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# **Cultivating the Taste of the Nation: The National Council of Women of Canada and the Campaign against “Pernicious” Literature at the Turn of the Twentieth Century**

Anne-Marie Kinahan  
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*Abstract:* This article analyzes the campaign against “pernicious” literature undertaken by the National Council of Women of Canada at the turn of the twentieth century. Concerned with the growing availability of dime novels, penny dreadfuls, and romances and their perceived influences on young readers, Council members sought to educate the Canadian public about the circulation of so-called “pernicious” literature. But they also sought to eradicate the popularity of “pernicious” literature by encouraging children, youth, and adults to read a “better class” of books, through the creation of the National Home Reading Union in 1895. This article argues that through these strategies, the Council’s campaign re-asserted the primacy of the family, with the mother as its moral guide, in providing the ultimate defence against the dangers of “pernicious” literature.

*Résumé :* Cet article analyse la campagne qu’a menée le Conseil national des femmes du Canada contre la littérature dite « pernicieuse » au début du vingtième siècle. Les membres du Conseil, préoccupés par la disponibilité croissante de romans à quatre sous et à l’eau de rose et de leur prétendue mauvaise influence sur les jeunes lectrices, ont cherché à éduquer le public canadien sur la diffusion de cette littérature pernicieuse. Ils ont tenté de contrer la popularité de cette littérature en fondant le National Home Reading Union « Syndicat national de la lecture à domicile » en 1895 dans le but d’encourager les enfants, les adolescents, et les adultes à lire une « catégorie supérieure » de livres. Cet article propose que la campagne menée par le Conseil a utilisé des stratégies qui ont eu comme résultat de réaffirmer l’institution de la famille, avec la mère comme guide moral jouant le rôle de protectrice par excellence contre les tentations de la littérature pernicieuse.

*Keywords:* Communication history; Gender; First wave feminism; Popular culture; Moral regulation.

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In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “pernicious” literature emerged as a significant issue for Canadian educators, legislators, and moral reformers.<sup>1</sup> Rising literacy levels, the proliferation of newsstands and libraries, and the affordability and accessibility of reading materials to the Canadian public, rendered “pernicious” literature a new and potentially dangerous influence (Wilson, 1998). Defined by female moral reformers as “all that debases the tastes, gives false views of life, and puts wrong ideals before youthful minds” (National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC), 1902, p. 83), “pernicious” literature generally referred to dime novels, crime fiction, and romances. Creating a rhetorical link between juvenile delinquency and popular fiction, Canadian moral reformers insisted “pernicious” literature posed a serious threat to the moral development of future generations. From 1893 to the early 1910s, moral reformers, and specifically the women active in the National Council of Women of Canada, sought to raise awareness about the dangers of “pernicious” literature, to curtail its circulation, and to destroy the public’s appetite for such material by providing healthier alternatives.

This article analyzes the campaign against “pernicious” literature orchestrated by the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC). This campaign is significant for two reasons. First, through their activism on the issue of “pernicious” literature, the middle-class women involved with the National Council intervened in public life and sought to create politically and socially significant roles for themselves. Second, we can locate in this campaign the germination of contemporary approaches to media education. Council members focused on many of the same fears and anxieties that concern contemporary proponents of media education; they shared the perception of media influence and effects, the presumption of children’s inherent suggestibility, and the assumptions of women’s responsibilities for addressing these issues within the home. Indeed, in current debates about violence in electronic and broadcast media, pornographic material on the Internet, and children’s potential exposure to such material, the “solutions” presented centre on strategies to manage media within the home. These contemporary strategies have a historical precedent in the Council’s campaign, which insisted that these issues were best resolved through the proper moral instruction of children in the home.

### **The National Council of Women of Canada and women’s public activism**

The NCWC was formed in 1893 with the express intent of providing a common platform to unite various women’s organizations concerned with social and moral reform. Motivated to bring together women from different religious and political beliefs, the NCWC aimed to create and circulate women’s public opinion on matters of interest to the home and nation. The National Council was (and still is) an umbrella organization, whose membership consisted of Local Councils of Women formed in urban centres throughout Canada and national associations such as the Dominion Women’s Enfranchisement Association, the Women’s Art Association, the Girls’ Friendly Society, and the Dominion Order of King’s Daughters (Strong-Boag, 1977). By 1900, the Council comprised twenty-one Local Councils and seven National Societies (Aberdeen, 1900). Specifically con-

cerned with enabling women's participation in the public sphere, Council members were active on a range of issues, including prison reform, the care of "feebleminded" women, domestic service, women's education, domestic science instruction in schools, woman suffrage, and the problem of "pernicious" literature (for detailed discussions on the NCWC, see Griffiths, 1993 and Strong-Boag, 1976).

Through their activism on a range of issues, Council members attempted to create an understanding of women as engaged and committed political agents. However, in what seems a striking irony, Council members justified women's public activism through recourse to their privatized identities as wives and mothers. Addressing the National Council at its 1894 annual meeting, its President, Lady Ishbel Aberdeen, characterized the Council's work as a mission of "mothering" (NCWC, 1894, p. 11). Hence, while Council members stressed the importance of women's participation in spheres outside the home, it was women's roles as mothers of future generations that justified their activism on these issues. With respect to the Council's campaign against "pernicious" literature, this blurring of public and private had important implications. Despite the complexity of issues raised by the problems of impure literature, the NCWC's proposed solutions reasserted the primacy of the family, with the mother as its moral guide, in providing the ultimate defence against the dangers of trashy books and literature.

