclectic mixture of economic liberalism, forceful compassion for women and evolutionary touches produces a cluster of principles that can only be untangled in the light of what Daniel Levine, talking about Jane Addams, called a "native radicalism," or the "American version" of a "sort of socialism."²³ This synthesis of republican ideals where the advocacy of social reform and defense of business are not in contradiction inform Rollins's sentimental endeavor and explains some of the idiosyncrasies that the melodramatic framework leaves unresolved.

1.2. Neither Sentimental Nor Realist Yet Both

Rollins's somewhat formulaic work continues what Lauren Berlant calls "the unfinished business of sentimentality," a business that picked up in periods of social anxiety and manifested an intense desire for an unconflicted world, where the subjects can communally "feel right" about structural inequities.²⁴ Given the fragility of the "confidence" characterizing the white middle class of the

²¹ These aspects are confirmed by her essays: Rollins, "The New Uncle Tom's Cabin." ———, "The Tenement-House Problem."

²² An exemplary passage describes Tom's inclusion in a tiny circle of radical workers in virtue of his complete downfall into alcoholic stupor "Poor Tom, besides being utterly incapable of anything requiring so much mental gymnastics as an argument on Socialism, or of anything necessitating so much bloodshed even in thought as a treatise on dynamite or bombs, was usually very much more than half-seas over during these discussions, and made a perfectly safe listener to secrets of state as he slumbered in his chair or on the floor." (448)

²³ Daniel Levine, *Jane Addams and the Liberal Tradition* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1971). See the Introduction for a wider framing of the concept.

²⁴ By the phrase "unfinished business," therefore, I mean to designate the specific conjuncture of adaptation, commodification and affect that distinguished this modern and nationally inflected modality of expression. See Lauren Berlant, "Poor Eliza," *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998).

Progressive Era, re-encountering *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in this historical moment suggests a longing for political optimism and for an unyielding faith in the transformation of unjust institutions. In the light of Jane Tompkins's analysis of the power of sentimental fiction, Rollins's novel respects the features of a female genre that, while offering a truthful glimpse of how a society reflects upon itself, violates some rules of formal economy in order to state and propose "solutions for social and political predicaments."²⁵ Beyond the conventions of the genre—coincidental plot, reliance on stereotypes and abundance of tears—Rollins's sentimentality is easily perceived as tactical, as an open stylistic device ideally fit for the discussion of modern preoccupations, and for the interpellation of a middle-class audience.²⁶ The waning decades of the century are the time in which "both in Europe and in America, writer such as W.D. Howells...and Zola began to shift literature away from sentimentality, with its emphasis on uplifting portraits of noble and genteel lives, to a harsh emphasis on the facts of life, regardless of the discomfort the reader might experience."²⁷ This tendency notwithstanding, Rollins's homage to Stowe cannot be considered an anachronism. It may not be listed as an effort in the direction of naturalism *tout court*, given that the bourgeoisie is often depicted in the beauty of the silks and in the crispness of the flowers,²⁸ but the conspicuous passages where the reader is protected from discomfort seem to suggest a performative intent germane to naturalism's purpose of impacting the public opinion. Reassuring scenes, in fact, are calculated to bring about a metamorphosis of consciousness into the middle-class reader. As Sabine Haenni intimates, this change, precisely instigated by empathetic recognition and identification, should originate in the "intimate relationship between the immigrant and the middle classes" that Rollins's novel

²⁵ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, xviii.

²⁶ As a result of this adaptation to bourgeois taste, her novel is interspersed with hyperbolic renditions of excess followed by a rational contextualization: description of poverty as excruciating, of wealth as voluptuous and of despair as tearjerking are most often designed to catalyze attention and open the discussion on the causes or consequences of these states of affairs.

²⁷ Hasia R. Diner, "Introduction," in *Jacob Riis; How the Other Half Lives*, ed. Hasia R. Diner (New York: Norton, 2010), xi.

²⁸ Rollins tantalizes the reader with the temptation of blossoming romances between the heirs of wealthy families and unfolds the intricacies of genteel domesticities like a diluted Edith Wharton. To this regard see Chapter IX in particular where Rollins portrays Lois Felton, for certain aspects a precedent to Lily Barth, a young woman of the middle class that a sudden death in the family has left with the necessity of being employed as a "companion" to a lady of the New York aristocracy. In Rollins's only half-felt irony Lois Felton is "one of the *nouveaux pauvres* whose suffering is keener than that of those who have always been poor." (186)

constructs and ought to transform “a privatized middle class into a socially conscious one.”²⁹

Haenni reinforces the didactic hypothesis through the observation that Rollins situates “domesticated versions of the immigrant poor in the middle-class home, not differently from the way in which photographer Lewis Hine relies on the intensity of close ups and portraits for his child labor projects” to reveal homely subjects to the wealthy classes. While such suggestion is persuasive, I would underscore that this device is the mean, and not the end of her work. “Pictures” are to Rollins a Trojan horse containing civic values and the adoption of *clichés* is calculated to challenge and subvert mainstream notions of the picturesque. In Rollins’s depictions, the “captions” almost overwrite the images, aimed as they are at equipping the reader with interpretative tools. Constantly throughout the text, the tableau vivant is the pretext for indefatigable sociological analysis. While we see Eliza as a “hungry sewing girl” we are instructed on the impact of mechanized sewing onto the home seamstresses; when Tom or Cassie goes to job interviews we are lectured on the prices of every menial job as well as on the internal hierarchy of servants; the predictable scenes of drunkenness teach the reader about the economic savings in coal deriving from having beer for supper; and even the ultimate sentimental theme of infant death is presented with some information on the advantage of life insurance for immigrant mothers.

This documentaristic abundance of “facts” is not dissimilar from a distinctive trait of the iconic works of American naturalism; suffice it to think of *The Jungle*, a novel whose author boasted its being “packed with facts” as demonstration of its intrinsic value, beyond the literary status of the work.³⁰ Not unlike Sinclair’s confusion of affective targets that lead him to hit the reader in the stomach when he was aiming for the heart, Rollins also attempts, if not to misplace her punch, to inveigle the middle-class readers into her argument so deeply as to convince them of the necessity to curb their revenues. As Berlant demonstrates in her essay on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, “the novel’s very citation is a sign that an aesthetic work can be powerful enough to move the people who read

²⁹ Sabine Haenni, “Visual and Theatrical Culture, Tenement Fiction, and the Immigrant Subject in Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl*,” *American Literature* 71, no. 3 (1999): 511.

³⁰ Quoted in Rebecca Harding Davis, *Bits of Gossip: Writing Cultural Autobiography*, ed. Janice Lasseter Milner and Sharon M. Harris (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001), 14.

it into identifying against their own interests.”³¹ Rollins, for example, proposes the demolishing of middle-class institutions such as philanthropy and business privacy with extreme seriousness, because the weapons of “sentimental fiction of purpose” are not less direct than the naturalistic ones in their “attempt(s) to redefine the social order.”³²

While challenging the chronological barrier of the sentimental, Rollins indirectly participates in the debate about the flourishing genre of tenement fiction and particularly criticizes the hypocritical usage made of “local color” in contemporary magazines. To clarify her position, Rollins opens the second chapter with a ghetto scene in which the spectacularization of poverty is discussed in terms of intellectual honesty. In the episode, a still crude Mr. Benham has just written a heart-rending editorial on the tenements, an exercise that he candidly declares as purely theoretical as well as lucrative. Unaware that the spectacle of real indigence is about to cure him from his cynical ways, the journalist accepts an invitation to a slumming tour of the Lower East Side with the intent to garner even more profitable and scandalous raw material directly from the underworld.³³ Rollins makes the ghetto the site of an epiphany: once confronted with the reality of abjection, Benham kills his “goose that lays the golden eggs” (24) to become a militant, if free lance, reformer. Since the connection between sensational writing and pecuniary reward is so harshly condemned as to almost stigmatize even Rollins’s own production, the author implicitly draws an epistemological distinction between Benham’s utilitarian “local color”—the fruit of a self proclaimed professional integrity based on ignorance—³⁴and the use of “the touch of exaggeration that typifies,”³⁵ the latter a classic realist device deployed by Rollins as a language through which the contemporary audience can better assimilate a pedagogical and heuristic lesson.³⁶ Aware of the pitfalls of the scenic

³¹ Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” 640.

³² Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, xi.

³³ “By the way” exclaims Benham suddenly, “now that I am in for it, in search for local color, I want to see the very worst you can show me”(25).

³⁴ “For I am a conscientious man...I could never write a moving editorial if I found out there’s nothing that needed to be moved. And moving editorials are just now my stock in trade”(25).

³⁵ In giving us Howell’s assessment of Balzac, Wonham reports that “Balzac earns praise for his panoramic vision of nineteenth century society, but he cannot resist “the touch of exaggeration which typifies”. Henry B. Wonham, *Playing the Races. Ethnic Caricature and American Literary Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 41.

³⁶ As a result of this adaptation to bourgeois taste, her novel is interspersed with hyperbolic renditions of excess followed by a rational contextualization: description of poverty as

vignette as well as of pamphletistic sensationalism, the writer never ascribes the traits of her types to racial character and tries to counter the mainstream opportunistic belief in environmental determinism. Thus, although we are presented with a stylized fictional treatment of Irish immigrants full of inept parental figures, many ragged children and caricatured Catholic habits, the Ghetto residents seem to collaborate with the environment to form their respective identity,³⁷ rather than succumb to it. In exposing the role of middle-class greed, Rollins's claims resonate with some of Jacob Riis's essays when he declares that "the greed of capital that wrought the evil must itself undo it, as far as it can now be undone. Homes must be built for the working masses by those who employ their labor; but tenements must cease to be good property in the old heartless sense."³⁸ However, although Riis recognizes that "the evil born and bred in the tenements may be caused by capital," he also contends that "the victims of capitalism, paradoxically contribute to the need for creating the boundary."³⁹ This attribution of responsibility to the tenement dwellers also emerges in Riis's fictional work *Out of Mulberry Street* (1898). In the collection of tenement tales, the working woman is often depicted with rather confining features while the tainted one is always considered as beyond redemption, regardless of the circumstances that have led to the loss of virtue. Quite distinctly, Rollins instead reserves her skepticism for the Anglo-American ruling classes, and she grants to her immigrant characters a great potential for assimilation and mobility, if only thwarted by the insensitivity of the system.

1.3. Rollins and the Tenement-Girl Story

The decade which followed Rollins's novel witnessed the development of the tenement tale: a genre which made the working girl a prominent subject in fiction. In addition to the celebrated works by Riis and Crane, short fiction written by other journalists treated the theme of Irish tenement dwellers with interesting results. James W. Sullivan,⁴⁰ a journalist and published author who

excruciating, of wealth as voluptuous and of despair as tearjerking are most often designed to catalyze attention and open the discussion on the causes or consequences of these states of affairs.

³⁷ Peter Kvidera, "Rewriting the Ghetto," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2005): 1131.

³⁸ Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Norton, (1890) 2010).

³⁹ Kvidera, "Rewriting the Ghetto," 1134.

⁴⁰ James W. Sullivan (1848-1938) was born in Pennsylvania. A printer by trade, he settled in New York around 1882 and started working in the proof room of the New York Time. He was active in

devoted a good part of his fictional work to the depiction of Irish immigrants. In his *The Tenement Tales of New York* (1895) the flexible form of the short story allows him to compile a varied crowd engaged in social passing, inter-ethnic marriages, dancing parties and even, for those middle class Irish who have climbed the social ladder, in literary societies.⁴¹ Sullivan is extremely modest when it comes to the morality of the slum girl and he never allows himself to follow young females to their complete perdition. Sullivan represents, Laura Hapke suggests, a “prime example of the evasive literary attitude towards the sexuality of the working class girl.”⁴² New York reporter for the *Sun*, Julian Ralph, also composed a series of stories on the life of German and Irish shop girls which were popular enough to be collected in book form under the title *People We Pass: Stories of Life Among the Masses of New York City* (1896). As Hapke observes, these productions are “men’s tales of the feminine...other-half” and tend to replicate the period’s anxiety about the morality of the working woman rather than grasp the newness and importance of female identity as wage-earner.⁴³ Nevertheless, through their adherence to the unromanticized rendition of the urban backdrop, these authors began to defy cultural prejudices against women in the workplace and on the sexuality of the woman worker in ways that genteel labor fiction and the shopgirl Cinderellas of dime-novel author Laura Jean Libbey, could not.⁴⁴

“Maggie” probably remains one of the best-known Irish-American fictional figures and the homonymous novella has become a canonical text that often

reform movements and also joined the AFL. Writing fiction was for him a sideline whose function was to elevate the common man. He published two collections of short stories: *So the World Goes* (1898) and *Tenement Tales of New York* (1895).

⁴¹ In analyzing the *Tenement Tales of New York* by James Sullivan, Bridie Chapman observes that “the tension between tenement reform and ethnic caricature in local color writing” is adopted with the intent of foregrounding “the dulling effects of tenement and working-class life” but also as an attempt to reject notions of “descent characteristics” that uncritically link the figure of the immigrant with the poverty of the slum.” This consideration very well applies to Rollins’s style as well. Bridie Chapman, “Revisiting Rum Alley,” in *Clinton Institute Summer School Symposium* (Dublin: 2009), 4.

⁴² Laura Hapke, *Girls Who Went Wrong*, 10.

⁴³ Laura Hapke, “The American Working Girl and the New York Tenement Tale of the 1890s,” *The Journal of American Culture* 15, no. 2 (1992): 43-44.

⁴⁴ John Hay’s *The Breadwinners* (1883), Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s *The Stillwater Tragedy* (1879), Clinton Ross *The Silent Workman* (1886). Laura Jean Libbey (1862-1924) authored about 200 dime novels many of which featured a factory girl’s quest for Prince Charming. Among the most famous titles are *Daisy Brooks or a Perilous Love* (1883), *Pretty Madcap Dorothy or How She Won a Lover* (1891), *Jolly Sally Pendleton or the Wife Who Was Not a Wife* (1897), and *Kidnapped at the Altar* (1909). See Joyce Shaw Peterson, “Working Girls and Millionaires: The Melodramatic Romances of Laura Jean Libbey,” *American Studies* 24, no. Spring (1983).

catalyzes all treatment of Irish identity, tenement life and prostitution, in addition to figuring prominently in the discussion of naturalism. Interestingly enough Rollins, whose novel preceded in publication all the aforementioned writers and whose reformatory inspiration appears to me as cogent and ambitious, is hardly ever mentioned in secondary literature. In her giving a “woman’s” tale of the feminine other half, Rollins is as candid as Crane, but, more bravely, affords to keep her prostitutes alive all throughout her novel. In this respect, Rollins’s work can be read, “as a gendering machine[s] tracing paths towards survival through plots of feminine feeling.”⁴⁵ The men’s tale generally do not permit survival for tarnished femininity: in their writing the untimely death provides a sort redemption of personal suffering, if only in uniting the reading audience in communal grieving over life lost.

In this sense, writers like Sullivan and Crane are more in tune with the literary conventions of earlier seduction tales than Rollins, whose politico-sentimental aesthetic is rarely so straightforwardly moralistic. The theme of death and self-sacrifice as treated in Rollins escapes both the sentimental model pursued by Stowe—but also by Joaquim Miller and Edgar Fawcett—and the naturalist one carried out by Crane. Stowe follows the moral theology of American domesticity, where death is the sign of the martyr saint; in Miller and in Fawcett the death of the fallen woman acquires overtones of expiation. On yet a different plane, Crane develops the environmental implications underpinning naturalism by producing a narrative where the mud of the slums inevitably suffocates the flower—Maggie, in fact, has already been spiritually killed by the virtue-corrupting slum before turning suicidal.⁴⁶ For Rollins’s fallen heroines, sanctifying death is not available, but neither is death as sign of condemnation, nor as homage to environmental determinism. Rollins’s lost women painfully survive and live a shattered existence in which no eschatological vision sublimates the privations they undergo, and in which no uplifting linkage between the privileged and the socially abject can be constructed.

⁴⁵ Berlant, "Poor Eliza," 636.

⁴⁶ In commenting the notorious opening of *Maggie*, Hapke observes that the famous metaphor was modeled upon Edgar Fawcett’s description of Cora Strang as a “delicate blush-rose in the midst of mirk and soilure” in *The Evil that Men Do*. Hapke moreover surveys the different interpretation of Maggie’s death in the chapter “Stephen Crane and the Deserted Street Girls.” Hapke, *Girls Who Went Wrong*, 9, 45-67.

In her populated fresco, Rollins situates other types more commonly found in the representations of the American Irish in late nineteenth century literature.⁴⁷ Rollins's deployment of conventional attributes to describe immigrant characters situates the novel in the "paradoxical interplay" where democratic ideals of inclusion coexist with ethnic typification. Henry B. Woonam identifies realism with the "age of caricature," where the caricature is intended as "a duplicitous attempt to reconcile the rival claims of consent and descent in a coherent account of American identity:" from this perspective, we can grant Rollins a literary position that lies "just beyond the pale of realist representation."⁴⁸ In Rollins's work the layers of typification are multiplied by the superimposition of the Irish and progressive types upon Stowe's sentimental and racial types; the result possesses "an uncanny reflexive quality, one that contests the same bourgeois mythology that such images were ostensibly devised to empower."⁴⁹ Furthermore, the citation of *Uncle Tom* foreshadows questions about the possibility of intimacy between the races in the United States⁵⁰ and, although in Rollins the ethnic specificity is left to the imagination of the reader, the traces of blackness show through the veneer or Irishness so as to make us wonder, from time to time, which color these "types" really are.

2. The Shadow of the Negro

In those characters where the nearness to Stowe's cast is greater, the discussion of racial and ethnic difference, carefully avoided in favor of a focus on class, reemerges as an afterthought, as a forbidden word poorly erased from the palimpsest used, after due scraping, for a new inscription. When the black skin is lightened, but all the rest remains, whiteness suddenly meets the reader's eye as an optical illusion and a cosmetic procedure—especially if contrasted with the "natural" whiteness of the Anglo-American upper classes. With two characters in particular this confrontational structure calls attention to a set of practices

⁴⁷ In his *Playing Races* Woonam argues that ethnic caricature appealed rather than repelled the writers of the American realist canon both for its nativist impulse and for its potential to instigate a radical decentering of identity. On these premises he sets off to illustrate the "complex sympathies that underlie literary realism's investment in the art of ethnic caricature." Woonam, *Playing Races*, 37

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Berlant, "Poor Eliza," 636.

incarnating cultural difference: observing little Harry Harrison in the Selby's parlor and newspaper boy Andy Highflyer interacting with his Pygmalion Mr. Benham, we strain our eyes to see these characters as Irish as they should be, updating the impression that Stowe's Harry and Topsy have left on our memory. As successful as this act of self discipline can be, some textual references cast a shadow on these children of the slum, the "shadow of the negro," which in Rollins's depiction takes up the profile of a peculiarly "signifying monkey."

2.1. Harry Harrison

Harry Harrison, Eliza's son, is an extremely opinionated eight year old that educational efforts have made into a miniature lord, and whose naiveté makes him perceive America as the classless society it claims to be—and act accordingly. We first meet him at the Selby's where, maneuvered into a surreal conversation, he gives a colorful assessment of his very Americanness. In manifesting his longing for the still open American frontier, Harry reveals his participation in the assimilation process described by Frederick Turner as happening in the confrontation with the wilderness.⁵¹ In the mythical west of his fantasy, Harry sees himself as opposed to animal forces (rattlesnakes, bears and Injuns) that he wishes to master, and, to pursue his design, he envisions a symbolic matricide.

But have you reflected my boy" said Mr. Selby with great seriousness, "that in order to make you an orphan, your mother would have to commit suicide?" "Yes," said the boy, slowly detaching another raisin, and not to be baffled by any mysterious new phrase. "I've thought of that. But she could do it"—he nodded his head approvingly—"my mother can do anything. (11-12)⁵²

⁵¹ "Governor Spotswood of Virginia writes in 1717, 'The inhabitants of our frontiers are composed generally of such as have been transported hither as servants, and, being out of their time, settle themselves where land is to be taken up and that will produce the necessaries of life with little labour.' Very generally these redemptioners were of non-English stock. In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics. The process has gone on from the early days to our own." Frederick J. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, 1921), 3.

⁵² The child will actually be offered to witness his first suicide, the only one taking place in the novel, three chapters later when his eloquence will already be tainted by the ghetto's slang and the hallucinations of drunkenness as well as the view of death will be regarded as exciting treats "If yr wants fun, come along to our house; there's a man hung hisself in old Ann's entry." "Hung hisself! And with a scream of delighted excitement the lower hall was vacated in an instant. "Yes, hung hisself up on the door. You'd better come quick, 'fore the coroner comes an' cuts him down!" (78)

In the half-serious prefiguration of Eliza's suicide, Harry professes the voluntary renunciation of his motherland, Ireland, a place of which he probably has no notion; still his words imply the effacement of European origins as precondition for re-inventing himself in the expanding American West. Child that he is, in the attempt to cover up his ignorance of the mysterious word "suicide," Harry unknowingly conflates the typical belief in almighty motherhood with the infinite potential for self-sacrifice that good mothers always deploy in sentimental novels. This defensive gesture of his dignity in the eye of his interrogator makes him happily welcome the eventuality of his mother's suicide as a demonstration of her (self-destructive) capabilities.

In finding "the Injuns" exotic, Harry also distances himself from another classic association that saw the Irish often compared to Native Americans in their degree of ferocity. Behind Harry's naive excitement with the people of the prairies, Rollins addresses an issue that had been a major element of contention over the whiteness of the Irish: while people of Celtic descent may be obviously white, they had been found nonetheless savage.⁵³ A couple of decades before Rollins' novel, at the time of the infamous largely Irish uprising known as the New York City draft riots of 1863, the "wild" nature of the Irish became a point of heated controversy. Following the Conscription Act, the Union began drafting men to relieve the manpower shortage plaguing the army, but it contextually allowed exemption from the war for anyone who could pay a conspicuous monetary fine. Resenting the class discrimination inherent in this economic measure, a mostly immigrant crowd burst into three days of utter violence resisting not only the burden of war, but also attacking the black population of New York, making it instantly a scapegoat. In addition, rioters unleashed their anger onto white abolitionists and "amalgamationists" such as two women who were married to black men and a white prostitute who catered to men of color.⁵⁴ Capitalizing on never-smothered nativist generalization, the *Harper's Magazine* described the Irish insurgents as "wild Indians let loose" whereas contemporary accounts stressed how their anger against "nigger-worshipping" revived their

⁵³ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 20.

⁵⁴ Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago Chicago University Press, 2003), 279-88.

nature of citizens whose rights to equality are wronged through class-based discrimination.⁵⁵

Rollins's Harry is extremely civilized, and possibly even more dignified than Stowe's younger Harry. He is fastidiously aware of social conventions to the point of demanding formal titles for his mother and for himself, and, in a slip of his young imagination, he mistakes the fact that his mother was Charlie Selby's nurse with her being, in the past, Charlie's mother. The slippage adumbrates a continuity of status between the two layers of society, eventuality possible only through the child's limping logic. His entrance in the bourgeois home counterpoints the minstrel show extracted from Stowe's little boy with an ostentatious display of table manners.

Come here, you little monkey, and get this bunch of raisins." But the boy turned with dignity towards his mother. "Shall I take them mammy?" "Yes, dear, yes, go to the gentleman." With this the child advanced slowly, and took the raisins. "I'd like a plate please." He was quickly put into a chair at the table....The child slowly detached a raisin from the bunch. It was evident he did not wish to appear that raisins were any novelty to him. Then, slowly raising his eyes to Mr. Selby's face again he said with great distinctness: "I'm not a monkey," "You don't like to be called a monkey? Why, Mr. Darwin once told me that I was a monkey, and I rather liked it. (11).

Rather than the exaggeration of deformity, as in Stowe, the affectation of composure here constitutes the entertainment and overturns the intentions with which those very manners have been taught and received. Just like Eliza's dress can pass for a tailor made piece so well that even Mrs. Selby wonders about the provenance of such dress, Harry's manners could allow for a successful social passing. Still, in the context of real wealth, the Harrisons' deportment assumes the quality of a humorous farce. With Stowe in mind, it is easy to perceive her Harry, painted white, amusing his urban master. The irony becomes thicker when Mr. Selby calls Harry "little monkey."⁵⁶ While Mr. Selby's idiom may initially only "recall the manner in which a plantation owner might refer to his slaves,"⁵⁷ the amused response offered to Harry's rebuke widens the perspective in which the

⁵⁵ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 52-53.

⁵⁶ "Come here, you little monkey, and get this bunch of raisin"...."I'm not a monkey." "You don't like to be called a monkey? Why, Mr. Darwin once told me I was a monkey, and I rather liked it..." (10-11)

⁵⁷ O'Brien, "Race-ing Towards Civilization," 129.

animal metaphor is used to embrace a whole branch of knowledge, as well as a worldview. The evolutionary mindset informing Mr. Selby's talk does not imply that "all monkeys are created equal;" as a consequence the Irish, often addressed as a "lower class of tenants," are collocated in a socially inferior evolutionary stage. In the circumscribed place of the bourgeois parlor, Harry and Eliza cannot be but monkeys in that they ape aristocratic manners and clothing. The sad performance is eventually exposed in its thinness by the patronizing bestowal of charity. The very same charity that is harshly deprecated by the Selbys in their enlightened discussions⁵⁸ is inadvertently employed to suffocate the Harrisons' attempts to rise above the necessity of accepting donations. After Harry has fought the temptation to accept some more raisins to bring home, he surrenders to the abundance of "other dainties." With the mindless donation of inane niceties, the Selbys subdue the child's defense mechanisms, in a manner reminiscent of how the early Spaniards won the Native Americans' dubiousness with the tricky donation of glass bijouterie.

But he found it impossible to resist the temptation of various other dainties and small toys forced upon him; and when mother and child left the home an hour later, both were laden with as much as they could carry. (14)

As Colleen O'Brien observes "Mr. Selby is affectionate toward Harry, yet he obviously could not imagine the child growing up to be his social equal."⁵⁹ Hence, the only way he facetiously envisions him included in his family is only as permanent entertainment: "clever Little Rascal! I'd like to adopt him as an antidote to the blues" (16). The whole scene, conspicuously positioned in the first chapter to set the tone for the rest of the novel, elicits a dialectic of attraction and repulsion on the part of the middle class that is reminiscent of that dynamics of "love and theft" that Eric Lott has mapped as the conceptual motor of blackface minstrelsy.⁶⁰ In Rollins's "whiteface" act, the envy of the immigrants' smartness and beauty is mixed to the subtle lampooning of their weaknesses, and the admiration of the lightheartedness that could cure the bourgeois ennui is

⁵⁸ The Selbys value the responsible involvement of the immigrant poor in the microcosm of the tenements and delight at the idea that "the people don't pay any lower rent that they ought to do."

⁵⁹ O'Brien, "Race-ing Towards Civilization," 128.

⁶⁰ See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

undermined by the fear of their ungraspable eeriness. In the inescapable logic of the novel, the result of such ambivalent attitude is the commodification of the dispossessed by the privileged.

2.2. Andy Highflyer

Just like beauty in the slum is an unusual spectacle destined to consumption on the part of Anglo-American eyes and subsequently to degradation, in the same way the glimpse of intelligence among the Ghetto dwellers is primarily a source of amusement, and secondarily a dangerous impulse in need of taming. Andy Highflyer, street Arab and newspaper boy, is “so eternally smart”(96)--or so he sighs to himself—and speculates that the source of such brilliance has to necessarily reside in some gentlemanly blood he got from a fantasized father. The pedigree that Andy invents for himself implies sexual exploitation and economic inequality: he theorizes a poor dead mother who abandoned him on a sidewalk and a hateful gentleman father who deserted him. This fantasy reverberates in the vicissitudes of many other characters in a way that recalls the life patterns of mulatto children in the context of slavery. Being a “child of the system,” not having known “no father, nor mother nor nothing,” and possessing a razor-sharp wit are only a few of the traits that relate Andy to his black double, Topsy.⁶¹ According to her own version, Topsy was not “made” (by God), she rather thinks of herself as “grow’d” and her self-perception harmonizes with the realm of nature. In a similar fashion Andy affirms he was not born, but “found” (96) in the street, as if to strengthen his belonging to the by-products of the city and civilization, in his case, to the refuse. Two other macroscopic features unite the characters: their being born performers and their becoming the object of a pedagogical experiment.⁶²

Stowe introduces Topsy as a ballerina in the “corps de ballet” (234) of the novel and a talented imitator. Her performances profanely mingle of the ways of the savages with the great style of Miss Ophelia’s best shawls thus challenging the decorum of the upper classes. Andy’s less extreme impersonations are, in the

⁶¹ The quotes are from Stowe’s description of Topsy in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (224).

⁶² The description of the two children denote a myriad of consonances that I cannot include in the body of the chapter, but that are extremely suggestive for further comparative work: Topsy is said to be “only spiteful in self defiance” and Andy describes himself like that in relation to his attitude towards card games, they go through the symbolic rituals of washing and clothing, they harbor the seed of self deprecation.

same way, fruit of his talent for observation and imitation, gifts that he applies in particular to the rituals of consumer's society. If Topsy's performances are the overflowing energies of an impish heathen who mimics the sounds and forms of nature, Andy models himself upon the idiom of the show business: his mates are always "ladies and gentlemen" and he is constantly conscious of how his success in business is related to his ability as entertainer. However, at the roots of Andy's theatrical upbringing, we discover a secret he carefully guards, namely that his ceremonious gestures have been learned from a hand-organ monkey. The small primate is again called into the context to indicate the strictures of class evolution: just like Harry's table manner do not save him from the epithet, also for Andy every studied gesture his zoological role model, thus situating the boy in the lower-than-ape tier of evolution.

Instead of being approached by Miss Ophelia's double in Rollins's novel, Miss Aurelia, Andy is "bought" in little installments of dimes and nickels by Benham who, fascinated with the intensity of the slums, initially only wants to have a native guide and to benefit from their conversation. Only later will he turn this extemporaneous encounter into a mission of civilization.

Come, you young ragamuffin, can't you tell us how to get there (Cherry Street)?" "Here's your nickel, then, and be quick about it." "Well," said the youngster slowly eyeing his interlocutor with care, "ef you're a right smart sort of a chap, yer gets there on yer legs. Ef yer a dude, yer takes along wd yr a little long narrer sort o' thing wid a knob on the end of it."..."I told you Mr. Harley here that I should at once be recognized for the dude I am. Now, will you show us the way for a quarter?" "You bet." "And if you'll promise to converse all the way, I'll make it thirty cents. (34)

Andy is streetwise and not only recognizes the "dude" in Benham, but also that the man will be flattered in being so addressed. The boy demonstrates his knowledge of dress codes by acknowledging that a "dude" should be found in the tenements with a "walking cane," object which he cannot properly name.⁶³ Yet Benham appropriates Andy's description of the cane ("long narrer sort o' thing wid a knob at the end") and takes it to a further level of abstraction making it the signifier for the little journey they are going to take together. In Benham's

⁶³ The Merriam-Webster Dictionary informs us that the term "dude" intended as "stylish, fastidious man" came into vogue as a slang term in New York c. 1883, in connection with the 'aesthetic' craze of the period.

pronouncement that the “contents of the knob will be worth their weight in gold...as literary material” (35), Rollins illustrates the outrageous revenues procured by sensational journalism, but, astutely, also capitalizes on a rhetoric of tourism which “writes the readers into the text as spectators.”⁶⁴ Benham appears to be what Abraham Cahan saw in Jacob Riis: an “amateur slumologist”⁶⁵ who unites the craving for “pictures” to a paternalistic confidence in uplifting missions—probably more confidence than Riis himself would have been optimistic enough to share.

