

Wayward Reading:

Women's Crime and Incarceration in the United States, 1890-1935

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Abstract

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This dissertation, "Wayward Reading: Women's Crime and Incarceration in the United States, 1890-1935" illuminates the literary stakes of a crucial, yet overlooked, moment in the history of American incarceration: the development of the women's prison and the unique body of literature that materialized alongside that development.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, the women's prison became a testing ground for the study of women's sexuality: social scientists sought to assimilate their "patients" into gendered and racialized citizenship by observing the minutiae of women's everyday lives and policing their sexual and social associations. Ultimately, this experimental study of women's sexuality served to reinforce racial stratification: sociologists figured white women's waywardness as necessitating rescue and rehabilitation into domesticity, and depicted black women's waywardness as confirming their essential criminality, justifying their harsher punishment and consignment to contingent labor. I argue that women's imprisonment also sparked another kind of experimentation, however, one based in literary form. A wide range of writers produced a body of literature that also focused on the "wayward girl's" life trajectory. I contend that these authors drew on social science's classificatory system and cultural authority to offer alternate scales of value and to bring into focus new forms of relationship that had the potential to unsettle the color line. In *Jennie Gerhardt*, for instance, Theodore Dreiser invokes legitimate kinship outside the racialized boundaries of marriage, while women incarcerated in the New York State Reformatory for Women exchanged love poetry and epistles that imagine forms of romance exceeding the racial and sexual divides that the prison sought to enforce. *Wayward Reading* thus draws together an unexpected array of sociological, legal and literary texts that theorize women's crime and punishment to imagine alternate directions that

modern social experience might take: popular periodicals such as the *Delineator* magazine, criminological studies by Frances Kellor and Katharine Bement Davis, the poetry and letters of women incarcerated at the New York State Reformatory for Women, and novels by W.E.B Du Bois and Theodore Dreiser.

To understand how both social difference and social intimacy were reimagined through the space of the women's prison, I model what I call "wayward" reading, tracing the interchange between social scientific and literary discourses. I draw attention to archives and texts that are frequently sidelined as either purely historical repositories (such as institutional case files from the New York State Reformatory) or as didactic and one-dimensional (such as Frances Kellor's sociological exploration of women's crime), as well as to literary texts not traditionally associated with women's imprisonment (such as W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*). Reading "waywardly" thus allows me to recover a diverse set of aesthetic experiments that developed alongside women's imprisonment, and also to reconsider critical assumptions about the status of "prison writing" in literary studies. A number of critics have outlined the prison as a space of totalizing dehumanization that in turn reflects a broader logic of racialized domination structuring American culture. As such, scholars have read literary texts that describe incarceration as either enforcing or critiquing carceral violence. However, by turning our attention to the less-explored formation of the women's prison, I argue that authors mobilized social science not only to critique the prison's violence and expose how it produced social difference, but also to re-envision the relationships that comprised modern social life altogether.

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Introduction

Wayward Reading and the Development of Women's Crime and Incarceration

In 1920, a 22-year-old woman named Ruth Long, who had recently served a sentence for prostitution at the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills, sent a letter to the prison's superintendent, as each woman released from the institution on parole was required to do.

Ruth writes,

any way i shall do my best to prove myself worthy of your trust in me, the weather has been very hot here too, well i don't really know just what to write i am at a loss as to what to say, i am having my poetry put in book form, and my whole heart and soul is really in my work and if it fall i shall be terrible disappointed, i am going to see a picture tonight whilst new york sleeps, sounds good doesn't it.¹

Despite the fact that Ruth professes that she is "at a loss as to what to say," her brief lines begin to illuminate her relationship to her experience with the reformatory, as well as her tentative and partial freedom in the city. Ruth responds to the task of reporting on her progress on "remolding her future" and the surveillance of her daily life that that entails, echoing the mission of the reformatory in her comment that "i shall do my best to prove myself worthy." Yet at the same time, she playfully reflects on her inarticulacy and provides a stream of quotidian details about her day that tell the prison staff little about her actual life and relationships – the fact that she is not working as mandated, for example, which she briefly mentions without explanation at her letter's start. Furthermore, Ruth somewhat slyly suggests that she is attending modern and unwholesome entertainment such as moving pictures, a practice that the institution's reformers sought to train out of the young women. And she also addresses the superintendent with an easy intimacy, inviting her

¹ "my dear friend," Case 2778, Series 14610-77B Bedford Hills Correctional Facility Inmate Case Files, 1915-30, Records of the Department of Correctional Services, New York State Archives and Records Administration, State Education Department, Albany, NY. To comply with the NYS Department of Correctional Services regulations for restricted records, I have created fictitious names for the incarcerated women in these files. In this introduction, as well as the fourth chapter and afterword, however, I will cite the case number for each file.

to imagine the pleasure of taking in “a picture tonight whilst new york sleeps, sounds good doesn’t it.” At the center of Ruth’s missive, however, is her assertion of a different kind of authorship than the prison administration asked of her – her poetry, which is her “whole heart and soul,” offering an alternate kind of “work” than the domestic labor expected as a condition of her parole and available to her in the city. How might we read and make meaning of Ruth’s invocation of her literary work, as well as her artful style of writing within the constraints of a mandated parole letter? Is it possible to seek out, retrieve and recover the poetry that Ruth alludes to writing? In fact, the case file that the prison maintained on Ruth’s history, as well as her experiences while incarcerated and on parole preserves multiple and multi-layered forms of Ruth’s writings – in large part due to its surveillance of her lived experience before, during and after her imprisonment.

Long’s record from her time at Bedford reflects the possibilities and precarity of life for a young black woman in modernizing New York City, as well as a life often shaped by carceral violence: according to the personal and institutional histories that the reformatory’s matrons dutifully documented, as a young child, Ruth had “absconded” from the Brooklyn Howard Colored Orphan Asylum, and as an eleven-year-old, Ruth was committed to the Hudson Training School for Girls (the first juvenile facility for girls in the state of New York), on charges of “immorality.”² Ruth’s parents had moved from Virginia and South Carolina to New York but their whereabouts were unknown; the matron notes that Ruth was “an illegitimate child” and “her mother was said to be immoral,” suggesting that Ruth had replicated her mother’s waywardness.³ As a teenager, furthermore, Ruth had been arrested for variations of “sexual misconduct” almost every year, and was sent to the workhouse for punishment.⁴ From these accounts in the case file, it would appear

² “Verified History,” Case 2778.

³ Ibid.

⁴ For violations of the tenement house law, as well as for soliciting. See “Verified History,” Case 2778.

that Ruth's life trajectory was pre-determined and proscribed by the racist criminal justice system and the de facto segregation and economic exclusion of black people who had migrated to the urban north; indeed, the last record about Ruth's experiences after her time at Bedford is a note about her incarceration at Auburn Prison, a state prison which housed women "depicted by the larger society and criminal justice officials as irredeemable."⁵

Yet despite its record of this carceral violence, the case file also inadvertently contains some of Ruth's writings (though not her collected works into which she put her "whole heart"), from letters to the reformatory matrons to a theatrical play that she composed for other incarcerated women to perform during their time at Bedford; these pieces of Ruth's work invoke possibilities for movement and a different future than the prison imagined for her, and which the racist hierarchy of the city seemed to allow. Take, for instance, Ruth's play "In the Woods," which she wrote while in Bedford's pseudo-pastoral and isolated environs outside the city, and which describes a man lost in the woods and addressed by nature. Joined by a chorus of flora and fauna, the character of "the bluebird" instructs the protagonist that her song will give him, "hope, courage that will break fate's/rod. . .I give to you in the woods today,/ The bluebird, the bird of happiness, leave these/ to you as I fly away."⁶ While it might be tempting to read this premise as cliché, or as dwelling within the reformatory's forced sentimentality, in fact it is a formal experiment in navigating and seeking to exceed the constraints of its institutional context. These verses begin to transform the reformatory's rural enclosure into a space that where the determinism of "fate's rod" might in fact be broken and where flight – the ability to "fly away" – was possible. The case file's play obviously does not give us access to Ruth's collected poetic works (which we learn about in her parole letter), but it provides a

⁵ Cheryl Hicks, *Talk with You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press (2010), 127.

⁶ "In the Woods: A One Act Play," Case No. 2778.

partial window into how Ruth may have used the written word to redefine her place within, and refuse altogether, the violent discourse to which she was subjected.

Thus, rather than provide a simple account of total dehumanization or heroic resistance to state violence, these writings occupy a vexed relationship to the mode of discipline that demands their collection and preservation in order to monitor and re-form imprisoned women's lives. The prison's staff of experts, too, have made note of Ruth's poetic talents in her file, though they read Ruth's authorship as a symptom of her waywardness. The staff psychologist writes, "Ruth is an excellent example of the modern psychological teaching that the borderline between insanity and genius is hard to define. Her poetry shows very clearly its source in her own obsessions. It is introspective and full of self-pity. Nevertheless this sublimation is an indication...that her future looks more hopeful now than at any other time...It is the best possible moment to give her an opportunity in order that she might remould her life."⁷ Here, we see how the prison's staff exploit Ruth's poetry's social and aesthetic potential for their own program of discipline and reform, seeking to mold Ruth's future into an acceptable position and trajectory. Ruth's case file and the writing contained therein is not simply a repository of demographic information or a record of carceral violence (though the file contains elements of both). Instead, it exists as an aesthetic text and generic object whose meaning was contested from its inception.

As we begin to read Ruth's file for its cultural antagonism and literary experiment, then, we encounter a series of questions. How do we account for both its discursive violence and its formal experimentation? Why was the social future of the "wayward girl" the subject of so much scrutiny and contestation? Who was deemed "incorrigible" – that is, seemingly promiscuous, "associating with vicious and dissolute persons," "willfully disobedient" and "in danger of becoming morally

⁷ Parole Report," Case No. 2778.

depraved” – and why?⁸ As we interpret and respond to the case file’s experimentation, how might we avoid replicating the state’s violence while also taking into account the historical structures through which its form emerged? Finally, how did other authors respond to these new conceptualizations of women’s criminality as well as the women’s prison as a newly separate institution? This dissertation, “Wayward Reading: Women’s Crime and Incarceration, 1890-1925,” takes up these questions as it illuminates a series of aesthetic experiments sparked by the growing attention to women’s “criminality” and incarceration at the turn of the century. The wide range of authors that focused on the problematic of “women’s crime” – from a well-known novelist such as Theodore Dreiser, to women incarcerated at Bedford Reformatory, whose case files are seldom read for the creative work they contain – produced works that drew upon the developing discourse concerned with women’s crime to reimagine radically new social futures at the start of the 20th century. In the process, authors not only envisioned alternative trajectories for social life in the US, but also grappled with the historical violence that shaped their newly modern moment.

During the Progressive Era, to combat what was called “the girl problem,” new laws were established to criminalize young women’s sexual disobedience and to police “undesirable associations,” or social relationships developed outside domestic propriety that might lead to sexual reproduction (especially between races). Police were given license to search both private and public spaces for women who seemed to have the potential to engage in casual sex, whether two young women walking alone at night (were they soliciting?), or a group of young men and women socializing in an apartment (what were the women’s incentives for being there?). And parents were given license to report their daughters for “waywardness” or “incurability,” that is, any suspicions

⁸ Act of May 13, 1886, Ch. 353, § 1, 1886 N.Y. Laws 559, 560 qtd. in Cheryl Hicks, *Talk with You Like a Woman*, 184.

they might have that their unmarried daughters were falling in with a fast crowd or having sex.⁹

New court systems designated solely for juveniles, women, and/or the family unit were developed to enforce these laws, and to police definitions of domesticity and the bounded family form. Finally, new penal institutions – which social workers and sociologists referred to as the reformatory model – were developed to house so-called “female offenders,” to study their so-called promiscuous and criminal tendencies and to decide their proper course of treatment and whether they should be rehabilitated into proper domesticity or otherwise punished, as reformers sought to determine the social trajectory of the modern city. Up to the late 19th and early 20th century separate prisons for women had not existed; it was during the Progressive Era that the women’s prison was established as a separate institution.¹⁰

In what follows, I will first provide a historical overview of Progressive Era social reform and modern social science and its relationship to the development of the women’s criminalization and incarceration. I focus on progressivism and social scientific inquiry because the sociological study of women’s criminality and sexual “waywardness” deeply influenced how women’s prisons were conceived and institutionalized as separate institutions. Furthermore, this new expertise in women’s crime and punishment provided a platform for people previously excluded from civic activity (perhaps most frequently white women, though also African American women and men) to establish their professional qualifications, and (somewhat paradoxically) to envision and reshape the

⁹ See Cheryl Hicks, *Talk with You Like a Woman*; Ruth Alexander, *The Girl Problem: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1995); Mary E. Odom, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (1995).

¹⁰ The first prison for women in the United States was established in Indiana in 1874; in 1901, the New York State Reformatory for Women was established as the third prison for women in the US (Freedman 46). In the first two decades of the 20th century, women’s reformatories were increasingly established across the U.S., but especially in the northeast. See Estelle B. Freedman’s chapter “Feminist or Feminine? The Establishment of Separate Women’s Prisons, 1870-1900,” in *Their Sisters’ Keepers: Women’s Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (1981). For an extremely detailed account of early women’s prisons in the United States from the period, see Eugenia Lekkerkerker, *Reformatories for Women in the United States*, The Hague: J.B. Wolters (1931).

modernizing social order in the U.S. As such, attending to the development of women's criminalization and incarceration also highlights how new conceptions of citizenship and social belonging were experimented with and envisioned during this period, despite its reputation for the establishment of modern disciplinary structures. Second, I will address how reading for the representational experiments that this discourse of women's criminality generated might shift our understanding of early 20th century realism, the period's dominant mode of literary expression. Finally, I will begin to outline how the constellation of literary texts that respond to the study and institutionalization of women's crime and incarceration might contribute to conversations about the generic status of "prison writing," and its capacity for illuminating histories of social violence, social difference and social intimacy that continue to shape life in the U.S.

Social Science and Progressive Era Reform

During the Progressive Era, which I loosely define as beginning in the 1890s and concluding in the 1920s (or from the end of the Gilded Age up to the Wall Street crash that concluded the 20s), social reform movements – and the social scientific study on which they were usually based – emerged in response to the forceful changes in the urban north. Despite progressive reformers' hopes to bridge the American nation's traditions with a more harmonious, modern future, this emerging modernity was characterized by conflict and collision. The afterlife of American slavery continued to shape social experience, as racial violence and oppression in the south sparked migration to the urban north, radically changing the urban, industrial landscape, which up to the early 20th century had remained mainly white.¹¹ As Farah Jasmine Griffin has observed, "The growing number of blacks in America's urban centers was viewed as an omen of a dramatic change

¹¹ Kevin Mumford observes in *Interzones: Black/White Sex Zones in Chicago and New York in the Early 20th Century*, "in protest of outrageous repression, African Americans picked up, left their southern roots, and commenced a movement that would transform American life...Between 1910 and 1920 the black population of New York increased by 66 percent" (xviii). Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Zones in Chicago and New York in the Early 20th Century*, New York: Columbia University Press (1997).

in Western society; as one example of the crisis of modernism: evidence that the natural order was in jeopardy.”¹² While the north had championed the abolition of slavery decades earlier, white northerners had not expected that African Americans would migrate in great numbers from the south, and their arrival was met with anxiety and violence. In addition to the upheaval that internal migration created in the urban north, moreover, large waves of immigration from Europe, especially from the southern and eastern regions, also arrived in northern cities. Matthew Frye Jacobson has noted that the rapid growth of American industry required a larger labor force, while the political and economic upheaval in Europe resulted in “unprecedented migration” of Europeans to the United States.¹³ These European migrations marked a shift from “the unquestioned hegemony of a unified race of ‘white persons’” in the United States “to a contest over political ‘fitness’ among a now fragmented, hierarchically arranged series of distinct white races.”¹⁴ In combination with black migration within the US, these seismic changes to the urbanizing landscape in the north seemed to represent an unprecedented threat to the white social order that the American nation was based upon. But they also represented unparalleled opportunity and change for the people who actually made new homes in urban centers. And for groups of urban elite and the city’s burgeoning middle class, who sought to explore the potential of but also to maintain their sense of order in the newly dynamic cityscape, these changes provided problems, tensions and crises that served as a platform for regulating and re-forming the city’s social fabric itself.

¹² Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Who Set You Flowin’?: The African-American Migration Narrative*, New York: Oxford University Press (1996), 51. Griffin also notes that this mass migration from the south was not only met with anxiety from white and black residents of the north, but that for those arriving in northern cities urban experience was an “assault on the migrant psyche” (51).

¹³ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1999), 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 41.

Focused on improving and reshaping the everyday experiences as well as the social roles of working, immigrant and migrant classes in the fluid and overflowing city, reformers sought to assimilate these city-dwellers into respectable and well-ordered domestic life, productive labor and civic duty in a newly modern era. Reformers created new institutions focused on social welfare, passed new regulatory laws and developed new social scientific methods for studying the “social problems” that migration, industrialization and the advent of consumer culture seemed to herald. While it might be tempting to view this reformist discourse as plainly coercive and objectifying (since these new programs often indeed aspired to forms of social control), in reality, the social “experiments” that progressive reformers conceptualized were multi-dimensional and were also implemented towards a variety of ends. As Shannon Jackson has noted in her study of Jane Addams’ seminal Hull-House Settlement, during this period, American culture “occupied a liminal zone that struggled to understand itself,” and thus reform work itself comprised a project that was “messy and paradoxical.”¹⁵

Much of progressive reform depended on and uneasy proximities to and identifications with the populations that these newly professional reformers sought to observe and reshape, as progressivism also opened the door for a different set of leaders, many of whom had not been historically afforded the opportunity to fully engage in civic life and political efforts. For example, white women social workers, who had themselves just broken into the echelons of graduate education, started settlement houses, where they lived in close contact with the immigrant and working class populations whose domestic lives they studied, despite the wide gap that separated their life experiences (as per Addams’ Hull House). Black sociologists such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells mobilized their discipline’s scientific descriptions to unsettle the popular, and racist

¹⁵ Shannon Jackson, *Lines of Activity: Performance, Historiography, Hull-House Domesticity*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (2001), 4-5.

view of black life as a fixed, unchanged and threatening essence, instead showing how black experience was formed “via the violently imposed effects of the color line.”¹⁶ And middle class black women activists and clubwomen such as Victoria Earle Matthews established mission homes for young women migrating from the south, and advocated for their economic opportunities, engaging in the project of racial uplift.¹⁷ As these disparate reformers sought to engage in and create reformist practices meant to benefit the populations they studied, they also sought to carve out new forms of professional prowess and civic influence for themselves.

But besides the tenuous affiliation between social reformer and social problem, what most united these various “experiments” (which, as we’ll see, becomes an almost generic term throughout the Progressive Era, whose connotations were just as often at odds as overlapping) was the belief that empirical knowledge itself could truly transform modernizing social conditions. This faith in empiricism was especially powerful as for seemed to perpetually teeter on the brink of becoming unrecognizable and dangerous to the future of American social life. If reformers could find a way to accurately pinpoint and describe a social “problem” or population, then they had the tools to transform it, reimagining the appropriate form it should take in the future. As Christine Stansell has observed in *American Moderns*, this faith in the power of empiricism and sociological research was also an engagement with questions of representation and imagination; she argues that the progressives believed that “in order to understand those one would aid on the other side of the class divide, one must first be able to imagine them.”¹⁸ This empirical comprehension required radically

¹⁶ Alexander Weheliye, “Diagrammatics as Physiognomy: W.E.B. Du Bois’s Graphic Modernities,” *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 15.2 (2015), 27.