The National Council's strategies to address "pernicious" literature not only reflected concern over the potential harm caused by popular fiction, but also revealed the extent to which the organization attempted to encourage the Canadian public to read a "better class" of books. Under the auspices of the National Council of Women, the National Home Reading Union was created in 1895 with the specific intent of exposing the Canadian public to higher-quality reading material. Rather than undertaking a repressive program of censorship, Council members advocated a program of moral regulation through the provision of "uplifting alternatives" to sensational literature. While Council members favoured the introduction of laws prohibiting the sale of impure literature, their efforts at eradicating this material were oriented toward the family. They encouraged Canadian mothers to take a more active interest in shaping and directing their children's reading, and through the creation of the National Home Reading Union, Council members sought to uplift and improve the literary taste of ordinary Canadians.

In an attempt to unpack the complexity of issues regarding "pernicious" literature, this discussion draws on the arguments of Michael Denning (1987), Nan Enstad (1999), and Alison Parker (1997, 1999), who collectively argue that debates over popular literature in Britain and the United States at the turn of the twentieth century were part and parcel of a larger cultural struggle between the "genteel" tradition and an emergent "sensational" mass culture. Denning explains that the boundary separating genteel and sensational culture was a "moral as well as aesthetic one, dividing the culture of the 'middle class' from the ways of the 'lower classes,' and giving very different inflections to apparently similar stories" (1987, p. 59). Through attempts to curtail the circulation of "pernicious" literature and to encourage the appreciation of a "better class" of books, the moral

reformers active in the National Council of Women attempted to police the boundary between the genteel and the sensational. In the following discussion, I analyze the Council's campaign against "pernicious" literature, focusing on its strategies of reform and regulation.

The following analysis offers a critical examination of the speeches, discussions, and resolutions on "pernicious" literature introduced by Council members at their annual meetings and reproduced in the Council's yearbooks. This discussion focuses on the Council's yearbooks because they were the central medium through which the organization communicated with its members, created women's public opinion about issues under discussion, recorded the Council's "progress" on these issues, and sought to inform the Canadian public of its work.

### **"Pernicious" literature: Its forms and audience**

In his detailed discussion on the history of "penny dreadfuls" and other forms of sensational fiction, John Springhall (1998) stresses that the penny dreadful was the popular choice of many Edwardian and Victorian youth in Britain, much to the chagrin of the adult culture. He argues that the term penny dreadful was a "blanket term of condemnation" used by powerful adults to "designate penny-part serials and cheap weekly periodicals, devoted mainly to tales of historical adventure or contemporary mystery, illustrated with vivid woodcuts, which held a particular appeal for working-class youth" (1998, p. 41). In American popular culture, penny dreadfuls appeared as dime novels, which Springhall explains were "published in series or 'libraries,' usually Western or detective stories complete in each monthly or fortnightly part and sold for a dime" (1998, p. 41). Denning corroborates this view, with the added acknowledgment that the primary audience for such material in the United States was working-class women and men: "craftworkers, factory operatives, domestic servants, domestic workers" (1987, p. 24). Dime novels intended for working-class women, according to Enstad (1999), were heroic, melodramatic adventures featuring strong-willed, capable, and independent heroines, who often overcame grave personal and sexual peril. Canadian readers avidly consumed a variety of popular novels, including those of the "sensational" variety. Along with religious novels and "daring" romances, historical adventures, westerns, and crime novels were all popular with Canadian readers (Vipond, 1979). Concerned over the growing popularity of such fiction, and convinced that popular fiction transmitted anti-social values, moral reformers inaugurated a program of surveillance, regulation, and substitution.

### **The problem of "pernicious" literature**

The attempt to strictly define "the problem" of "pernicious" literature is a challenging one. Canadian moral reformers cast their cultural net widely when they attempted to purify the taste of the nation. Not only were popular romance, crime, and adventure fiction suspect, so too were domestic romances, "daring" romances, and literature by Molière, Dumas, and Zola. In his detailed analysis of women's pro-censorship activities at the turn of the twentieth century, Wilson contends female reformers were expressly concerned with representations of sexuality and appropriate gender roles, the potentially negative influences of "foreign" culture, and the threat posed by what reformers saw as working-class

immorality (Wilson, 1998, p. 440). The attempt to curtail the circulation of impure literature, then, was expressly connected with elite and middle-class anxieties about changes to the social order.

For the majority of cultural commentators and critics who decried the arrival of the dime novel, the primary concern revolved around the presumed influence on its readers. As Gerson notes in her discussion on the culture of reading and writing fiction in Canada, commentators “acknowledged the astonishing ability of prose fiction to seize the imagination, arouse the emotions, and consciously or subconsciously persuade the reader” (1989, p. 24). Canadian moral reformers invested dime novels with powerful influence over the minds of their audience. Indeed, commentators argued that dime novels “deaden the moral sensibilities[,] familiarize the mind with crime, and lead it on to moral ruin” (George Stewart Jr., quoted in Gerson, 1989, p. 24). Prose fiction was thought to be an extremely powerful agent, and moral reformers believed that novels were harmful in two significant ways: “through their plots they engaged the reader in sympathy with characters or activities which would be reprehensible in real life, or because their style could arouse sentiments and ideas which would incapacitate the reader to function usefully in the real world” (Gerson, 1989, p. 24; see also Denning, 1987, p. 54).