The rhetorical mechanism of appropriation and abstraction marking the first conversation between Andy and Benham will characterize the journalist’s pedagogic approach. The gradual conversion of the kid to cleanliness, then to a steady home and finally to instrumental education, will be pursued through the “appropriation” of the child’s empirical wisdom and its projection onto an intellectualized level, the only one where the ideal civilization of the ethnic boy can be operated. For example, Andy’s attraction for the “circus” will be bent towards the necessity for schooling and his business sense, his sensitivity to “stage costumes” will be exploited to have him wear clean stockings as precondition for shelter.

The normative violence inherent in the act of civilization is patent in the way in which Benham deals with the child’s name. Andy has given himself a last name, Highflyer, that makes him independent from his ethnic legacy and that epitomizes his confidence in the infinite potential he can express.⁶⁶ Benham, instead, would like to normalize him to the flattest common man possible, Brown, which the child significantly finds too short, or maybe, too dark. As an alternative Benham offers “Van Rensselaer, or Taliaferro, or Cholmondeley” (97) in a cacophonous parade of Dutch, Italian and Celtic stereotypes thus suggesting that the cost of not wanting to curb his “high flying” ambitions, will be of maintaining the brand of otherness. What are Andy’s ambitions? Why are they threatening and in need of curbing?

⁶⁴ Kvidera, "Rewriting the Ghetto."1135

⁶⁵ Sollors, "Immigrants and Other Americans," 573.

⁶⁶Although there is no evidence that Andy can be Irish by descent, he reveals his feelings of belonging to the Irish community when he gives free rein to his hatred for a politician he takes for a Irish-loathing “Britisher” (95).

Going back to the theme of unfitness for self government, theme that the figure of Topsy allegorically acts out as “carnival of confusion” in the very moment she is left with no supervision, we can observe that Andy deploys, quite on the contrary, a stunning talent for social organization. When we first meet him, he is enjoying the company of two other kids with whom, he later explains, he has founded an insurance society. The orderly hierarchy that sees Blind Robbie as treasurer, Sam as president and Andy as vice president, apart from ridiculing the excesses of bureaucratic stratification, constitutes a lecture in self-management since the roles are distributed in a way to fight off both the dangers coming from the outside world and the limitations of personal shortcomings. Andy, for example, knows that he cannot “trust himself”—feebly echoing Topsy’s “I’s so wicked”—but for the common good he has learned to delegate power to more reliable fellows, thus compensating his imperfect traits and fostering the advantages of the redistribution of power.

Benham’s entrance into Andy’s life provokes a disruption of the insurance society and, if we take into account that Andy sometimes indulges in the socialist jargon, Benham’s well meant act symbolizes the boycott of a Socialist design, springing up from self organizing masses. The street Arabs’ initiative of self tutelage appears to be a potential “red ghost” calling for the intervention of a reformer who can give the basics of Americanness. The underlying assumption, and hope, is that the practices through which assimilation is administered—cleanliness, education and domestication—will normalize the unruly ethnics before they subvert society from within.⁶⁷ Benham, who would want the poor to rise, makes an admirable job of making them move into the opposite direction since the last time we see Andy, he has become the prophet of Spenserian evolutionism:

...if I wuz a City...I’d giv’ them big white cool rooms to the well boys, I would. I’d just let the sick uns die an’ be done with it, an’ I’d give the good places to the well uns, jus’

⁶⁷ Quite interestingly in her essay on the Tenement-House Problem Rollins makes it clear that by education of the tenement dwellers she means behavioral conditioning: “By education I mean something more than the development of intelligence or the cultivation of ideas: I mean the training in habits...Throw all of the English grammars and half of the Latin ones into the as-barrel, and introduce in their places manual-labor, cooking, and sewing classes, that shall teach the young not only how to do things neatly, but care about doing them neatly.” Rollins, “The Tenement-House Problem,” 114-15.

to kinder reward 'em like for keepin' well, an' savin' all the expense of doctors an' med'cine. (285-6)

This stunning declaration is delivered in front of perplexed Miss Aurelia at the deathbed of little Mattie, an ailing slum child that the aristocratic reformer will send to the hospital. While he speaks, Andy contemplates the clean stockings he is wearing—the *laissez-passer* to a soft bed—and he feels already evolved past the needs of the suffering homeless. This acquired self-righteous superiority marks the antipode of his initial insurance-society designs, and denotes a conversion, although not of the religious kind like in Stowe's *Topsy*. To christen this new self, Andy has received a laic baptism and, after discarding the ethnic names as too hard to spell, he takes up the last name Thompson. In this informal ritual, Andy is cleansed of the original sin of his ambitions as well as of his ethnic background just before being sent off to a religious school where he can learn some manual trade. The transparency of the name choice (son of Tom) reinscribes the child in a lineage of subordination, subsumed in the duplicitous intertextual character of Tom the slow Irish drunkard, and Tom the docile good Negro. Andy thus disappears from the street and from the novel, assimilated in the American mass, like *Topsy* disappears from America itself, absorbed in the colonialist solution that removes her from the United States.

As a confirmation that in portrayals of slum childhood “blackface is a charged signifier with no coincidental relationship to the racial politics of culture in which it is embedded,”⁶⁸ other fictional renditions of street Arabs manifest traits that supplement Andy's figure in a curiously congruous way. The parallel emerges as particularly fitting in *Peppino*, composed by the Italian immigrant Luigi Donato Ventura, and in the short story “Leather Banishment” by James W. Sullivan.⁶⁹ The trilingual novelette of 1885 by the Italian author represents a precedent for Rollins since it features a story of friendship and mutual education between the writer's alterego, a journalist of swindling fortunes—Mr. Fortuna in fact—and the illiterate Italian bootblack Peppino.⁷⁰ In the initial address to the

⁶⁸ Eric Lott, “White Like Me. Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness,” in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 475.

⁶⁹ James W. Sullivan, *Tenement Tales of New York* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1895). The page numbers referring to this text will be given parenthetically after the quotes.

⁷⁰ The piece was written in three versions: in Italian, in French and in English. The French version

reader, the narrator invokes compassionate admiration for the Italian street child by collocating his social and occupational position in the dialectic space left unclaimed by the abolition of slavery:⁷¹

Car je ne crois pas que vous soyez de ceux qui perdent leur temps a se mal cirer les bottes, et probablement vous ne pensez pas que la libertés politique et universelle ait pour conséquence nécessaire l'obligation de vous cirer les bottes de vos propres mains; après avoir voté pour l'abolition des nègres vous ne voudrez pas abolir l'Italien qui, pour cinq sous, noircit à la sueur de son front, vos extrémités inférieures. (50)⁷²

Quite tellingly, no reference to slavery is made in the English version as if the author would not risk compromising his contract with the American audience, a reading public which might receive the connection between labor and slavery less as an invitation to solidarity than as a source of anxiety. Only in the French and Italian variants of *Peppino* does the narrator address the readers as a community of abolitionists; his caveat operates as a defense of the minimum threshold of righteous Americanness accorded to the Italian immigrant, namely the right to operate in the United States at least as a *nègre*, meaning by that term, a wage slave. In the Italian version, the unusual locution “abolition des nègres” is dropped in favor of the more historically precise “emancipazione,” and the manual operation of polishing boots is described as a conflation of pleasure and gain. In this way labor—Peppino’s “golden door” into the American dream—is coded as the transfiguration of industriousness into the epicurean thrill of accumulating profits. Conversely, African-Americans are marginalized in that they are excluded from the joys of capitalism.

differs from the English in the tone and the details that makes it politically less causation in labeling ethnic groups with derogatory term and comments (the blacks are stifling, the Jews are Shylocks, Methodist landladies are detestable hypocrites, fun is made of Anglo-Saxon last names and the formal excesses of a supposedly classless society are satirized). The quotes from the original texts are excerpted from Luigi Donato Ventura, *Peppino Il Lustrascarpe* (Franco Angeli, (1885) 2007). Page numbers follow the text parenthetically.

⁷¹ See Alide Cagidemetro, "Introduction to 'Peppino'," in *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Marc Shell and Werner Sollors (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000), 215-16.

⁷² The Italian version reads as follows: “...dopo avere votato per l'emancipazione dei negri, non vorrete obbligare un'Italiano (sic) a privarsi del piacere e del lucro che può derivare da lustrare, per cinque soldi, col sudor della sua fronte e colla patina le vostre estremità inferiori” (50).

Since Ventura himself is an obvious specimen of a higher breed,⁷³ the implied resignification of the Italian coolie into a “*nègre*” only regards the lowest tiers of Italian immigration, but it is, for these workers, pretty literal. Especially in the French, the suspension grammatically created by the insertion of the locution “à la sueur de son front” between the verb “noircit” and its direct object, makes the verb temporarily intransitive and induces the reader to visualize, for the length of that moment, an Italian child growing gradually black in the face, as dark sweat streams down from his forehead.⁷⁴ This operation is physically carried out by Sullivan’s Leather, a young pickpocket who, in order to fool his pursuers, disguises himself as a shoeshine boy with the help of his “professional” friend:

Leather, taking note that his pursuers had not yet seen him, daubed his face with some blacking from Smutty’s board, seized a bootbrush, and held it up and called “Shine!”(135)

The pursuers question the two “poorly dressed half-grown” boys without recognizing the little thief who pulls it off protected, in his involuntary minstrel show, exactly by his blackness—a color, however fictitious, through which white people cannot see. The fictional treatment of young immigrants suggests that, in Rollins especially, but not exclusively, while chattel slavery morphs into wage slavery, the *nègres*—as Ventura would have it—are actually abolished, written out of the text, but tucked in under white skins, that, in moments of crises, performatively restore part of their colored memory.

3. Maggie’s Big Sisters

Before male writers made the unfortunate working girl a staple of slum fiction, Rollins created two eloquent specimens of this type, although neither of them is

⁷³ Ventura is a gentleman by Italian standards, but, within the American culture, his relying on a shoe-shine boy sets him apart as not gentlemanly enough, at least in the American sense. The Methodist landlady in fact assumes a normative role when she explains to Mr. Fortuna the republican ethics of self boot-blackening “Je vous assure Monsieur, que monsieur Gould et monsieur Vanderbilt cirent eux mêmes leurs bottes, Oui, Monsieur, eux-mêmes, parce qu’il sont gentlemen. (62-63)” We could then argue that the same difference between the *nègre* and the Italian occurs between the gentleman and the signore, and they are somehow united and divided by the direct or indirect relationship they have with a lowly paid job, in this case the black boot.

⁷⁴ Quite similarly, the Italian variant presents perspiration and the shoe polish as indistinguishably mixed in a dark shine whereas no trace of the correlation between bodily substances and blackness is to be found in the English wording.

the iconic factory girl who will populate naturalist literature. Eliza and Cassie, respectively a former nurse then seamstress and a stenographer turned servant, incarnate the impossibility for women to honestly support themselves within a ruthless economy, and consequently double as case studies of tenement prostitution. The little critical material available makes it hard to trace Rollins's affiliations and popularity at her time, nevertheless one could easily adapt Tompkins' comment on Stowe that the novel is "written by, for and about women."⁷⁵ The author interrogates sexual exploitation and female morality with acute, and provocative, sensibility, although her stemming from a genteel tradition of reform allows for little intimate connection with the urban poor she seeks to champion, and makes room for ambivalent conclusions.

Again, the guiding model of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is central to the significance of the two female figures. Building upon Stowe's iconic heroines, Rollins makes Eliza and Cassie prominent in her narration and ties their destinies, directly or indirectly, to a city. As in *Tom's Cabin* New Orleans is the "sexualized city"⁷⁶ where the auction deploys the interconnections of capital, sexual desire and structures of inequality, New York is for Rollins the sin-city where female bodies are inspected, coveted, and finally bought—but by consent rather than by force. Like Crane's Maggie, Eliza and Cassie are both initially unspoiled by their surroundings, enjoying high hopes and optimism. Gradually, the loss of all economic security leaves them with the only option of selling themselves, a conclusion they reach in different ways. Very soon in the novel, Rollins introduces her preoccupation with slum girls' morality in the form of an obvious foreshadowing. Her worries are voiced through Benham, the intellectual, and Harley, the tenement owner. While the two men walk about a dismal Cherry Street, Eliza and Cassie are conjured up as an unusual spectacle of beauty among the squalor of "forbidding" women and swarming children.

Good voice, that" remarked Harley, anxious to dwell upon any good point possible. "There's refinement in that voice...And there's a pretty girl, Benham! By George, isn't that a pretty girl?" (43)

⁷⁵ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, xiv.

⁷⁶ Gabrielle P. Foreman, "'This Promiscuous Housekeeping': Death, Transgression, and Homoeroticism in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *Representations* 43, no. Summer 1993 (1993): 55.

In one breath, we are presented with a “refined voice,” Eliza, and a charming walking figure, Cassie. The two are judged as inappropriately good looking for the environment, (“Tenement house girls have no business to be pretty” (44)) and as doomed to be ruined by it. Their handsome appearances, in fact, will be perverted into instruments of corruption and their moral stamina will be of no avail to their kin, and neither to themselves.

3.1. “Poor Eliza”

When these observations are made, Rollins’s Eliza has already appeared in a scene deliberately molded upon Stowe’s first chapter. Gabrielle Foreman reconstructs how in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s Eliza is immediately sexualized and always presented as escaping, or having just escaped, sexual predators.⁷⁷ Although within the Shelby household, Eliza is so free as to reproduce an independent family herself, she never ceases to be sectioned and weighted by the pound every time she is in the presence of a white man. Silhouette, ankles and “natural graces” are revealed in ravished descriptions which match the sexual desire she arouses around her; only Eliza’s determination to fulfill her maternal role through escape secures her sexual integrity.

Rollins’s Eliza seems to be the embodiment of the fears that set Stowe’s Eliza into motion: while the latter flees separation from her offspring and sexual slavery, Irish Eliza is the one whose family members “are moved around like checkers.”⁷⁸ Exactly because she is not a slave, Rollins’s character is responsible for her failures: she has already lost two girls to illness—a hint of her inability to protect her offspring from a polluted environment—and the little discernment allowed by the circumstances causes her to remain childless and prone to sexual enslavement. Eliza’s dogged occupation of the ground where her family should ideally re-unite⁷⁹ dooms her, and all the more so in a context in which a home fatally wounded in its patriarchal foundation, is impossible to restore. George, in fact, virtually emasculated by the loss of his job, has lost the capability for familial empathy together with his status of breadwinner. Not differently from Irish Tom,

⁷⁷ Ibid.,57

⁷⁸ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Signet, (1987) 1991), 29.

⁷⁹ The narrator explains: “If George were to come back, he must find her where he left her” (352).

who abandons his responsibilities through a descent into demented drunkenness, George escapes his shameful condition through inconclusive migration.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "Honest old John Van Trompe" comments with regards to Eliza that "handsome uns has the greatest cause to run sometimes, if they has kind o' feeling, such as decent women should" (86-87). While black Eliza is thus declared "decent" exactly because she runs away, Irish Eliza could conversely be deemed indecent for her clinging on to inauspicious surroundings. Intertextuality is made even more patent in the passage where Irish Eliza recalls Stowe's Eliza, whose story she has read, and whose destiny she considers rosier than her own.

She remembered the slave girl Eliza in "uncle Tom's Cabin...she remembered Eliza whose Harry had been sold, would have been snatched from her arms...How people wept over the story! Would they not weep more bitter, more scalding tears of sympathy if they could see her now, not parted from her child, but holding him out in her arms to whoever would come and take him, making frantic efforts, not to keep, but to give him up, crying, though she loved him as you and I love our darlings, "will no one take him away?...Will no one save him not from the slave hunter...but from me, from his mother, who can only give him too little food, too little air, indecency for shelter and vice for his companions? (169-170)

Knowing that she has forfeited human sympathy by having acted out of free will, Eliza reverts to literary sympathy, borrowing the consolation of the tears won by her fictional twin. The giving away of the children is openly connected with being parted from innocence, as if, once the child is removed, the "indecent" and the "vice" that were kept at bay, take over the environment and overwhelm its inhabitants. This symbolic valence foregrounds the scene in which Eliza parts with her newborn girl. Still at the shelter, an omniscient narrator explains that the baby girl will be nursed by Emmeline Maxam, that tenement girl who had "run on the street" and "got into trouble," to the cynical amusement of her own mother. Because of this unbecoming presence, Eliza had finally decided to send her baby away, a sacrifice nullified by an inexorable determinist circle. In contrast, Emmeline, spared by Stowe and, in a way, also by Rollins, becomes the type of girl whose carelessness prompts her on to a better life, at least economically, since as wet nurse "a girl get a great deal better wages than she ever arned afore" (353). Emmeline's profit points to the jungle-like dynamics of

tenement life rather than to class solidarity, and the girl's assumption of the mother role, in addition to completing the miserable catalogue of Ghetto motherhood, also foreshadows Eliza taking her place "running in the streets."⁸⁰

Eliza suffers a paradox which befalls many ethnically marked characters: an invisibility deriving from what Hannah Arendt has called the "privation of privacy."⁸¹ Eliza is endowed with so much privacy that it becomes a mode of isolation and an excuse for those who, although in the position to help her, forget, or decide not to. Her cry, "if only they could see," is a lamentation on her absence from the public eye: in Arendt's words she is "deprived of things essential to a truly human life...deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others."⁸² Still, given the novel's inescapable logic, when Eliza acquires visibility, she mainly attracts useless voyeuristic attention; the morbidity of the all-consuming bourgeois gaze and the quick condemnation to irredeemability express both the emotional bareness of the urban environment as well as the scarce confidence Rollins has in belated reforming efforts. On the other hand, the hasty farewell reserved for Eliza after she has been the virtuous touchstone for all the other mother figures, seems to reveal an unyielding Victorian substratum grounded on the irreparability of lost virtue.

At the same time, Eliza's being declared "gone" and beyond rescue once she is spotted in an opium den, suggests her undergoing a process of elimination from the urban and social scene whose final stage, the stage of waste, coincides with prostitution. The idea of utilization, elimination and waste became particularly relevant in the Progressive hygienic ideology, and its indiscriminate application in the industrial process was harshly criticized by muckraking journalists and novelists.⁸³ However, Eliza's expendability in the context of the bourgeois employment of immigrant female labor makes Rollins a precursors of

⁸⁰ We are confronted with dull Martha, whose only grief is the ill reputation of one of daughters, Emmeline's mother, who is almost glad at her daughter's lucky turn, and numerous others who are mostly so overworked to be insensitive or even happy at their children's death, or imprisonment.

⁸¹ Haenni, "Visual and Theatrical Culture," 511.

⁸² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, (1958) 1989), 58. 1989).58 In these terms it may be possible to read a connection between invisibility and blackness; Eliza's lament seems to foreshadow the distressed voiced by the protagonist in the prologue of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin, (1952) 1965), 7.

⁸³ See Duvall, "Processes of Elimination: Progressive Era Hygienic Ideology, Waste, and Upton Sinclair's *the Jungle*."

such critical strand, and inaugurates the idea of urban economy as a digestive system through which women in particular are used up to a further degree than men. When Eliza is in her prime, the family that employed her as a nurse got the best out of her in terms of motherly and educating potential. In a sense, the Selby's family symbolically "stole Eliza's milk,"⁸⁴ as confirmed by her successive incapacity to properly "nourish" her daughters, who die very young. Once damaged by the loss of her little girls, Eliza is unsuitable for attending to the aristocrats' childrearing exigencies, so she is downgraded to care for their aesthetic needs—their clothing—and, after that, unfit for anything else, she caters to their unspoken and lascivious desires. Completely digested by the urban machine, stripped of all usefulness and severed from her affective connections, Eliza becomes waste—a prostitute—and like waste she is quickly eliminated from the novel. Still, Rollins's avoidance to completely dispose of her character through death, underscores the peculiarity of the female condition: where the body of a man simply ceases to be a usable resource, a woman's body continues to fuel a subterranean economy while raising scandal in the eyes of those who patronize that underworld. Unable to successfully navigate the urban system, but also unable to leave it, the immigrant woman in the brothel remains an "indigestible" by-product and a disquieting reminder of the greed and carelessness of the upper class.

3.2. Sister Cassie

Whereas Eliza is afflicted by invisibility, Cassie is haunted by overexposure and grieves the lack of privacy. The first time we meet her, she is constructed through Harley's lustful gaze; her second nameless appearance is introduced through Effie's eavesdropping; when later, during her peregrination in search of a job, she realizes that even Mr. Benham knows her by sight, she is overwhelmed by the unbearable shame generated by constant exposure:

Did the poor live in a glass house? Did everything she said or did or thought open to the prying glance of the whole world?...Did this man, to whom she had come for help

⁸⁴ The novel does not clarify whether Eliza was specifically a wet nurse. Anyway, also in the absence of this detail, her having devoted the best of her mothering capabilities to an aristocrat's son recall both the traditional role which in the South belonged to black nannies and also, metaphorically, Sethe's lament "They stole my milk" in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

because he was a stranger know her name, her home, her agony? Could he track her, watch her, put his finger on her trouble, know...her exquisite suffering, her appalling anxiety? Was there any refuge for her than the waves of the East River...? (129)

Cassie's perturbation is almost symptomatic of impending paranoia: the insulting responses she has received for her newspaper announcement have been introjected as sexual sallies that she cannot fight back. Consequently, also Benham's benevolence is decoded as a studied attack meant to expose her "exquisite suffering" for his scopophilic sadism. Cassie seems to be doomed by misrecognition, a destiny also adumbrated in her name. While the last name Forrest, etymologically recalling the idea of "foreigner," can signal her immigrant origin—but her sense of alienation too—her first name, Catherine, means pure, and highlights her unscathed initial condition. However, the nickname Cassie ambiguously points at the name Cassandra, the prophet that nobody believes—that is to say, the person who is always misrecognized. The most interesting twist in the name game is introduced in the *coup-de-théâtre* of the last chapter where Cassie is addressed as Cleopatra. She appears as a mesmerizing queen both among the radical workers who attend her father's house, and in the studio of an aristocrat who is portraying her as the Egyptian beauty. But, at this late point of the story, Cassie alternates between dreams of destruction and wish of self-destruction as if, in the trajectory from Katherine-the-pure to Cleopatra-the-tragic-seductress, she had lost all capacity to feel at home and all desire to be finally recognized.

Earlier in the novel, when Cassie considers the lures of suicide, she abandons the idea as an act of ungratefulness towards her dear ones.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, she poignantly describes family ties as burdensome and introduces the theme of bondage as related to the ineptitude of immigrant families. This psycho-physical load becomes excruciating in the overpopulated, disorderly atmosphere of the tenement, vaguely reminiscent of Stowe's slave quarters at the Legree plantation.⁸⁶ The image of the tenement as a glass house is conflated by Rollins with that of the doll house, the coquettish metaphor that Effie finds

⁸⁵ "It would be one more cowardice towards those she loved and was bound by every tie to help bear their own troubles" (130)

⁸⁶ "Which of these will be mine?" said he [Tom] to Sambo submissively. 'Dun 'no, ken turn in here, I s'pose' said Sambo: "spect tha'r room for another thar; thar's a pretty smart heap o' niggers to each on 'em, now." *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (321)

appropriate to explain her new reformatory interest. Stowe's "heap o' niggers" becomes, in Effie's desires, a heap of equally depersonalized dolls:

Papa, I am tired of dolls...and I'm sick of my baby-house...But I have seen another baby-house I should like to have to play with...And it's full of the loveliest dolls. I mean, of very interesting dolls. (154)

The oversimplified rhetoric of Effie's speech expresses Rollins's disapproval of aristocratic amateurism in the face of reform. Her disdain reaches its apex when Effie, retrieving her decision to take up missionary work in the slums, announces her decision to her father by telling a story in which the fairy tale mode resonates with biblical language. In her disguised parable, Effie prophesizes the unfortunate outcome of her charitable efforts if she persists in them and, by way of farewell to her fantasy, she pronounces words of subjection which align her with the "prodigal son" who has squandered his father's property with prostitutes.⁸⁷ This distant biblical echo produces a correlation between Effie's doll-house and the prodigal son's prostitutes in a sense that is painfully evocative of Cassie's destiny. Cassie's perception of being a doll/prostitute in a glass-house, pried open to the world and fingered upon, breaks her spirit more than direct forms of subjection. The shame she interiorizes so intensely undermines the stability of her moral foundation. In an almost skizoid reaction to her constant commodification, Cassie fractures her persona into a set of separate identities—the caring daughter, the kept woman, the revolutionary, the artist's muse—as if her search for privacy could only be satisfied in the incessant commuting between provisional worlds.

While Cassie progresses towards the dubious finale, her paralyzing shame gradually turns into a sense of guilt vis-à-vis her immoral conduct, a feeling that proves strangely empowering in that it rekindles her resentment towards society. If shame was a non-intentional, confusing sentiment of inanity, guilt, the marker of having willfully committed a wrong, is embraced as a form of agency. Wearing her "guilt" with pride, Cassie determines to vengefully inflict a fatal wound to the

⁸⁷ Rollins's sentence "I will arise and go unto my father" (435) resonates with the Parable of the Prodigal Son: "But when he came to himself he said, 'How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough to spare, and I'm dying with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will tell him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight.'" (Luke 15:17-20). In this retrospective identification Effie has sinned against the aristocratic way of conceiving of charity which is less a total dedication to a cause than a win-win situation: "...that is the great advantage of genteel philanthropy. It can have its cake and give it away, too." (292)

heart of the bourgeois family—something that in Stowe only death has the power to do, but that in Rollins is connected to a form of imperfect social justice. The death of little Eva helps clarify where the two authors diverge more significantly. According to Philip Fisher, little Eva’s sickens and dies “from hearing and seeing the slavery around her.”⁸⁸ Hortense Spiller takes this interpretation further suggesting that “the sacrificial lamb of Uncle Tom’s Cabin—in the dual person of Eva the temptress and Tom the castrated—must be expended as a punishment for the crimes against the culture.”⁸⁹ In Rollins’s symmetrical play, the punishment that should befall the younger generation is often foreshadowed, but it is also generally escaped. When at the end of the novel Mr. Sinclair and Mr. Selby are desperate that the slums—the Minotaur—claim their operose offspring as their victim,⁹⁰ the two aristocrats interpret the ominous prospect as a fair sanction for their neglectfulness:

It is the Minotaur of the 19th Century; we create it, we let it exist, and then we wonder that it claims its victims from our own ranks...There are the slums, we let them be; and the pestilence steals slowly up from them to strangle us in its embrace; the ruined youths and maidens come out into the streets and corrupt our youths and maidens; and the minotaur itself draws back into itself the fairest of our young girls, the noblest of our young men. (384)

We know that these worries are misplaced, since charity will not win the two youths over. Still, the Minotaur has sent one of his “ruined maiden,” Cassie, to threaten their tranquility. Cassie herself describes her breed as the intruders in the pure domestic space of the upper Anglo American classes. In an appropriate observation, O’ Brien writes that “the claim that slavery destroyed the moral fiber, not only of slaves but also of white men who exploited and raped them, applies to the privileged men who take advantage of poor Irish immigrant labor and make whores of Irish daughters like Cassie and her sister Josie.”⁹¹ Cassie claims her

⁸⁸ Fisher, *Hard Facts*, 103.

⁸⁹ Hortense J. Spillers, “Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse or, Mrs. Sotwe, Mr Reed,” in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 39.

⁹⁰ At a certain point of the novel both Effie and Mr. Selby’s son seem willing to embark in a life of service in the slums.

⁹¹ O’Brien, “Race-ing Towards Civilization,” 122-23, Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*.

revenge against the class that has ruined her by pointing out that contamination is mutual:

I met at his house the rich man who ruined me; but his young son, his pet, his pride, his idol met *my sister* in the streets. If I want revenge, do you think I haven't had it? A rich man ruins a poor girl; a poor girl ruins a rich man. (454)

In this scene, Cassie is almost delirious, talking over the head of a bunch of disheveled Socialists too obtuse even to take advantage of her status as someone who can access different social strata. Exploiting her hybrid position, Cassie can wound her superiors and lambast her equals; the latter, a task that she carries out fiercely retracing a motive that appears often in the book, namely the responsibilities of the lowly. Cassie warns the harmless “revolutionaries:” “Shoot the millionaire who has ruined me, but not until you have blown up the man Legraw, the junior partner of Wilroff & Co., and the fifteen gentlemen who wanted me as a stenographer”(458). This genealogy of guilt may as well continue to indict Tom and all his hapless family. Cassie’s sole comfort seems to come from a dream of destruction, that is, her surreal design of buying a tenement in order to tear it down. The prominence of the scene in the compositional economy of the book makes us wonder about the underlying agenda: the smaller rings in the chain of inequality are here invested with an enormous amount of responsibility, which can doubtfully counterbalance the weight of their actual agency. In the same way Cassie’s meager revenge seems both insufficient to appease her rage and too little a crime to justify the reversal of destinies that concludes the novel.

The final scene of the novel throws the geography of duty into disarray and closes on the triumph of environmental determinism, a force as powerful with respect to human beings as to be equated, in Cassie’s words, to blood. The language of her final speech brings the idea of race and poverty to a degree of closeness that has never occurred in the novel before. The use of the blood metaphor to indicate vice is possibly more dramatic than substantive, still, the allusive language, the abrupt change of setting, and the excessive load of plot details piled in the last few pages seem to indicate an ongoing struggle for the reconciliation of incompatible elements. In her finale, Rollins deals with the contradictions existing between the concept of determinism, necessarily leading towards the abjection of the most unfortunate, and her faith in a rational

progressive solution for the evils of society. The impossibility to produce conceptual closure manifests itself in the narrative structure and produces a highly imaginative—if improbable—denouement, decidedly in tune with *clichés* of sentimental fiction.

With no causal explanation, Cassie is presented, simply “a year later,” in the act of modeling as Cleopatra for a painter who is sincerely in love with her. The painter is her former lover’s brother, and is apparently ignorant of Cassie’s past. Upon his marriage proposal, Cassie bursts into a vehement confession in which she admits not only of her past relationship and of the baby girl she had from it, but also, most significantly of having “learned to love” the life of a kept woman, with “its excitement, its fascination, its wickedness” (464-466). While Stowe’s Cassie is a mother who prevents separation from her offspring through infanticide, Rollins’s heroine, on the contrary, pleads salvation for her girl through separation, and puts the future of her daughter into the hands of the American upper-classes. Refusing the prospected marriage in order to spare the young aristocrat from her corrupting influence, Cassie imperiously demands of the painter—as token of his love—that he save her little daughter from her pernicious motherly influence as reparation for the wrongs she has suffered from the men of his class.