¹⁷ See Cheryl Hicks’ chapter “I Want to Save These Girls: Single Black Women and Their Protectors, 1895-1911,” in *Talk With You Like a Woman*.

¹⁸ Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (2000), 16.

new methods for scientific study, and reformers and social scientists sought to immerse themselves within the environments and conditions that they researched. Ellen Fitzpatrick also points out that progressive reformers were “impatient with traditional modes of analysis and enamored of scientific fact” and “...mounted social investigations at every turn, convinced that knowledge in itself was the key to intelligent reform.”¹⁹ Even as social science developed into a pronounced academic discipline, its “social investigations” took place not solely within university walls (though certainly the university supported its ventures) but in the “laboratory” of the rapidly transforming city itself.²⁰ However, as we’ll begin to see in the next section, while the experimental dimensions of progressive reform performed unexpected and varied cultural work, they also invented and enforced new variations of social norms that in fact replaced or amplified the stratifications and past forms of violence that they imagined to redress.

Social Scientific Reform and Women’s Crime

The figure of the “wayward girl” was perched at the fault line of social scientific reform’s aspirations to both reimagine a new and improved social order and to police social norms that still had their basis in white supremacy. Urbanization reconfigured shared social space in the U.S. and engendered new proximities between immigrants, migrants and the working classes more generally in the city. As Priscilla Wald has observed, sociologists and lawmakers described growing urban areas as “promiscuous spaces,” “where people mingled with strangers, where boundaries were fluid, and traditional spatial segregation according to class, race, religion, sexuality, gender, nationality held no purchase.”²¹ Given the opportunities that modernizing city presented for “intermingling” and undermining the norms of domestic life seen to uphold the modern nation state, the regulation of

¹⁹ Ellen Fitzpatrick, *Endless Crusade: Women Social Scientists and Progressive Reform*, New York: Oxford University Press (1990), xiii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Priscilla Wald, “Theodore Dreiser’s Sociological Vision,” *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, Eds. Leonard Cassuto, Clare Virginia Eby, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2004), 182.

normative categories of gender and sexuality became an especially urgent concern for progressive reformers. Women who moved between home and the city streets encountered the possibilities and dangers (depending on who you asked) of these “promiscuous spaces,” with their obvious connotations of unregulated and generative sexuality, were perceived to be a direct threat to the nation’s reproductive future. Thus, in the urban north, the “wayward” girl, or the figure that seemed to drift between and unsettle the boundaries the traditional domain of the domestic and the urban environment at large, came to emblemize the “promiscuous relations” of shared urban space and its potential threat to the future reproduction of white social life.

Concern over young working class women’s so-called sexual promiscuity reached a fevered pitch in both reform circles and popular opinion by the end of the first decade of the 20th century. Young women from European immigrant, white and African American working class families who performed wage work outside the home often experimented with the limits of parental control and marriage, enjoying new forms of leisure and intimacy, sometimes sexual, in the modernizing city.²² As young women unhinged sex from the domestic, associating it with the pleasures of modern consumption, they troubled the nexus between maternal reproduction and domesticity traditionally understood to be the foundation of the racialized American nation-state. Thus, young working class women’s potentially unregulated sexual reproduction in urban space became a focal point for anxieties over the dissolution of the family form and the decline of the white “American” race in the face of cultural fears about miscegenation.²³

²² See Alexander, *The ‘Girl Problem’: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930*.

²³ Alys Eve Weinbaum refers to the relationship between racialized reproduction and racial nationalism in early 20th century America as the “the race/reproduction bind,” arguing that it is crucial to an understanding of the systems of thought constitutive of the modern nation-state: “the figuration of the racialized maternal body comes to index the mechanism and the meaning of the color line that characterizes and simultaneously contours the nation in which that body resides” (17-18). Alys Eve Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.

The “girl problem,” “waywardness,” or “sexual misconduct” thus became a central focus for sociological study and reformist campaigns.²⁴ Women’s markedly increased criminalization and incarceration in the urban north in this period was tied to the desire to regulate women’s sexuality, their potential maternity, and to preserve the sanctity of white domesticity in the modernizing city. As leading criminologist and corrections official Katharine Bement Davis put it, “There is little doubt in the minds of those who have had much experience dealing with women delinquents, that the fundamental fact is that they belong to the class of women who lead sexually immoral lives.”²⁵ In particular, the concept of so-called “white slavery,” in which reformers believed that young white immigrant women “drifting” through urban space were “procured” or trapped into prostitution, scaffolded the moral panic that gripped urban reformers in the north, while also providing the impetus (and funding) for major research projects.²⁶ Social scientists studied women’s social environments, family histories, labor conditions, and physical health in their efforts to detect the root causes of women’s alleged promiscuity and incorrigibility. With a clear picture and definite knowledge of how best to identify and re-form the wayward girl (and her capacity for reproduction), these reformers believed that they might make the city’s social future legible, and in turn transform and control the city’s social composition.

As with most social scientific research and reform during the period, these studies were used to varied ends. The young criminologist Frances Kellor, who will be the focus of the first chapter,

²⁴ I draw the term “the girl problem” from Ruth Alexander’s *The ‘Girl Problem’*, which in turn takes it from the language of social reformers during the period. See also Regina Kunzel’s chapter on “The New Experts and the ‘Girl Problem’” in *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Women and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945*. New Haven: Yale University Press (1995).

²⁵ Katharine Bement Davis, “Plan of Rational Treatment for Women Offenders,” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 4.3 (1913), 403.

²⁶ See Kevin Mumford, “Jack Johnson and the Abolition of White Slavery” in *Interzones*. For a treatment of the cultural circulation of “white slavery” discourse, see Barbara Antoniazzi, *The Wayward Woman: Progressivism, Prostitution and Performance in the United States, 1888-1917*, Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press (2014).

developed innovative new methods and tools to study both the causes and history of women's crime, for instance using a kymograph (a machine similar to what we know as a lie detector today) to measure incarcerated women's emotional reactions and sensations, and visiting "convict farms" that incarcerated black women in the south, in her efforts to bring a newly comprehensive view of women's role in modern life into view.²⁷ Newly professionalized white women social scientists such as Kellor used the study of women's crime – not only to sharpen an understanding of women's alleged criminality and to develop new social programming to reshape urban social life – but also to re-envision a future in which they occupied a more fluid and powerful civic role. As Regina Kunzel observes in her study of the professionalization of social work in the first half of the 20th century, women social scientists sought to establish their professional credentials through their scientific and unsentimental study and treatment of working class women's sexuality.²⁸

At the crux of this panicked attention to the "wayward girl" and the "woman offender" was the mission to preserve racialized domesticity. As reformers and social scientists attempted to make the wayward girl's social future legible and re-formable, their experimental study of women's sexuality served to reinforce racial stratification as well as create a new racist order in the modern urban north. Even as liberal reformers studied the "environmental conditions" that seemed to shape women's "criminality," they viewed black migrants from the south as less culturally advanced due to the legacy of slavery, as Khalil Muhammad has observed. Muhammad writes, "[African American migrants'] ancestral victimization as the children and grandchildren of ex-slaves tied them to both an exceptional past and a peculiar present. Immigrants from dozens of European cities had their own distinct histories of oppression and subjugation, but their trans-Atlantic landing at Ellis Island helped wash away those distinctions....Progressive era social reformers were more willing to

²⁷ Frances Kellor, *Experimental Sociology*, New York: Macmillan (1901).

²⁸ See Kunzel, "The New Experts and the 'Girl Problem'" in *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*.

look beyond the unproductive behavior of the immigrant masses excuse it, or do something about it than was generally the case with black migrants.”²⁹ The gender dynamics of this racialized approach to crime and reform were in fact crucial to Progressive Era efforts to monitor and reshape urban social life. Reformers’ emphasis on black women’s delayed “capacity” for development, combined with explicitly racist law enforcement, translated into a markedly increased criminalization of black women in the urban north, as black women were assumed to be engaged in prostitution much more frequently, arrested at higher rates, yet provided none of the institutional protection that private reform agencies offered white working class women and immigrants.³⁰ In turn, as we will see in the final chapter on the New York State Reformatory for women, sociologists and reformers within the women’s prison figured white women’s waywardness as necessitating rescue and rehabilitation into domesticity, while depicting black women’s waywardness as confirming their essential criminality, justifying their harsher punishment, separation from their families and consignment to contingent labor. This coerced labor was frequently within the white domestic realm itself, or what historian Sarah Haley has recently referred to as “the carceral domestic sphere.”³¹ In this way, as progressive reformers sought to study, diagnose and make legible young women’s “waywardness” in order to mold and monitor the composition and social future of modern urban centers, they also helped to architect the segregation and exploitation of black life in the city and construct a new racist order in the north.

Literary Realism and “Women’s Crime”

²⁹ Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime and the Making of Modern Urban America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press (2011), 101.

³⁰ In *Interzones*, Mumford notes that “by 1920, the majority of prostitutes in prison were African-American women” (112).

³¹ Sarah Haley, “‘Like I was a Man’: Chain Gangs, Gender and the Domestic Carceral Sphere in Jim Crow Georgia,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 39.1 (Autumn 2013).

These debates over the meaning of women's crime captured the attention of a wide range of writers and thinkers (who were often already involved in social reform circles). In particular, social scientists' attempts to research, accurately represent and re-form the future of the "wayward girl," in order to reshape the relational fabric of urban life, presented both an intriguing and challenging platform for writers at the start of the 20th century. As they focused on the "wayward girl's" life trajectory, similarly focusing on how best to represent her sexuality and social relationships, these authors also sought to re-imagine the forms that modern social life might take – in ways that did not always adhere to the harmonious, yet stratified, ideal of the modern city that many social workers and sociologists of the day had in mind. Writers engaged with social science's classificatory systems and cultural authority – its experimental tools and aspiration to re-form the social order – to offer alternate scales of value and to bring into focus new forms of relationship that often had the potential to unsettle the enforcement of the color line in modernizing American culture. In *Jennie Gerhardt*, for instance, Theodore Dreiser uses the developing form of the social case history, which social workers used to track the development of the wayward girl, to invoke legitimate kinship outside the racialized boundaries of marriage. And women incarcerated in the New York State Reformatory for Women, such as Ruth Long, exchanged love poetry and epistles that imagine forms of romance exceeding the racial and sexual divides that the prison sought to enforce.

This is not to say that these aesthetic experiments always purely and perfectly resisted the new forms of carceral violence that they developed in tandem with the women's prison. As these writers engaged with the social scientific investigation of women's "criminality," they also often grappled with the questions about interpretation that Ruth Long's case file raised for us as readers at the beginning of this introduction. To explore and take advantage of the overdetermined symbolism of women's "waywardness" was to risk reinstating the "wayward girl" as a reductive metonym for modern or urban social life, even as authors sought to imagine social relationships and sexual

conventions as more fluid and more just. Similarly, in engaging with the intricacies of the carceral system, writers often ended up envisioning new norms for imprisonment, rather than departing from normative violence altogether. Take, for example, Frances Kellor's *Experimental Sociology*, the first monograph on women's crime and incarceration in the United States. Kellor employed innovative new sociological and representational methods to measure the "woman offender" to in fact redefine what constituted a "normal" woman and carve out more influence for her in modern public life. But at the same time, Kellor's representational experiments also contributed to the increased criminalization of black women and also helped to design new prisons solely for women. Similarly, in the *Delineator* magazine's "Child-Rescue Campaign" that Chapter 2 examines, the magazine (edited by Theodore Dreiser) combines photography and the form of the social scientific case history to advocate for a newly flexible form of motherhood – that simultaneously worked to advance a new conceptualization of "unfit" and deviant maternity.

Yet regardless of these texts' ideological positioning – or perhaps because of their messy and divergent politics – the series of aesthetic experiments sparked by the social scientific development of the women's prison illuminate a more complex relationship between social science, modern discipline and the period's realist literature than previously considered. Critics have tended to think of early 20th century social science as rigid and coercive, providing disciplinary scaffolding for the panoptical surveillance of newly modern life. In turn, scholars have understood realist literature that drew upon new social scientific technologies for observing the modern social landscape as cultivating a sense of safe spectatorship for middle class readers threatened by the city's increasingly "teeming streets," and as supporting institutional and state authority.³² In particular, realist

³² Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1992), 52. In addition Kaplan's seminal study, see also Michael Davitt Bell, *The Problem of American Realism: Studies in the Cultural History of a Literary Idea*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1993), Brook Thomas, *American Literary Realism and the Failed Promise of Contract*, Berkeley (1999), June Howard, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (1985). See also D.A. Miller's famous treatment of

representations of women's sexuality in this period have been understood to showcase this threatening capacity for reproduction as well as for the commodification of sex, while at the same time interpellating and foreclosing the possibilities that these sexual formations present for alternative forms of social relationship in urban space.

Take, for example, Mark Seltzer's work on the imbrication of modern social science and realist and naturalist literature in the early 20th century (which I refer to frequently in the body of this dissertation). In *Bodies and Machines*, Seltzer identifies the construction of the "fallen girl," or prostitute, and the "monstrously productive mother" "of the slums" as the figures around which social science's disciplinary apparatus most fully displays its new powers to monitor and discipline modern life.³³ Seltzer writes, "If the realist and naturalist novel frequently seems to require the figure of the prostitute, this is because the case of the fallen girl provides a way of at once embodying and bringing to book, in both sense, the desire to see and the project of making 'the social' visible...like the fallen girl, the terrifying and fascinating 'spectacle' of the mother is brought to book by the systematic machinery of justice and made legible as a police file or as a 'case' study."³⁴ For Seltzer, literary and social scientific treatments of transgressive women (i.e. the "case study" that he invokes here) and the so-called reproductive and sexual "spectacles" that they present and police, serve to exhibit and enforce the totalizing power of modern discipline, elaborating on Foucault's

the 19th century British novel in *The Novel and the Police*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1989). Jennifer Fleissner's 2004 *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* explores women's central place in realism and naturalism and argues that their "stuckness in place" in fact opens up a different form of literary historiography that exceeds the totalizing discipline Seltzer describes in *Bodies and Machines*. Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2004).

³³ Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, New York: Routledge (1992), 100.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 98-99, 100.

theory of biopower.³⁵ Yet if we consider the ways that authors drew on the experimental study of women's "waywardness" in order to envision alternative futures (rather than enforce status quo social relations, as we see in Seltzer's formulation), we might begin to texture a more complex narrative for the interaction of literature and social science and their disciplinary functions. This account might shed light not only on the new forms of normative violence these social scientific technologies established as they sought to study and observe the "girl problem," but also the possibilities for alternate social relations they imagined and archived.

"Wayward Reading" and Prison Writing

Thus, as "Wayward Reading" moves in a loosely chronological fashion, tracking the developing regime of women's criminalization and incarceration in the first decades of the 20th century, each chapter engages with developing social scientific forms used to monitor the wayward girl, from Frances Kellor's refutation of Lombroso's criminal anthropology and narration of women's crime as environmental, to Dreiser and Du Bois' engagement with the literary dimensions of the social case history, to the genre of the institutional case file itself. To understand how both social difference and social intimacy were reimagined through the representational technologies used to develop the women's prison, I model what I call "wayward reading," tracing the interchange between social scientific and literary discourses during the late 19th and early 20th century. To read waywardly, I'd like to suggest, is to pay attention to both the social possibilities that authors imagined through their focus on (really, their own readings of) women's waywardness. It is also to pay attention to the limitations of those imaginative visions, and attend to how they may also have contributed to the development of a carceral regime for women in the early 20th century US. Reading

³⁵ See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* Volumes 1-3, as well as *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1977. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books, 1978. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*. New York: Random House, 1985. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the Self*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988.

“waywardly” thus allows me to bring together archives and texts that are frequently sidelined as either purely historical repositories (such as institutional case files from the New York State Reformatory) or as didactic and one-dimensional (such as Frances Kellor’s sociological exploration of women’s crime), as well as to draw attention to literary texts not traditionally associated with women’s criminalization (such as W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, or the *Delineator*, a widely-circulated women’s magazine).

As “Wayward Reading’s” method seeks to recover the diverse set of aesthetic experiments that developed alongside the development of the women’s prison, it also allows us to reconsider assumptions about the status of “prison writing” in literary studies. A number of critics have outlined the prison as a space of totalizing dehumanization that in turn reflects a broader logic of domination structuring American culture, merging Foucault’s theory of the prison with the history of racialized crime and imprisonment rooted in chattel slavery. For example, in his recent *The Prison and the American Imagination*, Caleb Smith draws from Colin Dayan’s scholarship, which for him “suggests that Southern slavery and Northern incarceration were parallel sites for the [‘rituals of exclusion’]” and dehumanizing “civil death.”³⁶ Smith takes the connective “dehumanization” that Dayan draws a step further, observing that there are “uncanny similarities between the solitary cell and the structures of modern social life at large,” and that in fact, penal institutions “reduced the prisoner to a figure of living death, the first phase of his resurrection into a new, redeemed life... [the prison] was a centerpiece, the stage on which a new society of citizen-subjects played out the drama of its own mythic origins.”³⁷ For Smith, then, to constellate literary texts about imprisonment means to find writings that address and draw on the institution’s central “story of death and rebirth” – the

³⁶ Colin Dayan qtd. in Caleb Smith, *The Prison and the American Imagination*, New Haven: Yale University Press (2009), 50.

³⁷ Smith, *The Prison and the American Imagination*, 51.

prison's absolute "living death" remains a constant in these narratives.³⁸ The writerly resistance that Smith highlights (examining the poetry of Jimmy Santiago Baca), for instance, "discovers a kind of liberation in the dismantling of humanity, in the reduction of the captive to condition of mere flesh...stalling it in the phase of living death."³⁹

In his treatment of writing that emerges from the relatively contemporary American prison system, Dylan Rodriguez describes a different mode of literary production, "radical prison praxis," in place of the more well-known concept of "prison writing," and in a sense addresses the "living death" that Smith sees as integral to narratives of imprisonment.⁴⁰ Prison writing, Rodriguez believes, "equilibrates state captivity with other literary movements and spatial sites in civil society, or the free world...[it is] a discursive gesture toward order and coherence, where, for the writers, there is generally neither."⁴¹ Instead, Rodriguez proposes a radical prison praxis that is "political-discursive work embodied by imprisoned radical intellectuals": rather than giving the false illusion of equality with the "free world," radical prison praxis amplifies captivity's "incoherence" and its "threat of imminent death" (rather than a totalizing living death, as in Smith's theorization, a subtle but important distinction), which for Rodriguez also has its origins in the historical formation of chattel slavery. Foundational to this praxis is "its antagonism to the punitive and disciplinary technologies enmeshing its formation."⁴² While Rodriguez carefully limns the institutional constraints that incarcerated authors face, as well as their potential agency vis-à-vis antagonism

³⁸ Ibid, 198.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*, Minneapolis: Minnesota (2004), 73.

⁴¹ Ibid, 86.