Such opinions about the influence of popular fiction were echoed by several Council members in their discussions on “pernicious” literature. Certainly Lady Schultz, Council member from Manitoba, revealed her deep distrust of popular fiction when she claimed, at the annual meeting of 1895,

There is no agency in the world more powerful, in building or destroying character, than the books we read; it is, to a great extent, the pabulum on which the mind is fed; the material from which either strength or weakness is drawn. (NCWC, 1895, p. 108)

The powerful influences of novels were even more persuasive on the impressionable and ill-formed minds of children, who “are either stimulated to admire and imitate high and noble characters, or they are weakened and dwarfed by the bad example of the people set before them and who have been absorbing their attention” (NCWC, 1895, p. 108). Since novels had an unquestionable influence, both for good and evil, the careful cultivation of good taste was an important prophylactic against the potentially “dangerous seed” of impure literature.

While Schultz was convinced of the negative effects of novels on the young, other Council members took a more modest position with respect to the purported influence of popular fiction. In her 1896 discussion on “Home Reading Circles,” Miss Skelton stated that the real danger of books was not that they were overtly harmful, but that they may surreptitiously damage or pervert the developing mind. “Books may not be actually bad,” she suggested, “and yet their influence may have a stunting effect, and if they do not positively impregnate the reader with bad opinions and ideas, they prevent the growth of noble and great ones” (NCWC, 1896, p. 246). Thus, popular novels presumably had a pernicious and insidious influence upon the minds of the people who read them. The failure of popular literature to encourage the growth of higher thoughts and ideals paved the way for impressionable minds to be corrupted. While acknowledging that popu-

lar literature may not be overtly bad, Skelton still saw the prevalence of cheap and trashy literature as a menace, and she definitively outlined the results of a taste for such literature:

I feel sure that a great deal of crime, particularly amongst boys, is the effect of reading the Penny Dreadfuls, or the Dime Novel. In these books crime is surrounded by a halo of romance; the so-called heroes are made enviable by the exciting adventures they go through, and the publicity which they attain. I believe many a boy has started on a downward career through getting false ideas as to the perniciousness of crime from such books. (NCWC, 1896, p. 246)

Concerns over juvenile delinquency and youth crime characterized Council efforts to address the problems of “pernicious” literature. Indeed, concern over the moral health of future generations emerged as a central justification for the Council’s reform efforts. Delivering an address on objectionable printed matter in 1905, Minnie Gardiner, Convener of the committee on the topic, asked “could stronger evidence of the necessity of our work be given than the voluntary confession of a thirteen-year old girl, now under house arrest in Toronto for an awful murder, that it was seeing and reading the posters of a play that suggested to her the idea of her crime?” (NCWC, 1905, p. 102). Through the rhetorical link between popular culture and crime, Council members tacitly asserted a correlation between the consumption of “pernicious” material and criminality. This rhetorical correlation enabled Council members to create the image of the violent child, who was beyond the bounds of parental control and supervision and wreaked havoc in society. In her discussion on television culture in the 1950s, Lynn Spigel (1998) notes that a central fear that greeted the arrival of this new medium was the perception that it would expose children to forbidden knowledge. She argues that historically, children’s interaction with popular media has been characterized by “deep concern on the part of adult groups to monitor their entertainment and survey their pleasure” (Spigel, 1998, p. 114). Indeed, a central fear associated with penny dreadfuls was their presumed ability to transmit moral values that were dangerous, anti-social, and destructive. The campaign to raise awareness about the availability of such material was also an invitation to Canadian parents to become informal censors of their children’s media consumption.

Building on these concerns was the fear that popular media such as novels, newspapers, plays, and movies would usurp the role of the mother as moral guardian. As Mrs. Tilley stated during the annual meeting of 1895,

While we as mothers are thinking how we can best train our children while we pray and agonize for them, and while the teachers are thinking of the best way of training them, do you know that this subtle influence going on among our children, utterly unknown to parents, in a great many instances is undoing all the good that we are trying to do? (NCWC, 1895, p. 123)

The “problems” associated with “pernicious” literature, then, were not limited to social issues such as crime or violence. Additional concerns regarded the role of the mother as moral guardian and the possibility that popular media undermined

her ability to raise children with a healthy respect for authority. This relationship between popular media, children, and mothers resulted in the creation of new social identities for middle-class Canadian women. Indeed, the media's perceived threat to children's healthy development acted as a justification for women's involvement in these issues. The campaign against sensational literature served as the conduit through which middle-class women cultivated the public face of their private moral superiority. Feminist historians have argued that a central justification for women's public participation at this time was the belief that women were morally superior to men (Baker, 1984; Kealey, 1979; Morrison, 1976; Ryan, 1990; Sklar, 2000; Valverde, 1991). Certainly, a social problem such as the spread of "pernicious" literature was of central concern to women, since children and youth constituted the primary audience for such material. But additionally, since women were assumed to be largely responsible for the raising of future generations, and since "pernicious" literature threatened children's moral development, women's involvement in resolving these issues was paramount.