Just as in Stowe the colonist conclusion thwarts the equalizing impulse underlying abolitionism, in *Uncle Tom’s Tenement*, Cassie’s refusal of catharsis and her choice of a wealthy American male as ideal parental figure, defies the belief that the tenement dwellers can, even when given the means and the intellectual instruments, represent a decent class of citizens. Rollins’s somewhat conservative national design shows through: she seems to offer, to the American people, an evolutionary fantasy of ever-increasing amelioration, a vision that can only be endangered by the poison of “tenement blood.” In this view, Cassie represents the triumph of environmental determinism and a threat to evolution; her impersonation of Cleopatra reinforces the idea of poisoned blood, and the mentioning of the asp foreshadows a fate that would simultaneously deliver herself, and the American middle class, from further moral contamination.

The twelve years separating Cassie by the most successful and unrepentant kept woman of American realism, Caroline Meeber, bring about changes allowing a potentially unadjusted girl to navigate the moral relativism of the *fin-de-siècle*

unapologetically, and without succumbing to the weight of her own consciousness.⁹² Although *Sister Carrie*'s complicated publication history testifies to the difficulty of having such a feminine specimen accepted by a wide audience, it also marks the demise of a mentality that in Rollins's time still governed the literary and social sensibility. Taken globally, Rollins's endeavor eventually seems to combine—as it was not uncommon in the reformatory writing of the period—a certain measure of good intentions and with a profoundly ingrained common morality, so deeply constitutive of the writer's system of belief as to prevent the embracing of a wider, plural vision. However, if we consider the novel as a critique of the entrepreneur-speculator who, through his boundless egoism, compromises social balance,⁹³ it makes sense for Rollins to conclude wishing for the rise of a new kind of exemplary hero. This hero should necessarily stem from the class guilty of impairing social stability, but ought to be ennobled by an artistic intelligence and a wholesome consciousness. In this perspective, the closing image of the book is an allegorical transfiguration of Cassie as the City of New York, and of Vincent Harley as the class of aristocratic intellectuals who, in Rollins's wishful proposal, can take up collective responsibility for the future of the “wicked city.”⁹⁴

⁹² Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, (1900) 1998).

⁹³ Ickstadt, "Exploring the Abyss: The Discovery of the Social Underground in Late-Nineteenth-Century American Fiction," 65-66.

⁹⁴ “As Cassie knelt at the feet of Vincent Harley, the city of New York kneels to-day at the feet of those who might be her saviors...I have faith□ hope□ believe□that Vincent Harley, as he stooped and lifted Cassie in his arms, said, “May the Lord in heaven forgive us, Kate! I will save the child!” (468)

THE RHETORIC OF REFORM

PROTECTION, PREVENTION, AND EXCESS

The dark skins which in Rollins's New York only appeared as shadows and reflections, well concealed by Irish names and only invoked by literary memories or zoomorphic juxtapositions, made themselves tangibly visible, a decade later, in the growing flow of African-Americans who moved to northern industrial centers. In the decades straddling the turn of the century, the African-American population of New York City nearly tripled and, by 1910, it amounted to 100,000 people, most of whom were southern-born, unskilled, unmarried men.¹ After the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914, there was a significant spurt in the number of African-Americans migrating to New York, but, that notwithstanding, in 1920 only 2.7 percent of the city's population was black. Despite the relatively small numbers, the beginning of the Black Migration represented a strongly perceived social challenge which supplemented the grievances of metropolitan life with the uneasy specter of interracial sexuality.²

New York City and State presented, at least on paper, strong provisions against discrimination and the original Statute of 1873 guaranteeing "full and equal enjoyment of any accommodation...or places of public amusement," was increasingly expanded in the subsequent years up to 1909.³ By 1910 the Census Bureau had eliminated the terms mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon following the assumption that three-quarters of all blacks in the United States were racially mixed anyway.⁴ Yet, there was a large trend among New Yorkers to considered

¹ Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 10-17.

² Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in New York and Chicago in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 100.

³ Jennifer Fronc, *New York Undercover. Private Surveillance in the Progressive Era*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 102.

⁴ The first U.S. census in 1790, supervised by Thomas Jefferson, placed people into one of three categories: free white male, free white female, and other persons (which included free blacks, slaves, and "taxable Indians"). Seventy years later, the government began adding other categories like Mulatto, Chinese, and American Indian. The 1890 census added further distinctions and had categories for White, Black, Mulatto, Quadroon, Octoroon, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian. Bárbara C. Cruz and Michael J. Berson, "The American Melting Pot? Miscegenation Laws in the

the separation of races a necessary way to restore a waning moral order, and, despite the extensive civil right code, by 1913 a series of restrictive measures against black citizens was propounded. Among them the Carswell Act, a bill proposed—but not passed—with the intent to nullify marriages contracted between Caucasians and “the negro or black race.”⁵ In spite of its legal inconsequentiality, a similar proposition was symptomatic of the rising tensions influencing the racial barometer in town.

Against this background Kevin Mumford and Brian Donovan interpret the white-slavery hysteria in the years preceding WW1 as a re-establishment of a sexual color line while the Black Migration was enlarging its flow and the growing phenomenon of slumming was blurring the boundaries of traditionally segregated entertainment.⁶ The argument they convincingly build is a counterpart to the transformational continuum which from chattel slavery takes to white slavery going through the immigrant experience. Furthermore, considering the connection between moral order and racial anxiety as articulated in different strands of reform thought highlights contrasting impulses which sustained the social and legal crystallization of gender and race hierarchies during the Progressive Era.

1. Whose Progressivism?

In the late 1970s, Paul Boyer claimed that many Progressive social reforms were “moral reforms in disguise” since the Progressives had an “infinite capacity for moral indignation.”⁷ In his rendition, issues of social injustice, corporate and governmental corruption, and personal morality were inextricably linked in the Progressive mind: “almost every Progressive cause had its moral dimension; almost every condition Progressives set out to change was seen as contributing to a debilitating social environment that made it easier for people to go wrong and

United States”. OAH (Organization of American Historians) *Magazine of History*, Volume 15, No 4, Summer 2001

⁵ Some additional segregating measures were represented by the New York State Boxing Commission’s rule that prohibiting interracial sparring session even in licensed boxing clubs and by the refusal on the part of the New York National Guard to start a black regiment. Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 103.

⁶ Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, Mumford, *Interzones*.

⁷ Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (1967)1978), 220.

harder for them to go right.”⁸ The fact that the first generation of Progressives notoriously agitated for moral reforms which covered a wide range of activities—including recreational ones—involving the lower classes, has been recorded as a sheer effort to control the immigrant working classes, under the cover of pity. More current interpretations have supplemented the generally accepted notion that the Progressives were essentially inspired by Lincoln’s liberal republicanism to believe in the nobility of moral initiative in public life, with an objective assessment of the changes they produced “via the principle of rational organization, evolution and by pragmatically defined values.”⁹ More inclined to a re-evaluation of the Progressives’ politics rather than of their intentions, historian Maureen Flanagan sharply criticizes the traditional interpretive scheme that compounds the Progressives into a “white, middle-class, native-born...generally male” caste of cultural Victorians who formulated “new views of the individual, society, gender, and pleasure.”¹⁰

1.1. Centrists and Leftists

Flanagan’s comprehensive understanding of the Progressive Era that includes ethnic, working-class and African-American groups as Progressives seeking political opportunities interestingly enriches the outline of this period, but it also complicates the vision of the dominant strands of Progressive thought in ways that exceed the scope of the present introduction. On the other hand, historian Rogers Smith persuasively locates in what he terms *centrist progressivism*, the larger coalition of progressive representatives.¹¹ According to his interpretation, despite some differences in their ultimate civic visions, members of this camp increasingly agreed on the importance of cultural homogeneity, the dangers of immigration, the improvidence of black enfranchisement, the propriety of Anglo-

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in US History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 412.

¹⁰ Maureen A. Flanagan, “Desperately Seeking the Progressives,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* 4, no. 2 (2005). Flanagan’s article reviews Michael Mc Gerr’s *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920*. New York: The Free Press, 2003. For a wider discussion also see Flanagan’s book ———, *America Reformed: Progressives and Progressivism, 1890s-1920s* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹¹ Quite clearly Smith maintains that during the Progressive Era the gulf between American elite and mass beliefs deepened severely without ever finding “a strong political voice.” Rather than on Smith’s well argued conclusion I will rely on his convincing synthesis of the variety of Progressives ideologies. See Smith, *Civic Ideals*.

Saxon racial domination, and the maintenance of basic distinctions in the responsibilities of men and women.¹² According to Smith, ideologist Herbert Croly,¹³ together with labor historian John R. Commons, Booker T. Washington and S. J. Duncan-Clark,¹⁴ represented the bedrock of centrist ideology. These thinkers particularly shared the honest belief that they could support racial hierarchies at home and abroad while believing they were promoting democratic republicanism and individual rights. Hence, their fusion of ongoing liberal democratic idealism with ascriptive Americanism promised to satisfy middle-class white Protestants' desire for social control and continued cultural hegemony.¹⁵ For these centrist progressives, values of science, economic growth, equal rights and democracy were part of a well-ordered modern society; but so were the systems subordinating "inferior races" to "advanced" ones.

As to the woman's question, whereas Duncan-Clark promised that they would endorse female suffrage, the centrist Progressives still qualified egalitarianism as a way of better equipping females in defending their exclusive home domain. As old arguments against women education faded, new ones emerged. The old tale that college education turned girls into physical and spiritual wrecks was empirically refuted by the increasing numbers of healthy graduates. In 1890, even the conservative *Ladies Home Journal* offered a four-year scholarship in one of the leading women's colleges to the girl who could sell the most subscriptions to the magazine.¹⁶ Nonetheless, a reworked version of the

¹² Ibid., 413.

¹³ Herbert David Croly (1869-1930) is best known for co-founding the magazine *The New Republic* and for his book *The Promise of American Life* (1911). He was regarded by Theodore Roosevelt as the most important progressive ideologist. More fully than anyone else, Croly worked through the foundational arguments for progressive civic policies of social control, including the propriety of American imperialism. Ibid.

¹⁴ John R. Commons was a Wisconsin labor historian, and, although critical of imperialism, he applied Croylesque motifs to support immigration restriction. Duncan-Clark wrote, in 1913, the manifesto of the Bull Moose Party: *The Progressive Movement: Its Principles and its Program*. The tract sported a ringing introduction by Theodore Roosevelt and a mix of Croylesque principles, Jeffersonian democracy and Lincoln republicanism. Although the author dwells on the call for direct democracy, the critique of plutocracy and the civic ideal of community service, the book also resonates with a dismissal of the republican error of attempting to force the political recognition of an inferior race upon an unwilling and superior people. See Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 418-19.

¹⁵ Ibid., 418.

¹⁶ In particular the scholarships were offered to Vassar (founded in 1865), Wellesley and Smith (1875): the first post Civil War colleges to be established out of an ideological commitment to the higher education of women as such. Smith was created by a wealthy widow while Vassar, Wellesley and Bryn Mawr (1884) were creations of private benefactors who came out of the antebellum abolitionist, evangelical, and reform milieus. Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman*,

old myth sprang up from the steadily dropping national birth rate—a phenomenon occurring especially among American-born whites. Quite on the contrary, immigrant women still produced large families and the disparity intensified the nativist fear of “true” Americans being outnumbered in their own country. When sociologist Edward A. Ross coined the term “race suicide,” Theodore Roosevelt found it suitable for spurring American women on to their demographic duty and gave it great currency in the presidential campaign for fecundity. During the period from 1905 through 1909, “race suicide,” which the President had initially simplified into an argument against birth control and working mothers, became a minor national phobia whose nativist implication were quickly reasserted.¹⁷

In contrast, many *left Progressives* rejected doctrines of racial and gender inferiority and their associated policies of imperialism, immigration restriction and segregation. The figure among left Progressives who advanced a new conception of American citizenship at once more truly democratic and more cosmopolitan was John Dewey. Yet, even Dewey was often embarrassingly reticent on issues of race, ethnicity, and to some degree gender. Thus the possibilities for left progressive civic conceptions were most fully worked through, albeit in contrasting ways, by writers like Horace Kallen, Randolph Bourne, W.E.B. Dubois and Charlotte Perkins Gilman.¹⁸ Dewey agreed with Croly that American identity should center on realizing democracy, but, shaped by his work at Hull House, Dewey was wary of Rooseveltian new nationalism and efforts of herding people into big, efficient organizations scientifically managed by strong leaders.¹⁹ Despite the extant contradiction, conventional accounts are right to stress that in many respects this was an era of democratization. Though few favored unbridled direct democracy, the Progressives generally worked for a wide range of institutional reforms aimed at increasing popular control over representatives. Inclusionary perspectives concerning the nature of a citizen qualified by ethnic or gender characteristics remained centered around centrist

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¹⁷ Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 147.

¹⁸ Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 413.

¹⁹ Like Woodrow Wilson’s rhetoric, if not practice, Dewey tilted toward traditions of local participatory democracy and openness to immigrants, reformulated on pragmatist premises and purged of racism *Ibid.*, 420.

visions, but the debate enlivened by left Progressive thinkers on the legitimation of civic prospects for various groups never waned.

As the Progressive Era dawned, the signals Congress gave on questions of race, ethnicity and access to citizenship were confusing, even if their exclusionary thrust was clear and the use of control to police racial boundaries during a period of highly diverse immigration meant that the federal courts found themselves confronted with many cases turning on the nature of “whiteness.” At the instigation of the U.S. Bureau of Immigration, often the decision was taken that “white person” meant “person of European descent” and even then not all Europeans, but only those who shared the prevailing ideals, standards and aspirations of the people of Europe.²⁰ The emergence of the category of whiteness exacerbated the perception that the American cultural, religious, and racial identity was seriously threatened.²¹ The conceptualization of the new immigrant as a permanent Other who consumed the resources of the legitimate American people symptomatically underscored the disjunction between the economy—demanding cheap labor—and the polity—a realm in which the newcomer was often pitied as the victim of an unequal system, but also associated with the features of feeble-mindedness and subhuman depravity.²² This essentialization of difference, so overt in the cultural realm, made the immigrant an irreducibly distant although uncomfortably close presence—a constant source of anxiety which fostered eugenic convictions.

On a different note, during the Progressive years the civic possibilities of women began to brighten and the problems of previously invisible categories, such as working women, received long overdue attention. The second generation of Progressive reformers, not only saw the establishment of women-centered

²⁰ Ibid., 447.

²¹ “The old immigration movement was essentially one of permanence. The new immigration is very largely one of individuals, a considerable proportion of whom apparently have no intention of permanently changing their residence, their only purpose in coming to America being to temporarily take advantage of the greater wages paid for industrial labor in this country.” United States Immigration Commission, *Reports of the Immigration Commission* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1991), 1-24.

²² “The view that the ‘new’ wave of immigration contained significant numbers of mental and physical degenerates was widespread before Henry H. Goddard began his work with the ‘feeble-minded’ in 1906. Initially Goddard believed that public alarm over the quality of arriving immigrants was unwarranted, and produced data in 1912 to support this position. Over the next several years, however, his views and studies shifted, evolving into the widely cited 1917 findings that more closely mirrored the alarmist mainstream of the age.” Steven A. Gelb, “Henry H. Goddard and the Immigrants, 1910-1917: The Studies and Their Social Context,” *The Journal of The History of the Behavioral Sciences* 22, no. 4 (1986): 324.

institutions such as Jane Addams's famed settlement, but also the birth of the National Consumers' Leagues in 1898, and the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) in 1903. These labor organizations focused on the brutal hours, meager wages and debased working conditions that many women felt compelled to accept. Their leaders favored but usually did not stress obtaining suffrage; however, in the first decade of the twentieth century the conviction was starting to spread that female suffrage was needed to maximize the result of other battles and, thanks to this belief, the suffrage movement regained momentum.²³ The Progressive Era activists varied greatly on whether female citizenship should be identical to men's or whether women needed "special protection."²⁴ In Cott's terms, women activists were in a seesaw between the liberal rhetoric of equal rights and calls for protective laws that would enable women to realize their special virtues. As a matter of fact, the traditional female role was perceived as inseparable from the ideal of Americanness, and, as a tactical matter, emphasizing women's distinctive needs still proved most effective in having laws passed—even to assist working women. The "putting-children-first" strategy might then be traced to a shift in women's reform activity from moral suasion to a more pragmatic political discourse.²⁵ The Progressives who advocated economic regulations thus kept speaking of gender differences in very conventional terms, while embracing forms of socialism that conservatives feared and loathed.

1.2. Progressive Idioms

Within the context of vice reform, Jane Addams's writings represent an interesting twist of the analogy between racial and sexual slavery, a subtext which, in her copious writings, emerges in *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* of 1909 and in her white-slavery book of 1912, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*. Addams's use of chattel slavery as a metaphor for prostitution epitomizes how the genre of the white-slavery tract had circulated clusters of images that seeped also into writings of a sociological nature. Furthermore in

²³ Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 454.

²⁴ One symbolically eloquent step towards the equality of male and female citizenship was the Cable Act of 1922 carrying out a redress of a patriarchal precedent, codified in American law in 1855 and 1907, that a woman's citizenship followed her husband's: an American woman marrying an alien lost her American citizenship while an immigrant woman gained citizenship by marrying a male citizen. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 98-99.

²⁵ Gordon, "Putting Children First: Women, Maternalism, and Welfare in the Early Twentieth Century," 67.

Addams's pamphlet one can discern, together with some deep insights, a longing for an orderly generational hierarchy that called for "guidance agencies," and failed to recognize an adult dimension to city girls. The "generational" is an essential category because, in this period, it encroaches on issues of female sexual vulnerability, also unexpectedly correlated to racialized notions of the sexual body. Addams's vision, somehow informed by evolutionary underpinnings, is all the more interesting in that it intersects the Progressive discussion around the nascent idea of adolescence and the social phenomena to which the institutionalization of such concept was a response²⁶—not inconspicuous among them the urge to protect youth and sexual consent.

Another Progressive mode which pivoted around the constellation moral order/racial tension was a crusade which expressed the will to officially establish the world view of certain middle-class groups and, at the same time, a strong disaffection for an ill-considered public administration. In this respect, the shifting of reform activities from the hands of nineteenth-century Preventive societies to the ones of the Committees of notables can be discussed in the light of Mara Keire's suggestion that the white-slavery scare may be ascribed to the metaphorical arsenal deployed by Progressive authors who railed "against trusts and their perceived control of the federal government."²⁷ While in this context it is hard to incorporate Keire's interpretation of white slavery as a metaphoric critique of monopoly capital—a view that the scholar supports by focusing on the lexical traces of corporate economy within the prostitution discourse²⁸—her supposition that anti-vice reformers voiced some private concerns by shaping a powerful legislative agenda is crucial. This body of laws and adjudications gave voice to specific groups of citizens who aimed to appropriate some high stately powers perceived as dangerously centralized and generally poorly administered. More concretely: while white slavery can hardly be considered an image through which ordinary citizens lamented their "political and economic disempowerment,"²⁹ the interests revolving around the phenomenon—and the

²⁶ John Demos and Virginia Demos, "Adolescence in Historical Perspective," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 31, no. 4 (1969): 632.

²⁷ Keire, "The Vice Trust," 7.

²⁸ Keire particularly examines the notion of vice trust, the idea of red-light district intended as market places and the occurrence of debt peonage in the brothel economy.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

legal creativity instigated by it—prompted the empowerment of some private socialities in the face of the federal state.

A decisive role in this process was played by a consolidating form of investigative journalism: muckraking. Muckrakers came to define their “collective mission as investigative narrative writers able to captivate the reading public and activate its civic energies.”³⁰ Quite coincidentally the heyday of muckraking journalism corresponded to the years in which president Roosevelt disdainfully baptized the phenomenon, and overlapped with the period of the white slavery scare. Almost simultaneously, when prostitution discourse passed from the aegis of social critics and reformers to the medical profession—a transition coupled with the need to defend the soldiers’ health from STDs—muckraking also weakened. By the late teens the term was already synonymous of stereotyped, preposterous exposé. In its prime, muckraking activism could be regarded as a production of civic melodrama that wittily exploited the sentimental mode. As for Rollins, the mentality of the melodrama is vital to the muckraker narratives. Its societal stakes were socially urgent and critical because, as Peter Brooks stated with respect to melodrama, “to recognize and confront evil is to combat and expel it, to purge the social order.”³¹ The middle class extraction of these journalists though, made them precariously balance the tension between the impulse to denounce the status quo, and the need to keep their distance from the wretched masses which they surgically dissected as evidence and scandal of an unequal system. In the muckrakers’ treatment of white slavery, conflicts of this kind emerged quite pointedly. Focused as they often were on local power plays rather than on widely comprehensive social transformation, these journalists produced utilitarian representations of a complex social issue which sometimes exceeded their grasp.

In different combinations, the growing significance of race and ethnicity, the preoccupation with white slavery and the rhetoric of protection inform all strands of reformative thought, and surface in the empathetic attitude of Jane Addams as well as in the more aggressive ways of the Private Committees. The incandescent

³⁰ Cecelia Tichi, *Exposés and Excesses. Muckraking in America, 1900/2000* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 64.

³¹ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 13.

climate fomented by muckraking political exposés provided the preconditions which prompted, in the short run, legal developments of enduring resonance.

2. Jane Addams and the Faces of Guidance

In the first chapter of *Uncle Tom's Tenement*, Ralph Benham reflects on the effectiveness of writing for reform purposes and, after dismissing articles and editorials as befitting formats and after having, for a moment, favored the novel as a suitable vehicle for socializing his convictions, he is hit by the revelation advertising is the royal path to the mind of his audience—the masses, to use his words. The three advertisements which punctuate the novel call for “an Abraham Lincoln to emancipate the slaves of New York”(47), a “Florence Nightingale to keep the poor people well”(170), and “a training school for landlords”(207). If we consider Hull House as a symbolically ideal model for the greedy slumlords to look up to, then we may as well say that Benham was advertising Jane Addams.

The writings produced by Addams in the context of white slavery are paradigmatic examples of the mixture of acumen and blindness which characterized even the most enlightened leftist Progressives vis-à-vis the multiple facets of prostitution issue. Although Addams's relentless reformatory activity and her influential role in the settlement movement are not addressed by the present work, my analysis presupposes the “experiment in reality” which enabled the reformer to offer the immigrant workers dignified participation into American civilization. At the same time, Addams gained insight in the richness of foreign cultures, as well as in its pre-industrial values.³² This spirit also pervaded Addams's general attitude towards prostitution, an approach which uncovered the plight of the immigrant daughters crushed between the cultural constraints that their families brought from old Europe, and the moral and affective vacuum of the demanding urban world. Yet, Addams's historical juxtaposition of abolition and anti-prostitution, as well as her enthusiasm for anti-vice legislation and institutional intervention in matter of juvenile unrest, reveal the extent of the normative bedrock of reform—an apparatus whose nature was predicated on the paradigm of protection.

³² Ickstadt, "Exploring the Abyss: The Discovery of the Social Underground in Late-Nineteenth-Century American Fiction," 72.

2.1. Abolition Past and To Come

Large part of *A New Conscience* had been previously published in *McClure's Magazine* and was prompted by Addams's readings of the reports of the Juvenile Protective Association of Chicago. These second-hand stories of girls who worked in department stores, factories, offices and restaurants, made the sociologist vividly aware of the "incredible social wrong, ancient though it may be" that went under the name of white slavery and compelled her to a "rational consideration [of] the temptations surrounding multitudes of young people."³³ Addams's purported shock expressed how the two decades separating the publication of *Uncle Tom's Tenement* from *A New Conscience* had seen the concern about prostitution grow from one of the many urban preoccupations to the white slavery hysteria. Addams's overall consideration of prostitution was probably more consonant with Rollins's sober scrutiny of city life, than with the scandal-ridden accounts of her contemporaries. In an epoch when taxonomic confusion concerning prostitution was the rule, the reformer had to the merit to unequivocally code the "ancient evil" as a "community responsibility" designating it as "the sexual commerce permitted to exist in every large city, usually in a segregated district, wherein the chastity of women is bought and sold."³⁴ Despite so lucidly stated an intent, the causal analysis she offered struggled to find a difficult balance between the urban melodrama and a sociological treatise.³⁵ Maybe the resoluteness of the reformer's agenda, which included the strong belief in the complete abolition of commercial prostitution, stretched the limits of Addams's prose and made her purposefully amplify the dramatic effect harbored in the analogy between white slavery and chattel slavery.

Diverting from the classic sentimental-abolitionist model, Addams renounced the facile parallel between the conditions of black and white slaves, and opted instead, for a more conceptually ambitious chapter in which she recapitulated the historical process of social awakening that led to abolition. This

³³ Jane Addams, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1912), x-xi.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁵ However Addams avoids the abuse of adjectives like "lost" and "fallen" commonly used in the scandalistic literature of the time and bespeaking a narrative model meant to highlight the potential of moral progress, but which could only work if it happens in Rollins—if the wayward girl was congealed in her need for direction, Cassie, or lack of agency, Eliza.

perspective she projected on the current status of the anti-prostitution campaign. In her vision of abolition, the generation of “the fathers,” in spite of its callow ideas of race progress and degeneration, had managed to eradicate slavery—a poisonous “tree...as old as the race of man.”³⁶ In this universalistic perspective the old “heroes and martyrs” had initiated an itinerary of progress which Addams’s contemporaries were called to complete, since, she maintained, slavery originated by the same root that produced prostitution.³⁷ By conflating the origins of slavery and prostitution in a dehistoricized primal scene of “warfare,” Addams etched out the ruling classes of her “fathers” as the rescuers of war-blighted humanity, and, more to the point, momentarily suspended her declared efforts to stick to the “contributory causes” of the current phenomenon.

As if the end of slavery were a blueprint for the defeat of the white slavery traffic, Addams underscores the similarities between the chronotope of antebellum America and the new century by indicating the “scouts and outposts” who announce the final victorious battle, like in a repeated antebellum scenario. Thus the rescue homes for fallen women are read as a double of the underground railroad; the division among reformers is interpreted as the heightening of the abolitionist debates which prepared a successful conclusive phase; and the battle for the female ballot is compared in importance to the enfranchisement of black people.

With an eye to the cultural landscape, Addams individuates certain specific shifts in the production of literature as powerful instigators of social awareness. Addams contemplates an intensified capability to “feel” about prostitution as the prodrome to that “sympathetic knowledge and understanding” that she considers the “only way to approach...any human problem.”³⁸ Adamant that this emotional and intellectual energy should not be wasted on the excessive sentimentality of “impossible Camille(s)” and “weeping Amelias”³⁹ the reformer calls for a production of “disquieting” realistic fiction apt to spur on to action. Drawing a parallel with antebellum literature, the reformer welcomes “the growing literature, not only biological and didactic, but of a popular type more closely

³⁶ Addams, *A New Conscience*, 3.

³⁷ “Slavery doubtless had its beginnings in the captive’s of man’s earliest warfare, even as this existing evil thus originated.” *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁹ Addams is referring to *La Dames Aux Camélias*, by Alexandre Dumas *fils* (1852), popularly known in the United States as *Camille*.

approaching ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’” for “while the business of literature is revelation and not reformation...such writing is like the roll of the drum which announces the approach of the troops ready for action.”⁴⁰

After summarizing the steps which lead to developing “a new conscience” Addams delves into the present: the context she presents is populated by conscientious citizens who agree on the existence of a powerfully organized class of “procurers”—worthy only of legal prosecution—and on the necessity of rescuing a huge number of girls.⁴¹ Quite candidly, the sociologist admittedly draws these data from an inspection of legal actions, the source that has revealed to her the situation of the white-slave traffic at the international, federal and municipal level. Without questioning the selective procedures that lead to the prosecution of some cases over others, Addams treats the available data available as completely accountable. Furthermore, she sums up the development of the legislation concerning prostitution from the international *Treaty of Paris* in 1904 to the *Mann Act* of 1910, always assuming that all advancement towards a legal annihilation of the supposed trade is an advancement *tout court*. With the same linearity, Addams reports the “evident” and “close” alliances between prostitution and immigration on the basis of the resonances that the Immigration Commissions and Vice Commissions found in the respective reports. Hence, she foresees federal and state officers successfully shielding immigrant girls’ integrity.

This approach does not apply when the sociologist reverts to the African-American girls who are sexually exploited. In Addams’s alternation of insightful structural observations and ambivalent conclusions, the ambiguities of the notion of protection emerge most blatantly, when, after the historical overview of abolition, she considers the cause of black working women. The display of many black children roaming unattended in immoral surroundings together with “the large number of colored girls entering a disreputable life” constitute the raw data that trigger Addams’s elaborations. Looking for causes, the reformer first plausibly sketches out an economic context in which excessive rents push black people into ill famed districts and consequently force working mothers to leave their offspring “in the midst of temptation.” In addition unscrupulous

⁴⁰ Ibid., 5-6.

⁴¹Connelly would ascribe this belief to a “conspiratorial mentality” that he see as a recurrent theme in American history, as suggested by the classic article of Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” (1964) and David Brion David’s book *The Fear of Conspiracy* (1972)

employment agencies send black girls to work where they “would not venture to thus treat a white girl.”⁴²

In a second move, Addams explains how formal racial equality has done little to repair the deep fractures that slavery has procured to the black community, and clearly denounces how the long-standing destruction of “the negroes’ attempts to family life” has only recently ceased to be a matter of institutional perpetration. This take of responsibility for the enduring wounds inflicted to African-American familial relations denotes a sound historical consciousness: for this reason, the connections that Addams draws between her premises and the spreading of prostitution among the black women is highly unexpected:

The community forces the very people who have confessedly the shortest history of social restraint, into a dangerous proximity with the vice district of the city. This results, as might easily be predicted, in a very large number of colored girls entering a disreputable life...The negroes themselves believe that the basic cause for the high percentage of colored prostitutes is the recent enslavement of their race with its attendant unstable marriage and parental status...It seems all the more unjustifiable that the nation which is responsible for the broken foundations of this family life should carelessly permit the negroes, making their first struggle towards a higher standard of domesticity, to be subjected to the most flagrant temptations which our civilization tolerates.⁴³

Addams’s abrupt shift on environmental influences as main agents of demoralization almost undermines the socio-economic analysis prepared by the rest of her argument. Moreover, the environment she evokes appears to be hostile and corruptive by nature, rather than being a product of racialized unfairness. This dangerous and depopulated proximity is all the more threatening to the black population, Addams intimates, because of their little familiarity with restraint. This consideration is troublesome both with regards to the centuries of “restraint” imposed on the African-American population and because the supposed lack of self-control seems to pertain mainly to the sexual sphere.

The disturbing subtext implied by the hint to undomesticated sexuality is, in fact, the same that generated stereotypes such as the black rapist and the

⁴² Addams, *A New Conscience*, 117.