⁴² Ibid, 73.

towards this penal domination, his formulation is similar to Smith's in that literary texts that describe incarceration are cast as either complicit with or resistant to the prison's structural violence.

Like Rodriguez, I believe that it is intensely important to attend to the power gradients and institutional location that shape materials from and about the prison. But by turning our attention to the less-explored formation of the women's prison as a separate institution, I argue that authors mobilized social science not only to critique or to contribute to the prison's violence and its production of social difference, but also often to re-envision social life no longer tethered to the color line's intersecting racial and sexual violence. As we'll see in the dissertation's last chapter on the writings of women incarcerated in the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills – which were preserved by the state itself in the institution's case files – even within the isolation and humiliation of the prison, or in the developing carceral violence of the modernizing city, intricate forms of social life were constantly created and lived out. Women had sex, wrote poems, and gave birth in prison. Not all traces of these social and artistic practices, or remnants of these lived experiences and relationships, might be recovered or restored to their original or intended form completely. But by looking in unexpected and often overlooked texts and sites, from the prison case file to the sociologist's notebook, we might read for glimpses into these visions of futures that imagine “wayward” modern life unhinged from normative violence. Reading for these wayward visions might offer a resource for the continuing social and cultural work of “imagining a world without prisons.”⁴³

Chapters Ahead

The first two chapters of “Wayward Reading” focus on texts that trouble the conventions of realism and naturalism, while also inadvertently contributing to the development of women's criminalization and incarceration. My first chapter, “Experimental Naturalism,” examines how the

⁴³ Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press (2003), 8.

sociological study of the “convicted woman” opened up new representational possibilities in the early 20th century, and troubled the formal conventions of the period’s naturalism. I focus on criminologist Frances Kellor’s unorthodox measurements in her 1901 *Experimental Sociology*, a pioneering study of women incarcerated in prisons intended for men, from northern penitentiaries to southern convict farms. Critics such as Seltzer and June Howard have highlighted the intersection of sociological inquiry and naturalist literature, arguing that both forms sought to measure and quantify modernizing social life in order to police its disorder. However, I argue that as Kellor profiled the “convicted woman” and tested social scientific tools and methods – from the kymograph, a machine designed to chart emotion, to the statistical analysis of letters that women composed in prison – she redefined what constituted a “normal” woman and recalibrated her place in modern public life. To refute the 19th century theory that linked the “female offender’s” criminality to her supposedly masculine physiology and racial atavism, Kellor drew attention to the structures that impeded both black and white women’s capacity for enfranchised citizenship. I suggest that Kellor’s engagement with women’s criminality presents a form of naturalism that focused on deviance not only for social control, but to uncover alternate formulations of social life, drawing unexpected connections across class and race – even as Kellor also imagined a new and improved form of imprisonment designed solely for women.

The second chapter of “Wayward Reading,” “Rescued Children and Unfit Mothers,” moves forward a decade to examine the entanglement of maternity and crime in Progressive Era reform. I explore how popular women’s magazines mobilized social science to reconceptualize maternity as based in affective expertise, rather than biological reproduction. I argue that imagining this newly flexible kinship depended on the criminalization of the “unfit” mother. Specifically, I turn to the *Delineator*, a fashion magazine for women edited by Theodore Dreiser, and examine the magazine’s 1907-1911 “Child-Rescue Campaign.” Readers were able to write in to the magazine to adopt

“dependent” children whose images and “case histories” were featured in each issue. These children were often “illegitimate,” or born outside of marriage, as well as frequently from European immigrant families. I argue that these serialized images and “tragic histories” constructed a form of realism in which the *Delineator’s* readers were invited to act as maternal experts, saving “future citizens” by rescuing them “out of a life of crime” and into white, middle class domesticity, at the same time articulating the child’s biological mother as criminal and non-white. I suggest that what I call “child-rescue realism” was haunted by the figure of the “unfit” mother and the possibilities for social upheaval that she came to represent in the national imaginary.

The third and fourth chapters of “Wayward Reading” focus on how a range of authors engaged with the social scientific forms (the case history and the case file) used to monitor the wayward girl to more directly resist and re-envision the normative stratifications that progressive reform in fact engendered. My third chapter, “Reading the Wayward Case History,” pairs together two 1911 novels, Du Bois’ *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* and Theodore Dreiser’s *Jennie Gerhardt*, which center around the figure of the “wayward girl” but until now have not been compared. The novels draw on the conventions of the social case record, whose form sociologists and social workers experimented with to accurately describe a woman’s “deviant” attributes and to reshape her development. I argue that both Dreiser and Du Bois redirect the case history’s mission to reform and regulate modern social life to instead limn structural stratification along racial, ethnic and class lines in the US, and to gesture towards social affiliations no longer stratified by private property and the bounded family form. Dreiser’s *Jennie Gerhardt* focuses on the experience of a young German immigrant woman who has a child outside marriage: I suggest that Dreiser exploits reformers’ emphasis on wayward white women’s need for rescue and rehabilitation to critique the costs of assimilation into white domesticity in the US. Dreiser characterizes Jennie as naturally innocent and thus embodying the potential for kinship no longer predicated on marriage and private property. Du

Bois' *Quest of the Silver Fleece* more sharply draws into relief the racial and sexual violence underpinning modern capitalism by charting the development of a "wayward" young black woman, Zora, in the south. While mainstream white reformers often dismissed black women as incapable of rehabilitation, by composing a case history for Zora, the novel exposes the structural violence of criminal justice in the south and figures Zora's seeming waywardness as the creative labor necessary for cultivating communal and family life no longer dependent on racial subjugation.

My fourth chapter, "My Future is To Be Better Now," reads the real-life genre of the institutional case file as a form of "prison writing." I trace the discordant visions of sociality that emerged from the New York State Reformatory for Women, which pioneered the study of female delinquency and prostitution in large part through its experimental Laboratory of Social Hygiene. I examine the formal composition of the reformatory's case files, in which the Laboratory's social scientists compiled Bedford inmates' sexual and social histories to classify and individually rehabilitate each woman into a proper home environment, training white women for family life and motherhood while relegating black women to contingent labor in white households. I argue that paying attention to the multiple forms of description and categorization in the files also reveals how incarcerated women re-oriented Bedford's coercive classification to their own ends. In particular, I focus on love letters and poems exchanged between inmates, drawing attention to how these forms of address draw on the prison's institutional structures to discard domestic convention, and imagine social relationships that are not determined by women's capacity for racialized maternal reproduction and domestic labor.

Chapter One

Experimental Naturalism:

Formulating Women's Crime in Frances Kellor's *Experimental Sociology*

In his 1895 study *The Female Offender*, Cesare Lombroso intones that, “[t]he born female criminal is, so to speak, doubly exceptional, first as a woman and then as a criminal. This is because criminals are exceptions among civilized people, and women are exceptions among criminals....As a double exception, then, the criminal woman is a true monster.”⁴⁴ Within American culture, whose scholars imported Lombroso's theory, women criminals were indeed considered exceptional, as Lombroso theorized that women were not physiologically or mentally capable of participating in the rights and duties of citizenship. However, as the 19th century came to a close, urbanization and industrialization recast the American landscape, and waves of migration peopled these newly urbanizing spaces with immigrants from countries beyond Northern Europe, as well as African Americans from the post-reconstruction south, inflaming nativist and racist fears about the reproduction and preservation of the United States as a fundamentally white nation. As these demographics and social spaces became more malleable and assumed new forms, cultural anxiety over the social role of women, often imagined as preserving moral values and producing American citizens, increased.⁴⁵ The woman criminal as “double exception,” conforming to neither sexual nor social norms and illuminating the interdependence between the two, highlighted the imperative to

⁴⁴ Cesare Lombroso and William Ferrero, *The Female Offender*, New York: D. Appleton (1895), 151. While criminology as an emerging field quickly engaged with, elaborated upon and debunked Lombroso's studies in *The Criminal Man*, *The Female Offender* remained entrenched as a hallmark work of female criminology.

⁴⁵ See Linda Kerber's account of “republican motherhood” for her argument that 19th century American women in domestic sphere were seen to inculcate their children with civic values that equipped them for citizenship. In more recent scholarship, Alys Eve Weinbaum argues in *Wayward Reproductions* that nationalism, racism and the policing of reproductive sexuality should not be treated as separate entities (Weinbaum 6-7). Linda Kerber, “The Republic Mother: Women and the Enlightenment – An American Perspective,” *American Quarterly*, 28.2 (Summer, 1976), 187-205.

reproduce “American civilization,” which many saw as imperiled, but in the process, also drew into sharp relief the process of constructing the social fabric of the nation. Thus, the paradoxical figure of the so-called female criminal became a social and representational problem one that the growing fields of sociology and criminology in particular developed new methods and technologies to address in the modernizing US. Complicating the traditionally conceived divide between domestic space and public and commercial life, the paradox of the “doubly exceptional” woman in fact limned the possibilities for thinking about, and making legible, the constitution of social agency itself.

Frances Kellor was one of the very first white women social scientists to spearhead the study of female criminality: her early work located the potentialities for and limits on social mobility, evolution and change in the constitution of “the American woman.” Furthermore, Kellor was well aware of the tenuous position of a woman who sought to participate in civic life.⁴⁶ Kellor’s benefactor, Celia Parker Woolley, writes of Kellor’s developing career: “Step by step this other girl has worked her way up, from the primary through the high school, and then through college, two stern task-masters ever at her side, poverty and an ideal. A self-made woman! We worship the self-made man, base and pinnacle of the republic, but imagination quails a little before the self-made woman, who has ‘carved her own career,’ met and conquered the world on her own terms.”⁴⁷ Woolley’s understanding of Kellor as a “self-made woman” seem to underscore the way in which that figure of the self-fashioned woman, a woman who strove to make herself exceptional (rather than an “exception”), unsettles the cultural imagination of “the base and pinnacle of the republic.”

⁴⁶ Kellor grew up with her mother, who ran her own laundry business in Coldwater, MI; Kellor often helped her mother with her domestic work during her adolescence. According to most biographical notes on Kellor, two older sisters who ran the library in Coldwater took notice of her academic talent and eventually funded her undergraduate degree in law at Cornell University. There is no full biography of Kellor’s life, but William Joseph Maxwell’s 1967 dissertation on Kellor and progressive reform, as well as Ellen Fitzpatrick’s *Endless Crusade* provide useful accounts of Kellor’s early life and development.

⁴⁷ Celia Parker Woolley, *The Western Slope*, Evanston: William S. Lord (1903), 151.

Indeed, Kellor's criminological work takes on the prototype "criminal woman" as a figure of exception, seeking instead to illuminate how the stratifications of a social environment shapes an individual subject, and furthermore, how that individual might then shape her environment. In his introduction to Kellor's primary work on women's crime and incarceration, *Experimental Sociology*, Kellor's mentor at the University of Chicago, Charles R. Henderson, highlights Kellor's resistance to the stigmatization of "criminality," writing that in her book, the "word 'convict' is used advisedly in preference to the epithet 'criminal,' because not all who undergo punishment have a confirmed criminal disposition."⁴⁸ Unyoking the criminal from the biological, Kellor's work set forth a radically new methodology for understanding how the concept of the deterministic "criminal disposition" was socially constituted and gave form to social hierarchies that hindered women's capacity to participate in what she envisioned as a fully-formed civil society.

Kellor's focus on the construction of women's criminality – whose causes she locates neither fully in biology nor in social environment – has much to tell us about the way in which social agency and change was imagined, especially within the dominant representational fields of realism and naturalism in the period. In his 1992 *Bodies and Machines*, Mark Seltzer does not make a historical distinction between realism and naturalism, observing instead that in both genres, the twinned cultural discourses of the "body," that is, natural reproduction, most materially embodied in the figure of the mother, and the "machine," or technology, that seeks to manage and harness natural forces, in an attempt to reassert a kind of masculine autonomy through "the male technology of generation," "machine power."⁴⁹ Thus, the naturalist fidelity to "realistic" description of the

⁴⁸ C.R. Henderson, "Introduction" in Frances Kellor, *Experimental Sociology: Descriptive and Analytical*, New York: The Macmillan Company (1901), ix.

⁴⁹ Referring to Henry Adams' "The Virgin and the Dynamo" (and extrapolating his insights to Dreiser's Carrie and Norris's "mother"), in *Bodies and Machines*, Seltzer writes that the naturalist description of the embodied, generative force of maternal reproduction conflated with the natural "recovers not merely a male power of production but also projects the autonomy of that power" (31).

material world – in literature, as well as visual and sociological representations of embodied reality – was actually the projection of masculinized agency and an attempt to manage anxieties about modernizing society. “The radical pressure that the later nineteenth-century realist and naturalist text places on the category of persons—in positing that the individual is something that can be made—” Seltzer writes, “is bound up with an imperative that this making refer back to the constitutive agency of the social,” in effect creating a kind of tautological circle that reveals the continuous back-and-forth between the loss of and reassertion of masculinized agency.⁵⁰

Jennifer Fleissner’s 2004 *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, offers a different gloss on Seltzer’s circular “body-machine complex.” Complicating Seltzer’s formulation of realism and naturalism, and seeking to recover the “feminist potential” from naturalism’s apparently masculinized and totalizing character, Fleissner sees the historical transition from the autonomy figured in realism to the determinism figured in naturalism as turning “specifically on the failure to develop into a woman or a man...the attempt to inhabit a gendered situation *too* completely actually ends up revealing that situation’s impossibility,” thus illuminating the creative possibilities inherent the naturalist subject limns by “stalling” the linear development of realism’s autonomous subject trouble the teleology of Western historical progress.⁵¹ Fleissner’s emphasis on naturalism’s compulsive, rationalizing description as enabling radical creativity and a different version of historical time is a vital reworking of the literary historical understanding of naturalism. Yet, Kellor’s investigation into the causes and reformation of women’s criminality neither solely reveals the mechanisms of social surveillance and formations of power, nor does it depend solely on the radicalization of “stuckness in place” in the domestic sphere in order to engender new social possibilities.

⁵⁰ Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 94.

⁵¹ Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 52.

Rather, Kellor's investigations look to women's incarceration, in which the prison functions as a liminal space between the domestic and public spheres, to comprehend—and re-imagine—the deforming confinement of cultural expectations for women's domesticity. Kellor attempts to redraw the boundaries of realism's agential subject within the confined and supposedly hyper-determined naturalist mode of biologically determined gender norms (and thus, transgressions), not as a remasculinization of the subject, but as a refiguring of the terms of “natural man” at the heart of American citizenship itself, a methodological approach that I refer to as “experimental naturalism.” This chapter focuses on Kellor's innovative sociological study to better understand what criminology might tell us about the fraught relationship between realism and naturalism at the turn of the 20th century, and in tandem, to illuminate how the development of the women's prison played an important role in shaping concepts of agency and cultural change in this period. Thus, I look at how Kellor's sociological work might shed light on our understanding of the naturalist mode of representation, as I understand literature and sociology working in tandem, performing (along with other cultural forms) the “cooperative social work” which mutually constitutes the modernizing social order in the early 20th century.⁵² Thus, the chapter explores Kellor's varied works – from her 1901 criminological monograph, *Experimental Sociology*, to the visual images included in the articles she publishes in the *Chicago Tribune*.

In what follows, I will first provide some historical perspective on the particulars of Kellor's innovative mission to document and analyze women's imprisonment, as well as why she chooses women's imprisonment as a platform to highlight for women's capacity for civic action. Second, I will explore Kellor's experimental methods and vision in *Experimental Sociology*, while also attending

⁵² Here, my methodology is influenced by Joseph Slaughter's work in *Human Rights, Inc.*: drawing on Roberto Schwarz's conception of “forms as the abstract of specific social relations,” he offers “cooperative social work” as a way to think about the interaction of multiple cultural forms and the generic imbrication of fields like sociology, literature and law, which mutually constitute a particular social order (Slaughter 7, 11). Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form and International Law* New York: Fordham University Press (2007).

to the limits of that vision, especially in relation to her depiction of incarcerated African American women in the southern United States. Last, I will examine the “visual ensemble” that Kellor assembles in her series of articles on “women’s crime” in the northern and southern US, suggesting that not only does Kellor elaborate on and contour her partially experimental vision set forth in *Experimental Sociology*, but that we might also read these series for traces of social relationship and possibility that exceed the constraints of normative citizenship in the US.

Kellor’s Criminology: Progressivism and the Prison

To understand Kellor’s “experimental naturalism,” it is useful to provide some historical context for her scholarship and experimentation. This section contextualizes Kellor’s contradictory reform project, as she attempts to re-imagine women’s civic potential by researching their “criminality” and conditions of imprisonment. Kellor began her criminological investigations at the very turn of the 20th century and the dawn of the Progressive Era, a time in which reformers sought to rethink and reform governance and social life in the United States. In the summer of 1899, Kellor, at the time a graduate student in sociology at the University of Chicago, executed a rather unusual trek from the Midwest to the East Coast.⁵³ Thanks to funding from the Federated Women’s Clubs of Chicago, Kellor visited the State Reform Home in Geneva Illinois, Joliet Penitentiary in Joliet, Illinois, Cincinnati Workhouse in Cincinnati, Ohio, and the Workhouse and Penitentiary at Blackwell’s Island in New York in order to study “physical and mental characteristics” of sixty-one women incarcerated in those institutions, comparing them with the

⁵³ In the late 1890s and the 1910s, Chicago was a relative hot spot for young women who sought an education and involvement in social reform, due in part to the University of Chicago, who admitted women more freely than institutions on the East Coast and who had one of the first female deans, Marion Talbot. For an account of the development of the social sciences at the University of Chicago and their relationship to the Hull House settlement, see Rosalind Rosenberg’s *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1982).

results from the same tests she performed on sixty women students at Cornell University and the University of Chicago.⁵⁴

In her studies, Kellor sought to formulate a newly social scientific approach to women's crime, and thus test out the accepted wisdom of criminologists, especially Cesare Lombroso, whose "Italian school" ascribed criminality to the anatomical make up of men and women. Kellor also set her sights on testing out the theories of the "French school," which understood criminality as stemming solely from social conditions, depicting criminals as wholly victims of their social circumstance.⁵⁵ After publishing the results of her studies in Illinois, Ohio and New York in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Kellor received additional funding to continue her investigations, this time in the southern states of South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia and Alabama, whose penal system was neither "systematic nor scientific" and in which "the criminals consist largely of negroes."⁵⁶ Kellor's quest to fill the void of factual scientific data regarding women's crime and the conditions of their imprisonment in the United States combined a number of unconventional and new cultural attitudes: first, the willingness to enter into what many considered "diseased" and seemingly dangerous penal institutions as a middle class woman, (taking up residence in convict labor camps in the south, for example), second, an insistence on approaching women's crime without

⁵⁴ William Joseph Maxwell, "Frances Kellor in the Progressive Era," Ph.D. Diss., Teacher's College, Columbia Univ., (1968), 104.

⁵⁵ Kellor, *Experimental Sociology*, 19. Kellor's experiences at the increasingly progressive University of Chicago were crucial to the development of her work with women's criminology. Prior to her trip to prisons in Illinois, Ohio and New York, Kellor's advisor at the University of Chicago, Charles Richmond Henderson, encouraged her to visit Joliet Prison in order to gain a new perspective on women's criminology, which she had begun studying during her time as a student at Cornell Law School, and pursued in further depth at Chicago. Furthermore, Kellor also took a course with sociologist Albion Small, who encouraged his graduate students to challenge the easy application of European social theory to an American context. See Rosenberg's "The Social Roots of Personality" in *Beyond Separate Spheres*.