### **Insidious circulation: Children and the spread of "pernicious" literature**

Addressing the National Council of Women in 1896, Council President Ishbel Aberdeen stressed that the Council's effort to raise awareness about "pernicious" literature was one of its significant achievements. She stated:

If the NCWC had done nothing beyond warning the fathers and mothers in Canada concerning the possible dangers awaiting their children in the circulation of vile literature, and to put them on their guard against it . . . it would have amply justified its existence. (NCWC, 1896, p. iv)

But, of course, the NCWC did more than warn Canadian parents of the existence and potential harm of this material. Inaugurating a multipronged approach to the issue, the NCWC sought, first and foremost, to raise awareness of the "evil" of impure literature. Council meetings served as a forum for discussion on how such material made its way into Canada and into the hands of Canadian youth, how parents should be informed and educated about this threat to their children, and what strategies should be pursued in eradicating such material from the Canadian nation.

Council members' discussions on "pernicious" literature revealed the insidious circulation of such material among children and raised alarm bells regarding the ignorance of Canadian parents. Addressing the annual meeting of Council members in 1895, Agnes Maule Machar, representative from the Kingston Local Council, recounted the comments of the secretary of the Children's Aid Society, who stated that impure literature was far more prevalent than "most mothers are aware of" (NCWC, 1895, p. 123). Machar provided a telling example of the ignorance of Canadian mothers: "in one home where he [the secretary] had been talking to the mother about it, the mother who thought that her children never saw such literature, on further examination found a copy of the *Police Gazette*, which I believe is one of the worst of these publications, in her boy's room" (NCWC, 1895, p. 123). Additionally, reports from several Local Councils at the annual meeting in 1896 found "that a far greater amount of objectionable literature is



being circulated amongst children than the general public has any idea of” (NCWC, 1896, p. 336).

By 1896, the Sub-Committee on Literature offered a comprehensive report on the insidious circulation of impure literature throughout the nation. The committee detailed how

The names of boys and girls are procured from school pass lists published in newspapers, from lists of names attending social parties, or in some other way, and that specimen papers, etc., are then sent by mail to these children or young people, offering a free supply to them in return for lists of other names . . . parents have, in several instances, found such communications in their children’s pockets. (NCWC, 1896, p. 335)

Additionally the Sub-Committee noted that “on one of our railway lines, little pictures and booklets of an offensive character have been surreptitiously offered for sale” and others had been distributed as “religious papers” (NCWC, 1896, p. 336). Revealing this circuit of distribution, Council members stressed that children had access to material beyond the scope, purview, and control of their parents.

In the attempt to offer an organized and logical approach to addressing the problem of “pernicious” literature, Council members created a social role for themselves in raising awareness about the distribution of such material. But Council efforts did not rest on individual action alone. They also stressed the importance of government involvement in addressing and resolving the problems posed by “pernicious” literature. Indeed, since so many parents were ignorant of the presence of such material, multiple strategies of redress were required.

Commenting on the report of the Sub-Committee, Machar outlined the important role of the Council in informing public opinion and potentially supporting the efforts of the state: “I am very glad that the Committee has not hesitated to ask for legislation, which is simply the consensus of enlightened public opinion against the grasping cupidity and class selfishness of the few” (NCWC, 1896, p. 342). In her formulation, the Council was envisioned as a complementary body of the state, embodying the enlightened public opinion necessary for the effective and just governance of the nation. Mrs. Archibald, a Council member from Halifax, further reinforced this view when she claimed, “We should never forget that we can render material assistance to the authorities” (NCWC, 1896, p. 346). This assistance was not limited to lobbying government officials for amendments to the Criminal Code, but also encompassed the surveillance of offensive materials and informing authorities of its existence. In her discussion on the importance of keeping track of such material, Archibald suggested the necessity of co-operation between parents and authorities. She encouraged parents to notify post office authorities if such publications were found in their children’s possession (NCWC, 1896).

There was a crucial role for Canadian parents to be vigilant and informed about the types of material that could enter their homes. Essential to the Council’s approach was not only the support of legislative attempts to suppress such material, but strategies to involve Canadian parents in a larger program of reform. Council members focused on the need to educate parents and children, to supply healthier alternatives to sensational literature, and to inform a program of moral regulation and instruction. They encouraged parents “to be on their guard in this

matter,” noting that if they found such literature, it should be sent to the President of the Local Council or someone in a “responsible position,” so that further information might be collected (NCWC, 1896, p. 338). Parental supervision and surveillance was combined with an additional responsibility to educate their children about sexuality, thereby diminishing the allure of sensational and trashy literature. And finally, Council members gave themselves a public mission to “make an earnest effort to promote the circulation of cheap, attractive, healthy literature, and to make it popular, especially amongst the young people” (NCWC, 1896, p. 338).