⁴³ Addams, *A New Conscience*, 118.

hypersexual female. In short, under the surface of Addams's mea culpa, serious suspicions lurk disquietingly. Black people's capability of self-government is found shaky and not to be trusted; at the same time, the very "nation" which caused the wreckage of the bloodlines among enslaved families is re-instated as the guardian of their insecure virtue, and as the *cordon sanitaire* sheltering them from their own weaknesses. If Addams felt that European immigrants could eventually enter the fabric of American culture, she could not as optimistically second an assimilationist hypothesis for African-Americans. As Donovan has pointed out, until the 1940s, the Hull House prohibited African-American women from staying at its boarding house and summer camps, and the racial exclusivity practices in the settlement house became increasingly apparent as the black belt in Chicago extended eastward during the early twentieth century.⁴⁴

2.2. The Spirit of Adolescence

The discrepancy between great insight and difficulty of synthesis is a feature that also unfolds in Addams's treatment of non-colored city girls, a result probably imputable to the inevitable influence exerted by the all-pervasive white-slave literature. For example, when reporting the personal stories gathered by the Juvenile Protective Association, Addams's reruns some of the plotlines of the white-slavery tracts with abundance of young, unassuming prostitutes prey to loneliness, necessity and discouragement, but also misguided by vanity, elation and love of pleasure. Moreover, she gives prominence to the seduction under promise of marriage as one of the main tricks of the trade failing to discern that the cadet system, although existent, was quantitatively little relevant. What actually was paramount, was the popularity of the tale of seduction, a format spread through different media as a "romantic way to fall" and almost a moral prescription.⁴⁵

In more acute passages, Addams concedes that, under the given circumstances, the ideal degree of self restraint required of modern girls is unrealistic. Furthermore, she utters a rounded *J'Accuse* at the arbitrariness of the

⁴⁴ Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 165 and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, *Black Neighbors: Race and the Limits of Reform in the American Settlement House Movement, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

⁴⁵ In his *The Unadjusted Girl* William I. Thomas comments that, as consequence to the fact that womanhood has been so idealized, this explanation was not only expected, but delivered with inventive pleasure.

legal control exerted by the police,⁴⁶ as well as at the new scenario of economic pressure. For example she points to the greed of real estate owners as one of the main factors propelling the spread of vice,⁴⁷ and illustrates the deleterious role played by domestic service in “demoralizing” young workers. Addams exposes “domestic service” as one of the occupations providing the highest number of lost girls, but unfortunately, in her rebuke of genteel opinion, she only indicates the physical isolation of the job environment and the emotional distance of mistresses as the main culprit of servants’ distress, while she to mention the frequency of sexual abuse on the part of male family members.⁴⁸

Addams examines another imbalance produced in the ideal structure of the family, and that is the disruption produced by immigration. Addams denounces the psychological alienation connected to the shock of adjustment and, more importantly, she stigmatizes the despotism of immigrant families over their daughters implying that girls bereft of their parents are less at risk than those working to support them.⁴⁹ As to labor condition, she exposes the inanity of the Unions in increasing minimum wage and in constituting a net of social protection during the very frequent periods of unemployment. She even touches, without fully grasping the implication of her findings, on the fact that wages are not only insufficient in themselves, but incompatible with the standards of living induced by commercialized entertainment.

Heir to Frances Willard’s civic maternalism, Addams turned the old WCTU motto “Home Protection” into “protection of the poor and the young.” In *The*

⁴⁶“At the present moment” Addams observes “no student of modern industrial conditions can possibly assert how far the superior chastity of woman, so rigidly maintained during the centuries, has been the result of her domestic surroundings, and certainly no one knows under what degree of economic pressure the old restraints may give way.” Addams, *A New Conscience*, 54.

⁴⁷In particular she exposes the hypocrisies of those who do not hesitate to rent their buildings to disreputable usages, but who would be discourage in doing so if the names of the owners were made public.

⁴⁸ It is interesting to observe how Charlotte Perkins Gilman instead faced this occurrence in the short story “Turned.” In “Turned,” Marrion, an educated and enlightened American lady ends up adopts her dull, child-like Swedish servant and the illegitimate baby that the girl got from Marrion’s husband. While sexual violence is never mentioned, Gilman defines the man’s act as an “offence against womanhood. Against motherhood. Against□ he child.” Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “Turned”, 1911, 45.

⁴⁹ On the other hand, even when describing the objectively precarious situation of immigrant family households, Addams never essentializes misbehavior as racially constituted, the same is for the phenomenon of enslaved prostitution, thus I found it striking that Thomas, in addition to reporting that “Italians and Jews have been noticeably identified with white slavery” goes on by adding that “Italian girls and Irish are the most intractable among nationalities” (145) In 1923, just before the Johnson Reed Act, such affirmation resounds with nativist echoes.

Spirit of Youth and in *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*, Addams looks at the lower classes with certain compassion, but, not unlike Rollins, she ascribes them to an inferior behavioral—and evolutionary—standing. In particular, Addams diagnoses a constitutional underdevelopment common to almost all city girls, a weakness from which she is immune by status, and that she reads as detrimental to the highest degree, namely, the proclivity to consumer culture and temptation. Interpreting the issue of burgeoning consumers' culture as a new moral challenge, Addams points at the department store as a source of unprecedented desire.⁵⁰ Addams's incapability of reading the girls' responsiveness to modernity as an instance of personal advancement, rather than as an unredeemable weakness, becomes functional to her reformatory motive and confirms an agenda, which, as in the case of the black population, enlists "the nation" that enacted the disruption of the traditional values, to take up a parental role, and protect the girls from their unbridled self. Considering this inability to control one's impulses resistant to education, Addams favors the safer procedures of constant guidance—procedures that imply a desirable extension of the power of the established authorities:

While it may be difficult for the federal authorities to accomplish this protection and will doubtless require an extension of the powers of the Department of Immigration, certainly no one will doubt that it is the business of the city itself to extend much more protection to young girls who so thoughtlessly walk upon its streets.⁵¹

Behind Addams's penetrating sociological eye, we thus discern the workings of an intellect which still fails to acknowledge the capacity for self-government of a whole layer of "thoughtless" female adolescents. Her progressiveness speaks two different languages: the language of sympathy towards the "divine fire of youth" and the language of the "immemorial obligation which rests upon the adults [to]...nurture and restrain the youth."⁵² When Addams enlists "the adults" in her design, she does not entrust with the necessary maturity parents or grown-ups in

⁵⁰ "The department store has brought together, as has never been done before in history, a bewildering mass of delicate and beautiful fabrics, jewelry and household decorations such as women covet, gathered skillfully from all parts of the world, and in the midst of this bulk of desirable possessions is placed an untrained girl with careful instructions as to her conduct for making sales, but with no guidance in regard to herself." Addams, *A New Conscience*.61-3

⁵¹ Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, (1909) 1972), 35.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 161, 30.

general, but rather indicates institutions such as schools, juvenile courts and settlement houses as ideal surrogate families. Quite naturally, she zeroes in on girls, which she sees burdened with the double weight of responsibility and anomie, as well as propelled by a desire for adventure and self-expression that “drives them into all sorts of obscure expressions”—just like the boys are “driven into gambling and drinking.” Adopting the tone of the ideal civic progenitor, Addams obliquely evokes Hull House as the experimental model for those stately institutions which should provide infallible familial guidance.

In this respect Addams’s exploration is supported, and carried further, by William I. Thomas. In spite of being more an academic than a reformer, the sociologist was extremely committed to the activities and ideas of Addams and her female associates.⁵³ When around 1910 Addams wrote about the rapid changes that undermined the social order, she actually predated by more than a decade Thomas’s *The Unadjusted Girl* and *The Polish Peasant*, and her conclusions find resonances in the sociologist’s work. For example, in tune with Addams’s analysis, Thomas’s diagnosis of the “delinquency” of girls includes poverty, demoralization and urban fascination among the agents of degeneration while social agencies are prescribed as providers of salvation and ideal surrogate families.⁵⁴ Thomas’s thorough rendition of unadjustment encompasses a wider array of cases and phenomena than Addams’s, but both sociologists are guided by a behavioral model which points to the “wish for new experience” and the “wish for response” as the motors of most of female deviance.⁵⁵

Although “deviance” and “delinquency” are categories used by Thomas rather than Addams, one could contend that, in substance, both authors confine them to the age range specific of adolescence thus implicitly enforcing a hierarchy of moral dispensation that discounts women over girls and that produces a taxonomy bespeaking, in Thomas especially, a twofold message. Always careful not to judge behavioral irregularities by the canons of conventional wisdom, Thomas does not conceal a certain enthusiasm for anomalous traits in women—especially for sexual behaviors denouncing vivid sociality and the will to

⁵³ Mary Jo Deegan, *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892-1920* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988), 105.

⁵⁴ Cappetti, "Deviant Girls and Dissatisfied Women: A Sociologist's Tale." 144

⁵⁵ Thomas’s theory of human behavior and personality makes use, among its basic concepts, of four basic wishes as universally valid: the desire for new experience, for security, for response and recognition. This theory is expounded in the first chapter of *The Unadjusted Girl*.

abandon an oppressing familial situation. Still, whereas in mature women who realize the drudgery of marital life these traits are read as instances of liberation, in girls they become signs of disorder, and call for re-educational interventions.⁵⁶ Addams, for her part, does not address in the least the wish for recognition in adult women since, in her view, sexual instincts become thoroughly appeased with the pondered choice of a steady companion.⁵⁷ As far as restless adolescents are concerned, she proposes the cure of time and, possibly, discernment: “sometimes months and years elapse before the individual mate is selected and determined upon, and during the time...there is of necessity a great deal of groping and waste.”⁵⁸

The expression “groping and waste” echoes G. Stanley Hall’s view that adolescence was a period of heightened “storm and stress.”⁵⁹ Hall had initiated the scientific study of the puberal age and his most influential work in this area, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime and Education* (1904) introduced the term adolescence into common usage. Although Addams favored in her work the older and more general word “youth,” she was certainly familiar with Hall’s work.⁶⁰ Hall based his study on the Lamarckian evolutionary ideas that were considered by many thinkers of the early 20th century a better explanation of evolution than Darwin’s theory of natural selection.⁶¹ In this perspective he formulated his theory of

⁵⁶ In his sociological monograph Thompson includes a variety of testimony on female restlessness but, while the case studies concerning underage girl, all come from the probation officers of the Juvenile Courts and are therefore informed by the scrutinizing eye of the third person observer, namely an old school type of social worker trying to interpret behavioral signs as indicators of criminal potential, the stories of married women are drawn from the “letters” section of Jewish newspapers, especially from *The Forward*, where, under the symbolic protection provided by the impenetrability of Yiddish writing to American eyes, women pour forth their lives in a unrestrained confessional mode.

⁵⁷Addams, *The Spirit*, 10

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 11, 26.

⁵⁹ Stanley Hall was one of the major figures in the early history of American psychology and his work inspired and guided a new movement for systematic “child study.” The essentials of Hall’s view of adolescence appeared as early as in 1882 in one of his earliest paper, a work that already contained the idea of adolescence as “storm and stress” later elaborated in his encyclopedic work *Adolescence. Demos and Demos*, “Adolescence in Historical Perspective,” 635. Also see Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, “G. Stanley Hall’s Adolescence: Brilliance and Nonsense,” *History of Psychology* 9, no. 3 (2006).

⁶⁰ Allen F. Davis, Intro p. xii-xiii. Davis reports that the tentative titles for *The Spirit of Youth* were “Juvenile delinquency and Public Morality” or “Juvenile Morality and Public Morals.” These option were rejected as too detachedly sociological. xiii

⁶¹ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, “Adolescent Storm and Stress, Reconsidered,” *American Psychologist* 54, no. 5 (1999): 317.

recapitulation, that is, the idea that the developmental journey of a single individual “recapitulates” the evolutionary history of humanity.

Within this framework, adolescence represented the most recent of man’s stages⁶² and the adolescent was thus considered to occupy a privileged position, a liminal standing from which, once mastered the residues of the animal impulses pertaining to the early phase of life and the emotional stress involved in the transition, he would leap into a superior evolutionary dimension. The romantic belief in the civilizing possibilities of youth, and the focus on the young as individuals *in fieri* pervade *The Spirit of Youth*, as do references to vestigial primitive instincts. If these aspects of Addams’s thought probably owe something to Hall, they also participate, more generally, of the Progressive reformatory double consciousness, an attitude which proved simultaneously sympathetic and repressive. In the same way Addams’s understanding of youth and age, which somehow implicated adolescents as inferior adults to be perfected into mature citizens, expressed the current elaborations of genetic psychology as well as class and gender inflected views on independence and initiative. In fact, under the label of “groping and waste,” were often to be found behaviors which, far from being outburst of animality, importantly revealed unusually rationalized female autonomy. In this context, working-class girls’ increasingly visible sexual expression challenged conventional ideas of female heterosexuality in ways that most reformers were not ready to interpret as healthy declaration of independence. The case has been often made that the reformers’ effort to extend to working-class girls the legal status of children was servicing both a rhetoric of protection and a purely middle-class preoccupation. This ambiguous approach often took the form of a forceful infantilization of women, and of independently sexual ones in particular. Although well-meant, this operation resonated with the conceptual steps which, in the legal realm, led to the problematic erasure of the notion of consent from the legislation of sexual crimes, a move which made the decisional power of women irrelevant and in many of the legal cases to come.

⁶² Hall’s recapitulatory and Lamarckian assumptions led him to define adolescence as “the only point of departure for the superanthropoid that man is to become.” As quote from *Adolescence* in Robert E. Grinder, “The Concept of Adolescence in the Genetic Psychology of G. Stanley Hall,” *Child Development* 40, no. 2 (1969): 358.

2.3 Iconographical infantilization

While real girls investigated the intersections between sexualized identity and respectability as a generation who followed an ethos of its own, the fictional world of white-slave narratives, not only skirted all serious consideration of a generational power conflict, but depicted disorderly females in increasingly juvenile terms.⁶³ As Connelly suggests, the reduction of the white slave to a ruined child certainly simplified the complexities of urban prostitution and excused its discussion as manifestation of adult sexuality.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, it can be argued that the appropriation of the image of the child also describes the rise of an eminently American “mode of national belonging that is at once redolent of nineteenth-century sentimentality and responsive to new forms of affective nationality.”⁶⁵ According to Peter Coviello, contemporary modernity offers “an endlessly reiterated spectacle...of children’s innocence under threat,” spectacle which circulates “among us [Americans] that...reactive horror by which we are confirmed as fellow Americans.”⁶⁶

The same reactive horror may be said to have bound together the writers and readers of the white-slavery tracts, as if the sight of imagined child innocence succumbing to alien brutes could give back to the Americans the confidence that ineludible changes were eroding.⁶⁷ Like most expression of the captivity genre, the representation of women in bonds undoubtedly provided the readers with a vicarious pornographic experience. According to this logic, the transformation of women into children is also eloquent with respect to the visualization of unconfessable sexual fantasies, as the agitation around the age of consent as a preparation to statutory rape seems to confirm.⁶⁸

⁶³ Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution in the United States*, 127.

⁶⁴ The findings on age and appearance of prostitutes in the various vice commission reports showed that the majority of prostitutes were fully developed women in their early twenties. Ibid.127

⁶⁵ Peter Coviello, "The Sexual Child; or, This American Life," *Raritan* 27, no. 4 (2008): 152.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 153.

⁶⁷ For a discussion of the loss of confidence see Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 158-93.

⁶⁸ For a discussion on the Progressive battle for the age of consent as a way of targeting rape and some reflections of the ensuing conception of childhood and adolescence see: Robertson, "Age of Consent Law and the Making of Modern Childhood in New York City, 1886-1921.", Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), Jane E. Larson, "'Even a Worm Will Turn at Last': Rape Reform in Late Nineteenth-Century America," *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 9 (1997).

The infantilization of women into shapeless “girls” was not confined to factory jargon, to the pamphlets or to fiction. Abastensia St. Leger Eberle’s sculpture *The White Slave* (1913) (fig.11) is a graphic rendition of the conflation between sentimental strategies of indignation arousal, sublimation of sexual fantasies, victimization of women, stigmatization of the ethnic villain and defense of whiteness. Eberle was an active supporter of women’s rights and a politicized artist; she actually lived in a settlement house in New York and mentioned the influence of Jane Addams’s writings on her desire to become an active proponent, as sculptress, of social readjustment.⁶⁹ The small bronze *The White Slave* displays a nude pubescent girl in the hands of a grotesque slave trader. The tension between the aggressive, fully dressed, “decidedly non Anglo-Saxon”⁷⁰ man and the forlorn victim was calculated to produce scandal, but the audience’s reaction exceeded expectations. The representation of a grown up man in a suit holding a naked little girl by the wrists must have touched a sensitive nerve, because criticism to the composition was so strong that it made Eberle cast a censored version of the work, featuring the girl alone. Needless to say, the social message, as well as its pathos, was thus gone from the statue;⁷¹ what remained unquestioned was the accuracy of Eberle’s representation of the “slave”.

This fascination with lost innocence and alien “defilers” has precedents that go back to the famous *The Greek Slave* by Hiram Powers (c.1847) (fig.8) and to the almost coeval *The White Captive* by Erastus Dow (c.1859) (fig.10). Yet, an iconic harbinger of the sexual captive can be arguably found in the statuesque body of the “Hottentot Venus” (fig.7). Saartje Baartman, a Khoisan woman, born in the eastern Cape of present-day South Africa, became known under this epithet when in 1810 she was brought to London and paraded around Europe, to the obsession of the Victorian audiences. Although Baartman was a living woman and technically not a slave, it is interesting to situate her in a time line that continues with the aforementioned sculptures in order to show a certain reduction in the physique of the female naked body, in contexts where the idea of sexual exploitation lies in the background and the theme of bondage takes centre stage. By putting Baartman at the opposite end of an imaginary spectrum which

⁶⁹ Susan P. Casteras, "Abastensia St. Leger Eberle's 'White Slave'," *Woman's Art Journal* 7, no. 1 (1986): 33.

⁷⁰ Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution*, 127.

⁷¹ Casteras, "Abastensia St. Leger Eberle's 'White Slave'," 35

chronologically ends with Eberle's *White Slave*, one can perceive the transition from black to white, and from woman to girl, which accompanies the female body when transposed from the idea of chattel slavery into the one of white slavery.

Baartman's black naked body, with her hypertrophic sexual traits morbidly perused by "scientific" audiences,⁷² participates in the process of "pornotroping" to which the black female, according to Hortense Spillers, was subjected in the course of the nineteenth century.⁷³ A similar scopophilic mania was aroused by Power's *The Greek Slave*. This sculpture was perhaps the most popular American work of art at mid-century: over one hundred thousand people paid to see it during its 1847-1848 tour around the country. Powers himself supplied this gloss for the statue's sensational subject: "The Slave has been taken from one of the Greek Islands by the Turks, in the time of the Greek Revolution."⁷⁴ The pamphlet accompanying the statue forbade the lustful attraction that the neoclassical piece inevitably provoked: the viewers were in fact cued to behave, not as if in a place of entertainment, but as if they were in church.⁷⁵ Intense contemplation was encouraged, but only under the "doctrinal" interpretation of the viewed spectacle: an example, the recommendation booklet claimed, of female Christianity.⁷⁶

In *The Greek Slave* the female figure is overtly enslaved, as the *cachesexe*-chain demonstrates, as well as overtly made white. Quite peculiarly, the obvious connection between the naked woman in chain and plantation women in the

⁷² The fascination with Baartman's body, and the fetishistic obsession with her protruding buttocks was displaced on the preposterous medical aim of investigating anatomic difference. As Markus Kienscherf concludes in building upon Sander Gilman's scholarship, the "representations or constructions of Saartje Baartman's racial and sexual 'difference' established the tropes through which images of the prostitute were constructed." Markus Kienscherf, "Sexualizing Race - Racializing Sexuality," in *Seminar Paper* (Berlin: Free University - Institute of English Philology, 2003), 4.

⁷³ Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67.

⁷⁴ As the poet in *The Independent* observes, the American government even chose to use Powers' work as the centerpiece of the nation's exhibit at the 1851 World's Fair in the Crystal Palace in London.

<http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/sentimnt/grslvhp.html> 31.01.2010

⁷⁵ Joy S. Kasson, "Mind in Matter in History: Viewing the Greek Slave," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 11, no. 1 (1998): 81.

⁷⁶ "The chain is a story-telling device, evoking a narrative of horrifying violence but at the same time authorizing the viewer's access to female nudity. The pamphlet tells and retells the story: a Greek Christian woman has been captured in war and is being sold as a slave in a Turkish bazaar." *Ibid.*, 82. It was Powers' friend Miner Kellogg, tour manager in 1848, who put together a pamphlet that guided the interpretation of the work: "The ostensible subject is merely a Grecian maiden, made captive by the Turks and exposed at Constantinople, for sale. The cross and locket, visible amid the drapery, indicate that she is a Christian, and beloved...It represents a being superior to suffering, and raised above degradation, by inward purity and force of character." <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/sentimnt/grslvhp.htm>

American South almost went undetected to the point that the American responses to the statue never mentioned any relationship to chattel slavery—not even when the artifact was exhibited in Southern cities like New Orleans. Only some abolitionist newspapers hinted at the association and pointed at the “fair breasts, that heaved with genuine sympathy beneath the magic power of the great artist, that have never yet breathed a sigh for the sable sisterhood of the South!”⁷⁷ In proscribing sexuality and blackness from the range of concepts that could be correlated to the chained nude, the written instructions cosmetically whitened, that is purged, both the statue and the consciousness of the American viewers. By concentrating on the edifying tale of Christian captivity, the audience could in turn forget their responsibilities towards chattel slavery, meanwhile taking pleasure in the forms of the womanly body. This mystification did not seem to operate outside of the United States, and the cartoonists of the British humor magazine *Punch* exposed it immediately by portraying a black figure in the pose of the Greek slave under the title “The Virginian Slave” (fig.9).

While Power’s subject is a fully formed woman, Erastus Dow’s Palmer produced, shortly thereafter, a younger and “thoroughly American” variation on the theme. His full-length nude portrays a baby-faced female figure whose hands are bound to a tree. The subject has been supposedly snatched from her home in her sleep by the Indians; her attitude mixes defiance to terror as sign of her superiority vis-à-vis her savage kidnappers. Palmer’s contribution is crucial in that it added the essential ingredient of Americanness to the figure: by suggesting the backdrop of the American frontier, he connoted the subject as a country girl, an adolescent embodiment of the agrarian myth portrayed as all that is pure—and threatened—in American society.

As a conclusion of this parable of rejuvenation, Eberle’s slave epitomized the ominous fate of the country girls who ran to the city unattended. The physical bonds are invisible but the distressed of the figure is unprecedented: the captive has lost all the traits of adult femininity and for once, the villain is spelled out but in the bronze concretion of the Mephistophelian immigrant. In more than one

⁷⁷ *The National Era* 1847, unsigned. The responses that raised the connection with slavery were a the letter to Frederick Douglass’ anti-slavery paper *The North Star*, two articles from the abolitionist Washington weekly *National Era* (the journal in which *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* first appeared), and a poem in *The Independent*, a New York religious weekly with a strong anti-slavery stance.

sense the narrative sustaining Eberle's statue represents a regression with respect to the social exposé contained in Rollins's novel, where the women are adults who act out of volition and choice, although unluckily, and where the exploiters are not racialized but, on the contrary, clearly identified with members of the genteel society.⁷⁸ In this process the gradual substitution of the captive woman with the captive child resonates with an infantilization of the sexually vulnerable subject, as if the body of the imagined victim/temptress has to become younger and weaker to counter the fact real girls grow up to become adult and strong.

3. The Public Significance of Private Reform

The rhetoric of protection had often manifested itself through a process of infantilization with respect to specific categories. In its executive form, it was implemented not only by educators who worked towards the realization of an enlightened civic design, but also, more practically, by social activists who working outside but beside the mechanisms of state power, partly responded "to the negligence of municipal, state, and federal law enforcement agencies."⁷⁹ In *New York Undercover* Jennifer Fronc has documented and convincingly argued that private coalitions of this kind heavily influenced the course of politics especially at the municipal level and, as the case of New York illustrates, the practice of undercover investigation played a crucial role in the process.

3.1. From Preventive Societies to Committees of Notables

From the postbellum period, moral reform passed from the hands of women to those of men-run "preventive societies," most famous among them The Society for the Prevention of Crime and The Society for the Suppression of Vice.⁸⁰ In New York City the connection between legal agency and private initiative was particularly important since, in the last decade of the century, the municipality

⁷⁸ In Eberle, as in Addams, genteel society is relegated to the role of a spectator that can be aroused or instigated, but never indicted of the responsibilities of sexual injustice.

⁷⁹ Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 7.

⁸⁰ The first preventive society in the U.S. was founded in 1866 and aimed at preventing cruelty to Animal (ASPCA), the Society for the Prevention of cruelty to Children was constituted as a spin off in 1872. The Society for the Suppression of Vice was established by Anthony Comstock and the Society for the Prevention of Crime by Pankhurst in 1878. Timothy J. Gilfoyle, "The Moral Origin of Political Surveillance: The Preventive Society in New York City, 1867-1918," *American Quarterly* 38, no. Autumn (1986): 639.

had started to extend law enforcement powers to private groups who, with refreshed energies and updated tools, took over all those areas where they found the local government lacking. According to Erich Monkkonen, in an earlier period, the police had been invested both with crime-punishing and crime preventing tasks, but had later evolved to focus on the first mission almost exclusively.⁸¹ Preventive societies thus embraced their assignment, as Gilfoyle summarizes, together with a tendency to overtly blame the inefficiency and misconduct of police forces.⁸² In this way, public agencies and private actors were brought together as a consequence of neglect and competition, rather than in a spirit of cooperation: it was in this mood of ample distrust for the New York Police department and “its Tammany overlords” that Reverend Charles Pankhurst, became the leader of the Society for the Prevention of Crime in 1891.⁸³

Soon after his appointment, Pankhurst became the protagonist of a judicial episode which is worth reporting with a certain accuracy since it provides a model of political action which had great impact on the municipal results of the next few elections. Moreover, it influenced the development of more modern private societies that, in the early decades of the new century, took under their aegis the morality of the city—most famously the short lived Committee of Fifteen and its long-standing successors the Committee of Fourteen.⁸⁴ Rev. Pankhurst’s castigation of the municipal authorities was relentless: every week he would thunder from his pulpit at the Madison Square Presbyterian Church against Tammany Hall, until he found himself summoned in front of a Grand Jury where he was asked to prove his allegations. Pankhurst did not show up unprepared. In order to substantiate his invectives he had set out to gather evidence and, with the hired help of detective Charles Gardner, he had carried out his private investigation of New York’s lowlife. He especially prowled gambling and

⁸¹ Erich Monkkonen, *Police in Urban America, 1860-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 148-61..

⁸² Gilfoyle, "The Moral Origin of Poitical Surveillance," 638.

⁸³ Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 18.

⁸⁴ The Committee of Fifteen was a New York City citizens' group that lobbied for the elimination of prostitution and gambling. It was established in November 1900 and disbanded in 1901 after evaluating the investigations and reporting to Governor Benjamin Barker Odell, Jr.. It was succeeded by the Committee of Fourteen founded on January 16, 1905 by members of the New York Anti-Saloon League as an association dedicated to the abolition of Raines law hotels and only dissolved in 1932 for lack of funding. The Committee of Fourteen was the prototype of the Vice Commission that were subsequently formed in many U.S. cities. Robert M. Dowling, *Slumming New York. From the Waterfront to Mythic Harlem* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

prostitution venues, the sight of which provided new fervor to his sermons.⁸⁵ The police department and Tammany Hall, unable to discredit him, and worried that this bad publicity would damage their odds at the upcoming elections, resorted to emergency measures and, with a newly appointed police superintendent, they demonstratively raided and closed 444 brothels in 7 months. These efforts were lost on New York voters since the 1893 elections marked a stunning victory of the anti-Tammany Republicans. Once in power, the republican administration made some moves to cleanse the police system—at least apparently.

These efforts culminated in the Lexow Committee: an organ consisting of state legislators but whose investigations were privately funded by good-government activists. The private involvement in probing the wholesomeness of the police system was triggered by the fact that the police department was also in charge of the Board of Elections. To disentangle one from the other could result in accrued political success for socialities which had not been traditionally included in the governing machine. In the course of action though, the focus on electoral fraud was sidetracked and energies were instead devoted to curb the usual suspects; brothels and gambling parlors were newly stormed, while no change was carried out in the structure of the Board of Elections until 1900. In that year, a further investigation was conducted by the less distractible Mazet Commission and, as a consequence, the Board of Elections was finally moved out of the police department. Law-enforcement parted ways with the legislative body directly responsible for the electoral activities and, in the municipal election of 1901, thanks to the synergic support of the newly formed Committee of Fifteen and of Reverend Pankhust's league, William T. Jerome—a young judge famous for brothel raids—was elected District Attorney and the Tammany candidate for the mayoral election was defeated by the reformer's candidate, Seth Low.⁸⁶

Although this political victory resonated as a success for the preventive societies, it also constituted their swan song: with the end of the century their reformative style gave way to the new kind of organization represented by the Committee of Fifteen.⁸⁷ Less evangelically minded than their predecessors, these

⁸⁵ Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 20.

⁸⁶ Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order*, 193.

⁸⁷ The most influential were the Committee of Fifteen, the Committee of Fourteen, the Colored Auxiliary of the Committee of Fourteen, the People's Institute and the National Civic Federation. Cf. Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 27.

new committees conducted their reformatory work using local spheres of influence such as settlement houses or individual notables. Being economically and socially stronger than their predecessors, these groups had more ambitious designs with respect to their involvement in the regulation of the public and private sphere. They all regarded the connections between Tammany Hall, the police and criminality as residues of an old order which they wanted to replace by substituting rational, routinized bureaucracy to a corrupted political machine. The knowledge collected by their undercover investigators, allowed them to sell themselves as impartial insiders to local authorities willing to probe the soundness of their own structures. More importantly, undercover practice provided the toehold for the infringement of those freedoms accorded to the private and quasi-private sphere of the citizens.

In brief, these committees began to tackle those issues that democratic legislation did not—and could not—necessarily regulate: morality, sexual practices, leisure behavior and political belief. This mode of inclusion into a superior degree of Americanness through the tutelage of morality had been well understood, for example, by the German Jew Percy Straus, son of the Isidor Straus who in 1896 had purchased Macy's department store, and heir to the family fortune after both his parent died in the sinking of the Titanic. Percy Straus, in an ongoing effort to construct himself as "compassionate and decent," had been involved in the moral perusal of the working classes since 1908. First through the mediation of a Retailer's Committee and subsequently in 1913 out of his own initiative, he allowed and encouraged the moral investigation of the salesgirls in his own department store. This dedication was rewarded when in 1915 he was elected into the Committee of Fourteen and went on to occupy the high offices of the association.⁸⁸

Drawing on Beatrice Hibou's treatment of the privatization of the State, Fronc argues that "even though they were not official parts of the government qua government, [these organizations] had made themselves part of the state by the period of World War I."⁸⁹ According to this logic, white slavery, either used to

⁸⁸ For more details see Val Marie Johnson, "'Look for the Moral and Sex Sides of the Problem': Investigating Jewishness, Desire, and Discipline at Macy's Department Store, New York City, 1913," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18, no. 3 (2009): 466.

⁸⁹ Cf. Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 27. and Béatrice Hibou, "De La Privatisation Des Économies À La Privatisation Des Etats," in *La Privatisation Des Etats*, ed. Béatrice Hibou (Paris: Editions

service political ends or to express a critique of society, harbored a deeper level of complexity: it was the site of a struggle where factions of private citizens claimed full participation into the State through the access to legislative power. In this sense, the Committee of Fourteen and their affiliates were making their way into the realm of the State as active participants not dissimilar, in their impetus, from the suffragists who targeted the President for obtaining the Ballot or from the strikers who—with lesser results—marched to obtain fairer work legislations. The ethical principles at stake may have been different, but the desire to compete with the state in regulating the public sphere was analogous. However, suffragists and labor activists were individuals with somewhat idealistic visions. They often pointed to broad inclusive designs which they tried to force into the legislative corpus either through direct pressure onto the highest offices—the case of the vote—or through the mediation of collective actors such as the unions—the case of labor rights.