⁵⁶ Kellor, 53. According to the series of articles that Kellor published in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* in January and October of 1900, she received funding from the *Tribune*, the Federated Woman's Clubs of Chicago, and an unspecified "eastern magazine."

sentimentality, instead relying on “clear-eyed” scientific facts to view women’s potential for criminality as equal to men’s, and third, attempting to rigorously examine assumptions about the confluence of race, ethnicity and crime within the developing space of women’s imprisonment – even as prisons solely for women did not yet exist in the mainstream.⁵⁷ In addition to the series of articles in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* throughout 1900, Kellor also published her findings and pieces about her methodology in a diverse array of venues that addressed a range of audiences: the academic reviews such as *American Journal of Sociology*, as well as progressive reform periodicals such as *The Arena*, *Charities* and the women’s magazine *Harper’s Bazaar*. The culmination of Kellor’s criminological research was her first book in 1901, *Experimental Sociology*.

In 1899, when Kellor first began investigating the conditions of women’s prisons in the US, penitentiaries for major offenses and workhouses for minor offenses generally did not segregate women and men into separate institutions; rather, most jails and prisons instituted a “women’s department” for its female offenders, whose population was usually dwarfed by incarcerated men. Historians Estelle Freedman and Regina Kunzel both note that attitudes towards women’s crime in the post-civil war decades of the 19th century revolved around the figure of the “fallen woman,” almost always white, whom new coalitions of women reformers in the Northeast saw as both inherently victimized and capable of total restoration to the domestic realm.⁵⁸ Imagining a

⁵⁷ Of course, Kellor was not the first woman to involve herself with prisons professionally. In particular, Eliza Farnham was a major influence on prison reform in the 19th century. But Kellor’s attempt to study imprisonment by attempting to inhabit and understand women’s lives inside and outside the prison was a bold, unprecedented move. Furthermore, Kellor’s criminological work bore some resemblance to the work of W.E.B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells, who sought to disaggregate the easy conflation of race and criminality in the late 19th and early 20th century. For critique of Kellor’s slightly later work with the Association for the Protection of Colored Women, see Hazel Carby, “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992). Cheryl Hicks also provides a historical account and critique of Kellor’s work on black women’s criminality in *Talk with You Like a Woman*.

⁵⁸ See Estelle Freedman’s *Their Sister’s Keepers: Women’s Prison Reform, 1830-1930*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (1984) and Regina Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1993).

sympathetic, sisterly bond between fallen woman and woman reformer, and moreover, mixing “the dual perspectives of hereditarian thought and feminist sympathies,” these reformers submitted that all women possessed an inherent moral superiority.⁵⁹ Yet the influx of immigrants from Europe and black migrants from the South poured into industrial centers throughout the northern United States complicated the sympathetic, sentimental identification that these early women reformers imagined.

Thus, Kellor’s investigations into the women’s prison occurred at the same moment that a new scientific model of charity work emerged as the basis for progressive social reform that sought to better account for a quickly urbanizing landscape. Jane Addams, who founded the seminal Hull House settlement Kellor intermittently stayed and worked in during her time in Chicago, comments sharply on the untrained, sentimental charity of a middle class woman reformer in her 1902 *Democracy and Social Ethics*: “The charity visitor, let us assume, is a young college woman, well-bred and open-minded...she is often embarrassed to find herself obliged to lay all the stress of her teaching and advice upon the industrial virtues...it often occurs to the mind of the sensitive visitor...that she has no right to say these things; that her untrained hands are no more fitted to cope with actual conditions than those of [the] broken-down family” to whom she pays charitable visits, and moreover that the communities subject to this charitable relief “feel that the charity visitor is moved by motives that are alien and unusual.”⁶⁰ A model of systematic and professionalized social reform work—one that sought to inhabit, rather than simply “visit” the environments they sought to reform—began to gather popularity, as women reformers dedicated its efforts to systematically rehabilitating impoverished immigrants to the United States into citizenship. The settlement house movement, emblemized by Addams’ Hull House, pushed back against a Spencerian view of gender, race and ethnicity as biologically determined, as well as the sentimental

⁵⁹ Freedman, *Their Sister’s Keepers*, 41.

⁶⁰ Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics*, New York: The Macmillan Company (1902), 17-18, 23.

discourse of feminized charity: middle class social workers lived alongside the residents of working and immigrant neighborhoods in a “sociological laboratory,” in which reformers and residents learned from each other and cooperatively reshaped social norms and identities, as James Salazar has observed (though, notably, this pushback on biological determinism focused on immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, rather than African American migrants from the American south).⁶¹

Yet, although Kellor fought against the sentimentalized and rigid model of 19th century reform, her criminological project diverged from Addams’ vision of “reciprocal reform,” as the institutional structure of each prison Kellor visited depended on the distinction and gradients of power between the incarcerated, institutional officials and most abstractly, members of society who enjoyed the freedom denied to those incarcerated.⁶² Kellor did not imagine the prison as a space where the subjects of sociological study – incarcerated women – might directly transform their professional observer in a straightforward way, even as she often identified with the women she sought to measure. Rather, civic reform radiated out from Kellor’s social scientific laboratory, channelled by trained professional skilled in interpreting the data the women inmates provided; Kellor writes, “Such a laboratory should keep in touch with social service work and could train students for actual experimental work in settlements, civic reform, department stores and vacation schools.”⁶³ Avery Gordon points out that in the 19th and 20th centuries, imprisonment’s social function has been to manage socio-economic crisis and political dissent and enforce a social order’s stratifications.⁶⁴ Moreover, the prison as an institution reinforced a particular social order not only

⁶¹ James Salazar, *Bodies of Reform: The Rhetoric of Character in Gilded Age America*, New York: New York University Press (2010), 205.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Kellor, *Experimental Sociology*, 8.

⁶⁴ Avery Gordon, “I’m Already in a Sort of Tomb: A Reply to Phillip Scheffner’s *The Halfmoon Files*,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 110.1 (2010), 133.

through individuals' incarceration and seeming removal from society, but by opening up the prison as a kind of laboratory of vulnerable subjects, through which "scientists and bureaucrats [might] test their theories and systematically advance their own interests," generating a body of social knowledge that often naturalized inequality and produced racialized difference.⁶⁵ Thus, Kellor's status as a sociological observer in the prison was complicated, to say the least. The women's prisons she wished to investigate did not, in fact, function as open laboratories – Kellor struggled to gain access to these institutions in order to perform and publish her experimental studies, which she saw as a platform to call attention to both necessary changes for the penal system, as well as advocate for women's increased civic capacity (rather than solely reinforcing the status quo). Still, Kellor's sociological vision relied on imprisonment to make a vulnerable population of incarcerated women available for experimentation. Kellor sought to study and transform the institution to carve out more power and new social roles for a range of women in the US, while also directly engaging with the prison's violent and stigmatizing apparatus.

Furthermore, Kellor's entanglement with the institutional force of the prison was also bound up with articulating and codifying racial difference. Khalil Gibran Muhammad has noted that the proliferation of professionalized progressive reform that sought to ameliorate urban poverty and open up space within American citizenship for immigrants, categorizing them as white, depended upon the pathologizing study of African Americans as an exceptionally criminal threat to the post-reconstruction, modernizing social order in the United States.⁶⁶ What's more, taking turn of the century New York as evidence, Gunja SenGupta observes that "quasi-reform and relief regimes"

⁶⁵ Ibid, 138.

⁶⁶ Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 8. Muhammad writes that "in a moment when most white Americans believed in the declining significance of racism, statistical evidence of excessive rates of black arrest and the overrepresentation of black prisoners in the urban North was seen by many whites as indisputable proof of black inferiority" (7-8).

directed towards “new immigrants” in the US systematically criminalized and excluded black people, cementing the economic exclusion and exploitation in the early 20th century.⁶⁷ Thus, as Kellor investigated women’s relationship to the prison system, and reconceptualized the divide between incarcerated black and white women, she also addressed the criminalization of blackness post slavery, taking up black women’s so-called crime. Thus, in addition to her exploitative treatment of incarcerated women as sociological objects, Kellor’s criminological work presents a second question: how did Kellor’s experimentation in the women’s prison potentially reinflct the violence of racialized social norms while attempting to open up new social spaces and forms of citizenship?

Envisioning Women’s Crime

Kellor belonged to the group of progressive reformers who sought to retool the conceptual boundaries between biological heredity and social environment, beginning to reshape formulations of the “natural man” that undergirded traditional American citizenship and personhood. In the 19th century, the discipline of biology – in which man was understood “primarily a biological being, embedded in nature and governed by biological laws,” and thus, race was understood as a category of inherited difference that served to separate human “types” – gradually replaced natural history, which understood the human species as essentially homogenous.⁶⁸ As Robyn Weigman notes in *American Anatomies*, “As biology assigned to ‘man’ a new sphere of specificity, the racial determinations wrought through this sphere produced not simply the constancy of race as an unchanging, biological feature, but an inherent and incontrovertible difference of which skin was

⁶⁷ Gunja SenGupta, *From Slavery to Poverty: The Racial Origins of Welfare in New York, 1840-1918*, New York: New York University Press (2009), 2-3. See also Saidiya Hartman’s chapter “Instinct and Injury” in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, New York: Oxford University Press (1997).

⁶⁸ Nancy Stepan qtd. in Robyn Weigman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*, Durham: Duke University Press (1995), 29-30.

only the most visible indication,” producing “a logic lodged fully in the body.”⁶⁹ At the turn of the 20th century, however, theorists and reformers began to explore how the human body and its interiorized fate might in fact be influenced by external conditions. The University of Chicago, where Kellor trained, was particularly active in exploring how environment affected human development. For example, John Dewey, a professor of psychology at Chicago during Kellor’s tenure there, summarizes his controversial work in *Human Nature and Conduct* that “Human nature exists and operates in an environment. And it is not ‘in’ that environment, but as a plant is in the sunlight and the soil,” thus concluding that “human morals” are “ineradicably empirical.”⁷⁰ This emphasis on the relationship between physical environment and moral development, fostered experimental institutions that focused on developing Americans cognizant of their moral duties as citizens, including Dewey’s laboratory school at the University of Chicago and once again, Addams’ Chicago Hull House. Kellor, too, was interested in the way an individual shaped and was shaped by physical and social forces – seeking to understand how the interior of the human body was subject to external influence – but looked to women’s capacity for crime to illuminate the relationship between moral development and individuals’ environment.

Writing against two popular but equally confining ideals – on the one hand, the Lombrosian precept that women in fact were less sentient than men, unable to perceive the exterior world as sharply, and on the other, the common perception of women as inherently morally superior, gentler sex – Kellor worked to develop an experimental method that might accurately measure the women’s inner experiences and social behavior, and thus their potential as public actors more fully equipped with the rights and duties of citizenship. In *Experimental Sociology*, Kellor writes, “The point which is emphasized is that the capacity for good or evil, which in general distinguishes the sexes, finds its

⁶⁹ Weigman, 31.

⁷⁰ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, New York: Henry Holt Company (1922), 296.

explanation not so much in sex as it exists, but in the influences and conditions which have determined these characteristics.”⁷¹ Thus, the experimental method Kellor envisioned would measure and take into account social “influences and conditions” impact on the material body, creating a laboratory that develops “methods...interpretation of sociological data, use of instruments and acquaintance with material” to explain sexual difference.⁷² To put Kellor’s thesis most simply, women’s criminality did not increase as they moved into public spaces because they were unfit for the hardships of modernizing civic life, but instead demonstrated that their confinement to the domestic had stunted their capacity to evolve into civic actors coeval with male citizens. To bar women’s entrance to the public realm, and thus their natural development, furthermore, would continue to negatively impact the nation’s modern progress.

In reconfiguring the perceived divide between the public and domestic, Kellor’s methodology also posed a new aesthetic model that negotiated the divide between the ideal of unencumbered agency and naturalism’s stark determinism, beginning to limn the contours of the “experimental naturalism” we’ll see developed more fully in *Experimental Sociology*. In her earliest academic article, “Sex in Crime,” published in 1898 at the beginning of her studies at the University of Chicago, Kellor works to write sexual difference into a civilizational model, debunking the assumption that

Woman was created from a finer clay, and is inherently more moral, more virtuous, more aesthetic than man. Accordingly she is held to be less criminal; and, apparently, statistics sustain this view. Is woman’s apparently lesser degree of

⁷¹ Kellor, *Experimental Sociology*, (162). This point occurs in almost all of Kellor’s shorter essays, as well. Lombroso posits man as ultimately the prescient and sentient being capable of scientific observation: “In short, let a female delinquent be young and we can overlook her degenerate type, and even regard her as beautiful; the sexual instinct misleading us here as it does in making us attribute to women more of sensitiveness and passion than they really possess. And in the same way, when she is being tried on a criminal charge, we are inclined to excuse, as noble impulses of passion, acts which arise from the most cynical calculations” (Lombroso 97).

⁷² Kellor, *Experimental Sociology*, 8.

criminality attributable to this congenital moral superiority, or is it due to sexual and social considerations and conditions over which she has had no control, such as her having been selected as the anabolic organism, having had the burden of parturition placed upon her, and having been the favored sex in the progress of civilization?⁷³

In this way, Kellor not only begins to draw into relief women's position (and often, exclusion) in the public realm, but in the process also calls into question the status of the aesthetic itself in delineating the boundary between public and private spaces. Moreover, Kellor seeks to represent women's crime and punishment not in terms of the traditional rehabilitation of discrete individuals, the kind of cellular individualism imagined to function in the American prison, but in terms of the wide-scale *prevention* of crime, thus remodeling the relationship between domestic interiority and civic exteriority itself.⁷⁴ In order to prevent crime, Kellor believes that the crimes illegible to the criminal justice system that carry on without notice must be made visible; this visibility depended on calling into account women's forms of criminality, which were glossed over with sympathy and sentimentality, despite the decidedly public impact that they had national life.

Kellor thus calls for the accurate measurement and study of women's deviance and social norms, writing that, "There are numerous conditions and acts indicating a low morality and a criminal nature, acts which are injurious to the community and state, of which the law takes no cognizance, but which would be indispensable factors in an accurate study of comparative crime in the sexes," later explaining that sexual crimes, given the confines of the social space that women occupy, are most prevalent: "The crimes of women are more insidious. Prostitution, infanticide,

⁷³ Frances Kellor, "Sex in Crime," *International Journal of Ethics* 9.1 (October, 1898), 74.

⁷⁴ In *The Prison and the American Imagination*, describing the "paradox of the prison," which combines the dehumanization of civil death with the rehabilitation of the citizen subject, Caleb Smith writes of the "cellular soul" that 18th and 19th century prison reformers imagined the penitentiary creating and reshaping: "[the prisoner's] connections to a social circle of rebels and miscreants were severed, creating a radical individuation. Condemned to civil death, a discipline of labor, and an absolute isolation from the social world in a small, spare chamber, his subjectivity seemed to take the shape of its miniature world; in the imagination of reformers, the prisoner would come to appear as a *cellular soul*" (Smith 92).

abortion, and allied crimes exist to an alarming degree among women, and, from the view of public policy alone, are among the gravest, as they strike at the very root of society by decreasing population.”⁷⁵ In this way, Kellor’s work highlights the female body’s centrality to civic life: she reminds her reader that women’s bodies are the site of familial reproduction, but also have the capacity for agency regarding reproduction, and thus necessitate policing. Importantly, Kellor calls for visibility not only for purposes of surveillance and control, however, but also to make women’s sentimentally veiled yet active (and potentially injurious) impact on public life legible. While Mark Seltzer has written about the “realist seeing machine” that seeks to make “‘the social’ visible” and controllable, Kellor’s project here is different: making women’s criminality visible is not intended entirely to assert control and surveil embodied social reality, but rather to understand its possibility

for evolution when women’s capacity for public action is illuminated.⁷⁶

Furthermore, because her analysis of the continuity between the domestic and the public hinges on women’s capacity for sensation and perception – her belief that women are neither more nor less sentient and “aesthetic” than men – Kellor’s “experimental sociology” also works to



Figure 1, “2nd Floor of the Woman’s Prison, Joliet Ill,” Charles Richmond Henderson Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago.

reshape an understanding of aesthetic experience itself, which in turn presents a new

way to represent and perceive the way in which domestic and civil space is divided. Take, for

⁷⁵ Kellor, “Sex in Crime,” 76, 80.

⁷⁶ Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 98-99.

example, one of Kellor's diagrams of the women's section of Joliet Prison in Illinois.⁷⁷ In the diagram, Kellor outlines the women's living space in the prison, labeling the purpose of each boxed space: "yard," "schoolroom," "hospital." What is notable about this simple drawing is that it seeks to draw attention to and imagine the social life that occurs in this institutional space, showing how women occupy a liminal space between so-called domestic "privacy" and the function of a prison to enforce public order. Unlike Jacob Riis' diagrams of tenement apartments in his 1890 *How the Other Half Lives*, which complement his voyeuristic photographs of urban life (reinforcing a divide between the bourgeois reader and the "other half"), Kellor's drawing underscores the quotidian form of social life present within the institutional structure of the prison, drawing a bridge between the prison's interior and the exterior world, and beginning to signal the possible reconfiguration of these spaces.⁷⁸

To better understand Kellor's aesthetic model, however, it is useful to look more closely at her methodology, which imagines a new harmonious social whole by unsettling the boundaries of the public and the domestic. In both her shorter pieces and her book, Kellor tends to rehearse her formula for a method of better understanding this relationship between public and private in the US, which she terms "criminal sociology," throughout her various essays as well as in the more comprehensive *Experimental Sociology*. "Crime is the result of two forces, environment and heredity," Kellor writes in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1899, and devotes herself to unraveling the binary between the

⁷⁷Though the diagram does not actually bear Kellor's name, I found it (along with several other diagrams of the women's section of Joliet Prison) in the papers of Kellor's mentor at the University of Chicago, C.R. Henderson. Henderson, Charles Richmond. Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. Henderson initially encouraged Kellor to investigate women's incarceration at Joliet Prison, and Kellor's benefactor, Celia Woolley, also makes note of Kellor's work at Joliet in *The Western Slope*: "She said she was going to spend her vacation in Joliet, and she looked as pleased as if she was going on a pleasure trip to Europe. She had gained permission from the authorities to pursue her investigations among the inmates of the penitentiary" (Woolley 87).

⁷⁸ Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies in Among the Tenements of New York*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons (1890).

two academic approaches to crime.⁷⁹ The Italian school, headed by Lombroso, attributed crime to anatomical attributes, measured through the science of anthropometry, through which physical embodiment shapes any moral or social schema, and there are both “born” or “occasional” “criminal types.”⁸⁰ This measurement practice interfaced with the reifying description and stigmatization of racial difference, as Kellor notes in *Experimental Sociology*, “One assertion is that the criminal possesses arrested development and harmonizes with the civilization of previous decades rather than with the present one; that modern civilization has so rapidly advanced that it exceeds the natural capacity of many individuals who live in its midst.”⁸¹ An environmental study of crime, on the other hand, or what Kellor calls the “French school,” disregards the measurement of physical characteristics, looking instead to how an individual’s social environment has shaped his or her criminal behavior; “They assert that three-fourths of the criminals are such by occasion, and deny that crime is a disease or is due to disease.”⁸² Though Kellor’s ideological sympathies seem to lie with this school, she believes that the lack of scientific, laboratory-oriented experimentation undermines the credibility of the French school’s methodology. For Kellor, the demands of the United States as a particular – perhaps even exceptional – space requires the synthesis of both these approaches, as the American nation-state must account for both the increasing presence of European immigrants, as well as African Americans oppressed by the violent afterlife of slavery.