In its early approaches to the “problem” of “pernicious” literature, the Council positioned itself as an organization situated between the public and the private, which informed local, extra-local, and national initiatives to address this issue. While Council members encouraged parents to increase the supervision and surveillance of their children, they also positioned themselves as individuals in a “responsible position” who could do something to eradicate such material. For the members of the Council, legislation was just one element in a widespread attempt to purify the nation. As the report of the Committee on Pernicious Literature stated in 1900, “These are matters that cannot be dealt with by Act of Parliament, and which therefore call for ceaseless vigilance on the part of all mothers and those who have the care of young people” (NCWC, 1900, p. 19). While supporting amendments to the *Criminal Code* and measures to criminalize the manufacture of impure literature, Council discourses also signalled the limits of such political responses and called for the informal moral regulation of parental supervision and surveillance.

### **Creating the virtuous mother: “Pernicious” literature and the moral responsibilities of Canadian women**

Through their discussions on the roles and responsibilities of Canadian women, Council members outlined the public and private exercise of women’s moral influence. The discussions on how to address the problem of impure literature asserted the responsibilities of Canadian women as moral guardians of the nation’s future generations. These discourses effectively created distinctions between Council women, who were representatives of informed and thoughtful womanhood, and the mass of Canadian women, who were assumed to be largely ignorant of such problems and themselves in need of moral guidance. To this end, Council members focused their energies on awakening Canadian women to their moral responsibilities.

The Council’s discussions on the moral responsibilities of Canadian mothers were inextricably tied to discourses about the legacy of the Canadian nation, women’s proper social roles, and the value of moral instruction in the home. In her discussion on “Home Reading Circles,” delivered at the Council’s annual meeting of 1895, Mrs. Whipple made these connections explicit. Concerned that women’s increasing social influence might cause them to stray from their first mission, the home, she contended:

Her kingdom is to counsel, not to rule. In the realm of the home she is man’s coadjutor, not his rival, and in that realm she helps to make or mar the destiny of the nation by her influence upon the characters of the children committed to her care. (NCWC, 1895, p. 306)

Creating future generations of intelligent, self-reliant, and pure young men and women depended upon proper moral instruction within the home. As she further stated, this was indeed woman's *raison d'être*: "thoughtful womanhood can have no higher aim or object in life than to do all in our power to protect and guide the helpless, and to form the tastes and inclinations of the young aright" (NCWC, 1895, p. 116). To the mother fell the enormous task of forming the moral character of her children and woe betide the woman who did not seriously consider the pernicious influence of trashy, sensational, or impure literature on her impressionable young children. At the annual meeting of 1895, Lady Schultz related the story of two families of similar social standing:

One mother of which, when asked what had been her course in protecting her children from deteriorating [*sic*] literature, said, 'The only course we pursued was never to allow anything in the house that our children could not read.' Her children have grown up around her in honor, beauty and virtue. (NCWC, 1895, p. 114)

Indeed, the honour and virtue of her children reflect upon the mother's moral character. As the moral guide of the family, her kingdom and reward is represented in the lives of her "strong and stalwart" sons and daughters who "rise up and call her blessed" (NCWC, 1895, p. 114). The other family, she lamented, indulged their children's tastes for the "yellow-covered dime novel," with predictable and sorrowful results:

One son led a wild and reckless course, meeting with an early and tragic death. The daughter married, was divorced and married again, which tells its own tale. The eldest son lived a dissipated and disgraceful life, and when the younger child was laid in the grave, all said that it was well it should have been taken from the evident evil that lay before it. (NCWC, 1895, p. 115)

In this admittedly dramatic example, the serious effects of "pernicious" literature are reflected in the moral destruction of an entire family. Indeed, even the mother does not emerge unscathed, since this reflects her own failure in her role as moral guardian of her family. As both Nicola Beisel (1997) and S. Craig Wilson (1998) have noted, an additional fear that motivated moral reformers' campaign against "pernicious" literature was the ability of popular fiction to reach an audience beyond the working classes. The permeability of class boundaries and the spectre of a prominent family's fall from grace haunted middle-class and upper-middle-class reformers.

### **Women, "pernicious" literature, and the cultivation of moral capital**

In her discussion on "moral capital," Mariana Valverde compares the concept to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1984). For Valverde, "the aim of moral reform in a moral-capitalist setting . . . is not so much to change behaviour as to generate certain ethical subjectivities that appear as inherently 'moral'" (Valverde, 1994, p. 216). She contends that the attempt to change behaviour remains an important aspect of moral regulation, but is secondary to the development of an "ethical subjectivity" in which individuals internalize the values of correct living (1994, p. 216). Drawing on Foucault's arguments in *The*

*History of Sexuality* (1978), Valverde asserts “being moral is not so much a set of visible actions as the cultivation of a particular subjectivity requiring constant self-supervision” (1994, p. 220).

With respect to the campaign against “pernicious” literature, “moral capital” is generated and circulates in at least two different circuits. On the one hand, the women in the National Council who were active in raising awareness about “pernicious” literature cultivated their own moral capital through educating themselves and others about the presumed dangers of such material. On the other, through strategies of regulation, surveillance, and substitution, Council members and other moral reformers sought to cultivate the moral capital of middle-class women in general.