These new civic reformers, instead, shaped their strategy according to different criteria and used to their advantage the awareness of the importance accorded to custom and judicial precedent in a common law system. History had proved that, by determining a few meaningful sentences, one could effectively infiltrate his own moral standards into society—and winning a trial was less probing a procedure than passing an amendment.⁹⁰ In other words, these Committees were under the correct impression that an efficient way to shape social behavior entailed branding as crimes those practices they found deplorable. To do so, the legal machine had to be started exactly through the performance of the contested deed. In the absence of the meticulous codes of the civil law system, a jury and a judge had to be involved to authorize the claims the Committees would put forth and morph them, through the power granted by the State, into incontrovertible normative substance.

Thus, in the attempt to reach that stage in which, through a judge's decision, a moral ideal was condensed into juridical reality, these private socialities initiated a spiral of criminogenous acts. If, as Hayden White suggests, we understand the legal system as “the form in which the subject encounters the

Karthala, 1999).

⁹⁰ There is almost no need to specify that *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1893) represents the most obvious reference here.

social system in which he enjoins to achieve full humanity,”⁹¹ then the activity of this particular brand of reformers, constitutes an attempt to precipitate a dominant definition of humanity in the enduring structures of society. This perspective explains the abandonment of personalistic approaches against vice in favor of structural solutions that would curb alleged sources of social danger while securing appropriate political representation. The impulse animating reform became, in the hands of the committees, “a narrativity...intimately related to...the impulse to moralize society, that is, to identify with the social system” that authorized American society—the State.⁹²

Although these private societies mainly upheld quasi-Victorian convictions and abhorred, not shockingly, the uncouth masses and their disorderly ways, they nevertheless felt committed to a certain accountability and meticulously amassed hard facts as indispensable basis for launching legislative initiative. What Boyer calls the “fetish of scientific objectivity” took many forms: the penchant for exact numerical ratings on the eradication of prostitution for example, or the extensive use of statistics to indicate correlations between, say, saloon and death rates. Needless to say, besides the data, a great deal of story telling was necessary, or rather a narrative that could hold the “hard facts” together and be, in turn, validated by them. In our case, the investigations which gave to the “anti-prostitution” movement “more the aura of the laboratory, law library and university lecture hall than the pulpit”⁹³ were pointed towards the confirmation of a presumptive order of things popularized in a wealth of cultural products.

Right before the scientific trend gained its full sway and the agitation around the control of prostitution passed from the purity advocates completely over to the social hygiene enthusiasts, the imaginary created by the white-slavery tracts provided the blueprint for the collection of “evidence” in the real world. Moreover, the practice of striking the traffic in women for political ends had proved a tool of persuasion too effective to be dismissed in view of the upcoming 1909 election in New York City. To complete the picture, the international atmosphere, especially the influence of the British purity movements, had prepared the terrain where the American white slavery scare could flourish: while

⁹¹ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins, 1987), 14.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order*, 200.

in 1908 Theodore Roosevelt signed the international white slave convention recently adopted in Paris, at the federal level the U.S. Immigration Commissions were solicited for reports on transatlantic prostitution.

Many of the factors so far mentioned—suspicion of the ethnic other, privatization of public powers, surveillance, local politics and white slavery scare—were discussed, elaborated and reconfigured in the pages of *McClure's Magazine*, one of the leading muckraking magazines, with effects that probably exceeded the editor's expectations.

3.2. The Raking Up of Tammany Hall and the Rockefeller Grand Jury

The development of muckraking journalism had been favored by a propitious development in magazine publication. In the 1890s *McClure's* and rival *Munsey's*, together with several others, revolutionized American magazine publishing, and came to be known as a new generation of periodicals, which rose to challenge the status of the old-order publications monopolizing the magazine panorama in America.⁹⁴ The muckrakers who wrote during the Progressive Era came of age in the Gilded Age of the Robber Barons and had their background shaped by that period's spectacle of extreme wealth and poverty, power and misery. Therefore they practiced the literature of exposure to promote civic activism and to stimulate recognition of citizenly identity and its obligation.⁹⁵ The muckrakers' portrayal of a world whose societal stakes were threatened by corrupt political machines were reminiscent of the excesses of stage melodrama and therefore reflected a sensibility formed by the language of theatrical entertainment.⁹⁶ Like melodrama was the entertainment of the middleclass, also the values transmitted in muckraker's texts hint at the norms of middle-class respectability and ethnic distance. As a consequence the lower classes are pictured in their utter squalor so that consciousness can be scandalized, but their humanity is often underplayed in favor of the literary economy of excess which constituted the popular appeal of these articles.

⁹⁴ Tichi, *Exposés and Excesses*, 65-68.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

Resonant with another pre-eminent nineteenth century genre, the detective story,⁹⁷ muckraking journalisms often staged the action against the background of urban lowlife and dramatically pointed at a noticeable villain whose corrupt nature was not visible to untrained eyes, clad as he usually was in the respectability of his public figure. When in November 1909, muckraking journalist George Kibbe Turner published in *McClure's Magazine* "Daughters of the Poor, a Plain Story of the Development of New York City as a Leading Centre of the White Slave Trade of the World under Tammany Hall,"⁹⁸ the goal of discrediting Tammany Hall in the incumbent elections emerged as a main intent of the journal, which timed the publication accordingly.⁹⁹

Already in 1907, Turner had published a fiery article on prostitution in Chicago, a piece which opened the involvement of muckrakers into the prostitution issue. This exposé had brought together a group of Chicago reformers to crusade against vice and initiated what in a couple of years culminated in a real barrage of magazine articles on the subject: *The Arena*, *Harper's Weekly* and *Collier's Magazine* all printed pieces that confidently attacked the social evil, but, again, it was Turner who made the deepest impression.¹⁰⁰ In New York, the important November 1909 issue of *McClure's*, more than just titillating the readership with just another pitiful, lascivious story, was tailored against what the chief editor captioned "The Tammanyizing of a Civilization."¹⁰¹ To reinforce the accusations leveled against Tammany, the same issue contained an article by New York's ex-Commissioner of Police, General Theodore A. Bingham—an officer who had previously published on public corruption in the main American cities. Turner's article was supplementing a previous account of his that *McClure's* had published in June titled "Tammany's Control of New York by Professional Criminals" and which dealt in detail with the phenomenon of "repeaters." "Repeaters," Turner explained, were those voters—mainly of Jewish and Italian criminal extraction—who sustained the Democratic Party by mischievously

⁹⁷ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 238.

⁹⁸ Turner, "The Daughters of the Poor."

⁹⁹ Keire, "The Vice Trust." 8.

¹⁰⁰ Louis Filler, *The Muckrakers. Crusaders for American Liberalism* (Chicago: Gateway, 1968), 288-89.

¹⁰¹ S.S. McClure, "The Tammanyizing of a Civilization," *McClure's Magazine* 34, no. November (1909).

operating the polls in lower Manhattan. In this eminently technical article the thematic focus was on electoral misdemeanors, on the uselessness of criminal courts and on hypothetical laws that could reduce the impact of repeaters. To enliven the topic, prostitution was also thrown in as “an almost entirely political business...[insofar as] its affairs are conducted almost exclusively by men who are active lieutenants or ‘repeaters’ at the polls for the Democratic organization.”¹⁰²

It is difficult to gauge whether Turner aroused the expected amount of agitation with this article, but for the magazine issue closest to the elections, he thought best to expand the prostitution theme by drawing on the sentimental topoi of the white slavery tracts. Turner diluted the immediate electoral preoccupation with a the tearjerking destinies of the daughters of the poor, the immigrant girls in need of protection, the “big, dazed awkward child[ren]” drafted from Poland, France and Italy and sexually enslaved by Jewish “kaftans,” brutish Italians and French *maqueraux*. The litany of immigrant misfortunes was interspersed with Turner’s constant praising of the anti-vice work done by the Committee of Fourteen and by the Lexow commission. These precise references reveal that he had not abandoned the ambition to replicate the 1901 precedent: namely to defeat Tammany Hall by causing a “a revulsion of popular feelings against...the white slave trade.”

In Turner’s narrative the biggest procurer of all was Tammany itself. The simile proved effective because, for fear of reiterating the political collapse experienced in 1901, Tammany felt obliged to disprove its connections with the vice trade as publicly as possible. This reaction was hardly surprising since part of the muckrakers’ contract with the reader was the obligation to factual accuracy. This warranty should distinguish their vivid assault from the “truth” of soap box orators and campaigning politicians, accounts whose veracity was received with suspicion by the reading public.¹⁰³ Although the public was the ultimate arbiter of a muckraking piece’s efficaciousness, the jeopardy of libel imposed its own restraint, and submitted, even more, literature of exposure to rigorous accountability standards.¹⁰⁴ In fact, in January 1910, Tammany supporter Judge

¹⁰² George Kibbe Turner, "Tammany's Control of New York by Professional Criminals: A Study of a New Period of Decadence in the Popular Government of Great Cities," *McClure's Magazine* 33, no. June (1909): 127.

¹⁰³ Tichi, *Exposés and Excesses*, 69.

¹⁰⁴ Mark Sullivan, *Our Times: The United States, 1900-1925* (New York and London: n.p., 1927),

Thomas O'Sullivan appointed John D. Rockefeller as foreman of a Grand Jury that should investigate Turner's allegations.¹⁰⁵ The choice of such a prominent personality, often regarded as a "Tammany trick," reflected the attempt to protect institutional interests in illegal trades while assuaging the qualms of troubled readers and voters. The so-called Rockefeller Grand Jury thus added its inquiry to the many others already carried out in New York by the Committee of the Fourteen, but, despite its efforts, it could not "uncover" more than those practices which had been under everybody's eyes for a while. As Emma Goldman put it, "the 'righteous cry against white slave traffic' was a 'toy with glaring colors' for 'baby people.'"¹⁰⁶ The Jury's work amounted to a simple refreshing of those colors: at the end of a few months' work no trace of the international traffic was found, and even Turner withdrew his charges.

However, the discrepancy between the muckraking urge for denunciation and the necessity of attending to verifiable facts had already produced a fissure in the general narrative of White Slavery that the illustriously presided Grand Jury continued to inspect. The consequences, subject matter of the next chapter, display the legal developments of a civil campaign in a way that will express the segregational impulse harbored by the Anti-vice Committees as unspoken aspect of the white slavery scare.

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¹⁰⁵The Rockefeller investigation was only one aspect of the city's fight against prostitution. For a more comprehensive view see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 36. and Mara L. Keire, "The Committee of Fourteen and Saloon Reform in New York City, 1905-1920," *Business and Economic History* 26 (1997).

¹⁰⁶ Goldman, "Traffic in Women," 178.

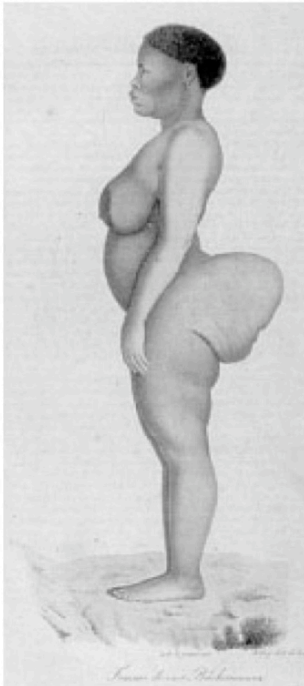


Fig.7. Saartje Baartman
(1810)



Fig.8. The Greek Slave
(1847)



THE VIRGINIAN SLAVE.
INTENDED AS A COMPANION TO JOUEN'S "GREEK SLAVE."



Fig.10. The White Captive (1859)



Fig.11. The White Slave (1913)

All the pictures in this page are sourced from the Web.

WHITE SLAVERY GOES TO COURT

THE LAW, GENDER AND THE COLOR LINE

When white slavery entered the court of law, many New Women entered with it. Even a passing survey of the adjudications and legislature concerning the white slavery hysteria shows how the women involved on all sides of the prostitution discourse—those who practiced, those who organized the practice, and those who cooperated for its eradication—challenged the social conventions informing the public sphere. Whereas the legal representations of white slaves leaned towards an ideal of female vulnerability coupled with childish helplessness and chastity, the real women in this landscape were independent earners who made conscious decisions about the market and the society they lived in. The procuress and the prostitute, but also the female detective, and even the blackmailer who profited from the female disempowerment imposed by the White-Slave Traffic Act, rationally evaluated rules and fallacies of the dominant morality. Proceeding from the options and expectations deployed before them, these women operated in the nooks and crannies that centuries of “double standard” had created in society, with “manly” determination and a utilitarian conception of their own virtue.

To quote the *New York Times*' gloss for the proceedings of the white-slavery cases, the emphasis on the legal discourse allows the “unprintable” matter that “filled the record” to surface.¹ “Unprinted” was not only the widespread racially-mixed debauchery the newspaper alluded to, but also the unspoken re-coding of whiteness as purity and blackness as corruption that permeated the court decisions, the congressional debates on the Mann Act, and the early enforcement of the same. While the “white slave” and the “white slaver” became empty categories, journalists, vice reformers, lawyers, judges and congressmen replenished them with the worries of a world they feared to imagine as miscegenated, debauched and irremediably changed.

¹ *The New York Times*, May 19, 1910.

1. *The People v. Belle Moore*

Frustrated with having lost an opportunity to shine as defenders of public safety and decorum, John D. Rockefeller and local D.A. James Bronson Reynolds commissioned two undercover operations that should substantiate, and strike, the white-slave trade.² They hired George Miller, formerly employed by the Anti-Saloon league and by the Immigration Commission and Frances Foster, a college graduate with conspicuous experience as social worker in Boston and in New York. Posing as two brothel owners, the investigators were able to buy two Jewish girls from a Russian Jew,³ and two white girls from a mulatto woman. While the Jewish man could negotiate a lenient sentence, the mulatto woman, Belle Moore, was found guilty of compulsory prostitution and sentenced to the maximum term. Her appeals to higher courts reconfirmed the first sentence.⁴

This trial, shot through with an urgency that exceeded the criminal act perpetrated by Moore, magnified an undeclared collective desire to legally determine a precise definition of humanity; Rockefeller's personal funding of the supplementary operations testifies how crucially this impulse was felt, and to whom that definition of humanity belonged. Being prostitution a "victimless crime," the trial revolved, quite obviously, less around evidence than around the performance aimed to persuade the jury. The compatibility of the defense narrative with the social values shared by the actors detaining decisional power was consequently decisive.

To illuminate these dynamics, I wish to consider the peculiarly performative nature of the trial according to "J.L. Austin's efforts to distinguish between performative and constative utterances, and in his companion efforts to fix our attention on the illocutionary forces of our words."⁵ Although this "distinction is

² The Grand Jury had been appointed to meet for thirty days, the they refused to adjourn and continued their task for six months. After the depletion of the original funding, the operations continued thank to a personal donation of \$250,000 on the part of Rockefeller himself. Cf. Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 91.

³ Harry Levinson, alias Druckerman, procured Ida Greenberg and Augusta Ehrlich. *The New York Times*, May 3, 1910

⁴ *The People v. Belle Moore*, 1169. Court of the General Session of the Peace, County of New York (1910). All the quotes from the trial transcripts will report the page number parenthetically in the text.

⁵ Timothy Gould, "The Unhappy Performative," in *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (New York: Routledge, 1995), 19.

tricky, and not always stable,”⁶ it proves particularly plausible when applied to the legal discourse, realms from which Austin himself picks the most fitting and numerous examples. Austin’s contrast between constative—purely descriptive—and performative utterances is enriched by a subdivision of the latter category in illocutions, utterances in which word and act coincide, and perlocutions, words whose consequences involve actions.

With these distinctions in mind, we can read the discursive representations of prostitution pervading the socio-historical context as descriptive instances. Although the “epidemic of virtue” set off by Turner’s article effectively used the dominant idiom of sexual coercion to tilt the voting scale and to produce an impact on the collective imaginary, with regards to white slavery, it falls in the category of the constative,⁷ as well as most of the ink spilt on the topic. The phenomenon of white slavery, in fact, reaches its truly “performative” stage only in the moment it enters the legal system. Without this transition, prostitution, and the Progressives’ obsession about it, may gravitate in the public opinion for the longest time and its orbit would just tip slightly according to socio-political circumstances. Conversely, the shifting of the discourse of white slavery from the marketplace of ideas to the courts of law corresponds to the creation of a new little planet exerting its own gravity.

Reasonably enough, some documents and cultural artifacts having a certain impact both on their contemporary audience and on future recipients, are of perlocutionary nature: muckrakers’ writings, for example, are meant to provoke action, and provoke they surely do. Yet, in spite of their being perlocutions, they fail to be successfully performative since no act occurs in virtue, and in the very moment, of their being published. Quite on the contrary, when the Grand Jury is formed and the door to the legal realm opens, the significance of Austin’s distinction becomes patent and useful. In a juridical context, and especially during a trial, all the utterances, insinuations, and fantasies, which in any other context would remain constative, become productively performative.

Quite ironically, as the examination of the trial transcripts demonstrates, the utterances that acquire illocutionary force are virtually the same of common

⁶ Judith Butler, “Burning Acts,” in *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (New York: Routledge, 1995), 197.

⁷ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962,1975), 30-32.

parlance; still, in their performative suit, they partake of the “force” that enables words to autonomously “do things,” totally separated from the weight of their own meaning. In this particular instance the “thing done by words” is the creation of one single criminal. As important side effect, the exclusion of Belle Moore from the arena of the negotiations of social justice validates the ceremonial ostracism that renews the rules of the social pact for those who are instead included in the polity.

Moore’s figure as mute actress and ventriloquized defendant emerges from the different voices as the projection of many fantasies, although, broadly speaking, she appears to be a New Woman, rather than a classic mulatto stereotype: she is in turn the negro slave trader, the lewd procuress, the reformable fallen woman, the dancing entertainer, and the Bohemia’s female entrepreneur. In inhabiting and giving meaning to the urban scenarios evoked around her, Moore is also a lapsed Virgil who guides the jury throughout infernal circles where other types of New Women thrive. With her the jurors visit the Black-and-Tan sporting resorts with their mixed couples and queer dwellers; they become acquainted with the changing world of white femininity made of consensual prostitutes and women adrift; they catch a glimpse of middle class free-spirited ladies such as divorcees, college graduates and professionals.

The disproportionate importance of the backdrop with respect to the sheer boundaries of the criminal action allows us to reconsider the second half of the dyad performativity/performance, for the theatrical quality of this trial is compelling and significant. Taking the cue from Erving Goffman’s terminology, we cannot but acknowledge the abundance of “dramaturgical” factors at work, especially if we consider his definition of performance as “all the activity of an individual which occur during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers.”⁸ Our set of observer, consisting of the jurors and Judge Thomas C. Crain, is often invited by the defense to ponder the transgressive nature of the scenes which are materialized through sworn narrations. The nature of the job of the undercover agents offers the step stone for a metatheatrical twist which defense attorney, Alexander Karlin, exploits in its strategic potential. He turns the classical defense move of discrediting the witness

⁸ Erving Goffmann, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 25.

into a more general attempt to blur the distinction between the scripted act of the faux criminals and the criminal intentions behind that act. In other words, he tries to expose the investigators' performance not as a necessary masquerade in the service of the State, but as the contrived act of confidence men.⁹ To do so, the attorney highlights the detectives' violations of the expected consistency between setting, appearance and manner, where appearance and manner constitute the "personal front" of the individuals, while the setting is the socio-urban environment as conjured up through testimony.

Most of the action takes place at the intersection of the two dimensions so far discussed, that is in the superimposition of the aspects pertaining to the production of crime through the employment of adjudication (performativity) onto the mechanisms prompted by the dramaturgical elements in the trial (performance). For example, the perlocutionary strategies adopted by Karlin cannot be separated by the notion of impersonation he is trying to criticize in the witnesses. Conversely, Karlin's histrionic defense style could be described, in Austinian terms, as an exemplary "unhappy performance." As a matter of fact, the array of countermoves the attorney deploys aims to interrupt and deviate towards his person the illocutionary forces flowing in the trial. In so doing, Karlin calls for a mistrial, invokes entrapment defense, manipulates the length of the legal proceedings through digressions and suspicious maladies, almost shows contempt of the Court, and physically exhausts the jurors' attention through endlessly repetitive cross examinations.

1.1. Performativity and Normativity in Defense Strategy

Karlin's intensive "stage management" eventually founders in the face of illocutionary forces which he cannot maneuver to his success. Precisely in virtue of its predictability, the severe sentence that befalls Belle Moore invites to a brief exploration of the relation between performativity and normativity.¹⁰ This correlation seems to be ascribable to the great role played by "restored behavior" in the different performative levels constituting the trial. In his definition of "restored behavior" as the recombination of previously lived pieces of behavior, Richard Schechner emphasizes how the "rules of the game," be they unconscious

⁹ Ibid., 58-59.

¹⁰ Ross Charnock, "Speech Acts in Legal Language," *Journal of Pragmatics* 41, no. 3 (2009): 401.

habits, structured rituals or codified practices, are often homogenized within a culture.¹¹ Schechner claims that only a dramatic displacement of behavior from a known to an unexpected context can produce an appreciable change in the reception of the “performance” or, in other words, can make a performance transgressive.¹² In our case, Karlin seems to subvert the *cliché*—not unfamiliar to the jurors—that a mulatto woman and former prostitute is quite likely to be trafficking in white women. Karlin forcefully goes against an established type that white-slavery literature had popularized; even in the stories written by the Chicago prosecutor Clifford Roe, the character of the black maid marked the transition for the abducted girl between freedom and enslavement in the brothel.¹³ By presenting the mulatto woman as a victim of illegitimate pseudo-legal operations on the part of white middle class agents, Karlin destabilizes this context. Still, the weight of the restored behavior guiding the decision of the jury is not easily thrown off balance, and eventually reconfirms the old set of beliefs.

Karlin’s efforts were probably not completely futile, at least if one considers that *The New York Times* reported Moore as having “an appearance of great intelligence, and (is) not unsuggestive of Cassie in ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin.’”¹⁴ The mentioning of Cassie transfigures Moore into a noble literary character that the audience could emphasize with and codes her as the colored sexual victim of a white master; on the other hand though, Moore-the-person is simply flattened into yet another type, another character superimposed to her persona, chosen among the snippets of literary restored behavior available to the public. Overall, although legally inconclusive, Karlin’s approach does challenge the influence of restored behavior as a confirmation of the dominant notions attached to certain practices. This provocation comes forth with vehemence when Karlin decodes as “good faith” a behavior which the Court calls “crime.” As a development of this argument, the attorney builds up an “entrapment-defense” argument in the course of which he interestingly exposes the interdependence between the normative intentions of the reformers and the counternormative practices they combat.

¹¹ Richard Schechner, "Restoration of Behavior," in *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (1985), 34.

¹² *Ibid.*, 36.

¹³ Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 81.

¹⁴ *The New York Times*, May 19, 1910, 5

At least a decade before the Moore case, the private eyes employed by the Committee of Fifteen had inaugurated the practice of entrapping prostitutes when “investigating” supposed violation of the Tenement House Laws.¹⁵ As the succinct Disorderly House Report testifies, during these operations money had to pass hands so that it could become evidence of the crime; moreover, for the legal violation to be complete, the money recipient had to expose her person for prostitutional purposes.¹⁶ The trial transcripts reveal that, in the 1910s, similar procedures were still in vogue as well as the practice of making “the investigators participants in the very violations they were charged with eliminating.”¹⁷ Detectives Miller and Foster, in fact, devoted little effort to gaining a comprehensive overview of the Black and Tans of the Tenderloin,¹⁸ and rather pursued the accomplishment of a criminal transaction. Their fictional stint in the pimping business was meant to corroborate a series of preconceptions: as Karlin phrased it, they were out “to make a case for the District Attorney” (168). Hence, when they got acquainted with Belle Moore, it was in the best interest of those who invested in their venture, that they hastened the completion of the task with all possible means. Unlike Rev. Pankhurst or George Kibbe Turner, who never trespassed the role of observers, detectives receiving a commission were used to participating in the activities of lowlifers so convincingly that they most often initiated and carried out illegal negotiations; at the same time, they often ignored opportunities to prevent or report crime that arose in the course of action.

The novelty of Karlin’s strategy is that he condemns this practice as unlawful, and as particularly inappropriate for an operation trying to assert, not the individual involvement in illicit behavior, but the existence of an international system of abduction and enforced sexual slavery. At a more general level, Karlin attempts to cast a dim light on the necessity of such an investigation by intimating that the whole notion of “white slavery” is more for the feuilleton than for the court of law. The cogency of this insinuation is confirmed when his attempts to denounce the arbitrariness of the District Attorney’s intentions, or

¹⁵ Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 45.

¹⁶ In her book Fronc reproduces the Disorderly House Report form where one can clearly read the entries “amount paid” and “paid to.” In the more detailed affidavits, detectives report that the would ask the prospective criminal to lay on a bed disrobed. *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁸ Interracial clubs were frequently referred to as Black and Tans. The term apparently originated in the South and denoted interracial cooperation, when black and white men combined in an election to defeat a white supremacist party. Cf. Mumford, *Interzones*, 30.

simply to mention the international traffic, are promptly fended off and severely admonished by the judge.¹⁹ Distressed, Karlin tries to address the matter in terms of personal opinion and asks Belle Woods, the 25-year-old married woman procured by Moore, if she considered herself to be a white slave: the witness is forbidden to reply.²⁰ During his cross examination of detective Frances Foster, Karlin hints at the inexistence of the white slavery traffic for one last time:

Karlin: Mrs. Foster, as a result of your investigation since March 2nd, you don't actually believe that there is any such thing as a White Slave Traffic in this city, do you?

Objected to. Sustained. Exception.(164)

As if the suspension of yet another answer corresponded to the suspension of white slavery itself, Karlin shifts the axis of discourse according to the syllogism that, given the "unmentionability" of the traffic, his client is logically involved in something that is also nonexistent. As ensuing conclusion, he proposes, if the defendant has committed a misdemeanor, it is only attributable to the persuasive pressure exerted by the investigators:

We propose to ask your Honor later on to charge that if this defendant was enticed or induced or *entrapped* into the commission of such things, that the jury have a right to consider it on the question of the criminal intent of the acts here charged (165) (my emphasis)

In this perspective, entrapment is invoked as the demonstration that the defendant, left to herself, would have never committed the crime. The issue of intent is of primary importance and the attorney strives to separate it from the illegal act, the procurement, which cannot be denied. The denunciation of entrapment implies a shift of responsibility from Belle Moore to the investigators and, by implication, to the State that is averring the procedure before a tribunal.

¹⁹ Already from the first cross-examination, when Karlin tries insinuate this doubt, the judge immediately threatens to punish him for contempt of the court: "Karlin: When was the first time you went around the colored sporting resorts in new York...in your campaign to lead other people in this net - -/Mr. Press: I object to that.../Karlin: In your campaign to get evidence in the White Slave inquiry, in the course of your employment as a special investigator for the District Attorney?/The Court: You may show cause before me tomorrow morning why you should not be punished for contempt. (43-44)

²⁰ Notwithstanding this missing response, elements of coercion are obviously absent from the picture to the point that Ms. Woods, up to the last moment, felt free to change her mind.

Quite interestingly, Karlin depicts an act of entrapment that reads like a tale of seduction in which Moore is lured out of her “humble existence” by the temptations that the detectives provide:

She [Moore] is going to tell you that...because night after night this woman leading an humble existence suddenly found in her path George Miller and Frances Foster lavish with money; they took her night after night to various sporting places, that they had dined and wined her that they took her around riding in taxi cabs, and, because of this influence, and not because of any criminal intent, she is going to tell you that she did some act that the State here is trying to make out to be a crime. (233)

Stylistically, Karlin draws on the same genre that featured the black brothel maid, but he pictures Moore in the role that tradition assigned to the naïve, white girl. He lingers on Moore’s vulnerability to urban pleasures; he emphasizes the disorientation that was generally a sufficient moral excuse to absolve the immigrant or country girl who, fascinated with restaurants, cars and entertainments was inveigled into a life of dishonor. Karlin does not go as far as to enrich his picture with a promise of marriage—the cadet’s trademark illusion—but states very clearly that the male investigator has slept with Moore, thus completing the trajectory of his seduction narrative.

Two important implications need to be extracted from this fabulatory strategy. The first concerns the general effectiveness of the seduction story and, in this case, its failure. The factor that prevents Belle Moore from enjoying the benefits of fictional victimization seems to be her race; the hysteria around white slavery, far from making society more sensitive to sexual vulnerability of all women, seems to refresh the conflation of sexual and racial purity.²¹ The two experienced prostitutes that Moore has procured comfortably admit before the tribunal their adult age and occupation. Although too flashy and confident to inspire pity in the jury, they are nonetheless uncriticized in their career choice and, even against appearances, both the newspapers and the detectives persist in lowering their age and in associating them with imaginary children supposedly trapped in the Tenderloin. Moore, on the contrary, despite the rough experiences

²¹ Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 95.

her testimony reveals,²² is always fully credited with the weight of her own immorality as if honesty, good faith, of even naïveté were irreconcilable with her status of colored woman. Even when detective Miller mentions some little black girl occupying the brothel, virtually nobody inquires further, as if blackness had the power to disconnect threatened childhood from the idea of innocence and from the need of protection.

Even Karlin himself, almost reassures the jury of his understanding of dominant social values by often referring to Moore's morals as being rather loose and concedes that "she has not lived that pure life that we would like any of our women to live" (289). The content of the declaration is not as telling as the grammar that qualifies it, where the pronoun "we" enables Karlin to include himself into the homosocial circle comprising the jurors and designating the whole group, through the possessive "our," as legitimate proprietors of pure, that is white, women. By estranging the defendant from the idea of moral integrity, the court excludes the possibility of her being deceived and consequently establishes that "the idea of carrying out the criminal transaction in question originated in the brain of Belle Moore" (285). The only concession made by the judge, after the maximum of the penalty has been inflicted, is a paternalistic remark about the appropriateness of leading a moral life: "It will be wiser for you, belle Moore, to lead a moral life when you come from prison. You can do so, if you will. Don't forget that and I hope you will"(291).