In particular, Kellor emphasizes the American origins of psychology as combining the environmental stimulus that concerns the French school with the study of physicality in order to

⁷⁹ Frances Kellor, “Social Conditions in the Southern States,” *The Chicago Tribune*, October 14 (1900), 53.

⁸⁰ Kellor writes in *Experimental Sociology*, “In this belief, the investigations have been principally along anatomical lines the assigned reason being that the organ must be studied before the function and the physical before the moral. It has continually sought to identify criminals with animals and barbaric peoples” (2).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, 4.

meet the hybrid demographics of the United States' population. Kellor's mode for describing criminality thus comes from a synthesis, or a "dovetailing," as she calls it, of these various interlocking disciplines that work to structure an organic social whole while remaining discrete disciplinary branches; Kellor writes, "Crime is thus studied inductively, for data are secured from minute study in all these branches rather than from wide observations of criminal populations. By this method, anthropometry reveals facts for the structure, psychology for the physical, psychophysical and mental, and sociology for the environmental conditions in which the individual functions."⁸³ In this way, as Kellor advocates for a preventative model of crime control that blurs the boundaries between what was understood as the feminized domestic sphere and masculine public sphere (in which autonomous actors participate), her methodology envisioning a kind of continuous social whole whose interlocking components harmonize yet remain distinct. Yet for these disciplines to form an interlocking, harmonious whole, they also must evolve and take into account Kellor's new conception of social life in the modernizing US.

Sociological Jurisprudence

As Kellor makes a case for accounting for women's criminality, she also illuminates how a new form of sociological science might shape legal personhood itself. In a series of essays on "Criminal Anthropology in its Relation to Criminal Jurisprudence" published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1899, Kellor begins to write about the loosening of disciplinary boundaries separating science and law, diverging from the natural law tradition that informed much of 19th century jurisprudence and reconceiving of the natural human form in terms of scientific control and measurement. Such a practice, Kellor believes, depends on reconciling criminal anthropology, which itself depends on the combination of psychology and sociology with jurisprudence and legal codification, and she acknowledges the inherent antagonism that a synthesis of these disciplines

⁸³ Kellor, "Sex in Crime," 33, 5.

must overcome: “the one is revolutionary, the other conservative; one is the result of the study of society and individuals, and consists largely of theories or propositions, the value of which is unknown, as they are mainly untested, while the other arises from the necessity of protecting society.”⁸⁴ What is striking about Kellor’s argument for new legal formations that take the science of criminology into account is her insistence on the “rights” of society as a whole. Presenting a narrative of punishment that reflects shifting modes of power (anticipating Foucault in a sense), evolving from vengeful terror to rehabilitation within prison, Kellor criticizes the reformist mode of punishment, with its emphasis on ineffective cellular isolation and its excessively liberal safeguards afforded to the criminal, which frustrate reformers’ and lawyers’ efforts to effect change. Kellor writes that “Society should have legal rights and privileges equal to those of the criminal, and systems and institutions should be modified to conform to this view. An absolute equality for each should be maintained.”⁸⁵ This personification of the organic social whole that Kellor has envisioned (attributing legal personhood to the social) also shapes her view of legal personhood and the making of the social itself: it reimagines universal equality in terms of the relationship between the social and the individual, seeming to formulate a kind of social citizenship in which society’s public and private spaces are not so clearly divided. Public institutions – in affording political, economic and civil rights to citizens – also demand protection and responsibility.

In the nascent welfare state Kellor seems to imagine here, a set of laws make connections between the economic and social dimensions of citizens’ lives in the United States and furthermore, conceiving of a kind of symmetry between individual and state in which citizenship is neither wholly individualistic nor based solely on the social whole, but rather what Margaret Somers, in revising

⁸⁴ Frances Kellor, “Criminal Anthropology in its Relation to Criminal Jurisprudence,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 4.4 (January, 1899), 526.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 525.

T.H. Marshall's classic formulation of "social citizenship" and describing hybrid political culture in England, calls "autonomy in membership."⁸⁶ Thus, this imagined social citizenship refigures the boundaries of the autonomous, individuated "natural man" that undergirds personhood, opening up the possibility for others – women such as Kellor, for example – to occupy that space as well. Here, then, the realist, agential subject obtains his or her agency only through participating in a kind of interrelational social whole.

Yet while Kellor envisions a more socially embedded subject, in a sense combining facets of both realism (an individuated, agential subject) and naturalism (an individual subject's rootedness in a social whole), opening up private social spaces to institutionalization and state supervision also opens up possibilities for socially coercive modes of statecraft and surveillance. In the United States, corporate capitalism gathers momentum around the same time as the institutional networks of the welfare state begin to emerge; Bruce Robbins has argued that the welfare state's social institutions developed in a sense to contain the effects of industrialization and myopic focus on short-term profit.⁸⁷ From this perspective, it is interesting to note that Kellor's legal personification of society itself seems to emerge around the same time as the rise of corporate personhood, working to defuse the socially injurious effects of modern crime, which, as we will see, Kellor views as spanning the class spectrum. However, as Barbara Johnson has perceptively observed, "[t]heories of rationality, naturalness, and the 'good,' presumed to be grounded in the nature of 'man,' may in

⁸⁶ Somers writes that in the development of English citizenship, rights developed in relational terms: neither communitarian nor liberal individualism, but a hybrid political culture that combined elements of both local and national norms. Margaret Somers, "Rights, Relationality, and Membership: Rethinking the Making and Meaning of Citizenship" *Law & Social Inquiry*, 19.1 (Winter, 1994), 76, 78.

⁸⁷ Bruce Robbins, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (2009), 7-8. In this work, Robbins is critical of Foucault's anti-statism and looks to recover some of the value of the welfare state in the 20th century.

reality be taking their notions of human essence not from ‘natural man’ but from the corporation.”⁸⁸

While Johnson’s account of the person highlights its instability and abstraction, and thus, its openness for contestation and refiguration, and while a reformer like Kellor envisioned new a newly social personhood that could draw a sharp dividing line between human life and the machinations of industrial capitalism, the premise of formal equality itself was deeply imbricated with forms of racial subjection and economic coercion.⁸⁹ Considering both the instability of personhood and its historical imbrication with structures of exploitation, Kellor’s attempts to imagine a new kind of American society by granting it its own personhood remains entwined with forms and histories of violence and slavery.

Thus, Kellor’s position as a professional scientific observer is fraught. In addition to the structural forms of exploitation that the 20th century free market engendered, the institutionalization of progressive reform measures depended on the “scientific benevolence” of often upwardly mobile women such as Kellor, who sought to fashion themselves as “new women” not necessarily in the sense of sexual impropriety, but rather as women who were “quintessentially modern, secular, scientific, objective, willing to confront sexuality head-on,” as Regina Kunzel notes.⁹⁰ However, in a schema like Kellor’s, which opened up space between the domestic and the public realms and placed the female body at the center of the social order, facing the social problems of the day “head-on,”

⁸⁸ Barbara Johnson, “Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law,” in *Persons and Things*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (2010), 206.

⁸⁹ It is important to remember that the corporation’s form of economic commodification originated with the Atlantic slave trade. In “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” Sylvia Wynter has written about the construction of a prototypical white, Christian Man as the political subject of the state which depended on the symbolic death of a black (or indigenous) “other” for existence; she observes that the “mythology of the Black Other of sub-Saharan Africans (and their Diaspora descendants)” whose “systemic stigmatization, social inferiorization, and dynamically produced material deprivation [serve] both to ‘verify’ the overrepresentation of Man as it were the human, and to legitimate the subordination of the world and well-being to those of the former (267). Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003), 257-337.

⁹⁰ Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*, 64.

white women reformers such as Kellor paradoxically garnered fashioned themselves as rational and objective experts and professionals by turning the sexual practices and social relations of other women into objects of scientific inquiry, even if trying to engender a more flexible social arrangements. Kunzel writes of the professional social workers whom Kellor prefigures, “social workers established that authority at the expense of the objects of those scientific meanings, by claiming the right to diagnose other women.”⁹¹ In this way, while Kellor’s experimental naturalism seeks to illuminate the continuity between the domestic and the public realms, refiguring the national landscape to include women as civic actors, her vision of the potential woman citizen also runs the risk of replicating the bourgeois subject (which I’ve been associating with realism), or “natural man” that depends on the subjugation of bodies marked as embodied and vulnerable in order to pose as an abstractly autonomous and equal subject.⁹² Although Kellor intended on restructuring and improving conditions for poor women across a wide swaths of society, this relationship appears especially coercive when we consider that the imprisoned women whom Kellor studied generally had little choice in whether or not they would participate in her experiments.⁹³

Thus, while Kellor’s theorizations of a new jurisprudence that included women within public life imagined an organic social whole, made up of distinct yet harmonizing individual components, the distinctness between these parts also had the potential to reify and normalize their differences and naturalize inequality.⁹⁴ As Patricia Williams writes about the violence of the forced symmetry of

⁹¹ Ibid, 64.

⁹² It is important to note that the 19th amendment was not passed until 1920, and states only began granting women the vote by 1910.

⁹³ Though Kellor does note that some of the women she asked to participate in the studies chose not to or left part-way through the experience, and so forth.

⁹⁴ Lauren Berlant provides a clear and useful explication of this contradiction between the abstraction of formal equality and the social hierarchies that shape everyday, on the ground experience, “[t]he contradiction between the sovereignty of abstract citizens and the everyday lives of embodied subjects has been structured

formal equality in the United States, “both slave and bourgeois systems regarded certain attributes as important and disregarded certain others, and that such regard and disregard can occur in the same glance, like the wearing of horseblinders to focus attention simultaneously toward and away from. The experiential blinders of market actor and slave are focused in different directions, yet the partializing ideologies of each makes the act of not seeing an unconscious, alienating component of seeing.”⁹⁵ The following sections, however, are concerned with that “regard and disregard “that occurs in the same glance,” but also, Kellor’s attempts to reshape the way that her audience sees and thus conceives of women in the public sphere, as I explore the Kellor’s imaging of female criminality in her studies that circulated in newspapers, sociological journals and other progressive forums. Examining what Kellor both “regards and disregards” in creating an archive of women’s criminality, I will explore the contradictions and tensions inherent in her vision of progressive, scientific citizenship that seeks to reconfigure public and domestic spaces. Looking carefully at this scene of contradiction, however, requires us to understand not only the perpetuation of new oppressive norms of bourgeois citizenship but also the possibilities for alternate sociality within the United States that Kellor also circulates in her archive.⁹⁶ It is not at all my intention to apologize for Kellor’s often troubling politics in her work. I’m most interested in understanding how her methodology and representations of women’s crime and imprisonment unsettled and began to reformulate dominant cultural ideologies about social science, imprisonment and social agency – and

by the administration of class hierarchies alongside formal democracy,” though this structure is not limited solely to class hierarchies; constructions of racial, ethnic and sexual difference are also deeply enmeshed here (43). Lauren Berlant, “Citizenship” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* eds. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, New York: New York University Press (2007).

⁹⁵ Patricia Williams, “On Being the Object of Property,” *Signs* 14.1 (Autumn, 1988), 10.

⁹⁶ Here my goal is to explore this material along the lines of the question Saidiya Hartman poses about reading practice in the archives of enslavement in her essay “Venus in Two Acts,” “If it is no longer sufficient to expose the scandal, then how might it be possible to generate a different set of description from this archive?” (Hartman 7). Saidiya Hartman “Venus in Two Acts” 12.2 (June 2008), 1-14.

configurations of naturalism and realism – while also attending to the limits of her new methodological vision.

Kellor's Lens: Reading Women's Criminality

Frances Kellor's body of work on women's criminality is unwieldy in its often repetitive and highly-detailed character: the three hundred pages of detailed findings *Experimental Sociology*, for example, makes it a somewhat laborious read for the non-specialist reader. At the same time the body of work is also full of conspicuous absences, as most of the photographs and test material from which Kellor draws her conclusions is missing from her publications (in part a testament to the lack of funding for women social scientists in this period, as well as Kellor's own lack of a financial safety net). Frustratingly, these records are also missing from the historical archive.

To better understand Kellor's new formulation of citizenship and social control, I organize her materials through the medium of representation that she employs, starting with her book-length *Experimental Sociology* and ending with her series of investigative articles in the *Chicago Tribune*. Taking up Seltzer's formulation that the "merger of optics and statistics...the desire to measure and the desire to look," or "the conversion of individuals into numbers and cases and the conversion of bodies into visual display" form "the crucial control-technologies of machine culture: statistics and surveillance" in late 19th and early 20th century American culture, I begin with *Experimental Sociology*, in which statistical analysis and social scientific description plays a large part, to understand how her measurement of incarcerated women might offer a new way of understanding measurement beyond simply social control. As *Experimental Sociology* is Kellor's most comprehensive work on women's criminology, it also offers the most complete vision of the new social subjects and norms that Kellor envisions. At the same time, as I explore Kellor's "experimental" descriptions of incarcerated women, I also attend to the marked differences in the tools she uses to measure, describe and

represent incarcerated white women in the north and black women in the south, which I suggest illuminates Kellor's racial stratification of women's citizenship.

Furthermore, to better understand the relationship between the statistical and visual dimensions of Kellor's work, "optics and statistics," as Seltzer puts it, I conclude the chapter by examining Kellor's series of articles in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, looking in particular at how the visual representations of Kellor's findings (including photographs and lithographs) animate and antagonize the norms that she envisions and describes in *Experimental Sociology* (also complicating Seltzer's formulation of the visual and statistical as working in tandem for social control). As Kellor attempts to reconceive of the relationship between the biological and the social, seeking to open up new cultural possibilities, *Experimental Sociology* provides an overwhelming amount of detailed information, and its social scientific mode of description reconceives of the relationship between domestic and public life, as well as the north and south in the modernizing American nation (leaving little room for the reader's interpretative response). On the other hand, Kellor's serialized *Chicago Daily Tribune* studies, with their ad hoc mixture of lithographs, photographs, graphs and diagrams, inadvertently present a more dynamic experience for the lay reader looking to understand women's crime and imprisonment. The series thus adds an important new visual dimension to the kind of experimental naturalism Kellor first presents in *Experimental Sociology*, and allows us a window into the forms of alternate social relationship that often become displaced, yet linger within Kellor's representational work. Thus, by reading the social scientific description in *Experimental Sociology* and visual complication in the *Chicago Tribune*, as well as attending to Kellor's construction of race, we might better understand the way in which the ensemble of visual and textual materials in Kellor's studies draw upon to reimagine social norms and subjects in the modernizing United States.

Introducing Method in Experimental Sociology

In *Experimental Sociology*, Kellor divides the monograph into sections that account for the different disciplinary methods she seeks to weave together. As Kellor brings these divergent measurements and methods into harmony, she also envisions an alternate narrative of female development that does not depend on biological fixity. And as she presents a new coming-of-age narrative for the female civic actor to her reader, charting how her social possibilities might exceed her biological and reproductive function, Kellor simultaneously formulates a new disciplinary apparatus for women's criminology that focuses less on recovering the "constitutive agency of the social," as Seltzer puts it, and more on exploring how the social itself might be reconceived and reshaped altogether.⁹⁷ To give this new account of disciplinarity, Kellor begins with the physical, or "anthropometrical," measurements of the female body, describes the perceptual, "psychological" interiority of those bodies, outlines the modes of social relationship and environment these subjects engage with, and finally, limns the contours of a new preventative penology which, in taking into account women's agency – their ability to reshape the social – removes the traditional divide that Kellor perceives to be drawn between the public and domestic. Finally, *Experimental Sociology* also illuminates the representational forms that Kellor utilizes to describe and imagine these new social configurations, corresponding, as I've begun to suggest, with a kind of experimental naturalism that seeks to reconfigure the dimensions of the subject and her agency.⁹⁸

Experimental Sociology's narration of its new methods is in a sense performative, as Kellor begins the book by laying out her own experiences in implementing her experiments. Her descriptions of this experimentation emphasize the inaccessibility and guarded character of the

⁹⁷ Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 94.

⁹⁸ Interestingly, in *Experimental Sociology* Kellor also acknowledges that she administers these anthropometric, psychological and sociological tests in this particular order to gain her subjects' trust, further illustrating how her narrative depends on both the recognition of these women as sympathetic, and their manipulation as objects of study: "suspicion and fear must be eliminated, and this requires careful arrangement of tests" (Kellor 27).

spaces that she enters in both the north and south, as she seeks to open them up for both sociological study and public readership.⁹⁹ Thus, by highlighting the way in which she has inhabited these concretely bounded spaces, as well as her more flexible and responsive scientific approach, Kellor connects her experiments in the prison to her larger project of imagining a social whole without rigid conceptual divisions between public and private life. For instance, Kellor describes the difficulty of entering the living quarters of a southern convict camp, and illuminates her own subject position in relation to the women she “investigates”: “All request for visits to the convicts’ quarters were met by assertions that it ‘was no place for ladies,’ although only women were confined there.”¹⁰⁰ Here, Kellor draws a connective bridge between herself and the incarcerated black women, an unexpected and bold move for Kellor’s time – though as she flags the prison’s attempt to shut women out from the task of public investigation, Kellor does not dwell on the fact that black women were designated as occupying a position outside the “no place for ladies.”

Furthermore, despite this tenuous identification with her subjects, as well her deep investment in distinguishing her methods as scientific and rational, Kellor also documents how the incarcerated women she works with both unsettle and antagonize the scientific reason on which her experiments are based. Writing of the incarcerated women’s initial unwillingness to participate in her experiments, Kellor observes that “suspicion and superstition are the most difficult elements to

⁹⁹ Kellor observes that in the north, investigators attempting to gain access to “Women’s institutions, as houses of refuge and reform prisons, [were] almost invariably denied admission—some on the ground that the inmates were not criminals” and furthermore, that Northern prison matrons were “often uneducated and extremely suspicious. They did not wish any intruders in their departments and in one instance the matron believed she would lose her position through the investigation and her attitude so affected the prisoners that subjects were undesirable” (21). Though Kellor found prisons and convict camps more open in the south, as their administrators were less concerned with their treatment of the largely African Americans incarcerated, but noted that: “Where the work was conducted upon lessees’ plantations the attitude was one of suspicion. They seemed in constant fear that something would be discovered” (21).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 19.

overcome, and the ‘weirdness’ of the tests tends to accentuate them.”¹⁰¹ In this way, despite her condescension, Kellor also describes her experimental method as negotiating between her own scientific way of knowing (as a kind of rational, autonomous subject) and her subjects’ perspective, rather than objectifying and evacuating their agency entirely.¹⁰²

Having begun to establish this seemingly more flexible experimental approach to the scientific method, Kellor splits the women she has examined into categories for analysis and comparison. Though Kellor notes that she has studied black women in prisons in the North, she groups women from northern workhouses and penitentiaries as white women, while representing black women’s criminality solely through her southern studies (which include convict camps, plantation leasing and workhouses). Kellor also includes “normals” in her study; namely, white women university students from which she has also taken measurements.¹⁰³ These categorizations indeed construct and reify racial difference, especially as white women occupy a “normal” position while black women remain contained within southern carcerality. At the same time, by creating a network of comparison between these subjects, Kellor also invokes the possibility that these women might build and participate in social relationship in new and different ways, and furthermore, attempts to make these connections between women visible and public.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 22-23.