Council members cultivated their moral capital through their attempts to educate Canadian parents about the availability of dime novels and their purported influence on impressionable young readers. Through their efforts to raise awareness about “pernicious” literature, Council members positioned themselves as moral guardians and moral exemplars for “other” Canadian women. Careful to assert a productive and appropriate role for women in Canadian public life, Council members sought to define the public dimension of women’s moral influence. They encouraged women to engage in a program of positive influence and moral guidance, typified by informing public libraries of objectionable material found in their stacks, informing store owners of the relevant laws, and requesting the removal of inappropriate material (NCWC, 1905, p. 103). Woman’s greatest weapon was her moral influence, and Council members believed “every woman can at least use her influence to induce readers to refuse to purchase, audiences to listen, and advertisers to advertise anything that is pernicious” (NCWC, 1905, p. 101).

Through these discussions on women’s purported moral influence, Council members demonstrated an awareness of their own social standing and position of influence within society. While it is impossible to determine whether these women actually were moral exemplars for other Canadian women, it is significant that they focused on their ability to influence through example and strove to embody the values and virtues of correct living.

### **Children at risk: The presence of the other**

Council members stressed that the most effective means of diminishing a child’s taste for “pernicious” literature was through proper moral instruction within the home. Indeed, many of the Council’s initiatives addressing impure literature were predicated upon the belief that if children were brought up correctly within the home and armed with an appreciation of good literature, they would be protected from the temptations that awaited in the city, the school, or the neighbourhood. These discussions also revealed the fear that perhaps not all children received proper moral instruction within the home. Indeed, in their discussions on the ways in which “good” children might come into contact with “bad” literature, Council members constructed the image of the precocious (and invariably working-class) child who presented a danger to the moral development of the nation’s children. Council discourses on impure literature participated in the ambiguous and simultaneous construction of children as innocent and children as potential threat (Adams, 1995, 1997; Saunders, 2002). At the annual meeting of 1896, one

Council member warned of “the dangers our children encounter in the common schools along this very line of evil suggestions . . . of immoral pictures and of suggestions by other children” (NCWC, 1896, p. 346). She further contended that mothers must be ever-vigilant, since their “child is living in constant danger from the child sitting behind at the next desk” (NCWC, 1896, p. 347). It was in this sense, then, that cultivating a taste and appreciation for good literature acted as a prophylactic against the undoubtedly pernicious influence of children from other homes.

While introduction into the school exposed middle-class children to potentially pernicious influences in the form of other children, education also became the means through which middle-class values and tastes were cultivated and protected (Corse, 1997). In the discussion on the importance of developing national literature, a clear link was drawn between education, the cultivation of taste, and the future of the nation: “But it is on the rising generation mainly that the continued development of our national literature will depend. To give them a love of reading is to provide them with a shield against many trials” (NCWC, 1895, p. 239). Council members assumed that middle-class children were regularly and routinely exposed to good books, but that they faced a danger from children from other parts of the city who did not have such benefits. In the attempt to mitigate this perceived threat, the NCWC placed a high degree of faith in the education system to elevate the taste of the poorer and working classes:

For children in the poorer quarters of the city, who are not likely to meet with proper books in their own homes, the teachers strive to inculcate a taste for healthy literature by setting apart a time each week for reading aloud some entertaining matter from standard works for the young. (NCWC, 1903, p. 97)

Once again distinctions were drawn between innocent and dangerous children, and these distinctions also correlated to the perceived “threat” of impure literature. Children from the poorer quarters of the city were presumed to be the “natural” audience for cheap and trashy literature: it was readily available, easily obtained, and cheaply priced (NCWC, 1896, p. 246; Wilson, 1998, p. 445). It was, therefore, presumed that these children were raised on a diet of cheap, unhealthy, sensational literature. But other children—those assumed to be the sons and daughters of Council members and women like them—were the obvious audience for good literature. It was this generation of children that deserved the benefit of good, noble, national literature and this generation of children that was most in danger from pernicious or impure fiction. The suggestion that children from good homes might also constitute an audience for impure literature was simply beyond the pale.

Accordingly, the task at hand was a combination of developing and cultivating the tastes of middle-class children, while at the same time attempting to reform and enlighten the tastes of the working classes. At the annual meeting of 1900, a Council member observed, “cheap volumes with attractive titles . . . are purchased by young girls employed in small shops and read during unoccupied hours” (NCWC, 1900, p. 20). Indeed, for Council members, the popularity of sensational literature among working girls presented a serious problem. Very

early in the Council's discussions on the problems of impure literature, the concern to ensure social stability and class hierarchies was unmistakable. Lady Schultz discussed the effects of novel-reading on Canadian girls:

In the case of domestic servants and young women generally the effect is to produce discontent with the monotony of duty, and a distaste for ordinary simple labor . . . in that of young school girls it produces a distaste of simple living, and through the medium of the novel their intoxicated wishes learn to stray only too far. (NCWC, 1895, p. 113)

The problems presented by impure literature, then, were not only limited to concerns over the moral health of future generations or the romanticization of crime, but additionally that such sensational literature may challenge or subvert social, class, and gender roles. While Council members were concerned specifically with the potential effects of such literature on boys and the possibility of encouraging a life of crime, their stated concerns regarding the effects on girls were that it would encourage romantic and fanciful notions of a life not so constrained by domestic responsibilities.