The second instance interrogates the notion of the State that is being debated between the lines of Karlin's lengthy cross-examinations. In one of his tirades, Karlin explicitly contends that "in this case...the State did solicit and it did persuade or tempt the defendant" (294) and that in the whole story "anything criminal...was brought about through the agency of the State". This language suggests less an indictment of the impersonators laying out the trap than a substantial questioning of the regulatory practices going under the label of "reform." Karlin challenges the shady collusion of private good-government activists with the administration of justice; in this context his attempt to call for a

²² Detective Miller reports that the middleman who introduced him to Belle Moore had been the one who "broke her in," a procedure normally described as involving an obvious degree of violence and coercion. Cf. *The People v. Belle Moore*, 12.

mistrial (108) corresponds to an attack to the legitimacy of these reformers to flaunt public ambitions.²³

Undeniably, his burdensome repetitive questions such as “is it appropriate for a college graduate to be there” or “is it appropriate for a married man to do so” primarily target the witnesses’ credibility, but they resonate longer and louder *vis-à-vis* the Progressives’ impetus to involve the State in the regulation of the private. Following up to Goffman’s treatment of misrepresentation, we agree that “sometimes when we ask whether a fostered impression is true or false we really mean to ask whether or not the performer is authorized to give the performance in question, and are not primarily concerned with the performance itself.”²⁴ Along this line of reasoning, Karlin may be understood beyond his questioning the right of the investigators’ to live multiple and contrasting identities. More to the point, he may be asking a real question about who should act as the paladin of morality, if anyone. Moreover, he envisions for the State the risks ensuing from the employment of private eyes for policing citizens; in this sense, his bottom line could be a defense of the exclusivity of the established State institutions in administering justice. Considering that the first case to recognize and sustain a claim of entrapment by government officers as defense took place only five years later, one can suggest that Karlin, with his failed attempt, was possibly expressing a widespread desire to disentangle state officers from the unseemly ways of private justice.²⁵

More generally, Karlin also interrogates the nature of the reformers’ motivations.²⁶ The attorney’s line of argument seems to dismiss both the detectives and their patrons from the quota of righteous reformers, yet, his moral undertones express the necessity of restoring, if not enforcing, moral standards. The higher actor Karlin appears to be pointing to is an almost disembodied and utopian idea of the State, a smoothly functioning organism which, through the correct endorsement of its founding principles, can also accommodate compassion. In this respect, Karlin can be designated as the ultimate Progressive

²³ For a definition of mistrial as included in the Austinian doctrine of infelicities see Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, 25-26.

²⁴ Goffmann, *The Presentation of Self*, 59.

²⁵ The first case to feature a successful entrapment defense was *Woo Wai v. United States*, 223 F. 412 (CA9 1915)

²⁶ Karlin to Miller “Am I right that you did not enter this work because of your interest in reform?” (135)

in this legal episode; someone, as Robert Wiebe would have it, sharing the national habit in vogue at the end of the nineteenth century, to attribute omnipotence to abstractions and thus reconciling the excruciating contrast between a familiar set of values and “the strange world beyond.”²⁷

1.2. The Hard Boiled Detective and the Agrarian Past

The almost romantic stature of Karlin’s instrumental idealism is revealed in his onslaught to Miller’s quintessentially modern profession. In his cross-examination, the attorney constructs the figure of the private detective as the basest product of the “wicked city of New York,” a character even more objectionable if projected against a nostalgic ideal of rural America. Detective Miller’s biography is a tortuous itinerary beginning with a hard-working adolescence on a farm, continuing with informative work for the Salon League and the Immigration Commission, and leading up to the District Attorney’s secret investigations.

Such a résumé represents a model conducive to those mental transformations that in urban fiction befall characters who migrate to the city from the ordered communities of the countryside. In her study of urban novels, literary critic Blanche Gelfant calls this omnipresent motif “personal dissociation” and correlates it to the moral and emotional unbalance suffered by characters alienated from the localized community.²⁸ This dissociation is a feature defining the lost girls protagonists of the white slavery tracts, but, while in their case it is a harbinger of (self)destruction, for Miller it becomes the quality that allows him to thrive in the urban jungle and that crowns his only recently appeased *wanderlust*:

Miller: Well, I worked on the ranches, I worked in mines, and I worked at a good many occupations, first at one place, and then at another, trying to find something to suit me.

Karlin: You finally found in special investigation something that suited you? Miller: Yes, sir. (29)

²⁷ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 164.

²⁸ Dowling, *Slumming New York. From the Waterfront to Mythic Harlem*, 12-13.

Miller's process of dissociation has not been an abrupt occurrence: Karlin likes to stress how Miller has trained himself for his current job through experiences with groups relegated to the margins of Americanness—mostly Native Americans and Immigrants. The attorney purports that Miller has entertained with them relationships based on the pretence of frankness in order to expose, or encourage, their weaknesses. In Karlin's interpretation, Miller's formative years are those of an actor by trade whose performance of illegality has produced real delinquents. Miller's "more suitable" occupations pivoted on the structural inconsistency inherent in his criminogenic function. Since Miller admittedly drank heavily while investigating liquor laws²⁹ and visited hundreds of brothels while working for the Immigration Commission, Karlin would like him to confess that he also procured white slaves while working at the present case. In the absence of a confession, the lawyer works at detaching Miller's figure from the mechanisms of organized legality—the ones which, in his view, should work according to the contrastive principle of crime-punishment rather than to the homeopathic one of crime-enticement.

When Karlin evokes the pastoral ideal of rural honesty which Miller deliberately left in order to become a "mercenary," he prospects to the jury the American Adam that Miller could well be and remain—an ideal abjured by Miller only to embrace a career of immanent schizophrenia. Karlin's stubborn narrative pursues what Leo Marx calls a "shallow, not to say perverse conception of reality inherent in...[American] sentimental pastoralism...generated by an urge to withdraw from civilization's growing power and complexity."³⁰

Miller: I was born and raised on a farm. / Karlin: How long did you follow the honest occupation on the farm? / Mr.Press: I object, if your honor please, he has intimated that this witness has had a dishonest occupation. (28) /... / Karlin: You felt that you are more fitted for that kind of work of deception that you were for honest work, on a farm or a cattle ranch. (81)

The ability to mingle and morph, that Karlin regards as an aberration of personality, was an emerging professional skill that enabled the investigator, as

²⁹ "Q. and while you were encouraging drinking you were connected for about a year and a half with anti-saloon league, weren't you? A. yes, sir." *The People v. Belle Moore*, 30

³⁰ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, (1964) 2000), 8-9.

Esther Romeyn suggests, to occupy the position of model subject in the city.³¹ Penetrating into the recesses of urban life, in fact, called for a professional whose specialized knowledge entailed not only physiognomy, phrenology and impersonation, but also an almost bipolar degree of self-control so that the prolonged periods of forced mimicry would not lead to the dissimulation of identity so typical of deviance. By the late nineteenth century, all these techniques of (self)surveillance were so widely popularized in the dime novel and in the memoirs of actual detectives that this professional figure had become a familiar institution.³² The detective's adroitness in navigating the urban environment was tightly connected to the command of two epistemological models based on his capacity of decoding the city and encoding the self in a space of "radical exteriority."³³ According to Karlin, Miller's professional career reveals a short circuit in the mechanism of encoding, not in the sense that the impersonation has become irreversibly ingrained in the actor,³⁴ but in the sense that it speaks for authenticity as if Miller had not been "playing" the urban *debauché*, but he had truthfully "been" one all along. Miller's willing abandonment of the countryside, occurring well before urban influences could corrupt him, is emphasized to drive the point home: the investigator's country-to-city progress is invoked to demonstrate that his delinquent "character" has always preceded the impersonator. From this perspective, Miller's quest for "a job to suit him" becomes a quest for a permanent immunity, the astute cover up for an unstable and deceiving nature.³⁵ As Karlin tries to undermine the conduct dispensations inherent in investigative performance, he also paraphrases Miller's profession with the lexicon of suspicion and mercenariness:

³¹ Esther Romeyn, *Street Scenes: Staging the Self in Immigrant New York*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

³² Memoirs of actual detectives such as Allen Pinkerton, George McWatters, George Walling, and New York Inspector Byrnes instructed the city dweller in the tricks of their trade. Cf. *Ibid.*, 29.

³³ Romeyn observes that "It is a space that is marked by a fundamental distrust in hermeneutics and communicative signs, a space that focuses attention instead on 'traces that must be deciphered and read'...But where some interpreted theatricality...as the dissimulation and concealment of identity, other saw a sign of true mastery and professionalism." *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁴ Romeyn vividly presents the case of McParlan, an Irish immigrant recruited by the notorious Pinkerton Agency to infiltrate the Irish secret society of the Molly Maguires, as exemplary case of someone who, after a couple of years undercover, could never recover his "original" self. *Ibid.*, 31-33.

³⁵ "I take it that in the course of your work as special investigator you have learned to have a high regard for the truth?" (80)

Karlin: Mr. Miller, what is your profession? Protector, investigator, self-styled secret service man, or what... Miller: Special Investigator. Karlin: Employed by anybody that is willing to pay you the money, is that right? Miller: Yes, sir. (28)

Karlin accentuates the individualistic and undersurveilled nature of Miller's professional collocation and, in his string of impatient definitions, he hints at the widely debated notion of "protection." Karlin inserts the term "protector" between more negative job descriptors and apparently stresses it as a way to contrast the function that a law enforcement agent should perform—the safeguard of citizens—with Miller's specific tasks. At second glance though, the term reveals its ambiguity, for, since Miller is deemed a procurer, one cannot help but read the word "protector" in its vicinity to the term pimp, a synonymy that languages such as Italian and French deploy in everyday usage. The other element crucial to the investigative profession is money, both the money designating the utter commodification of Miller's services, and the public money he liberally makes use of during the course of the investigation. This entrenchment of consumerism and lack of higher morals is the combination that guides Karlin's depiction of the slumming world.

Miller's description of his slumming excursions delineates what Chad Heap calls "the crucial role that slumming played both in making visible and in facilitating the transition from one racial and sexual regime to the next."³⁶ Heap claims that the different slumming vogues characterizing the Progressive Era corresponded to particular configurations of sexual, racial and socioeconomic classifications.³⁷ In the teens, during the period of the "the bohemian thrillage," the city started to open up spaces where sexual fantasies could be explored far from the constraints of social obligations and where the desires of people engaging in same-sex or cross-racial relationships could concretize.³⁸ The Tenderloin's black resorts particularly attracted curious white interlopers in search of ragtime music and cross-racial sex. By 1910's the "Negro Bohemia" had relocated to the twenty-eight and thirtieth streets, where a few of the district's

³⁶ Chap Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 10.

³⁷ In his book Heap looks at the period from 1880 to 1930 and he mainly observes four subsequent slumming phases: the slumming tours in the working-class immigrant environments, the bohemian thrillage, the "Negro vogue" and the "pansy and lesbian craze".

³⁸ Heap, *Slumming*, 3.

colored cafés, including some of those mentioned in the trial, were very popular among a mixed crowd of bon-vivants.³⁹ Given the repute of the area, it was not difficult for Karlin to add sexual impropriety to his charges against Miller and to picture him at the center of a racially mixed orgy:

Karlin:...Didn't you on the morning of the first day that you were in the apartment of this defendant occupy the same bed, first with Alex Anderson, second with Belle Moore the defendant, and third with another colored girl? Upon your oath, tell me if that is not so, Mr. Miller? / Miller: No, sir. (49)

Despite this attempt to charge Miller with sexual degeneracy, the detective's masculinity is not diminished since sexual abnormality at the time was only attributed to subjects who adopted the mannerism commonly associated with the opposite sex: only "mannish women" and effeminate male "fairies" were considered abnormal. Furthermore, the feminine role in interracial homosexuality was typically adopted by the black man. Beyond providing juicy titles for the press, Karlin's slander accomplishes the more crucial task of define the codifications, presumably those shared by the jury, of the hegemonic social order, a system structured primarily around an "increasingly polarized white/black racial axis and a hetero/homo sexual binary that were defined in reciprocal relationship to one another."⁴⁰

1.3. The Utopian Dream of Commensurability

Since the socio-historical circumstances behind the legal occurrence play a paramount role, the Moore case is "an event that lends itself to narrative representation"⁴¹ while simultaneously abiding to the rules of the legal genre. To respect this double nature one needs to observe the felony being contested both in terms of the legal code object of transgression, and of the sentence issued. Both these documents present some eloquent silences which produce the exclusion of some important elements from the core of the trial—first and foremost white slavery as an organized trust. The salience of this muted topic invokes some considerations on the irreducibly derivative nature of justice.

³⁹ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁴¹ White, *The Content of the Form*, 13.

Wai Chee Dimock reminds us that justice emerges as a concept that “etymologically as well as historically...[is] given primacy only under the rule of law, only with the legal mediation of human relations.”⁴² Being justice, she argues, a “virtue” among others, defined by a porous language whose central premise is “commensurability,” we necessarily have to take into account also the category of residues: “residues unsubsumed and unresolved by any order of the commensurate, residues that introduce a lingering question...into any program of justice.”⁴³ Elaborating on John Stuart Mill, Dimock stresses this central premise as to define justice the “reification of commensurability” based on the utopian dream—inherent in all adjudication—of the perfect equivalence, say, between offence and punishment. Against this dream, she addresses the “abiding presence of the residue,” a presence that makes itself deeply felt in this case. However, pondering the elements “measured” in the decision requires our delving, for the time being, in the mechanisms of “objective” adequation.

The trial opens with a clear description of the contested allegation:

[Belle Moore] feloniously did procure and place in the charge of one George A. Miller two certain women, one Alice Milton and one Belle Woods, with the consent of the said two women, and each of them, for immoral purpose...that said George A. Miller should shortly thereafter...procure each of them to enter and become inmate of a certain house of prostitution...against the form of the statute in such case made and provided, and against the peace of the people of the State of New York. (4)

The transcripts virtually end with the same paragraph in the guise of sentence, the only meaningful addition being a definition of White Slavery (290)—crime of which Moore is declared not guilty— and the mentioning of money: “You [Moore]...placed, with their consent two immoral women in his [Miller’s] charge for immoral purposes, and received from him money in the belief that he was paying you for procuring them (violation of sec.2460 Penal Law)” (291). As we evince from this wording, the object of commensurability, that is, the violation against which a punitive compensation is demanded, is the successful completion of an economic transaction.⁴⁴ The decision is somehow in tune with Belle Moore’s

⁴² Wai Chee Dimock, *Residues of Justice. Literature, Law, Philosophy*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Karlin tends to deny that money has been given since the money was not marked. He sneers at

self-perception: she seems to consider herself primarily a businesswoman and acts accordingly. Her words are always and only reported, but, among the silences and the echoes of the sources, Moore's irritation reaches the posthumous reader undeflected:

Miller: ...Alex Anderson then said "Leave it to Belle Moore...She has been in the business nine years, and I broke her in myself" She then laughed and said "He did". And she said, "If I had had some sense, I would have some money now, I would be rich; as it is, I got furniture for one flat stored, besides the furniture I have here". (12)

Instead of expressing the old sorrow of an abusive experience, Moore regrets not having performed successfully in her line of work. Although frustrated, she still indicates to Miller some meager signs of conspicuous consumptions as a way to validate her potential in the field, almost to prove that she has not been completely idle, but simply lacking "some [business?] sense." In a formal letter to Foster, where Moore reports the progress made in the procurement, she closes with a plea for reliance "you can depend on me" (155) not wanting to lose a client who can blow some wind into her sail. In the same way she seems to be quite adroit with her "merchandise:" she takes good care of her girls, tries to understand their psychologies, and presents them to their best. In the game of contingent identities that has Moore at its center, the role of the entrepreneur seems to be the one favored by the defendant herself, as if the rituals and the mechanics of the free market had become the backbone of her "work ethics." The only aspect that Moore has miscalculated seems to be the ownership of the commodity she deals in.

In her more general discussion of consent and sexual rights, Pamela Haag points out how one of white slavery's innovations, both popularly and juridically, "was to identify the impersonal, economic association in sexual commerce...as its primary violence, the thing that defined and was synonymous with the offence."⁴⁵ The language of the transcripts articulates this "impersonal and commercial" dimension of the felony as the only transgression deserving juridical attention

the detective for wanting this transaction to be believed on his words "don't you know from your past experience as a special investigator...that it would have been a fine piece of detective work in this defendant had been entrapped by you with marked money?" 36

⁴⁵ Pamela Haag, *Consent: Sexual Rights and the Transformation of American Liberalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 82.

since no other form of abuse illegality mentioned in the course of the trial is considered worth of notice. If we agree with Haag that Progressivism could be seen as “a problem of contract, an attempt to separate legitimate from illegitimate forms and conditions of expropriation through reconceptualization of public responsibility and freedom,”⁴⁶ then, in this case, procurement is coded as an illegitimate expropriation of one’s right to autonomously enter a house of prostitution. Hence, Karlin’s attempt to shift the responsibility of the procurement on the investigators goes beyond the usual discrediting of the witnesses: it amounts to accepting the nature of the crime and to determining the actor who technically carried out the expropriation: “I am trying to show that this witness [Miller] and not this defendant did the procuring on that night”(86), Karlin explains. Since the ladies’ consent is irrelevant to the indictment as well as to the verdict, it is not from their hands that the right is extracted through procurement.

The proprietorial mode underpinning the decision, a vestige of the traditional “seduction laws,” seems to suggest that the “victim” dispossessed of the right attached to female capital is a generalized old-order father figure, in this case subsumed by the State. As Margit Stange argues in her acute study of white slavery literature, “in the booming market economy of the early twentieth century, woman constituted a form of private property acquired through the market.”⁴⁷ This conception already had a long history, but asserted the necessity of reaffirming “woman as property” in a time when the self-owning person seemed to be the guiding model of individuality within market capitalism.⁴⁸ In the rhetoric of American white slavery discourse, fair access to the exchange value of the white slave becomes the interest of the State, where the State is a plural version of all those male nationals that Karlin designates with a highly suggestive “we” (189). Prostitutes, even adult and willing ones, are gathered in a daughterly category that any man of a certain “fatherly” status can claim as his “own.”

⁴⁶ Ibid., 201.

⁴⁷ Margit Stange, *Personal Property. Wives, White Slaves and the Market in Women* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 2.

⁴⁸ Dimock frames this principle with Lawrence Friedman’s definition of nineteenth century law as emphasizing “the protection of property rather than morality” and for that reason “criminal justice and civil justice alike ceased to be concerned with the individual.” Lawrence Friedman, “Notes towards a History of American Justice” *Buffalo Law review* 24 (1974): 125. as reported in Dimock, *Residues of Justice*, 18.

In the course of the case we are also reminded of the specific characteristics this valuable feminine commodity should have; in this way the law reveals itself, as Scott Herring suggests, as “complementary medium of sexual taxonomy.”⁴⁹ When detective Miller meets Moore for the first time he gives precise requirements for the girls he will purportedly employ:

I will tell you about those girls; *I don't want colored girls*; I want white girls; girls weighing *less than one hundred pounds*, not more than one hundred and ten at the most; must be naturally good looking, well built and be able to get twenty or twenty-five dollars in any whorehouse”(9) [my emphasis]

In detective Foster's testimony more explanatory details come forth:

[I told her] my backers had asked me to bring them young girls, simply because the fast women in the West are older women. I even told Miss Moore that, if she could procure me a *girl that had never been touched*, I would like to have her. I was told that there are girls of that sort to be gotten in New York City. ...I said I did not want a girl that showed *any stain of colored blood*, because I was *afraid* to put her in my house with white girls. (143) [my emphasis]

We are here presented with the whole imaginary of the white-slavery tracts, an imaginary that rehearses along very distinct racial lines what in the fiction was simply left unsaid. The daughters of the nation, whose exchange value is requisitioned by the father-State, have to abide the “one drop rule” of racial purity.⁵⁰ Black or mulatto prostitutes cannot even be imagined as sharing the same physical space with white ones, in spite of the soaring occurrence of black and tan resorts: in Foster's account proximity generates unmanageable anxiety and the necessity of segregation is invoked to fend off irrational fears.

The hierarchy of values qualifying good daughterly merchandise goes on by defining age well before requiring beauty. In some occasions the investigators specify that the girls have to be “under eighteen” but in more frequent remarks youth seems to be equated with aesthetic canons rather than with birth certificates. The visual politics of beauty are here subsumed by the physical

⁴⁹ Herring, *Queering the Underworld*, 11.

⁵⁰ As *The New York Times* reported, the Jewish girls that the two investigators had bought from Harry Levinson had been paid less than a third of the price contracted with Moore for the American prostitutes. *The New York Times*, May 3, 1910.

appearance of miniature women, for a “well built” girl under one hundred pounds must be either petite, or so slender that her sexual attributes suggest pre adolescence rather than womanhood. The ephebic female body adumbrated in this request holds, in my view, a certain connection to the prepuberal naked girl in Eberle’s sculpture *The White Slave* and bespeaks, once and again, a disturbing correlation between the idealization of female identity and its crippling infantilization.

The construction of innocence, that ideological underpinning necessary to validate the vehemence of the whole judicial action, operates at an eminently linguistic and rhetorical level. The request for virginal girls, in fact, is only mentioned once in passing as the curiosity to substantiate an urban myth and it is dismissed almost the moment it is raised. Nevertheless, in the rest of the reported conversations the girls are referred to so often as “babies” and “kids” that Karlin feels obliged to expose the partiality of such language (“What was the necessity of this defendant telling you they were little babies”) as well as to inquire about the reasons of the lapidary weight limit.⁵¹ The “necessity” is urgent, since, unlike the expectations created during the Grand Jury, no real “baby” happens to be seen in the court. Prior to the trial, D.A. Reynolds had insistently described Alice Milton and Belle Woods as frightened, teddy-bear toting children.⁵² Quite on the contrary, as the *New York Times* reported, Alice Milton “confessed to 23 and looked the part...[She wore] a mammoth scarlet hat, and, throughout her testimony swung a patent-leather toe in the neighborhood of the stenographer’s left ear.”⁵³ Belle Woods, as we know from the transcripts, even had a previous (childless) marriage in her vitae.

Alongside with the metaphorical child of the familiar appellations, a fictional one makes her way from the Grand Jury’s fabrications to the court of Law: her name is Helen Hastings and she is an eleven-year-old girl whose disappearance has been investigated by the police. D.A. Reynolds claimed that Belle Moore was upholding the girl, but the conjecture was probably so

⁵¹ The insistence on slenderness almost becomes a mantra in the many times in which the “procuring assignment” is repeated and when Karlin finally asks “For the purpose of your work...will you kindly tell us what difference it was weather the girls weighed 100 or 300 pounds?” (78) Miller’s answer seems to reiterate a connection between weight, beauty and earning prospects in the brothel.

⁵² Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 95

⁵³ *The New York Times*, May 5, 1910: 6.

unsustainable that he dropped his allegation before the trial. Miller nonetheless clings onto this version of the facts and testifies that Moore, in the attempt to sell him the girl, had her disrobed for him as sexual offer for the night.⁵⁴ Again we enter the realm of the imaginary as expressed by Eberle's sculpture, but with a peculiar difference: instead of the Jewish looking pimp auctioning the naked girl, the transaction is directed by an acrid-faced, showy mulatta.⁵⁵ Although this part of the story is quickly dismissed as impossible to corroborate, the message ensuing from the scene stigmatizes the living sign of racial mixing, the mulatto, as a propagator of corruption. Exactly because her blackness is not that apparent, Moore has to be publicly exposed in her utter immorality, so that any possibility of having her pass—not for white, but for respectable—is irrevocably curtailed. Without a real child to protect, the court has to do away with the narrative of tutelage of innocence; what is left to protect is the “peace of the citizens of New York” and that seems to be only shaken by the “fear” of interracial relations. The court thus dutifully seeks to provide the citizens with protection from potential racial trespassers, and, in pragmatic terms, to provide protection to whiteness through segregation. All these preoccupations encroach on the residual part of the trial, the zone where, once the nature of the illegal transaction is established, the lingering questions resisting adjudication reside and persist.

1.4. Conspicuous Residues #1: “Black and Tan Fantasy”

The administration of justice seems to have the capacity to span across the cultural landscape of its given historical moment. Indeed it so appears when considering the racial undertow of this legal case against the backdrop of the campaign waged by the Committee of Fourteen—and those sharing their agenda—against the egalitarian politics of the city and State of New York. William S. Bennet, congressman and member of said Committee, explained to his fellow associates that “if it is a colored place in which white people where not admitted at all,” then it “would seem to me that there is no chance for trouble.”⁵⁶ The “chance for trouble” is the immoral outcome of race mixing, a sexual ghost encountered in the commercial establishments of the Tenderloin and discussed in

⁵⁴ Fuller instead denied the fact. Cf. 196-197

⁵⁵ “Belle Moore is a very light mulatto, probably not more than 35, with a thin acrid face...Her hat was an amazing thing of peonies and pampas grass.” *The New York Times*, May 19, 1910.

⁵⁶ Hon. William Bennet later coauthored the Mann Act. Cf. Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 66.

the trial at such length that it constitutes a conspicuous and influential “residue” of the events under examination.

In the prelude to the Moore case, the protection of innocence had been popularized as the noble mission animating whole operation; during the trial the protective impulse proved to be a pretext, a thin excuse reduced to an aside so improbable that the protection of whiteness rose instead as a central concern. In this respect, what makes Belle Moore peculiarly guilty is her lack of cooperation in the maintenance of the color line. Congressman Bennet’s words reveal a general intention to transfer onto African-Americans the responsibility of “voluntary segregation,” a strategy which, given the impossibility of dissuading white New Yorkers from the charms of the Black and Tans, seemed to be the only viable option. Criticism against this line of thought was raised, among others, by W.E.B. DuBois;⁵⁷ the Committee, indifferent to disapproval, searched instead for men of “the Booker T. Washington type” to assist them in the separation of public amusements. Their attempt to usher Jim Crow back in town therefore generated the Colored Auxiliary of the Committee of Fourteen. As a rule, disorderly-house laws or liquor licenses were used to blackmail the barkeepers into signing extralegal promissory notes, so that black saloon owners committed in writing to institute a policy of discrimination. Technically speaking, black proprietors were forced to break civil rights law as a way of ending those situations reported as immoral by the Committee’s investigators. While the main symptom of degeneracy was the presence of white women in black resorts, the mixing of black women with white men, although considered unfavorably, was not as disreputable.

This etiquette illuminates the pressures shaping a certain understanding of femininity—both black and white—*vis-à-vis* public entertainment and the racial responsibilities thereto attached. Once again, Karlin’s attitude reveals the unspoken expectations nourished, in all likelihood, by the jury. First among them, the idea that a good Negro—“of the Booker T. Washington type”—knows his place. Karlin in fact, while interrogating Miller about the connections that led him to Moore, stresses how Steve, the African-American doorman of the Albany Hotel

⁵⁷ Letter from W.E.B. DuBois to the Committee of Fourteen secretary Fredrick Whitin in which DuBois indicts the Committee of violating civil rights laws in New York State. See Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 119.

where Miller was staying, sternly refused to show Miller around the black underworld and that he only yielded because of Miller's exhausting stubbornness. Steve takes Miller to Baron Wilkin's (sic), a Black and Tan café where the saloonkeeper organizes, on the spot, a meeting with the middleman who leads to Moore. At least on paper, Baron Wilkin's was a segregation abiding place: only the previous year its owner had signed a promissory note to the Committee of Fourteen stating that he would not "admit male whites to any part of the licensed premises to which colored women are admitted" and that he would not "at any time admit any white women."⁵⁸ Probably to keep up the formality of the agreement, Miller's encounters with Moore always took place in other locations. In the descriptions of these "business" meetings the irresistible nature of colored entertainment fills the court, in spite of Karlin's nervous attempts to conceal the defendant's active role in entertaining her white guests. The prosecutor, Mr. Press, knowing that he is touching on a point of contestation, wants to extract from Miller a full picture of colored debauchery:

Miller: ..she [Moore]left two colored men come in, one with a mandolin and the other with a guitar. They began playing and after a few minutes Belle Moore returned with two colored girls, who proceeded to entertain us the rest of the night.

...

Q. How did Belle Moore entertain you?

A. By music and Belle Moore herself by dancing with her skirts up over the knees and higher. (13)

Mr. Press astutely mobilizes the voyeuristic appetites of the jury and, while treating them to a licit slumming tour, he sees to it that Moore's image, very early in the trial, can be crystallized with her "skirts above the knees and higher." Karlin, in an effort to divert attention, pleads naively against this "irrelevant, incompetent, immaterial" remark "calculated to prejudice the jury." Actually, the entertainment scene endangers not so much the defendant's repute, but rather the entrapment defense strategy that Karlin has envisioned. The entertainment scene goes against the seduction tale that Karlin tries to concoct, and does so with the robust visual impact of realistic detail. The pose in which Belle is depicted is only too symptomatic of the prostitute's pose and is reiterated often in the trial.

⁵⁸ Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 113

Its repetition invites the jury to superimpose Moore to the image of the other white prostitutes—often mentioned as showing their legs for critical evaluation—but Moore is to catalyze blame. In her case, given the absence of a specific request, the act of baring one’s own legs is the gesture of the solicitor. Karlin surmises only too well that his call for entrapment can hold only painfully in the face of the defendant’s willingness to engage in meretricious poses at the sole benefit of the only white man present.

In the course of the trial, a few other entertainment scenes are reported with a similar intent and the only rhetorical countermove that Karlin attempts is directed against Miller’s lack of resistance to entertainment. This is no little matter if we consider that the dance-halls that welcomed black and white patrons but prohibited interracial dancing were viewed as more respectable than the typical Black and Tans. Detective Foster, in fact, tries to minimize Miller’s and her own appreciation of black music by stating that they only “tried to dance” (220) as if that practice were either quite alien to them or as if the endurance of such promiscuity left them stiff and unable to perform. Karlin nevertheless endeavors to project Miller’s quite indifferent attitude as erotic involvement and, by picturing him as a central sexual actor, he strives to reestablish the credibility of his client and the soundness of his argument.

1.5. Conspicuous Residues #2: Ladies at Work

Karlin’s line of argument entangles matters of surveillance, self-discipline and social control in the attempt to tackle two complementary issues. The counsel emphasizes how both black men and women generally accepted and endorsed racial segregation, thus absolving the duty to protect whiteness, as far as they could guard off the enticements of loose white males. On the other hand, he maligns the white female investigators, Mrs. Foster and Miss Jackson, by exposing how these two examples of modern femininity make detrimentally little of their respectability, especially by disregarding the observance of the color line. The reproach addressed to their racial conduct is elaborated through a harsh critique of the two white ladies as working women, and is carried out through the lawyer’s refusal to acknowledge certain behaviors as specific professional requirements, or even, more simply, as the normal ways of many self-supporting ladies.

Amy Jackson is the British-born thirty-year old has participated in the investigation by posing as Foster's maid. At the time of the trial she has already been in the service of D.A. Reynolds for four years, but Karlin goes to great lengths to excavate her professional past from the very moment she entered the U.S., a decade earlier. Ignoring Jackson's having held a steady job for five years, the counsel insists, with obvious intentions, on the woman's first occupation as a seamstress.⁵⁹ In the early months of her American permanence, the young woman used to hire herself out to a dozen different families and lived in a gender-mixed boarding house where people would only room, "not board", a few days a week. Miss Jackson is not afraid of describing herself as a "woman adrift:" she candidly admits that she quit living with a relative of hers in Connecticut "simply because [she] wished to move"(213) and mentions among her occupations also a stint as a salesgirl.

That these details are only elicited in order to sabotage Jackson's integrity becomes soon clear. In his final harangue, Karlin, alluding to Jackson's testimony, declares that "the key-note of our defense is going to be absolute frankness...This defendant will not tell you that she is an honest seamstress...We are not going to claim that this defendant is a woman of highly moral type"(231-2). Jackson's social station and unmarried status probably prompt the gratuitous projection of the basest stereotypes associated with female wage earners and Karlin's innuendo pivots on the use of her early profession (seamstress) as a code for prostitute. With a woman of superior upbringing the syllogism does not flow as easily, and, in the case of Frances Foster, the elements at hand make Karlin's manipulation of the detective's image an interestingly demanding effort.