¹⁰² In a longer version of this chapter, we might also trace these moments for the glimpses they provide of alternate modes and methods for understanding incarcerated women’s experiences and social relationships, even if Kellor does not recognize them as such.

¹⁰³ These students were from Cornell University and University of Chicago, Kellor’s alma maters, suggesting that *Experimental Sociology*’s narrative is also in part a narrative of Kellor’s own self-fashioning. In this way, Kellor’s own presence as an investigator is inextricably connected to the category formations she makes, though her self-presentation remains implicit and abstracted in *Experimental Sociology*, as an attempt at objective self-effacement. See Chapter Three, “Scientists of Society” in Ellen Fitzpatrick, *Endless Crusade: Women Social Scientists and Progressive Reform*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1994), for an overview of Kellor’s graduate studies at the University of Chicago in particular.

Kellor begins to make the social potential of this new network of categories visible by measuring the physical forms of incarcerated women, yet resisting for the most part the complete objectification of the women she measures. Working through the anthropometrical examinations of women that Lombroso made famous in his studies of female criminality, Kellor actually insists on the *failure* and inadequacy of these measurements (while also meticulously detailing the record of her results). Further, Kellor instead mobilizes these measurements to refute the existence of a specifically degenerate race or “criminal type,” observing instead the hybrid and evolving character of different “types” in the United States. Kellor writes, “They may be predominantly Irish or German, etc., but there are too frequently infusions from other races. Even among negroes, pure types are not always obtainable. When they are secured they have frequently not been exposed to the same conditions of climate, soil, food, heat, etc., as with Irish immigrants.”¹⁰⁴ Along these lines, while Kellor records the averages of students, white convicts, and black convicts’ head measurements (following Lombroso’s lead), she uses the data to demonstrate that head measurement does not actually correlate with deviant or normal behavior, and does not form a fixed typological hierarchy.¹⁰⁵ Rather, the comparison of women’s physical characteristics allows Kellor to draw attention often to their relative malleability, and instead, highlight the need for new forms of measurement that might also account for environmental forces shaping women’s material and physical embodiment. Thus, Kellor promotes the “value of social knowledge in interpreting results” as reading practice that might unsettle if not completely overturn biological determinism.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Kellor, *Experimental Sociology*, 36.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid 37-39. For instance, Kellor measures women’s “cephalic index, bizygomatic arches, orbits, inner corners of eyes, nasal index, length of ears, mouth, height of forehead” (xi).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 45.

While Lombroso posits that “criminal women” (particularly “the prostitute” as the prototypical “woman criminal” who commercializes sex) are inherently more masculine in their features, for example, Kellor does not do away with masculinity as a “distinctive” and legible characteristic, but rather draws attention to how a social environment has sculpted a woman in a particular way, which then becomes coded as her biological essence and determined fate:

Faces of criminal women unquestionably reveal harshness and cynicism and sometimes licentiousness, but masculinity has a distinctive character and is not necessarily made up of coarseness or vulgarity. The sharp competitive struggle for existence, dissipation, immoral surroundings, and harsh treatment, especially of prostitutes must produce these expressions.¹⁰⁷

Here, Kellor’s care in presenting her reader with the various factors that shape the circumstances of women deemed prostitutes illustrates the interaction of embodied, physical experience with social experience. As Kellor refuses to sensationalize or condemn the character of women who have engaged in sex work, she also highlights their set of social conditions as deforming and imprisoning, preventing them from evolving into a new and “healthier” state. Furthermore, these detailed descriptions of this confining environment call upon the reader to begin to imagine what a different environment might look like when barriers such as economic competition and “immoral surroundings” are removed, highlighting both the disfiguring and unrealistic divide between seemingly public and domestic spaces. Thus, while Kellor does not do away with normative categories altogether (i.e. masculinity, or “the prostitute”), her descriptive observations also ask her reader to imagine a more harmonious social totality that does not hinge on the competition of the public market nor the supposed enclosure of the domestic.

Perceiving Women’s Development

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 41. Interestingly, Kellor’s own self-presentation blurred the boundaries between feminine and masculine style. Many of the photographs taken of her throughout her life show Kellor dressed in pants, ties and with her hair up or cut short, depending on the period’s conventions, and participating in activities that were deemed particularly “masculine” for those times, such as driving an early automobile, fishing and playing ball. These photographs are housed in the Mary Dreier papers in the Schlesinger Library of Harvard University.

After establishing how social environment and physiology interact chiasmatically, dramatizing the possibility for a more harmonious social whole, Kellor investigates how women's perceptual capacities negotiate and respond to the boundary between the most basic interior space—the body itself—and the exterior world. Thus, in her chapter on “Psychological Tests,” Kellor begins by once again describing measurements, this time the results of tests that seek to measure subjects' perception: their visual, auditory, dermal and muscular, olfactory and gustatory capacities.¹⁰⁸ In calculating and collecting this data, Kellor also again averages the results of each category of woman; she mobilizes this data not to extrapolate a causal relationship between sentience and criminality, but instead to call attention to how the boundaries and demands of social environments might shape perception itself. For example, in measuring sensibility to pain, Kellor writes that

[t]he white criminal class compares favorably with washerwomen, and is probably of equal social and educational grade. Workhouse inmates were less sensitive, which fact probably finds some explanation in dissipated habits and hard life. The negro compares favorably with northern white criminals and with the laboring class.¹⁰⁹

In these few sentences, Kellor continues to connect categories of women who were traditionally considered insurmountably separated by fixed categories of race and class, and furthermore, begins to attribute their sensitivities to “dissipated habits and hard life”: the labor they performed, for example, and their living conditions. Kellor thus theorizes cognition as a developmental process, one of acculturation, rather than fixed ability: “It is asserted that criminals are allied to savage races, and hence have sense better developed and must rely more upon them in lieu of higher reasoning processes. The results indicate, however, that education and culture tend to develop higher

¹⁰⁸ Kellor, *Experimental Sociology*, 50-57.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 55.

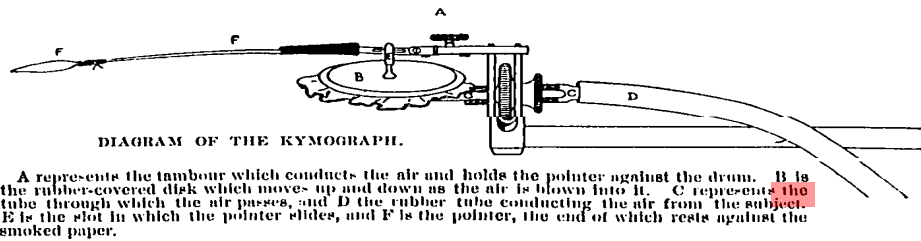
sensibilities,” she writes.¹¹⁰ In Kellor’s view, then, while an individual or “race” might be at a different “stage” or phase of development, each component had the capacity to evolve through educational resources, and a holistic society allowed for and was enhanced by the development and “education” of each individual and group. What’s more, Kellor re-orientes the narrative of civic development by placing women, commonly conceived of as belonging to the enclosure of the home for their reproductive function as mothers (in the case of white women such as Kellor) and domestic labor, squarely in the center of the *bildungsroman* of liberal citizenship, and furthermore attempts to dissolve boundaries between public and private spaces altogether, as she envisions (and idealizes) a more organic and evolving social whole.¹¹¹ In this sense, Kellor uses a system of naturalist measurement, attending to how her subjects are embedded in their particular social and physical environments, in order to imagine women’s development into universal subjects in a social order that is in turn more evolved.

Furthermore, to draw attention to her subjects’ capacity for both feeling and reason, and to narrate their possible development and contribution to an evolved social whole, Kellor introduces a new technology of measurement (and a new method for interpretation), departing from Lombroso’s experimentation altogether (see figure 2). In addition to measuring women’s memory, association of ideas, color preference, and fatigue, Kellor employs the respiration test from a new and complex machine called the “kymograph,” which sought to measure a subject’s emotion, tracking her

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 56.

¹¹¹ For a discussion of *bildungsroman* and citizenship, see Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*

reaction to a particular stimulus by recording her respiration rate on smoked paper.¹¹² In an article



for

Figure 2, "Diagram of the Kymograph" from Kellor's "My Experiences with the Kymograph" in *Harper's Bazaar*, November 1900

Harper's Bazaar, Kellor outlines the function of the kymograph, writing: "It was the necessity for obtaining definite facts regarding the emotional life of students and criminals which led me to use the kymograph and the registration through the respiration" and further explains the procedure for administering this test: "The kymograph is set up in a quiet room, and the subject is seated with her back to the instrument, so she cannot see the registration. Every effort is made to prevent unintentional interruptions, and to shut out any external suggestions or stimuli."¹¹³ What is interesting about these tests is that Kellor actually includes visual representations of her results, which are difficult to articulate without visual illustration (and this explicitly visual representation is unusual for *Experimental Sociology*, which is mainly comprised of text and statistics). Instead, the emotion that each stimulus provoked (a pin prick for pain, an investigator's request for the subject to think about a person that the subject hates or loves) is recorded as a curve that follows the subject's breathing. In this way, what was generally considered interior, private emotion is made

¹¹² Though not always recognized as such, the kymograph and Kellor's experiments with it were early versions of what a 21st century audience might recognize as a polygraph or lie-detector test (a test which, noticeably, only became a popular piece of extrajudicial technology in the United States). According to Ken Alder, Hugo Munsterberg founded the first major American program of "brass instrument" psychology in William James' lab in Harvard, and his student William Moulton Marsten, invented what is now known as the polygraph in 1915 (Alder 6-7). Ken Alder, "A Social History of Untruth: Lie Detection and Trust in 20th Century America." *Representations*. 80.1 (Fall 2002).

¹¹³ Frances Kellor, "My Experiments with the Kymograph," *Harper's Bazaar* 33 (November 10, 1900), 1756-7. Kellor performed kymograph tests on women incarcerated in both the north and the south.

public and visual, signified as abstract measurement, perhaps signaling the continuum between the two.

Moreover, as the kymographic lines chart the development of emotion and thus blur the conceptual boundary between public exteriority and private interiority, Kellor challenges the cultural valorization of women's sentimentality, which undergirded the ideological construction of white domesticity as removed entirely from public life. While Ken Alder has noted that cultural representations of the polygraph (invented shortly after the kymograph) "often played off of gender stereotypes, with the interrogating examiner invariably coded as male, and the evasive subject as female," Kellor uses her position as kymographic examiner to unsettle a relationship in which the observer's autonomy depended on the vulnerability and objectification of the observed.¹¹⁴ Instead, charting emotion for Kellor is a way to illustrate how the supposed public/private divide deforms women's development: Kellor considered women more emotional not because of their inherently sensitive or irrational character, but because their seeming removal from public life distorted their potential to contribute more fully to the social whole.

The form of the kymographic line in *Experimental Sociology* thus challenges the reader's expectations about scientific representation of social life. On the page, the development of the lines appear irregular and jagged to the reader's eye (see figure 3), not exactly undulating evenly in the narrative of progress that one might expect, given Kellor's emphasis on women's capacity for progressive development. But this irregularity works to prove Kellor's point, to some extent: women in prison might be further developed and trained into rationality, and these, isolated, serrated, fragmented lines might be sculpted to form a more congruous social whole. To this end, unlike some of her contemporaries who worked with machines like the kymograph, but chose to present the lines recorded in aggregate form, a line that was the average of many recorded tests, to

¹¹⁴ Ken Alder, "A Social History of Untruth," 14.

present the *typical* reaction to a particular emotional stimulus, Kellor instead presents records from individual women she has tested. Lisa Cartwright has observed that the kymograph's "linear trace" actually enabled wider public consumption of scientific observation, yet here, the uneven, abstract form of these individual lines, and their disconnection from an explanatory key or diagram, in fact makes the reading experience of both the lay reader and specialist equally strange and difficult.¹¹⁵

Instead of a precise measurement, these jagged lines evoke the need for meaningful reformation and re-ordering of the social itself, calling for a new public order. Take, for example, Kellor's description of the kymographic record of an imprisoned woman crying:

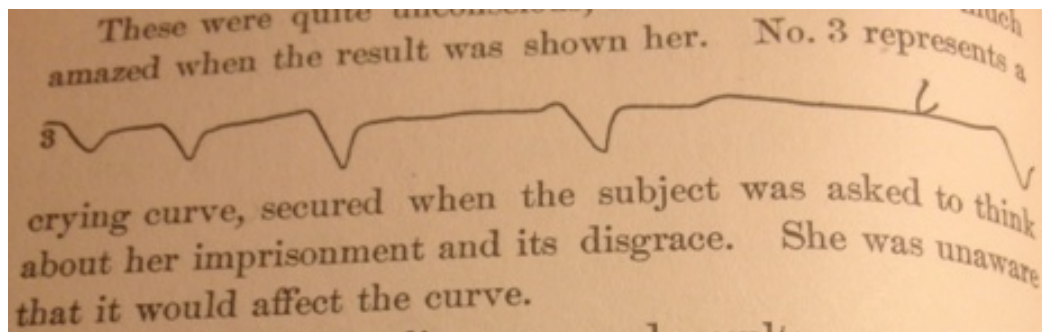


Figure 3, "Crying Curve." "No. 3 represents a crying curve, secured when the subject was asked to think about her imprisonment and its disgrace. She was unaware that it would affect the curve" (Kellor, *Experimental Sociology*, 76).

This "crying curve" images the uncontrolled, jagged character of crying due to shame and grief (representing quite literally a "crying jag"), an excessive emotional reaction commonly associated with feminine hysteria, fitting into Kellor's thesis that women's "excessive" emotionality stems from their foreclosure from public life. Yet, importantly, the premise of this crying jag (authentic in the woman's unawareness "that it would affect the curve") is incarceration itself. Imprisonment, and moreover, its stigma, which continues to limit the social possibilities of women outside of the prison, propel this line of emotion in a ragged, uneven direction, in a sense mirroring the irrational

¹¹⁵ In *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture*, Cartwright observes that "[t]he inscriptions of data produced through techniques like kymography... replaced the sensory observations of the physician or technician as a privileged source of scientific knowledge" (26). Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1995).

division between public and private spheres. Understanding the interior emotional experience itself as shaped by social conditions—here, imprisonment—accentuates the importance of women’s participation in reshaping those social spaces (and highlights Kellor’s tenuous identification with the women that she prods for emotional response). Thus, here, Kellor social scientific representation does not as much resemble Seltzer’s formulation of precise and aggregate “statistical personhood” as a way of knowing and controlling the social, as much as the potential for a new kind of social citizenship, again forming a kind of “experimental naturalism” in which an individual’s agency is figured as potential through the social itself rather than fully autonomous or fully determined.

Representing Race, Gender and the Public Order

After exploring the relationship between body, environment and perception, Kellor looks more closely at forms of social relationship themselves, limning the way in which particular groups of women might participate in the social whole that Kellor envisions. Here, the racial dimensions and limits of Kellor’s sociological experimentation come more clearly into view, as Kellor uses different representational forms to outline the social relationship of white women in the north and black women in the south. As historian Khalil Muhammad has noted, the insidious underside of Kellor’s narrative of civilizational development is that African Americans were represented as “underdeveloped” and incapable of taking on the full responsibilities and privileges of citizenship in this modernizing moment.¹¹⁶ As Kellor grouped women who were often marked as “ethnic” European immigrants with white women in the north, their capacity for development was brought into relief by figuring black women as less civilizationally advanced, thus bearing the burden of excessive embodiment and vulnerability. Here, then, we see a major schism in the social agency that Kellor has envisioned and theorized thus far in *Experimental Sociology*.

¹¹⁶ Khalil Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 100. Muhammad observes, “As Kellor discounted race traits and made significant strides towards an environmental or sociological perspective on black criminality, part of her analysis reified the inferiority of blacks even as criminals” (100).

Citing white women's easier access to education, as well as better kept institutional records, Kellor excerpts and closely examines the letters of white women imprisoned in northern penitentiaries and workhouses in order to illuminate their relationships to their "associates" in crime-ridden districts, and thus the connection between carceral and urbanizing spaces in the north. After all, Kellor writes, "conditions were more favorable to the expression of 'innermost sentiments,' than a life of freedom would have been," and thus provide a more accurate representation of life within the city and within the confine of the workhouse or penitentiary.¹¹⁷ Kellor takes paragraphs from a letter and suggests these passages symbolize a general trend in a wide swath of letters, thus synecdochically substituting one woman's writing for the experience and expression of many. For example, Kellor excerpts the following letter, "I write you asking you not to refuse the dollar I asked for, as I shall need it on the 11th of August to get a room for it, and as soon as I get my work back again I can send it to you. I know I will be in the streets again if you don't help me a little..." and then follows this excerpt with an interpretation of the social conditions she believes are represented here, "This indicates clearly the desire to lead a different life and yet habit and environment are so unfavorable that money received is often the means of their return to workhouses."¹¹⁸ Here, Kellor makes legible the letter writer's "desire" for growth, looping imprisonment and the industrialized city together as equally confining spaces. The prison thus comes to represent a portion of white women's more general restriction within modernizing American life. Kellor's use of synecdoche in substituting these letter excerpts for the general experience of incarcerated women is especially important for her project of presenting women as capable of developing into public citizens; the synecdochic forms of relationship between women that Kellor presents mirrors her larger vision of a social whole comprised of interlocking and

¹¹⁷ Kellor, *Experimental Sociology*, 101.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid* 102.

harmonious components.¹¹⁹ By displaying one woman's capability to represent a larger body of women, Kellor seeks to demonstrate that women – categorized specifically as white women in the north – are capable of participating in the ideal structure of democratic representation, in which one public actor represents many citizens. Finally, as Kellor (without permission, notably) transforms private correspondence between intimates, or their “innermost sentiments,” into texts that circulate through a wider reading public – in a sense inserting herself into this synecdochic relation – she demonstrates how she is able to intervene into and begin to reshape the fabric of modern civic life.

Strikingly, however, Kellor does not provide excerpted letters for the “negro criminals” she studies, instead presenting “brief sketches of crime or of peculiarities of the criminals” intended to serve a similar function as the preceding letters: the sketches “are given as indications of the great mass of material which is of social value, in that it represents their attitudes, life processes and progress.”¹²⁰ Unlike the letters from northern prisons, however, which intercept and present communication between intimates (albeit within the confines of prison censorship), these sketches rely on the distanced and one-sided observation of Kellor as investigator, and moreover focus on the women's exceptional rather than typical nature. These descriptions take the form of what we might think of as character sketches. For example, Kellor focuses on a the figure of a “13-year prisoner in the south,” whose ability to balance masculine labor with feminine conduct she admires, writing:

She was sent to the institution when about 18 years of age for the murder of her step-father. The circumstances as given by her are that while intoxicated he abused her mother and in defending her the murder occurred. She does not deny the crime and her only hope seems to be to live to return to her children. The stockade where she is incarcerated permits no men and a masculine style of dress was adopted

¹¹⁹ Here, I am drawing on Kenneth Burke's definition of synecdoche; in “Four Master Tropes,” he suggests that “some part of the social body...is held to be representative of the society as a whole” (Burke 427). Kenneth Burke, “Four Master Tropes,” *The Kenyon Review* 3.4 (Autumn, 1941).