### **The National Home Reading Union: Policing the sensational**

Do we well consider what an immeasurable amount of harm it is capable of doing? Books are such important factors in our lives. The novelist of to-day is the man or woman who reaches the greatest audience. Fancy writing what five thousand may read! Think how the hearts of thousands can be invaded! Novels are in this age the chief reading of the masses, particularly the young. Then let us try to suppress the bad ones. (NCWC, 1903, p. 98)

In the early years of its formation, the National Council proposed a systematic, disciplined, and organized approach to cultivating the good taste of the Canadian public. Under the auspices of the National Council of Women, the National Home Reading Union (NHRU) was formed in 1895 (for an analysis of the British Home Reading Union, see Snape, 2002). At the annual meeting of 1896, Miss Skelton discussed the NHRU at length and outlined how it proposed a good and systematic approach to reading:

We are all too apt nowadays, when books and magazines are so cheap, and are to be found everywhere, to read in a desultory way, simply as a kind of distraction, whereas, were we to read a little more regularly and systematically, we should soon find that our minds, instead of being distraught and dissipated in the vain endeavor to keep up with the flood of literary gossip, would become gradually strengthened and filled with thoughts and ideas which would serve as life-giving food. (NCWC, 1896, p. 245-46)

The Home Reading Union sought to encourage thoughtful and systematic reading "among those who required to be induced to read, and who needed some direction in their choice of books" (NCWC, 1896, p. 246-247). Membership in the Union included a subscription to a magazine that ran articles on featured books and suggested readings. For a member to receive a certificate at the end of

the year, he or she had to have read at least six of the recommended books (NCWC, 1896).

But the real value of the NHRU was its encouragement of the reading of good literature, the development of literacy skills, and the exchange of ideas and opinions about the books under discussion. Outlining the finer details of membership, Skelton stated that individuals could join alone or as part of a group. "This latter method is recommended as being distinctly best when feasible, for, in addition to the advantages gained by reading, there is the still greater advantage of the interchange of ideas and the discussion of moot points" (NCWC, 1896, p. 247). Commenting on how the Reading Union worked, she suggested the creation of a critically debating public: "Essays or short papers might be written in answer to the questions which are often asked by the writer of the magazine articles—in short, the circle meeting might become a very interesting literary or debating club" (NCWC, 1896, p. 248). The practical application of the Reading Union, then, was to encourage the Canadian public to read, and debate, a better class of books and novels. The attempt to encourage a wide membership in reading unions was reflected in the suggestions of how such clubs were best formed: "call public or drawing room meetings. . . get clergymen and ministers to interest their congregations. . . get a few people, fond of reading, to start circles, and write notices for the local papers which would attract the attention of the public" (NCWC, 1896, p. 249). Additionally, suggestions were made that public libraries, as well as organizations such as the YMCA and YWCA, should include selected books on their shelves so that they might be readily available to the public (NCWC, 1896, p. 249). What these strategies indicated was a very deliberate "reaching out" to the masses of the Canadian public in an attempt to engage women and men in a thoughtful, critical, and disciplined approach to leisured reading.

Confronting a then-prevalent opinion that reading novels was a selfish act and a waste of time, the founders of the National Home Reading Union instead contended that reading was an important act of self-development and self-culture for both the working and the middle classes. As stated by a member participating in the discussion on reading:

There is so much to do in the world it seems a selfishness to take time for self-culture, and yet the world's work needs trained workers, and there is a right self-seeking in order to service. And so I think every woman should claim as her 'right' some time each day to be absolutely alone, to sit still, to read, to rest, to consider. (NCWC, 1896, p. 251)

This participation of middle-class women in self-culture thereby enabled them to develop their own moral and cultural capital, which in turn justified their roles as cultural, moral, and social arbiters (Rubin, 1992). At the same time that the Reading Union encouraged the working classes in their pursuit of self-improvement, it also reinforced the social and cultural distinctions between genteel and sensational culture (Denning, 1987; Enstad, 1999). In fact, the Reading Union attempted specifically to police this boundary between the genteel and the sensational, as is evident in the 1898 discussion on the progress of the Union. Stating that the most "in demand" titles were Bacon's *Essays*, Carlyle's *Chartism*,

Sterling's *Torch-bearers of History*, and Rose's *Uses of Democracy*, a representative from the Montréal Local Council of Women concluded that "the fact that people throughout the country are being induced to read such books shows not only that the Union is a useful agency but that it is a most valuable aid towards attaining a broader and better standard of literary taste among our people" (NCWC, 1898, p. 306-307). That a "better standard of literary taste" was thought to be acquired through reading political non-fiction illustrates the extent to which Council members distrusted popular fiction and specifically excluded such novels from the canons of "literary taste."

The National Home Reading Union was predicated on the idea of practical education, a form of education that sought to "train minds to the level of their capacities" (NCWC, 1895, p. 306). This approach to practical education reserved a specific role for well-educated, socially minded, middle-class women to guide the working classes to self-improvement:

Such an educator will understand the right uses of books as applied to the needs of the hour and the good she wishes to accomplish, never for one moment losing sight of the sifting process that must precede her selection. Think of the magnitude of the task—to rightly determine what is a wise choice, with so much that is good and needful to choose, and so much that is evil to avoid. (NCWC, 1895, p. 306-07)

In this educational work, middle-class women were able to cultivate their cultural and moral capital as they attempted to lead the working classes along appropriate routes to their self-development and improvement.