As a professional, Frances Foster unites two female figures that had been on the social scene since the late 1880s: the undercover lady detective and the "embedded" reformer—or philanthropic slummer. Already in 1887 Nelly Bly's *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, published in Joseph Pulitzer's *World*, significantly inflected the practice of undercover investigation in terms of gender. Bly's widely acclaimed account of her sojourn in a New York asylum set standards of veracity for the representation of low-life that were repeatedly imitated. From then on, the practice of "purposeful" impersonation among women with investigative

⁵⁹ Also *The New York Times* refers to her as "the British seamstress" and reports her being on the verge of tears during the cross-examination. *The New York Times*, May 20, 1910.

ambitions quickly grew in popularity.⁶⁰ The female “charity” slummer was another well-known type, as the character of Effie in Rollins’s *Uncle Tom’s Tenement* demonstrates.

Moreover, in the eve of the trial, a sensational case redirected the spotlight on this figure: the murder of Elsie Sigel, a nineteen-year-old missionary in Chinatown, had just taken New York by a storm. The circumstances of Sigel’s mysterious death particularly fit the dramatic imagination of the period: the girl’s body had been found strangled in the apartment of the Chinese man with whom she had been having a quasi-secret relationship.⁶¹ In addition to the inevitable panoply of ethnic stereotypes, the case raised many questions about the sexual and emotional vulnerability of white women in the presence of cunning racial others. The practice of charity slumming was also looked at with suspicion insofar as it could avert women from “the self-sacrifice of traditional reproductive womanhood in favor of the selfish pursuit of pleasure and self display.”⁶²

The thrill of perusing the depths of the urban labyrinth certainly constituted for some charity workers the greatest charm of their mission,⁶³ however, as far as Foster is concerned, the significance of her figure goes certainly beyond what Lawrence Burt called “women’s innate love for the exotic.”⁶⁴ Just as she does not fit the type of the sentimental missionary, Foster is not the settlement-house dweller either; in eschewing the type of woman who, “detaching herself from the havens of privatized middle class identity, often championed temperance, suffrage and corporate reform,”⁶⁵ Foster represents a new generation that resists the facile categorization of urban femininity and participates in New Womanhood with a peculiarly complex style.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Dorothy Richardson’s experience provides a clear example: it is still undecided if she entered the working world by choice or necessity but in *The Long Day: The Story of a New York Working Girl* (1905) she describes her struggle to survive as a factory worker in New York City. Although some critics contend that Richardson was hired to research the lives of factory workers, *The Long Day* remains typical of the Progressive Era’s tide of texts written by investigators exploring the world of those they pretended to be. Cf. Cathryn Halverson, “The Fascination of the Working Girl: Dorothy Richardson’s *the Long Day*,” *American Studies* 40, no. 1 (1999).

⁶¹ Romeyn, *Street Scenes*, 60-64.

⁶² Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 50.

⁶³ At least it so emerges, among other testimonies, in the journalistic account of an “undercover salvation lass” published shortly after Sigel’s murder. Romeyn, *Street Scenes*, 64.

⁶⁴ The reference is to the title of an article published in *Munsey’s Magazine* in 1909. Romeyn, *Street Scenes*, 69.

⁶⁵ Herring, *Queering the Underworld*, 27.

⁶⁶ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg maintains that “as progressive women reformers increased their

As we know, she successfully posed as a West Coast brothel owner, and as Miller's wife, but this fictional persona could not be further from the thirty-two-year-old that the newspapers portray as an elegant lady in glasses with a deep-toned, vibrant voice.⁶⁷ Karlin's questions are calibrated to present the all-male jury with a woman whose principal achievement has been a systematic demotion of domesticity and he emphasizes from the start how she deliberately sacrificed "reproductive womanhood" to her intellectual and professional ambitions. We learn that Foster has devoted her youth to getting a degree from Radcliffe College; that, in the early years of her marriage, she has busied herself with charity work rather than with motherhood, and that, in her adult age, she has become completely estranged from her lawyer husband. Moreover, Karlin does not fail to emphasize, she appears to comfortably engage in the undercover work that leads her to associate with colored people in resorts of dubious repute.⁶⁸

As Brian Donovan observes, Foster's New-Woman features become the target of Karlin's reprimands. His harsh criticism ranges from the ostensibly close relationship she has with Moore to her patronizing colored cafés and appears to be grounded on "a configuration of ideas that tied white women's sexual freedoms to racial vulnerability."⁶⁹

Karlin: From the time that you first met this defendant, under what name had you been in the habit of addressing her?

Foster: Addressing her as Miss Belle Moore.

Karlin: Oh, so you got so intimate with this colored procuress that you called her Belle? (178)

...

political power in the years immediately preceding the First World War, and as the suffrage movement reached a crescendo of public visibility (parades, arrests, forced feedings) and of political power (the passage of the Twentieth amendment), articles complaining of lesbianism in women's colleges, clubs, prisons, and reformatories "wherever women gathered" became common." Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New Woman, 1870-1936," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinius, and George Chauncey (New York: Meridian, 1990), 242.

⁶⁷ *The New York Times*, May, 20 1910.

⁶⁸ Chad Heap sheds light on the significance of such detail: "On occasion white women even expressed their sexual availability to white men simply by suggesting that they go slumming in a black cabaret...While some white women used slumming as an excuse to give white men easier access to their bodies, most middle-class women accompanied their suitors and husbands to black-and-tan cabarets just as they would on any other date "to solidify their relationship with these men and simultaneously proclaim their "emancipation" as New Women." Heap, *Slumming*, 197.

⁶⁹ Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 103.

Karlin: These cafés I understand, they are frequented by colored folks, and they have tables where drinks are served and Orchestras play certain kinds of music...and you, a college graduate of Radcliffe College, were hanging out with colored folks in those places? (183-84)

More subtly and more significantly, Karlin also chastises an element in Foster's deportment that he finds particularly disturbing, namely the self-assurance with which she undertakes her professional endeavor; an engagement she honors almost out-staging the male detective, and making use of her femininity in an unusual way. Female reformers were held as role models and salvation agents to the benefits of their fallen sisters; at the opposite end of the spectrum female detectives often used their charms to entrap lewd males. Forster does none of this. In her performance, femininity becomes the empty simulacrum of transracial sisterhood meant to create a deceptive homosocial bond. Foster wields gender equality to lower the guard that racial difference would keep high: only by endearing herself to Moore as an equal, in business *and* in gender, can the detective obtain dangerous secrets and services, eventually fatal to the socially inferior.

In an article describing the Macy's Department Store investigation of 1913, Val Marie Johnson discusses the undercover survey on the integrity of Macy's salesgirls. Johnson highlights how the figure of the female detective had become crucial for moral surveillance and how her professional task consisted less in the objective observance of behavior than in the ruthless prying at the working girls' intimacy. The six-month-long investigation at the store saw the turn-over of three lady detectives since the Committee of Fourteen, which was co-governing the enterprise, was not satisfied with the sober reports produced by the first two informers—Faith Habberton and M.C. Sidney. When the third investigator, Natalie Sonnichsen, was hired, the general secretary of the Committee, Fredrick H. Whitin, gave her precise instructions that she should “look for the moral and sex sides of the problem” and was confident that she would successfully do so given her condition of Russian immigrant and proved effectiveness in “drawing out their [the monitored girls'] confidence.”⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Johnson, "Look for the Moral and Sex Sides," 478.

Foster undeniably participates into this unsisterly “new womanhood” and lends herself to a daring “confidence game” in which the energies set afloat are particularly ambiguous. Karlin, in fact, agitates uneasily among the sexual ambivalences adumbrated in the dynamics taking place between Foster and Moore, yearning to use them for his argument, but failing to grasp them completely. Foster is disturbingly “mannish,” in the sense that she is the emotional seducer. She is the temptress winning the mulatto over with “hoodwinking language” after Miller has only “broken the ice” for her (194); she is the false friend who acts “gracious” (196) calling Moore “dear Belle” in letters (152-176) and “good old sport” (153) in person; she is finally the one who will ostensibly treat Moore “white,” therewith prospecting economic and racial uplift in one single tantalizing offer.

This active strategy of seduction destabilizes the dominant understanding of same-sex attraction, or, at least, questions the principles formulated in the context of other racially mixed environments subject to moral surveillance. This was the case, for example, of the 1913 investigation addressing interracial romances at Bedford Female Reformatory in Albany, New York.⁷¹ The reformatory’s superintendent cherished the belief that the segregation of inmates by color principle did not improve their moral conditions. Opposing this claim, the State Board of Charity purported that “most undesirable [same] sex relations [grew] out of the...mingling of the two races.”⁷² In the body of scientific observers commenting on the phenomenon, psychologist Margaret Otis explained same-sex desire by equating black women’s darker skin with virility and described such captive relationships as “racialized sexual inversions.”⁷³ In this regard, Estelle Freedman observes that the construction of white lesbianism as displaced heterosexuality⁷⁴ underscores how threatening the notion of a “mannish” white

⁷¹ See Regina G. Kunzel, "Situating Sex: Prison Sexual Culture in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8, no. 3 (2002): 262. and Sarah Potter, "Undesirable Relations: Same-Sex Relationships and the Meaning of Sexual Desire at a Women's Reformatory During the Progressive Era," *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004).

⁷² Cheryl D. Hicks, "'Bright and Good Looking Colored Girl': Black Women's Sexuality And 'Harmful Intimacy' In Early-Twentieth-Century," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18, no. 3 (2009): 446.

⁷³ *Ibid.*: 447.

⁷⁴ White inmate were rarely described as initiating relationships, but rather inveigled by the virile black women. Cf. Estelle Freedman, "The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class, and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual, 1915–1965," *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 2 (1996): 400–401. Freedman also notes that “at the same time, assigning the male aggressor role to Black women

woman was. In this light, Foster's performance of a white woman who "mannishly" lures the black one into intimacy and crime comprehensibly raises unsettling emotions.⁷⁵

Karlin's enterprise of persuasion has left none of the possible demeaning nuances of Foster's behavior untouched: antidomesticity, the gaining of a college degree and the dishonoring of the same, promiscuity, drinking habits, and racial carelessness all take up a big part of his harangues and innuendos. Still, at the end of his cross interrogation, like an uneasy afterthought, he mentions Foster's most unnatural trait, namely the fact that she is not, not in the least, nurturing.

Are you at all *interested* in what happens to Belle Moore?/ Objected to. Sustained. Exception./ Karlin: Do you *feel* that because you spent a large amount of money in the prosecution of your work any interest in having this defendant confined in behind the bars at the Auburn prison. (166-7 my emphasis)

Foster is obviously not "interested" and, even worse, she does not "feel." Her betrayal of her gender lies in her neglecting those characteristics—"to feel and feel right" as Beecher Stowe would put it—that should be the seal of womanhood. In this case these features are traded for aseptic professionalism and for the unflappable cool which allows Foster to sidestep Karlin's traps and to adamantly refuse to answer the questions that she does not consider "of any benefit to the case"(201).⁷⁶ Foster gives off an anticomunal, unbelonging feeling and shows no regret for it. By treasuring her professional comportment more than her sex would allow, Foster becomes the representative of a disquieting New Woman: the detached, feelingless virago; the cold Erinyes who, following a logic of homeopathic vengeance, accesses the male social sphere with the weapons of virile professionalism.

and preserving a semblance of femininity for their white partners racialized the sexual pathology of inversion. In this interpretation, white women were not really lesbians, for they were attracted to men, for whom Black women temporarily substituted. Thus the prison literature racialized both lesbianism and butch/femme roles, implicitly blaming Black women for aggression and, indeed, homosexuality, by associating them with a male role" (Freedman, "The Prison Lesbian," 400–401).

⁷⁵ Teresa De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

⁷⁶ "Under cross-examination Mrs. Foster was icily calm, and only smiled slightly at some of Lawyer Carlin's (sic) sallies." *The New York Times*, May 20, 1910.

2. The White-Slave Traffic Act

In spite of the guilty verdict, the Moore case was considered, as a *New York Times* editorial stated, a laborious act put up by “Ill-Chosen Agents of Reform” who managed to create “the criminality they had been sent out to find.”⁷⁷ This journalistic comment may suggest that criminogenic control techniques were somehow criticized as incompatible with the reformatory apparatus; nevertheless, contemporary developments reinforced their influence and continued the demotion of some legal essentials as foreshadowed in the Moore decision. Paramount among these elements was the notion of female consent.

In the amalgam of volition and property rights informing late-nineteenth-century seduction laws, consent held a certain contractual significance but, towards the turn of the century, its status started paling until it was dealt the fatal blow by the White-Slavery Traffic Act. The Statute, quickly baptized after its sponsor, Representative James R. Mann of Illinois, was written, debated and enacted by Congress exactly while the Rockefeller Grand Jury was conferring and it was signed into law by President Taft only one month after the Belle Moore decision.⁷⁸ For the succeeding generations, the Mann Act came to symbolize the idea of white slavery, and its ratification stimulated a revival of white-slavery fiction. Moral hysteria though marked its genesis too, and played an important role in Congress when, at the moment of the bill’s approval, traditional fears of excessive federal interference were superseded by sexual panic.

2.1. Prostitution and Immigration: a Long-Term Affair.

Before the Mann Act, the federal government had often included prostitution as a component of migration policy. The first federal Immigration Law, the Page Act of 1875, made it illegal for alien women to practice prostitution and severely sanctioned their “importers.”⁷⁹ In 1903 and 1907 the scope of this provision was

⁷⁷ *The New York Times*, May 21, 1910.

⁷⁸ David J. Langum, *Crossing over the Line: Legislating Morality and the Mann Act* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 44.

⁷⁹ Historians tend to agree on the fact that this measure was an expression of Anti-Asian sentiment based on the unproven assumptions that most Chinese women were prostitute. With the Page Act the great majority of Chinese women were barred from the Country and, with the Chinese exclusion act of 1882, Chinese male immigrants faced the same perspective. Cf. Paul Spickard, *Almost All Aliens. Immigration, Race and Colonialism in American History and Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 238. Leti Volpp, "Divesting Citizenship: On Asian

enlarged to target anyone who, even unknowingly, cooperated with the prostitutional employment of foreigners. In a subsequent amendment the definition of the “incriminating” activity was made more vague and simply labeled “immoral purpose.” Having thus succeeded in shifting the language of the law from “prostitution” to “sexual immorality,” the proponents of the federal policing of white slavery *de facto* invited the intrusion of the State into matters of private behavior.

These premises implied important consequences for individual freedoms, and Justice David J. Brewer made an attempt to keep them at bay in penning the decision for the trial *Keller v. United States* (1909).⁸⁰ The Keller case, in spite of some dissent from the majority opinion, made it clear that the federal government had to limit its interference to the mere importation of prostitutes insofar as the extant legislation provided no constitutional basis for the prosecution of general sexual deviations.⁸¹ Extemporaneous decisions such as this, although meaningful, proved of little consequence compared to the work of some zealous commissions, active in preparing the ground for a definitive stretch of congressional power over the States’ jurisdiction—as well as into the citizens’ intimacy.

J.D. Rockefeller, for example, once his Grand Jury Duty expired, organized the influential Bureau of Social Hygiene and hired George J. Kneeland to prepare his famous report *Commercialized Prostitution in New York City*, published in 1913. Kneeland’s work was preceded by the probing efforts of two other influential delegations: the Dillingham Immigration Commission, which reported

American History and the Loss of Citizenship through Marriage.," *UCLA Law Review* 52, no. Paper. No.870087 (2005).

⁸⁰ Joseph Keller and his associate Ullman had employed in their Chicago Brothel a Hungarian woman, Irene Bodi, who had been residing in the U.S. for two years at the time of the indictment and who was willingly working in the establishment. Keller and Ullman were not involved in the woman’s immigration into the country and had no information about her immigrant status. The provision in the Immigration act made guilty every assistant to an alien woman’s prostitution up to the third year from the entrance into the U.S. Justice Brewer decided not to uphold the existing provision since the two defendants were not involved in Bodi’s entrance into the U.S. In delivering the decision Justice David J. Brewer asserted that the single question is one of unconstitutionality” for, as offensive as the keeping of a house of ill fame could be, its immorality should not provide an excuse to delegate to Congress those punishments that should only be administered by the State. Grittner, *White Slavery*, 85. Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution*, 52-54.

⁸¹ Grittner suggests that Justice Brewer, in wording the Keller decision already suggested that a Treaty on White slavery would be able to sustain the federal prohibition of sexual immorality on a larger scale. Since Keller was charged in February 1907 the International Treaty signed in June 1908 was not applicable.(86)

in 1909, and the Chicago Vice Commission, whose findings were published in 1911. The Dillingham report, with its authoritative forty-two-volume study of virtually every aspect of immigration, was probably the account which showed the most inconsistencies, permeated as it was with the eugenic belief in the inferiority of new immigration.⁸² Bias notwithstanding, the picture the Dillingham Commission drew of the white-slave trade is crucial to our discussion since it deeply affected the Immigration Act of 1910. Building up on the report's section "Importation and Harboring of Women for Immoral Purpose," the new Immigration Statute took the sensational account very seriously, and harshly expanded the punitive measures against foreign women involved in the sex trade. Foregoing any need to demonstrate culpability, the Statute made the criminal offence depend on the mere association with "resorts habitually frequented by prostitutes"—an association which was sufficient ground for arrest, prosecution and, eventually, deportation.⁸³

Enacted only a few months after the Immigration Act, the White-Slave Traffic Act directly incorporated the preconceptions voiced by the Dillingham Commission—especially the idea of a mysterious procurement syndicate operating nationwide. In its final draft, the Mann Act saw the inclusion of an entire section designed to integrate immigration law by attending to strike the importers of women. At a closer analysis though, the Act's concern with the transatlantic traffic proved more formal than substantial, and appeared to be a bureaucratic fulfillment of the obligations imposed by the international anti-prostitution treaty signed in 1908. The cogent effects of the Mann Act, in fact, were primarily felt within national boundaries and addressed eminently American preoccupations. The problem with prostitution seemed to adjoin a certain longing for the preservation of an all American female purity⁸⁴ the remaining sections of the Statute directly regarded this concern. The most famous clause, the one whose repercussions we will follow, made it a felony to knowingly

⁸² Langum, *Crossing over the Line*, 35, Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution*, 55.

⁸³ Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution*, 56.

⁸⁴ In the Congressional debate on the Mann Act representative Gordon Russel of Texas voiced this connection clearly by stating that "no nation can rise higher than the estimate which it places upon the virtue and purity of its womanhood.... This Bill is a Tribute to every pure and good woman in this land" Quoted from *Congressional Record*, 61st Cong., 2nd sess., January 19, 1910, 821 as referenced in Grittner, *White Slavery*, 83.

transport women across state lines for immoral purposes, with or without their consent.

2.2. The Rise and Fall of Sexual Consent

The Mann Act, although distant in tone from the sensational verbiage of the white-slave tracts, actually propounded those cultural assumptions that shaped white slavery into its ultimate profile. A legal milestone of the Progressive Era, the Mann Act represents the durable legacy of a period when nativist sentiment, fear of miscegenation and mounting anxieties around the emergence of the New Woman condensed into legislation which kept producing sexual criminals until the 1980s.⁸⁵ The Statute, in fact, while moving the preoccupation with regulating women's sexuality exclusively within national borders, also made no provision for the prosecution of the "white slave" or the "hardened prostitute."⁸⁶ As a consequence of the irrelevance accorded to the will or intent of the woman being transported, the presumably male schemer remained the only party exerting his own volition, and therefore the only party criminally liable. According to this androcentric dynamics, sexually active women who traveled interstate could only be either old-time victims or, in particular circumstances, blackmailers—the latter a possibility opened up exactly by their immunity.

Pamela Haag's fine work on the notion of sexual consent in the light of American liberalism illuminates some of the peculiar functions fulfilled by the Mann Act. For one thing, the Statute operated the migration of the legal regulations of sexual promises from the domain of individuals to the domain of things: as a consequence of the reduction of women to commodities both the event of coercion and the one of complicity disappeared from the discourse. This maneuver removed the dilemma of having to relinquish the ideal, inexorably eroded by reality, that white women were inalienably virtuous *feme solae*. The tension between wishful idealism and reality had afflicted legislators for a long

⁸⁵ Langum explains that "The statute, dating from 1910, has now been significantly amended. However, Congress has never had the courage to repeal an absurd law that has been used, and still could be used... to persecute selected individuals." Langum, *Crossing over the Line*, 3. In 1978, Congress updated the definition of "transportation" in the act and added protection for minors of either sex against sexual exploitation. A 1986 amendment further protected minors and replaced "debauchery" and "any other immoral purpose" with "any sexual activity for which any person can be charged with a criminal offense." That allowed the government to quit "legislating morality" while retaining the Mann Act as a weapon in the fight against human trafficking.

⁸⁶ Grittner, *White Slavery*, 96.

time and had found its expression in the categorization of seduction and breach-of-promise as criminal offenses against “the people;” a taxonomy which reflected a rhetoric of public purity and criminal liability against the commonweal.⁸⁷

By the end of the nineteenth century this principle started to weaken as adjudications increasingly elaborated sexual consent as a “cognate of economic self-interest”. This liberal understanding of the “private person” as a free contracting agent had been so influential as to supersede, or at least compete with, the concept of woman as disembodied receptacle of virtue. Within this framework, consent was converted into a coin of exchange: a coin that a woman would concede as seal and reward for the previous reception of marriage proposal. The promise of marriage, although equated to the price paid for obtaining sexual interaction, constituted a bilateral contract validated in the very moment of intercourse. The risks inherent into the acceptance of this contractual model were connected to the relative freedom accorded to the female party. As soon as women were officially endowed, within the marital marketplace, with the power of contracting their own virtue against a tangible value (matrimony), the specter of the possible misuses of such agency rose, and judges were quick to define these risks “extortion” and “revenge” as early as in 1873.⁸⁸

If on the one hand the idea of self-interest in the disposal of one’s virtue has discomfitingly branded the genealogy of American sexual rights,⁸⁹ on the other it granted women an undeniable decisional power over their bodies intended as “property.” By the time of the Moore case this decisional power was neutralized and the prelapsarian fantasy of female innocence was rejuvenated by the impossibility of ascertaining the woman’s intention. Furthermore the legal malleability of the female subject, once her juridical status was moved to “the law of things,”⁹⁰ provided the legislative potential which was seized, quite literally, by senator Mann. When he treated White Slavery as a form of interstate commerce, he used, in the new context, the previous experience he had accumulated in extending the constitutional commerce clause to a wide range of interstate

⁸⁷ Haag, *Consent*, 52.

⁸⁸ *Cook vs The People* quoted in *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸⁹ Haag sees this feature as contemporarily prominent in rape trials, which tend to discredit the case through implying a woman’s mercenary or calculated interests and she directly connects this proclivity to the classic liberal tradition and its concept of individual identity and equality. See *Ibid.*, 52.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39-41.

transactions. To senator Mann the regulations protecting pure food provided the blueprint for his tutelage of pure women.⁹¹

2.3. Manning the Act

In order to substantiate these considerations and to reconnect the white slavery discourse to the oblique defense of whiteness it entailed, some passages in the genealogy and in the wording of the Mann Act offer crucial insights. From the very first days of probational scrutiny in Congress, the Mann Act won the immediate approval of President Taft, who promptly gave a favorable opinion about its constitutionality. Technically speaking, jurists have easily detected in the Act at least three significant unconstitutional aspects: the impossibility for the interstate commerce clause to regulate the private travel purposes, the violation of the immunity clause granting all subjects the right to travel, and the infringement of the powers reserved by the Tenth Amendment to the states in matter of private morals.⁹² While the Bill sailed through Congress the main objection raised in a minority report penned by the Southern Democrats addressed the third of these issues, and bespoke the difficulty of conciliating the deeply felt duty to protect white female purity with the imperative to preserve sovereignty for the individual states.

No one in Congress felt the need to clarify what the expression “any other immoral purpose” meant, since the unofficial consensus about the extreme specificity of the act was considered a sufficient warranty for its application to forced prostitution only. The Southern representatives’ unwillingness to welcome the federal regulation of the states’ health and morals was not completely unreasonable, but these congressmen deployed little ability in supporting their almost affective argument with respect to Mann’s statistical remarks on the pervasiveness of the white-slave traffic. Their hesitations finally dissolved when confronted with the spurious but vivid claims raised by one Texas representative: in an effective *coup de théâtre*, Rep. Russel cited the episode of a black man from Georgia who purportedly bought himself three wives at a white-slave auction in

⁹¹ Of all the objection raised against the Mann Act only rarely was the equation of women to commodities regarded as a conceptual fallacy. In 1913 in *Hokes vs United States* for example, the objection that Justice McKenna inserts into his own decision concerning the equation of women to articles of merchandise, does not affect the court sentence which confirmed the Mann Act as perfectly constitutional. Cf. Grittner, *White Slavery*, 98.

⁹² Langum, *Crossing over the Line*, 62.

Chicago.⁹³ An uncanny fear of miscegenation immediately steadied the wavering spirits and Mann seized the moment by revisiting the juxtaposition between chattel slavery and white slavery—only to find the latter incomparably more outrageous.

The legislative record of the Mann Act features an instrumental use of the figure of chattel slavery similar in tone to the usage that the labor activists made of it in their mid-nineteenth-century battles. Still, if in a labor context the trope of slavery was suddenly abandoned because of its inevitable—and unwanted—association with blackness, in the case of prostitution the metaphor held. For workers, immigrant or not, aspiring to a full realization of their condition as free, white Americans the affiliation with blackness was perceived as an unacceptable alienation; in the present case, the mutant form of depigmented and feminized slavery proved suitable for an almost unconscious transference onto American-born women. The poignancy of the original concept endured hovering in the form of an apotropaic echo meant to keep off lax legislation, liberated morals and female political advancement.

Furthermore white slavery became a fetish occupying the place of a multiple absence: the absence of the traffic as first thing, but also the absence of physical coercion for those women who chose to exert the profession or milder versions of it. In short, white slavery veiled the unconfessable absence of the innate innocence informing American womanhood and came to signify the lack around which the symbolic, as well as juridical, network allowing for the re-instatement of purity, was organized. The expelled and repressed element, blackness, never really left the discourse but agitated subconscious visions wrapped in the nightmarish distortion of the insatiable black Bluebeard buying himself innumerable white wives. So uncontrollable was the power of this fiction, that the bill passed handily, and its language got anxiously misread even against the best interest of its voters. White slavery then, operated, in this case, embodying a frustration and reifying the structural impossibility of law-enforced purity. But the Progressive congressmen never perceived, in this paradox, “the inertia that

⁹³ Rep. Russel read to the House a newspaper article reporting the episode. The author of the piece was Tom Watson, a Georgia Populist and clansman who forcefully spread racial and religious bigotry. Cf. Grittner, *White Slavery*, 95.

[could] slow(ed) their irresistible march to victory;⁹⁴ instead, they set about to enforce the newly minted Act with unremitting confidence.⁹⁵

Few Americans opposed the Mann Act and, the few who did, only objected to its infringement of states' right or to its potential for blackmail. In the wider political landscape, the Statute became so popular that a majority of states adopted "Little Man Acts" prohibiting the transportation of prostitutes also within state territory. These local measures, however, were strictly limited to acknowledged sex-workers.⁹⁶ Many fervent reformers were nonetheless dissatisfied with the light sentences that judges imposed; this laxity was often ascribed to the generational gap separating the magistrates, mostly raised in the culture of the double standard, and the new reformers. Among the latter, Frederick Whitin of the Committee of Fourteen openly called for an "education of the judges that they could be abreast of the moral sentiment of the day."⁹⁷

Since the Department of Justice was to handle the Act's enforcement, its police division became responsible for all investigation and apprehension deriving from it. At the time the division was still called the Bureau of Investigation and it had been created, against Congressional opposition, by Theodore Roosevelt through executive presidential order.⁹⁸ Thanks to the Mann Act, the Bureau underwent a dramatic increase in manpower and, if up to that moment the government had necessarily hired private detectives, official federal prosecutors were now available in so great numbers, and with so extended powers, that they outclassed all other investigative force.

Under the direction of Stanley Finch, they developed methods for collecting information on Mann Act violations based on the census of prostitutes. This method implied a tight cooperation between the government agents, the local police and the brothel owners: once the federal agents obtained a clear picture of the prostitutional activities in an area, it was easy to increase their indirect power through the selection of targets and by delegating the local police where the absence of an interstate activity impeded their mandate. Although the early years

⁹⁴ Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 65.

⁹⁵ The person arrested under the Mann Act was a woman, a Madame who, in July 1910, was escorting five willing prostitutes from Chicago to her house of ill fame in Michigan.

⁹⁶ Langum, *Crossing Over the Line*, 71.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁹⁸ Max Lowenthal, *The Federal Bureau of Investigation*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1950, 3-10. The Division was famously renamed Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1935

were marked by the difficulty of obtaining funds from a Congress still suspicious of a centralized investigative force, the importance of white slavery work within the Bureau grew to such an extent as to call for the creation of its own subdivision. At its birth in 1912, the new section received delighted praise and important mediatic support from all the Purity Movements. Slowly but inexorably, the Bureau of Investigation took over the surveillance work previously conducted by private organizations; the private organizations in turn, publicly sustained governmental activities as a ratification of their particular vision of social improvement.⁹⁹

As Fronc observes, in this transformative period the nation's intelligence agencies shifted from civil society to the government. The private socialities that, only a few years earlier, had carried out their own explorations of the underworld, became subsidiary to the federal partners whose agents may have been no less mercenary than their private counterparts, but whose vast legal powers supplemented the dubious ways of old time impersonators with the authoritative force of official endorsement. Although the private committees may have been "participating into their own obsolescence"¹⁰⁰ by entering into collaborations that eventually usurped them, the gradual extension of the scope of the Statute acted out their fantasies of control and reached unhopd-for depths of interference into the morality of citizens. Subsequent adjudications, in fact, determined that the "immoral purpose" constituting the crime could simply be a state of mind, or, in legal words "an intention to entice into debauchery."¹⁰¹ Soon afterwards, even non-commercial travels across state lines by romantically involved consenting adults also began to constitute a federal offence.¹⁰² In short, the application of the Mann Act went towards the fulfillment of functions that were neither preventive nor punitive, but rather continued, via the State, that certain "criminogenous" impulse that seemed to be lurking behind the intentions of private reformers, and that found, in one of its early victims, an overtly instrumental application.

⁹⁹ Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 178.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁰¹ This development was marked by the decision of the case *Athanasaw v. United States* (1913).