¹²⁰ Kellor, *Experimental Sociology*, 106.

because she is the blacksmith, mechanic, teamster, errand boy, etc. She is given a small shop and here she reigns supreme. She is an excellent engineer and is a most valued and trusted convict. Strangely enough she is not masculine, though she strikes a straight blow with her hammer and holds her reins firmly. Her movements are essentially feminine and she possesses more modesty than the average negress. She affords an illustration of the fact that masculine labors do not necessarily induce masculine habits. She is probably the only negro woman who is a competent engineer, blacksmith, wheelwright and mechanic.¹²¹

On first reading, Kellor also seems to blur the boundaries between experience in confinement and freedom, as the woman profiled – recently identified by historian Sarah Haley as Mattie Crawford, who lived in Georgia – moves from a violent domestic space to prison.¹²² Furthermore, despite Crawford’s separation from her children, she is able to “reign supreme” over the blacksmith’s shop in prison, and moreover, maintain a distinct, and even idealized, femininity while taking on traditionally masculine work. As such, Kellor takes note of the woman’s ability to fashion and maintain her own identity despite her incarceration, and begins to suggest a new understanding of black women’s role within public life, seeming to follow and even amplify Kellor’s overall ambition to blur the boundaries between the traditional domestic/public divide.

Yet at the same time, this “sketch” takes a very different form than the synecdoche of the excerpted letters which Kellor uses to illustrate white women’s capacity for public representation. Kellor represents Mattie Crawford as exceptional, as opposed to the “average negress” she measures Crawford in relation to. Rather than employing the synecdoche in which an incarcerated woman’s letter represents a larger body of women trapped in conditions that must be remade for women’s

¹²¹ Ibid, 106.

¹²² In her important recent monograph, Haley identifies this woman blacksmith as Mattie Crawford, as Crawford is also profiled in a 1903 *Atlanta Constitution* article titled “Only Woman Blacksmith in America Is a Convict.” Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016., 96. The *Atlanta Constitution* article tells a much more violent story about Crawford’s adherence to “her own norms of womanhood,” observing that “Her skirts being in the way, her guards forced her to put on trousers. Several whippings were necessary to make her consent to this. But after she had them on awhile she became so attached to them as to refuse absolutely to take them off” (Haley 96, *Atlanta Constitution* qtd. in Haley 96).

greater freedom and civic capacity, in her “sketches” of black women incarcerated in the south, Kellor instead presents a metonymic relationship: as Kenneth Burke notes, the work of metonymy is essentially reduction, as “the basic strategy is...to convey some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible.”¹²³ In her sketch of Mattie Crawford, Kellor creates a contiguous association between the “average negress” whose femininity, modesty (and implicitly, labor), are found lacking, and the valued woman convict who “strikes a straight blow with her hammer and holds her reins firmly” yet whose “movements are essentially feminine,” synthesizing admirable masculine and feminine qualities (while attempting to keep them distinct). In this way, the abstracted statistical fiction of the “average” black woman might aspire to embody the particular character that Kellor has sketched. While here Kellor engages with the tenets of Booker T. Washington’s ideology of racial uplift, which imagines a self-disciplined and compliant African American labor force as an entrance point to American modernization, the metonymic relationship between the “peculiar” figure of the black woman blacksmith and the “average negress” also speaks to Kellor’s vision for black women’s capacity for citizenship.¹²⁴ Rather than illustrating their ability to publicly represent other women, the distance between the ideal and average black woman that Kellor presents establishes an alternate mode of development. In this schematic, the deficient “average” aspire to the particularized contours of Crawford’s characterization: her ability to “reign supreme” over her labor in the prison flags her as a markedly embodied subject, rather than the abstract citizen-subject of synecdoche (represented by letters’ symbolic circulation, instead of a particular, concretized character).

¹²³ Burke, “Four Master Tropes,” 424.

¹²⁴ While Kellor does not cite him explicitly here, she includes Booker T. Washington in her works cited for this section in *Experimental Sociology*. It is notable that Kellor does not cite or engage with fellow sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, who developed a similarly environment approach to criminology in his studies of black life in the same years (though their methods and aims also significantly differed).

The final aspect to note in Kellor's "sketch" of Crawford is that in this description, she gains only a limited form of agency, "reigning supreme" over her environment through her separation and distance from her family. This emphasis on Crawford's social and familial isolation, and the woman's positive development *within* a markedly carceral space differs significantly from Kellor's treatment of social conditions themselves as confining in the Northern urban landscape. In fact, Kellor is quite critical of the fact that the letters of white women prisoners in the north include little mention of their children.¹²⁵ This maternal disconnect appears to be an aspect of social conditions that she wishes to reshape, reinforcing white women's supposedly fundamental role as mothers, despite her earlier mission to loosen the strictures of the domestic. In contrast, Kellor's profile of Mattie Crawford becomes contradictory: while her maternal instinct, her wish for reunion with her children, seems to preserve her femininity, at the same time, her laudable capability for masculine work and self-sovereignty is made possible only through her incarceration and the loss of her children.¹²⁶ In *No Mercy Here*, Sarah Haley notes that Crawford's "forced performance" of masculinity brought about by her work as a blacksmith in prison "reified biological racial difference...[and] stabilized and fortified [white, feminine] gendered subject positions...Kellor's liberal reverence for Crawford illuminates the entrenched expectations of black female queerness

¹²⁵ Kellor, *Experimental Sociology*, 105.

¹²⁶ This sketch of Mattie Crawford's severance from her children partially replicates the formulation of "natal alienation" that Orlando Patterson presents in his hallmark study, *Slavery and Social Death*, which focuses on the effects of the enslaved's inability to draw on the "social heritage of his ancestors," as well as the fragile attachments of parents, children and couples whose relationships were not formally acknowledged by their enslavers, and could be easily broken up (Patterson 5-6). The term natal alienation "goes directly to the heart of what is critical in the slave's forced alienation, the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations" (7). Here, though, the focus is placed solely on the figure of the black mother as paradoxically freed by the loss of her children, emphasizing the potential benefit of this "natal alienation" – in this sense, Kellor seems to endorse and naturalize the continued violence of enslavement – especially its violent use of black women's bodies as reproducing an exploitable labor force – through the carceral system that developed post-emancipation. Orlando Patterson *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1982). See also Hortense Spillers' seminal discussion of black maternity under slavery and the discursive production of "flesh" in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17.2 (Summer, 1987), 64-81.

defined by promiscuity, aversion to hard work, and masculine comportment. That Crawford had learned the art of feminine performance and seemed comfortable in womens' clothing made her a remarkable spectacle."¹²⁷ Adding to Haley's analysis, Kellor's positioning of Crawford as "peculiar" or queer also suspends her capacity for lived maternal intimacy with her children, reifying white women's normative maternity, and creating a formulation of maternity in which Crawford's future diverges from her children's trajectory, even as the hope for return to them sustains her.

This paradoxical formulation in which a kind of melancholic maternity within confinement allows for Crawford's limited freedom and self-sovereignty is likely due to Kellor's understanding of black family life as fundamentally shaped by enslavement, and moreover, Kellor's understanding of the slave system itself (and its subsequent relationship to incarceration). Kellor clearly marks the difference between white immigrants easier incorporation into the representational structure of American citizenship as opposed to African Americans in the south quite clearly when she writes in her section about environment and criminality,

In domestic training whites, even the immigrants, are far ahead of negroes, for this race has some peculiar disadvantages. There is no race outside of barbarism when there is so low a grade of domestic life, and where the child receives so little training. In slavery, there was no domestic life. Continuance of family ties depended upon the will of the master, and his attitude favored immorality, for his desire was to secure as many slaves as possible regardless of this. Negroes have not had quite forty years in which to *create* and establish all the sound principles and practices of domestic life. (138)

In this formulation of slavery, the coerced labor of black women is also the result of an imbalance between the domestic and public realm. Yet, in voiding the enslaved's possibilities for inhabiting domestic life altogether ("In slavery, there was no domestic life"), Kellor positions black life as adjacent to the binary of public and private spaces, inadvertently troubling the construction of that

¹²⁷ Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 97-98. There may in fact be another reason for Kellor's "reverence" for Crawford's queerness, and her elision of the violence that engendered this performance. As Kellor herself dressed in a distinctly masculine and unconventional style for women in the period, she may have admired and identified with Crawford's fashion – though this moment of identification eclipsed a rigorous engagement with the violence that shaped Crawford's experiences while incarcerated.

distinction altogether. Despite her emphasis on unsettling boundaries between the domestic and public life, however, Kellor does not seek to do away with this binary. Kellor later posits that women's generalized historical position in the United States has been "slavery," as the crimes they have committed depend upon the amount of freedom they possess, and as women were historically both protected and confined, they committed few crimes: "There must be *opportunity* as well as *inclination* for commission of crime or for immorality and women's position—often that of slaves—did not favor these. Their sanction of crimes of men show them to have been either slaves without influence or else of similar moral breadth."¹²⁸ This metaphor should disintegrate when Kellor presents a model of civilizational development to narrate the difference between African Americans' development from slavery to citizenship with European immigrants' development into citizenship. Instead, it becomes a justification for the unequal distribution of social resources and the development of different carceral systems for African Americans and white and European immigrants.

Along these lines, Kellor's vision of the form of confinement and thus the prevention of crime differs greatly for northern and southern landscapes. For northern reform, Kellor envisions diverse mechanisms for women's mobility into civic life, such as "public playhouses," in which women might participate in physical exercise, developing their physical and mental capacities, thus training these women for competition and "success in the both the business and social world," as well as "department store schools" for children and young women who have entered the workforce, to ensure sufficient education.¹²⁹ However, Kellor's vision for southern reform instead focuses on refiguring black people's domestic life itself. Thus Kellor's two major suggestions for penal reform is a system of "state farms" that eliminate convict leasing and mandate state supervision, but

¹²⁸ Kellor, *Experimental Sociology*, 163.

¹²⁹ *Ibid* 262, 272.

preserve much of the plantation-style labor historically entrenched in the south, as well as kindergartens for black children, supervising their training and their “home life.”¹³⁰ “The education of the negro has been downward and, and luxuries, not necessities, have been given,” Kellor observes, “...The system must be changed—the child must be trained from infancy, his surroundings improved and the standards of his home life raised. Only then can the question be dealt with, ‘What effect has education upon the negro.’”¹³¹ Though Kellor works to represent “the negro” as a potential citizen, albeit one set apart from the white race, she delays or displaces the *bildungsroman* of education that results in harmony, which results in enfranchisement and harmonious social citizenship through her figuration of black domestic life, as she begins (with many others) to imagine new foundations of the modern American welfare state in the North. Hence, Kellor’s meticulously descriptive work in *Experimental Sociology* in fact naturalizes these racial “developmental” differences, positioning African Americans’ “disadvantaged” and displaced development as a kind of foil for white immigrant progress. The potential for reshaping the social that Kellor presents in what I’ve called her “experimental naturalism” also enforces racial violence rooted in enslavement while beginning to formulate new and coercive social norms in its imagination of a more “harmonious” social whole.

Visual Representation in the Chicago Daily Tribune

The differences that *Experimental Sociology* produces, however, both resonate and take on notably different forms in her shorter pieces in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, as the pieces include many more visual representations of the incarcerated women that Kellor studied in northern and southern prisons, and these images complicate and re-orient Kellor’s formulations of social’s potential in *Experimental Sociology*. If *Experimental Sociology* is a kind of *bildungsroman* of disciplinary knowledge, and

¹³⁰ Here, Kellor is engaging with the widespread belief that education for African Americans increased their criminality. See Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 97.

¹³¹ Kellor, 300.

in turn, Kellor's coming-of-age as a social scientist, the series in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* focuses much more on the contours of the incarcerated woman herself. Importantly, the visual dimensions of Kellor's work in the *Daily Tribune* does not simply function in tandem with statistical description, making "the social visible" as in Seltzer's formulation of the "realist seeing machine," but instead allow the reader to apprehend social possibilities that Kellor perhaps did not anticipate – especially important to consider as Kellor wrote in serial form here, for a much wider audience than the academics for whom *Experimental Sociology* was intended, thus making her work more public.¹³² In "The Body and the Archive," Allan Sekula observes that the role of photography in creating "optical realism" did not produce a "monolithic or unitary model of nineteenth century realist discourse," but rather the camera was "integrated into a larger ensemble: a bureaucratic-clerical-statistical system of 'intelligence.'"¹³³ Thus, in arranging her own "visual ensemble" of sociological and visual material, Kellor's "experimental naturalism" tests out the traditional boundaries of realism (which presents an autonomous subject unencumbered by his or her social environment, resembling the bourgeois citizen-subject) and naturalism (which is often thought of as presenting a subject evacuated of agency, whose fate is determined by his or her natural environment).

Kellor begins her first article on northern prisons, "The American Female Offender: The Psychology and Sociology of Criminals and Students Compared," by drawing attention to the relationship between crime and class, elaborating on her theories in *Experimental Sociology*. Writing against the precept that the capacity to commit a crime is determined by heredity or "disease," Kellor troubles the notion that a person's anatomy might make visible her criminality. Thus, Kellor complicates a particular mode of spectatorship, in which the viewer conceives of him or herself as

¹³² Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 97. See Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, for a discussion of the relationship between newspaper serialization and the imagination of a "horizontal" community among citizens of a particular nation. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* New York: Verso (1983).

¹³³ Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* Vol. 39 (Winter, 1986), 16.

disembodied and autonomous (the unencumbered realist subject) by reading the other's body as physiologically criminal, and thus evacuated of agency (the naturalist subject). However, the images Kellor has selected for this piece draw attention to the equivalence between incarcerated white women and white women students, rather than enabling a relationship in which the privileged agency of one subject depends on the deprivation of another.

Though this concern with class boundaries is similar to Kellor's work in *Experimental Sociology*, Kellor's tone in this article is much snappier than the voice of academic expert she employs in her book length work. Writing against the notion that crime is a "disease" that affects the "criminal classes," necessitating their quarantine and determining the arc of their lived experience, Kellor again introduces her environmental thesis as she compares the capacities of upper and middle class women with "criminal" women of immigrant and working classes. "To say there is any peculiar combination which makes the criminal; to say there are traits of common factors found in them not found elsewhere, is to set aside fact," Kellor insists, and continues to remind her reader, "'Vanity,' says Lombroso, 'is characteristic of all criminals (women).'" But does this not apply equally to normal women? The fact that it may be more crudely expressed among less moral or cultured women does not make it more prevalent than where it is covered by a hundred artifices born of education and culture."¹³⁴ As Kellor justifies her methodology in this first *Daily Tribune* piece, she seeks to equalize the figures of the privileged white student with the impoverished women who have been subjected to negative "environmental forces."¹³⁵

Thus, Kellor writes almost polemically of the representational structure of law itself, asking, "Is there any other disease originated by and its course determined by legislative bodies? Can there be a biological condition dependent upon legislative caprice?" and further pointing out that, "It is

¹³⁴ Kellor, "The American Female Offender – No. 1" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan. 7, 1900, 33.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

the violation of the standard involved which makes a man criminal, not the fact of his being caught and legally adjusted so. If this is true, who constitute the criminal and thus ‘diseased’ classes? How do many of the acts of the speculator, corporation, trust and politician differ from those of the thief? Only in method, mental being substituted for physical force.”¹³⁶ In this way, Kellor opens the space for a more nuanced accounting and recognition of women’s criminality, illustrating that women may in fact be able to occupy the civic position of “man” described above as they acquire the mental skills necessary for the public realm’s commerce and competition. This taking “legislative bodies” to task for their inability to account for crime more holistically, moreover, gives Kellor grounds to argue for forms of governance that balance out unchecked capitalism and male criminality, as well.

In keeping with Kellor’s concern with equivalence and commensurability in the piece’s writing, the visual work of the images Kellor has selected also draw attention to equivalence that Kellor seeks to establish between incarcerated white women and white women students. The layout of the newspaper page itself is bookended by two line drawings (see figure 4), one of a woman in a striped prisoner’s uniform slumped over a table in what appears to be a barred cell (though the drawing itself is not framed or enclosed), and the second of a woman seated at a desk in a striped comfortable chair, reading a book (this woman might be read as Kellor or a student). We might read these opposing images as constituting what Sekula refers to as the “shadow archive” of criminal “mug shots” that mirror bourgeois portraiture in the late 19th and early 20th century. Positing that photographs meant literally to “arrest” their subjects are the result of a social system that seeks to position a select few bourgeois subjects as autonomous and “natural” subject captured in photographic portraiture, Sekula observes that “[t]o the extent that bourgeois order depends upon the systematic defense of social relations based on private property, to the extent that the legal basis

¹³⁶ Ibid.

of the self lies in the model of property rights, in what has been termed ‘possessive individualism,’ every proper portrait has its lurking, objectifying inverse in the files of the police.’¹³⁷ And he further elaborates, “We can speak then of a generalized, inclusive *archive*, a *shadow archive* that encompasses an entire social terrain while positioning individuals within that terrain. This archive contains subordinate, territorialized archives: archives whose semantic interdependence is normally obscured by the ‘coherence’ and ‘mutual exclusivity’ of the social groups registered within each.”¹³⁸ What is unexpected and perhaps even radical about Kellor’s work here is that she does away with the “mutual exclusivity” of the portrait and the mug shot, drawing her reader’s eye to the interconnected, mutual dependence between these two categories of “criminal” and “normal” women, as eye moves across the page from abject incarcerated woman on the left, paralyzed with excessive emotion, to the self-contained, studious, and rational woman on the right, sandwiching the article’s title, “The American Female Offender – No. 1” and the image of Kellor and her student

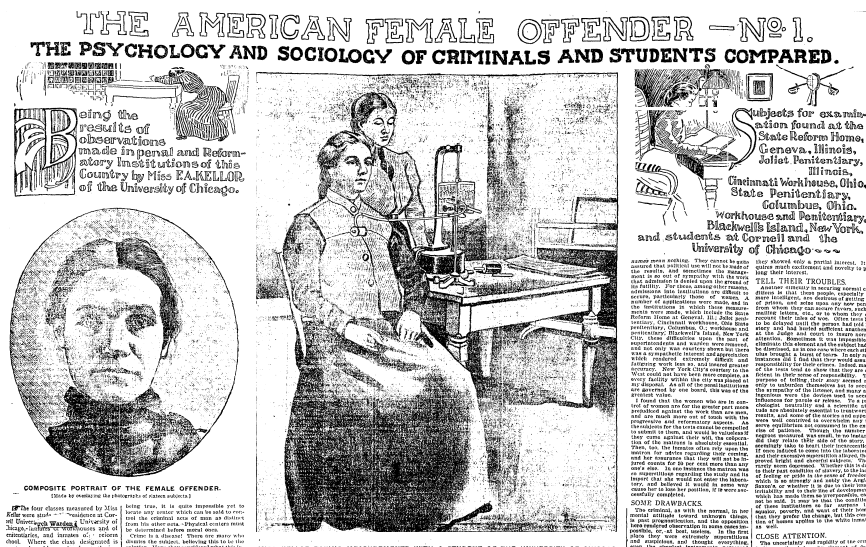


Figure 4, “The American Female Offender – No. 1: The Psychology and Sociology of Criminals and Students Compared” *The Chicago Tribune*, January 7 (1900), 33.