### **Taste and the Canadian public**

In their attempts to form and reform the reading habits of the working classes, moral reformers presumed the Canadian public had naturally bad taste. The task of correcting the bad taste of the public fell to the educated and enlightened women of the National Council, working in concert with teachers, educators, librarians, storeowners, and legislators. The campaign against impure literature, then, must be understood as more than a call for increased surveillance and censorship. It was part and parcel of a larger process of cultivating, educating, and forming the cultural tastes of the public. In addition to the attempts to actually remove "pernicious" material from stores and libraries, Council members pursued a wide-ranging project of reform that sought to inculcate in the working classes a taste for good and healthy literature. This program was not limited to dime novels, but also addressed theatre, movies, posters, and the popular press. In the discussions regarding the potential danger of "pernicious" media, Council members constructed specific roles for themselves, for working-class women and men, and for children and youth of both sexes. Throughout their discussions, distinctions were drawn between the individuals who possessed the moral and cultural capital to lead such initiatives and those individuals who were thought to benefit from them. In this sense, then, Council members positioned themselves as "mothers of the nation," whose duty was to rein in the inherent bad taste of the Canadian public.

Council discourses on impure literature stressed the extent to which the moral development of children, a province largely in the hands of women within



the home, was central to the development and progress of the Canadian nation. The problems of impure literature—its accessibility, affordability, and popularity—required an engaged and committed response not only by the nation's leaders through the drafting of relevant legislation, but also by the nation's mothers in the development of a wide-ranging program of moral regulation, surveillance, and the reform of popular culture.

By raising alarm bells over the potential influence of popular literature on children's sensibilities and the nation's cultural standards, the Council's campaign against "pernicious" literature created a public role for middle-class female moral reformers. Through their activism on these issues, Council members were able to construct public opinion on the problem of "pernicious" literature, raise awareness about the potential harm of such material, and present tangible and reasonable strategies to address the problem. These strategies were predicated on the assumption that women's primary responsibilities revolved around the home and the "proper" raising of their children. What is strikingly absent from the Council members' discussions is any sustained criticism or analysis of the industries that produced and circulated "pernicious" literature. While Council members expressed support for measures to criminalize the sale of indecent literature, their efforts at eradicating such material were largely focused on educational strategies designed to improve the taste of the Canadian reading public. The publishers that created dime fiction, penny dreadfuls, and sensational romances managed to escape sustained criticism. Instead, reformers developed strategies targeting the individual citizen: mothers were expected to monitor their children's reading and encourage a diet of healthy fiction, middle-class reformers and educators were given the responsibility of exposing children and the working classes to higher-quality literature, and individuals themselves were encouraged to undertake projects of self-improvement through participation in the National Home Reading Union.

The National Council's campaign against "pernicious" literature at the turn of the twentieth century set an important precedent for contemporary approaches to media education and literacy. Indeed, through this campaign, Council members asserted that proper moral instruction within the home was the most effective defence against "pernicious" literature. Within this paradigm, it was the mother's task to wisely regulate the cultural diet of the children in her care. In their separate discussions on the forms and practices of media education, Spigel (1998) and Seiter (1998) argue that the changing multimedia landscape has meant that women's child-rearing responsibilities must also include the effective and disciplined regulation of their children's media consumption. By focusing on strategies such as developing children's critical thinking skills, employing technologies such as the V-chip and blocking software, and encouraging parents to take a more active role in their children's media consumption, contemporary media education aims to empower the media consumer. But, at the same time, such strategies also reinforce relationships of dominance and subordination: between parents and children, between "educated" reformers and "uneducated" subjects, and between media producers and media consumers. Spigel and Seiter note that what has been absent from these debates is the suggestion that media industries have any responsibility to their consumers. Lost in the concerns over how to "manage"

media in the home is the suggestion that media industries should be responsive to consumers' demands for higher-quality programming. Rather, the onus falls upon the individual consumer to make smarter media choices.

In his discussion of the "censorship campaigns" of the National Council of Women and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Wilson (1998) observes that Canadian historians have largely ignored the history of censorship and the important role that women's organizations played therein. To this cogent observation, I would add that communication scholars in Canada have tended to ignore the relationship between communication and moral regulation, the role of middle-class female moral reformers in an emergent critique of mass culture, and the history of popular culture regulation in Canada. It is my hope that through this analysis of the debate over "pernicious" literature, we can begin a productive dialogue that seeks to uncover, explain, and critique the complex relations between nation-building, moral regulation, and Canadian communication history.

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### Note

1. Throughout this discussion, I use the phrase "pernicious literature" to describe the Council's campaign. It should be noted, however, that Council members used the adjective "pernicious" interchangeably with "impure," "obscene," and "questionable." Indeed, the official name of the committee investigating the issue seems to have changed from year to year. I have relied on the phrase "pernicious literature" because it was the phrase initially used by Council members and because it conveys the severity of the concern over such material.

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