¹⁰² As validated by the legal history of the case *Caminetti v. United States*, 1917

2.4. “Unforgivable Blackness”

The phantom-like John Frankling, the black man who supposedly wrote a letter from Tifton Ga. to Tom Watson, bragging about his wifely purchases at the white slave market, was probably a figment of racist propaganda, but he still produced the effect of tipping over congressional uncertainties in favor of a freedom restricting federal bill. Jack Johnson from Galveston Ga., the first African-American heavyweight champion in the history of boxing, never bought himself a wife, but he nonetheless got married three times, every time to a white American woman.¹⁰³

This detail alone could suffice to explain how the symbolic impact of Johnson’s figure called for retaliation on the part of moral crusaders, advocates who, this time, coincided with federal prosecutors in Chicago. In 1913, Johnson was sentenced to prison for a supposed violation of the Mann Act in a legal action that, no sooner than in 2009, the House has recognized as a “racially motivated conviction prompted by his success in the boxing ring and his relationship with white women.”¹⁰⁴ The fact that Johnson, son of freed slaves, was technically indicted of practicing “white slavery” provides the exemplary completion of the transformational process involved in such metaphor, the final point of a reverse logic turning the black slave into a black slave holder. Johnson’s vicissitudes are illustrative of the ways in which the white slavery scare became instrumental not only in defining white womanhood, but also in defending a racially based ideology of male power which conflated whiteness, physicality and masculinity. This particular notion of white masculinity was threatened not so much by Johnson’s matrimonial occurrences as by his groundbreaking athletic career, a parable whose ascending phase represented a hard blow to racial segregation in the sporting world. On the other hand, the descending phase of Johnson’s story, starting with his indictment, epitomizes the effects of the criminogenous potential of the Mann Act. The Statute was in fact upheld when all other measure of containment towards a non-servile, color blind, sexually irreverent negro failed.

¹⁰³ Johnson’s first wife was Etta Duryea, married in 1911. The second wife was former prostitute Lucille Cameron, married in 1912. In 1925 Johnson married Irene Pineau, a divorcée from Peoria. Geoffrey Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness : The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*. (New York: Knopf, 2004).

¹⁰⁴ S.Con.Res.16. In October 2009, for the first time, a resolution urging posthumous pardon for Johnson, passed both Houses of Congress reaching the presidential desk. In December of the same year the Department of Justice declined the request.

These two phases reflect two equally important facets of Johnson's personality: "the athlete" and "the sport."

At the end of Reconstruction, professional and amateur sports emerged as a significant presence in American cultural life and developed throughout the age of racial segregation. In the interpretation of Jackson Lears, the "quest for physical vitality which spread among the sedentary middle and upper classes"¹⁰⁵ surfaced like a counterweight to the volatile circumstances of modernity which made the achievement of manliness at once more elusive and more urgent. The fascination with weightlifting, body building and prize fighting reflected the reassertion of white manhood against the enervating impact of uncertain times.¹⁰⁶ At the turn of the century boxing was still in its infancy and a largely illegal enterprise, yet, it was followed obsessively by men of every class and it was about to develop its modern aesthetics. Jack Johnson's boxing style was disturbingly modern for his time: swift and intelligent, the athlete picked up the competitor's blows and only punched with an aim. When boxer Jim Colbert had displayed the same technique a decade earlier, he had been praised as the cleverest man in prize fighting; quite on the contrary, the sports press transfigured these features of Johnson's style as the mark of the lazy, deceitful black man who carried onto the ring the "cowardice" typical of his own race.¹⁰⁷

As historian Gail Bederman observes, "late Victorian culture had identified the powerful, large male body of the heavyweight prizefighter (and not the smaller bodies of the middleweight or welterweight) as the epitome of manhood."¹⁰⁸ In the light of this projection, one easily understands why Johnson's elegant body was depicted as that of a "long-limbed, flat-chested, bullet-headed coon" and why the title holder Jim Jeffries, who had fought against other black men before he became world champion, adamantly refused an athletic confrontation in sign of respect for the title. Jeffries retired undefeated, but Johnson did not abandon his claim to the bastions of the white title. Moreover, the most popular sport newspapers, responding to imperatives within the sporting world which were in conflict with other imperatives in American

¹⁰⁵ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 93.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 94

¹⁰⁷ Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*.

¹⁰⁸ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 23.

society, maintained that it was time for the color line to be ignored.¹⁰⁹ In 1908, Johnson had the opportunity to fight the new heavyweight champion: Tom Burns, a Canadian boxer who had accepted the challenge convinced by the huge prize—and by an ill-calculated self-esteem. They fought in Sydney, Australia and Johnson, who won the match in fourteen very civil rounds, became the first African-American heavyweight champion. W.E.B. Dubois hurried to comment on how Johnson had “out-sparred an Irishman with little brutality, the outmost fairness and great good nature.”¹¹⁰

Nevertheless the victory ringed like an insult and a threat to white boxing fans and, almost immediately, a cry went up for a “great white hope” who could restore their concept of athletic justice. The American language was then enriched with an enduring idiom. “White Hope” is today included in the dictionary as “a white man who had a good chance of winning the heavyweight boxing championship from a Negro.”¹¹¹ Since no able contender came up, an ageing and reluctant Jim Jeffries agreed to fight with the reported sole purpose “of proving that a white man is better than a negro.”¹¹² In a match that was a symbolic race war and the richest sporting event in American history, Johnson won effortlessly, but deliberately slowly, wanting, he declared in his autobiography, to punish Jeffries. Through the way he managed the match, Johnson ostentatiously defended his authority in a white realm: the allegory was so transparent and unacceptable that Theodore Roosevelt, disgusted with the fight, called for the prohibition of future ones and, to mitigate the visual impact of demolished whiteness, led Congress to ban interstate diffusion of fight films.¹¹³

In the immediate future, the spectacle of the dethroned white king sparked vengeful riots nationwide, well beyond the borders of the inflammable Southern States. Contemporary reports counted overall eighteen people dead and hundreds injured. By any standards, white Americans’ response to Johnson was excessive and, as it is now widely known, since the boxer could not be defeated in the ring, the battle moved to his private life. Johnson had constantly flouted cultural

¹⁰⁹ Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (London: Anova Books, 1992), 50.

¹¹⁰ Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*.

¹¹¹ Robert Sklar, "This Sporting Life," *Reviews in American History* 11, no. 4 (1983).

¹¹² "Is Prize-Fighting Knocked Out?" *Literary Digest* 41 (16 July 1910) 85

¹¹³ For a complete treatment of the impact of filmed prizefight on the birth of cinema and on the reception and suppression of the Johnson's films see Dan Streible, *Fight Pictures. A History of Boxing and Early Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

norms raising equal scandal in black and white communities: he was the quintessential “sport,” flaunting beautiful clothes, fast cars and gold-capped teeth. Johnson’s particular investment in his self-fashioned dandyism is corroborated by a wealth of written and visual testimonies, not least his highly unreliable autobiography of 1926, purportedly written by himself, *Jack Johnson is a Dandy*. He endorsed the title role with such seriousness as to become the archetype of the racialized dandy and to stir those anxieties that Monica Miller defines as threats “to a supposed natural [white] aristocracy” excited by the “vision of an outstanding citizen.” These visions were all the more powerful when projected in the face of a segregated society and featuring “an outsider broadcasting his alien status by clothing his dark body in a good suit.”¹¹⁴

The seductive potency of the dandy was also an aspect amplified in Johnson’s performance. From the beginning of his career, the boxer had become the object of intense feminine attention: women would flock to see him train and fight and he kept to the part by stuffing his pants with gauze in a simulation of virile superiority. He made no secret of his insatiable hunger for nightlife and white bawdyhouses; he openly associated with white prostitutes, many of whom he introduced as Mrs. Johnson, and one of whom he married. When his first wife, Long Island divorcée Etta Terry Duryea, committed suicide in 1912, antimiscegenists felt somehow vindicated and appeased. Still, when only weeks later, Johnson married nineteen-year-old Lucille Cameron, outrage was rekindled both in the black and white community. Cameron was an ex-prostitute who ostensibly worked in Johnson’s restaurant bar in Chicago, the Café de Champion. The federal authorities, on the look out for an incriminating pretext, were quick to agree with the girl’s mother who accused Johnson of having abducted her daughter. The prosecutors arrested the boxer accordingly, but, contrarily to their expectations, Cameron always refused to implicate Johnson in her leaving her hometown. Given the debacle, federal Attorney Parkin instructed the Bureau of Investigation to scrutinize all of the many travels that Johnson had with numerous white women so that a Mann Act violation could be eventually found.

Parkin’s reasoning was rather effectively based on the certainty that, if Cameron did not play the blackmailer’s role that the Mann Act allowed for, some

¹¹⁴ Cf. Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 11.

other white woman would. In 1912 the discussion around the blackmailing downside of the Mann Act was not yet of public concern but, in the years that followed, the frequent cases of “many scheming women of the worst sort” using the law to extort money created a wave of hostile public sentiment against the Act. The agitation around this problem grew to such an extent that, in 1915, a decision of the Supreme Court established the death of a fantasy: in *United States v. Holte*, Justice Holmes ruled that, although a woman could not be at the same time slave and slaver, she could nonetheless be charged with conspiracy if she facilitated the crime for blackmailing purposes. The application of the conspiratorial mode was technically flawed, but it was as far as the spirit of the time could go in the criminalization of female agency in the event of active sexual circumvention. The language of the decision clarified that it made sense to treat the woman’s ill schemes “as a conspiracy that the law can reach, if we abandon the illusion that the woman is always the victim.”¹¹⁵

When the federal prosecutors happened upon Belle Schreiber, that illusion was still alive and powerful. The twenty-three year old prostitute, who years earlier had received a courteous monetary contribution on Johnson’s part to travel the country and meet him—but also to pay off her debts and to open her own brothel—gratuitously charged the boxer. Johnson was immediately indicted in virtue of the train tickets he had bought her to reach him from Pittsburgh to Chicago. Governmental employees encouraged Johnson to leave the country, which he did, and for seven years he endeavored to obtain a more lenient sentence, but to no avail. In 1920 he returned to serve a ten-month sentence and pay a thousand dollars fine. He was by then an impoverished and defeated champion and the photograph of him losing the title to the white fighter Jess Willard in Havana in 1915 remained a standard decoration in white bars for many years after.¹¹⁶ Also without this highly symbolic demise, Jack Johnson was too controversial a figure to serve as an official black hero in his postchampionship years and he was held up as a negative example to young fighters until the 1960s.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Langum, *Crossing over the Line*, 80.

¹¹⁶ Al-Tony. Gilmore, *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1975).

¹¹⁷ Even decades after Johnson lost the title, new black champions like Joe Louis and Floyd Patterson were warned at the beginnings of their careers that they should “never disgrace the

Johnson's vicissitudes exemplify the completion of the white-slavery myth in its final version, just months before the Hygiene movement started to claim the regulation of prostitution. Exactly while interstate train and trolley service made it easier to escape the physical boundaries of small-town and rural America, a locus where the virtue of the nation could supposedly survive untouched, the Mann Act was wielded to strike mobility, in the hope to control its twin, immorality.

race." It was only in the 1960s with the rise of another controversial champion, Cassius Clay, that the boxer's name was recalled from oblivion. Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*.

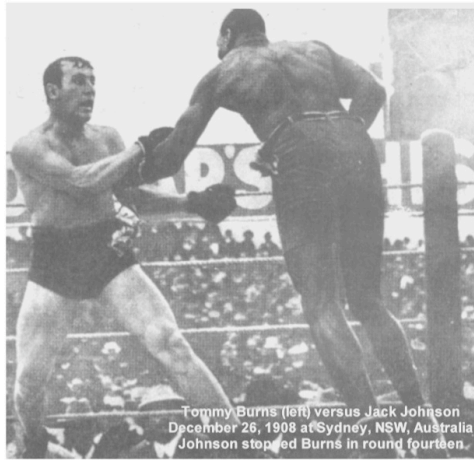


Fig.12. Tommy Burns v. Jack Johnson
Sydney, Australia (1908)

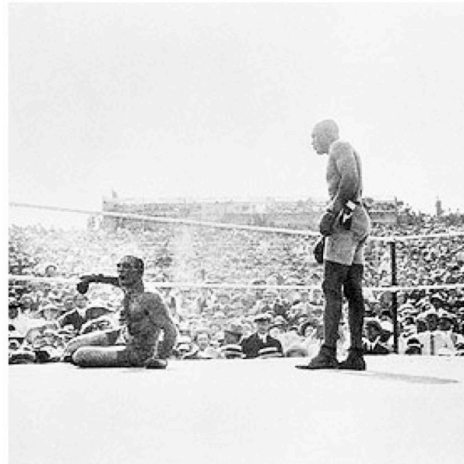


Fig.13. Jack Johnson v. Jim Jeffries
Reno, Nevada (1910)



Fig.14. Johnson and Etta Duryea,
his first wife



Fig. 15. Johnson marries Lucille
Cameron, his second wife



Fig. 16. Belle Schreiber, his nemesis



Fig. 17. *The Chicago American*, Nov. 9, 1912

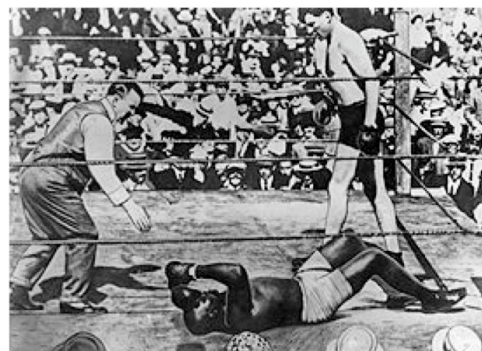


Fig. 18. Jack Johnson vs. Jeff Willard, Havana, Cuba (1915)

Fig. 12, fig.13 and fig. 18 are sourced from the Web.
Fig. 14 through fig. 17 are sourced from Geoffrey Ward's *Unforgivable Blackness*.

CONCLUSION

“A TALE OF TWO MORALITIES”

In 1913, the *New York World* proclaimed the birth of the Flapper.¹ In the same year *Damaged Goods*, an adaptation of a French play about prostitution and the spreading of syphilis in the bourgeois family, took America by a storm.² These two events marked the demise of the New Woman and the white slave, respectively. With the rise of the flapper in the late teens and twenties, the high-minded, socially engaged New Woman lost ground to more aesthetically inflected ideals of modern femininity. The unexpected success of the play which *The New York Times* baptized “a medical sermon” likely to “start an epoch-making movement in the country”³ signaled the dissipation of the rhetoric of white slavery. The language of social purity gradually yielded to that of social hygiene⁴—a shift also sustained by the War Department’s propaganda for the preservation of the troops’ health in the face of the venereal infections afflicting soldiers.⁵

Nonetheless, behind changes in the models of femininity, continued what Lois Banner has called “a general American fascination with young women.”⁶ Young women, she maintains, had been used as symbols of the American character since antebellum times and had in turn embodied the conflicts between purity and sensuality, between traditional society and the future, between the

¹ On January 5, 1913 the *New York World* reported that models of female beauty had dramatically changed: the tall aristocratic Gibson Girl was out and the “hipless, waistless, boneless” flapper was in vogue. The Gibson Girl became a period piece as did other exemplars of an earlier age of emancipation for women. Cf. Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 166.

² *Damaged Goods* was a translation of the *Les Avarié* by Eugène Brieux (1901). The play was also novelized by Upton Sinclair and saw at least two film versions. In 1913, Mr. Richard Bennett, the producer who presented the play in the face of savage criticism, was overwhelmed with requests for a repeat performance. See Katie N. Johnson, *Sisters in Sin: Brothel Drama in America, 1900-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Johnson, *Sisters in Sin: Brothel Drama in America, 1900-1920*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³ *The New York Times*, April 6, 1913.

⁴ See David J. Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene: Women, Prostitution, and the American Plan 1900-1930* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002).

⁵ Clement, *Love for Sale*, 157.

⁶ Banner, *American Beauty*, 167.

beauty of a pastoral utopia and the ugliness of the industrial world.⁷ The idealization of women had started when the nation's founders valorized the concept of "Republican Motherhood," a radical shift from the Puritan belief that women were less virtuous than men. The nineteenth-century Cult of True Womanhood perfected this spiritualization of women and viewed them as representatives of morality. Still, Victorianism also secretly nourished the obverse tendency, namely a public fascination with female physicality grounded in the double standard.⁸ My investigation of the New Woman and the white slave has implied an approach to femininity as it emerged from this split imaginary.

1. Gathering Threads

The binary category of gender organized society in a way that allowed specific women's cultures to perform apparently restricting mandates through undertakings that complicated and defied the separate sphere model prescribed by normative paradigms such as the Cult of True Womanhood. As the normalizing force of the Victorian model was undermined from within through the resignification of the purity imperative, the Progressive New Woman dawned onto the social scene, publicizing those political battles that the early maternalist movement had sought to master in the first half of the nineteenth century. An important source of the Progressive sensibility, social Maternalism bequeathed a mixed and difficult inheritance to its New Womanly heiresses. The latter continued its socializing mission while incorporating new ideas about sexuality, evolution and social critique into its approach. If the bottom line of the New Woman's identity was a repeal of domesticity in favor of politicized awareness of the world, the intimate correlative of such an attitude was a discovery of the sexual in term of passionateness and sophisticated explorations of the libidinal dimension of women's lives.

⁷ This fascination continued well beyond the time period covered by this dissertation. The first Miss America pageant of 1921 is particularly emblematic: the first winner, Margaret Gorman, was only fifteen when she was nominated and was announced as the smallest of the contestants with irresistible "doll like" measurements. See Faludi, "American Electra: Feminism's Ritual Matricide," 38.

⁸ By the 1890s a ubiquitous use of women as symbolic personification—for example of the nation—was accompanied by a symbolic commodification found in barrooms and trolley-car decorations, pin-up posters and men's magazines, cigarette cards, pornographic *cartes de visite* and all kind of parades. Banner, *American Beauty*.

Concurrently with the decline of what Freud called Civilized Morality, the ascent of alternative femininities offered by immigrant and working-class women were deeply troubling to the defendants of the old order, as well as some representatives of the Progressive cohort. I have argued that “rebel girls” of working class extraction, in virtue of their being independent wage earners, of their increasing political awareness and of the way they navigated the urban maze as sexualized figures, are a legitimate incarnation of Progressive New Womanhood. Through the heterosocial practices of treating and charity, these girls challenged the long-held association between women in public and prostitution and vigorously upheld new, monogenerational standards of ethical conduct. Being the most socially vulnerable among the New Women, working girls attracted the moralizing attentions of the reformers who longed for a moral regeneration of society. But reform-minded regeneration envisioned the return of independent ladies to secluded environments, less threatening to the patriarchal status quo. Thus, while the supposedly separate spheres showed their osmotic—although still asymmetric—configuration, the recrudescence of the anti-prostitution crusade rekindled the affective relation of the population to a State that should principally protect “the peace of the citizens.” The need to be protected from changing times translated into the worries about the new masses of immigrants, the alienating presence of industrialism and the hidden ghosts of city life. This dynamic promoted the emergence of the “U.S. political sphere as an affective space, a space of attachment and identification that is not saturated by mere ideological or cognitive content.”⁹

Considering the Progressives’ preoccupation with prostitution from this affective point of view, I have postulated that measures against white slavery can be understood as a backlash against a century of surreptitious aperture of the female/private sphere towards society, labor and politics. More precisely, I have traced how the transnational preoccupation with purity intersected with American concerns about the status of women, of the immigrants, and of the newly acquired imperial subjects. This encounter of anxieties took place against the backdrop of slavery, America’s original sin against the racial Other. The analysis of Alice Wellington Rollins’ *Uncle Tom’s Tenement* has demonstrated

⁹ Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, x.

how one of the first efforts in long fiction to consider the urban prostitute as a privileged object of knowledge in her own right,¹⁰ also initiated the first steps of a process of alienation of slavery as a modern myth. Rollins, herself a New Woman *avant la lettre*, started this transformation by transposing Stowe's abolitionist icon into an Irish working class tenement. In this process, her analysis of the repercussions of capitalism on the city poor countered the nascent hermeneutics of sexual suspicion,¹¹ common in slumming literature, that often reduced the tenement novel to a peephole into the sexual secrets of modern metropolitan life.

More to the point Rollins drew together three historical subjects—African-American slaves, European aliens, and American-born women—which became central in the migration of the noun “slavery” from race bondage, to factory wage slavery, and the forced prostitution of the daughters of the nation. In Rollins we have observed how the concept of bondage itself started to shift in meaning, losing the political connotation it had during the struggle for abolition, and acquiring an association with struggle for self-mastery, against enslavement to vice.¹² However, old and new assumptions about bondage kept coexisting and coalesced in the depiction of literary female exemplars that would populate the panorama of naturalism in the two decades to follow. Rollins's cognates for Crane's Maggie and for Dreiser's Carrie, fashioned as they are on Stowe's mulattas, uncannily replicate a certain connection that in the mind of the middle-class reader conflated purity with whiteness immorality with blackness.

Since throughout Progressivism the widespread yearning for the regeneration of public life coincided with the heyday of scientific racism, policies and projects of moral and social renewal that formed the foundation for American society in the twentieth century were somehow inflected by racial and ethnic bias. This undercurrent particularly informed the context of vice reform and even seeped into the writings of the most enlightened leftist Progressives, those who, like Jane Addams, in an unselfish devotion to the commonweal addressed public and private morality with a single rhetoric. The polarized imaginary that the quick spreading of white slavery tracts popularized hinged on the character of the

¹⁰ Jann Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Hysteria, and Reading Difference in Nineteenth Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 4.

¹¹ Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld: Literature and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 10.

¹² Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 9.

helpless white girl who, unaccustomed to the dangerous elations of city life, fell victim to ethnic vice syndicates. The Manichaeism of such melodramatic format, also shared by the belligerent muckrakers, became effective in valorizing protection as the imperative that justified middle class intervention with regards to a varied urban crowd.

Undoubtedly, by supporting the anti-prostitution campaign, female reformers “took the male rescue fantasy and recast it as a mother-daughter emancipation drama.”¹³ On the other hand, working girls, supposedly disorderly adolescents, and African-Americans supposedly unable to govern their freshly obtained freedom, were evenly flattened into the count of the helpless in need of institutional protection. In short, emancipation inevitably coexisted with limitation to the extent that protection entailed control. The dialectic between liberation and limitation defined important conflicts about generational authority, about the understanding and the tutelage of adolescents, and about the support for institutional incursion into areas that had previously been left untouched by public scrutiny. This intrusion was advocated by many private groups who agitated for a substantial rationalization and cleansing of society. Public-private partnerships that began with the Preventive Societies of the late nineteenth century, and continued with the Committees of Notables of the early twentieth, materialized such encroachment and produced long-term consequences for the practice of individual freedoms in America. The legal vicissitudes surrounding white slavery reflected this impulse together with a growing sentiment of racial suspicion, which ushered Jim Crow back into the egalitarian environment of integrated northern cities such as, for example, New York.

The readings hereby offered of the Moore case and of the Mann Act have shown how all these tensions coagulated into ostracizing legal acts that renewed the exclusion of African-American citizens from the polity, while keeping desperately alive an idea of female American purity that had been long defunct. Incidentally, but symbolically, the Mann Act was passed the year after the first mass production of the Model T celebrated the dream of carefree movement: in this context the white slavery craze can be also understood as the expression of

¹³ Faludi, "American Electra: Feminism's Ritual Matricide," 36.

various nostalgias. As Walter Benn Michaels has suggested, it could even represent the “gendered expression of nostalgia for slavery that had dominated the Southern plantation writings of the 1880s.”¹⁴ But, rather than in affective terms, I would regard the connection between sexism and racism informing white slavery as based on common economic, social and psychological forces. In the light of Paula Giddings’s observation that “the greatest gains made by women have come in the wake of strident Black demands for their rights,”¹⁵ the instrumental applications of the white slavery scare look like a setback for women and for African Americans alike. In the same way, the genesis of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the history of black America, and the regulation of female sexuality have been linked together in the Progressive Era in a relationship that defined “a government that has been at odds, more often than not...with its own professed values.”¹⁶ Yet, this contradiction also voiced the impatience of a great deal of private citizens who longed for participation in that government, in ways that representative democracy did not allow.

2. Binding Off

Like the other reform strands that convulsed Progressive America, the agitation that bound together gender politics and vice legislation produced fundamental changes to American society that altered both governmental institutions and the relationship of the citizens to their government. The Progressive construction of race, gender, ethnicity, and class sometimes bound reformers to their own inconsistencies, but it also expressed the conflicting ideological positions upheld by a broad range of Americans.¹⁷ The rhetoric of Progressivism interpellated citizenship by infusing affect into a political language that straddled the scientific and the sentimental. As Laurent Berlant has put it, “the displacement of politics to the realm of feeling...shows the obstacles to social change that emerge when politics become privatized.”¹⁸ These obstacles were placed in the path of women.

¹⁴ Walter Benn Michaels, "The Contracted Heart," *New Literary History* 21, no. 3 (1990): 511-12.

¹⁵ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 6.

¹⁶ Kenneth O'Reilly, *Racial Matters. The FBI's Secret Files on Black America (1960-1972)* (New York: MacMillan, 1989), 8.

¹⁷ Flanagan, *America Reformed*, vi-vii.

¹⁸ Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, xii.

Casting American girls as potential white slaves, that is, as volition-less subjects easy to obliterate both from the urban surface and from the polity, allowed Americans to protract the illusion of Victorian ideals of purity while re-instituting the male savior that the vast woman-led reformative enterprise had curtailed. Furthermore, it prepared ideological measures of containment to thwart women as political actors after they got enfranchised. The ensuing legislation—functional in redrawing the civil and identitarian outline of the full-fledged American citizen—facilitated the emplotment of a certain “moral imagination” in the mechanisms of the state.

More to the point, the increasing federal influence on American everyday life, starting with Pure Food and continuing with Pure Women, prompted the entrenchment of a conspiratorial mentality in para-stately forms of social control. This conspiracy thinking emblematically erupted with the Prohibition Amendment of 1919 and with the Red Scare hysteria of 1919 to 1921. Nonetheless, the same regulative impulse also prepared the field for the sweeping state measures succored Americans after the Great Depression. In this respect women’s lobbying skills served as a crucial bridge to the social welfare reforms of the 1930s introduced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal.¹⁹

Nobel Prize Laureate and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman addressed the conflicts raised by Barak Obama’s unsuccessful “welfare turn” by pointing out that the “great divide” in American politics is less about pragmatic issues than about differences in the two “moral imaginations” underpinning the public debate.²⁰ His distinction is articulated in terms of divergent beliefs about what constitutes social justice. The birth of these two imaginations can be traced back to the Progressive Era. Although social justice Progressives “never successfully convinced Americans that social responsibility has to come before individual needs in order to create a good democratic society,”²¹ they endowed the political sphere with more than the pro-or-against-welfare debate. They commenced the exquisitely philosophical diatribe between the urge to have a protective State curb potent private interest and the fears, frustrations and risks

¹⁹ Lynn Dumenil, “The New Woman and the Politics of the 1920s,” *OAH Magazine of History*, no. July (2007): 26.

²⁰ Krugman, Paul, “A Tale of Two Moralities,” *The New York Times*, January 13, 2011.

²¹ Flanagan, *America Reformed*, 284-85.

inextricably coupled with what political theorist Melissa Orlie calls “the inevitability and necessities of governance.”²² Among these inevitable necessities the issue of protection and control that accompanies all initiatives wielded through common power onto a portion of the citizens towers in all its ambiguity.

Because in the Progressive Era the dominant arrangements between the sexes signified by the metaphor of the separate spheres began to falter, that period can also be imagined as the time in which traditionally male and female moral imaginations started to mesh. For example, the crusading mothers of the commonweal had found it productive, in the nineteenth century, to herald the superiority of unified female “feelings” to storm the world of civic engagement. With the dawn of the Progressive Era, male reformers regained terrain as they too wielded sentimentalism as a communicative weapon, but often in the inferior species of sensationalism and excess. If in the new century some reformers like Jane Addams firmly believed in a gender superior approach towards democracy, many other women lived by an ethos inspired by traditionally male anti-nurturing attitudes, and by the demands of rationalized, professional times.

The gender divide between the public and private sphere, seemingly pursued by the rhetoric of white slavery, was countered, in practice, by a divide between two emerging moralities—the one looking empathically at the Other, and the other wanting to hold the Other accountable for her often unsustainable and unreasonable responsibilities. The nascent dichotomy between the two moral imaginations subsumed and virtually superseded the gender divide. This did not entail a collapse of the clout of patriarchy, nor women’s rapid surge to political office; it rather translated into a panorama of female political allegiance organized along lines of affiliation that overrode the necessity to unite women on the political stage, as the final rush to suffrage had forcefully presupposed. The aftermath of suffrage showed, on the contrary, how plural and divided womanhood actually was. The interpolations between New Women and white slaves in the 1910s, and the signifiatory arsenal that the two figures deployed, foregrounded the fragmentation of the female world that surfaced in the 1920s, and that continued to inhabit the history of feminism, like a haunted legacy.

²² Melissa A. Orlie, *Living Ethically, Acting Politically* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 1.

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Estratto per riassunto della tesi di dottorato

L'estratto (max. 1000 battute) deve essere redatto sia in lingua italiana che in lingua inglese e nella lingua straniera eventualmente indicata dal Collegio dei docenti. L'estratto va firmato e rilegato come ultimo foglio della tesi.

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Dottorato: LINGUE, CULTURE E SOCIETA' – STUDI IBERICI E ANGLO-AMERICANI
Ciclo: 22°

Titolo della tesi¹: New Women, White Slaves
Separate Spheres and Social Anxiety in the Progressive Era

Abstract:

During the Progressive Era (1890-1920), the dominant meaning of sexuality in the United States underwent a paradigm shift that called for different regulations and politics. The iconic "New Woman" emerged as an epitome of modern femininity in her many emancipated incarnations: the intellectual, the suffragist and the professional, but also the divorcee, the free-lover, and the working girl. At the same time, the preoccupation with prostitution developed into a national obsession and the Progressives invested enormously in the fight against "white slavery," an ostensibly international traffic for the abduction and sexual enslavement of girls. This dissertation investigates how the white slavery scare can be considered part of a general attempt to recompose and repair the male social sphere from the attacks it was suffering in the form of more and more assertive womanhood. In exploring how the attitude towards prostitution exposed the anxieties of modern America, this study relies close readings and historical analysis of novels, reformatory writings, journalistic pieces, sculptures and legal documents in which New Women and white slaves appear center stage.

Negli anni del Progressismo Americano (1890-1920), la concezione della sessualità negli Stati Uniti subì un cambiamento epocale che produsse una serie di nuove politiche sociali. La "New Woman" emerse come esempio di moderna femminilità in svariate accezioni: l'intellettuale, la politica, la professionista, ma anche la divorziata, l'adepta del libero amore e la lavoratrice. Al tempo stesso, la preoccupazione nei confronti della prostituzione si trasformò in ossessione generale. I Progressisti investirono enormemente nella lotta sul suolo nazionale quella che venne denominata "white slavery," ossia un ipotetico traffico internazionale atto al rapimento e alla riduzione in schiavitù sessuale di ragazze bianche. Questa tesi analizza come l'isteria della "white slavery" possa essere considerata parte di un movimento generale per la restaurazione della sfera pubblica maschile, incrinata dalle incursioni ricevute da parte di una presenza femminile sempre più indipendente. Nell'esplorare come l'atteggiamento nei confronti della prostituzione riveli le tensioni dell'America moderna, questo studio analizza romanzi, trattati di riforma sociale, articoli giornalistici, sculture e atti processuali in cui la "New Woman" e la "schiava bianca" giocano un ruolo determinante.

Firma dello studente



¹ Il titolo deve essere quello definitivo, uguale a quello che risulta stampato sulla copertina dell'elaborato consegnato