¹³⁷ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 7.

¹³⁸ Sekula, 10.

subject. Having established this interdependence, the “composite portrait of the female offender [made by overlaying the photographs of sixteen subjects]” featured on the left hand side of the page (underneath the crying prisoner), combines the photographed faces to create an “average” female offender who bears no difference from the women whose faces are sketched in the drawings with Kellor and the student, as well as the solitary student. Interestingly, the face of the distraught incarcerated woman is not featured. Here, the composite portrait presents a kind of inverse synecdoche, in which the “whole” represents the individual incarcerated women, again presenting their capacity for civic representation. Within the “visual ensemble” of this article, Kellor presents an opportunity for her readers to re-envision female criminality as a condition that the confines of class hierarchy creates, perhaps enabling her readers, for the first time, to understand their own relationship to the “criminal” and “normal” woman as one of potential substitution as well. What is especially striking here is that rather than the abstracted descriptions in *Experimental Sociology*, Kellor’s embodied, authorial figure is quite present on this page, suggesting the possible exchange between Kellor, as author and sociologist, and the subjects, both “criminal” and “normal” that she examines.

This logic of substitution continues as Kellor’s second article goes on to detail the anthropometric (physical) tests that she runs on both incarcerated women and women students in order to extricate women’s bodies from theories of physical determinism and view them instead from the lens of environment, as we saw in *Experimental Sociology*. For example, Kellor presents “composite” lithographs of German, Irish, and English “students” and “criminals,” as well as “negro criminals” feet to disprove Eugene S. Talbot’s theory that “the criminal was allied to the savage or less developed races” (which drew on footprints of various racial “types” as evidence); Kellor upends his logic by highlighting the fundamental irrational associations that Talbot makes. Kellor writes, “I am unable to say that this is not so, but my results tend to show that this is a racial trait, obscure, but not necessarily due to culture or peculiar to the criminal. The criminal, like the

normal, will be flatfooted or have an arched foot, according to race. Upon the culture theory, and that the criminal is allied to the savage, the Germans would come nearest the Africans for both are flat-footed, and yet, strangely enough, we can find in the latter race no Schopenhauers, no Goethes, no Wagners no Wundts!"¹³⁹ While critical of Talbot's own racist stereotypes, this humor and "common sense," of course, hinges on Kellor's own racial, and racist, stereotyping, and foregrounds the exceptionality that the "negro criminal" plays in Kellor's analysis, despite the fact that she organizes her visual representations for immigrant white women by national types. Yet what is also interesting about Kellor's lithographs of these composite feet is that Kellor chooses to represent body parts that are not gendered; though her textual discussion does not compare women's traits with men's explicitly, the composite feet could very well be taken as measurements of men. Furthermore, the visual representation of these body parts are not accompanied by any other images of a particular criminal trait, giving the reader's eye no immediate instruction as to how he or she might interpret their presence on the page, thus allowing the reader to potentially imagine his or her own measurements in relation to the shapes recorded on the page. Likewise, in the same article, Kellor also presents drawings of arms and a chest as the subject grips a device meant to test her strength, however, based on the contours of the drawing, it is difficult to tell whether the subject exerting her strength in the image is a man or a woman. In this way, the piece not only provides the reader with the results of anthropometric tests that had been used to draw too easy of a connection between the body and criminality, but also, highlights the plasticity of the human form itself. Because of the open-ended visual presentation on this page, which refuses clear gender delineations, the reader is able to re-imagine the dimensions of what constitutes a "natural man," in turn re-imagining what kind of bodies might occupy the space of citizenship; furthermore, he or she might

¹³⁹ Kellor, "The American Female Offender – No. 2, the Psychology and Sociology of Criminals and Students Compared," *The Chicago Tribune*, January 7 (1900), 33.

imagine his or her own form as another possible substitution in this chain of syndecochic relationship.

Kellor's final article in this series tackles the flip side of naturalism: whether an individual's environment or 'social conditions' determines his or her fate. Detailing the sociological relationships that Kellor also covers in *Experimental Sociology*, such as "the influence of occupation," "the marital relation" and "mental operation," the article includes a set of drawings that represent the streets of urban Chicago (see figure 5). Like the line drawings of the "normal" woman student and the "criminal" incarcerated woman in her first article, the line drawings open into the text of the article; the columns of the storefronts and tenement exteriors are almost (but not quite) in line with the columns of text (which take the reader through a methodical and thorough rehearsal of Kellor's findings), presenting a mismatched and almost overwhelming visual experience of the streets that Kellor describes.



Figure 5, "The American Female Offender No. 4 - The Psychology and Sociology of Criminals and Students Compared," *The Chicago Tribune*, January 28 (1900), 46.

Both looking closely at building windows and stoops, as well as zooming out to look at social life on the sidewalks, Kellor's reader encounters a chaotic scene of everyday life in the modernizing city, represented in an almost multi-dimensional collage of urban streets "where vice is open," as the caption for the central drawing of State Street reads. The disorder of these scenes, which blend into one another without seeming editorial direction, dramatizes the need for a more schematic system of organization, as per Kellor's argument that the public and domestic realms need a better, more balanced system of integration in order to recognize and prevent gendered forms of crime. Much like the jagged lines of the kymograph, the slanted, incomplete lines that compose the uneven layout of these street scenes seem to call for a more nuanced reorganization. And alongside Kellor's reading of "letter specimens" in this article, whose synecdochic relationship I have previously outlined in *Experimental Sociology*, the less detailed and thus less individualized figures walking the street seem to imply the possibility for formal equality between men and women, as well as between "classes" of women, as the figures walking the street appear somewhat commensurable.¹⁴⁰

Yet the possibility of racial miscegenation also shapes these drawings, as the center drawing depicts a street shared by both white and black men and women. Such an inclusion is a striking difference from Kellor's analysis of northern crime in *Experimental Sociology*. While Kellor likely included this image to call for a better-organized and better-integrated social whole to supervise such social contact, interestingly, the almost impressionistic character of these line drawings also suggests the malleability of these relationships, not only for sculpture into the model of formally harmonious

¹⁴⁰ Here my reading is somewhat inspired by Alan Trachtenberg's reading of lithographs of mining camps in *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*. While within the context of his reading, Trachtenberg sees the lithograph as deadening the particularity of photographs and presenting miners as equivalent, self-disciplined subjects, my reading is trying to suggest that these particular line drawings actual open up new ways for the reader to envision urban social spaces. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (1989).

equality that Kellor envisions, but into a more open-ended interpretation of social possibilities that the reader might him or herself imagine. Though the lines in the drawings resonate with Kellor's jagged kymographic measurements, in this context, they function as part of an incomplete whole, which invites a reader to imagine the details in the empty spaces; they neither come to a complete stop nor fully intersect or exist in harmony with the other lines which compose these visual sketches of life on the street. Thus, in this representation of social life and contact on the streets, offering a different mode of "development" which depends on the reader's engagement with the images, we might also find the traces of a social formation that does not lead to new norms that must be policed, but rather, is a relationship in flux and in continual development. This developing relationality allows the reader herself to imagine her own body in a new relationship with space and time defined by the fluidity of the street itself, a space which is neither fully public or private. In this way, the images that Kellor deploys in her more publicly circulating treatment of women's criminality potentially open up collaborative and "experimental" forms of sociality (imagined by the reader) that Kellor herself did not anticipate.

Kellor's series of articles on southern prisons expand upon the racial dimensions of Kellor's vision of the evolution of modern culture. The lithographs featured in the first of Kellor's articles on "Social Conditions in the Southern States" (see figure 6) at once introduce the series as a sequel to the initial series on women's criminality in the north, as the top right corner image depicts an empty, decrepit city street, labeled "Environment in Chicago." By making this visual connection, this next series of articles presents itself as participating in the formation of the urban north and its modernizing and chaotic city streets, although the *Tribune* describes the goal of the articles in vaguer terms: "the statistics and other data concerning Southern criminals were lacking and they were essential to a complete presentation of criminological conditions in America."¹⁴¹ Unlike the

¹⁴¹ Kellor, "Social Conditions in the Southern States," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Oct. 14 (1900), 53.

lithographs in the last of Kellor's northern series, which opened into each other in their representation of a cityscape in flux, however, the lithographs in this article are boldly framed, enclosing and separating each image rather than suggesting the impressionistic social malleability that the reader saw previously in the city's streets (see figure 6).

This enclosure highlights Kellor's contradictory theorization of "negro crime." Kellor's text details the oppressive labor conditions of black workers in the south, observing that "[t]he negro is more restricted in his choice of labor than any other class, and by nature and opportunity he is limited to the lowest forms of labor...The whites value his labor only upon the plantations, so every effort is made to confine the negro to agricultural labor," yet Kellor does not continue on to advocate for economic and social justice and repair for African Americans in the south, nor does she open up the possibility for black migration to the urban north.¹⁴² The framed lithographs also suggest the carceral nature of this exploitation, but do not present an alternate relationship to the land; instead, they present the starkness of this confinement whose thick framing lines almost call as much attention to their enclosure as to the images themselves, as well as its repetition from frame to frame. The frozen frames of scenes seem to seek a photographic realism capable of capturing and regulating the movements and vagrancies of yet-unmodernized, hyperembodied black bodies who have not yet developed capacity for agency (as per Kellor's writing in *Experimental Sociology*), as the image of "negroes cheap labor in south" and "environment in Chicago" evoke the threat that potential migration poses to white modernity and the white labor force in northern industry. However, images such as "farm scene on convict camp" and "dwelling of southern planter," which closely resemble the elements of plantation slavery blur the temporal distinction between antebellum enslavement and post-emancipation incarceration, reflecting not the civilizational "backwardness" of the "negro race" but rather highlighting the forms of unfreedom and entrapment that capitalism

¹⁴² Ibid.

continues to generate. This combination of Kellor's halted and incomplete critique of the southern penal system, the starkly framed images themselves, and the visual connection to the urban north offers a disorienting reading experience. While the visual dimensions of the spread seem to expose the south's carceral violence and its replication of social life under slavery, and Kellor details the "penal system's" many problems, the reader ultimately remains a spectator to this violence, left to her own devices to imagine how these southern "social conditions" might connect to modern life in the north.

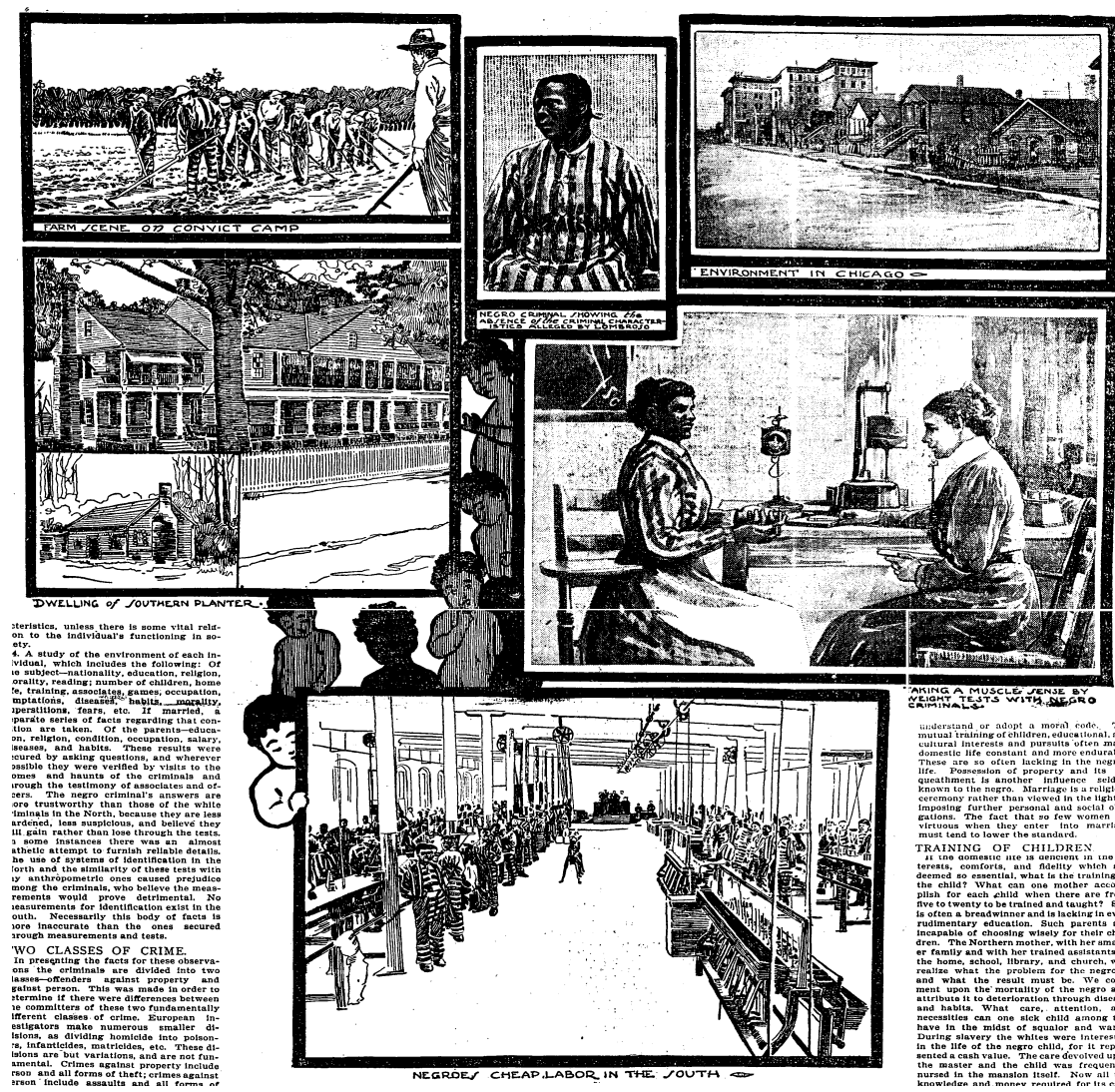


Figure 6, Frances Kellor, "Social Conditions in the Southern States," *The Chicago Tribune* Oct. 14 (1900), 53.

But what exists in the margins of space between these photograph-like frames is important for recovering a potentially alternative narrative from the article's ambiguous spectatorship. In the very middle of the newspaper spread, in between the frames of the photographs, there are far less realistic line drawings of small, cherubic babies, who emerge from behind the still scenes of enclosure and confinement. These simple drawings draw attention to the gap between the particularized scenes in the series on "southern conditions" and the more self-conscious, artful line drawings in the first series of illustrations on northern urban life. We might read the babies' shaded spectrum as confirming readers' fears about miscegenation, or Kellor's vision of domestic education in the south, as she attempts to counter the argument in literature on "black disappearance" that African Americans were already in the process of degeneration and death – instead arguing for proper re-education, as we saw in *Experimental Sociology*.¹⁴³ Furthermore, the baby drawings also seem to echo Kellor's "character sketch" of Mattie Crawford's self-actualization through her removal from her family and children in *Experimental Sociology*, as the children drawn here exist literally outside of the carceral frames, yet in dialogue with those frames. But these babies, existing in the gaps between these frames without the representation of their specific parentage, also signal the possibilities for creating new forms of social life and social relationship that exist adjacent or appositional to Kellor's written narrative of progress and evolution, rather than simply reproducing new forms of bondage and incarceration.¹⁴⁴ Their ambiguous shadings do not reference stable racial codification, but rather the instability of this signification itself.

¹⁴³ Frederick Hoffman's 1896 *Race Traits* was perhaps the most prominent amongst these arguments; he argued that black people were innately self-destructive and criminal, analyzing data from Philadelphia and Chicago. See Khalil Muhammad's chapter "Writing Crime into Race: Racial Criminalization and the Dawn of Jim Crow" in *The Condemnation of Blackness*.

¹⁴⁴ I borrow this term from Fred Moten's essay "The Knowledge of Freedom." I am using "appositionally" to describe close proximity, and also in the grammatical sense, "a relationship between two or more words or phrases in which the two units are grammatically parallel and have the same referent." Fred Moten, "The Knowledge of Freedom," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4.2 (2004), 274.

The second article of Kellor's "southern series" continues to critique the penal system in the south yet refuses to explicitly connect modern northern life and reform with southern carcerality. In the text of the article, Kellor details what she believes are the political and historical realities of black life in the south, reporting on the "unequal" application of laws and the violence of systemic lynching. Kellor notes the formation of racialized categories of women, stating "The laws are not more equally applied to women. The negro is first a negro and then a woman, and she is not shown the consideration extended to white women."¹⁴⁵ Kellor also describes the numerous forms of exploitation that have occurred in the south post-emancipation, especially convict leasing, which fail to separate men and women, ending with a description of the lack of reformatories. Yet, in depicting these forms of enclosure, Kellor also falls back on depicting slavery as simply a "backwards" pre-history to the civilizational advances that modern white America was making.

This second article also presents the only conventional photograph that I have located in Kellor's oeuvre on women's crime and imprisonment (see figure seven, bottom image). Entitled "Dinner Hour in Southern Prison," it shows about seven black women seated on a bench, with more women standing behind them. Unlike the composite photographs of white women criminals, which signal the commensurability and synecdochal relation of those subjects, the women photographed at a prison dinner hour (introducing the domestic into the carceral) sit and stand adjacent to one another, their individual profiles and slightly different uniforms at different angles, some women looking towards the camera, others away. Kellor perhaps intended for us to read the women as arrested in a particular moment of civilizational development, not yet commensurable (as in the initial composite photograph of women in the north) and prepared for citizenship. However, the image in between the margins of the framed photographs and lithographs again comments on and complicates this determinism: adjacent to the photograph, we see an uncaptioned black woman

¹⁴⁵ Kellor, "Social Conditions in the Southern States," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, Oct. 21, 1900.

in a striped prison uniform skirt, and the woman is farming. This drawing, once again literally “out of time” between the frozen stills of the photograph and lithographs evokes slave labor, and might be seen as presenting slavery as outside of historical time. But at the same time, the image also resonates with the babies seen in the previous southern series article. Its tenuous connection to both the framed lithographs and the photograph underscores the drawn woman’s potential for either maternity or labor, rather than the deterministic instrumentalization of her body. This break in the straightforward connection between women, reproduction and labor might be read as disconnecting black women from their “natural” attachment to the southern landscape, highlighting potentially new forms of kinship and attachment in reconfigured social spaces.



Figure 7, Frances Kellor, “Social Conditions in the Southern States,” *The Chicago Tribune*, October 21 (1900), 53.

Reading these images in the midst of Kellor’s scientific description illuminate that her textual imagination of black women’s criminality in the south is composed of multiple representational logics that do not form the coherent or harmonious social whole that Kellor seeks to imagine and actualize in the text of her sociological findings. As I’ve suggested, this incoherence serves as a foil

to for Kellor's vision for reform in the north, bolstering her narrative of white women's development into public citizenship. But, we might also read the visual dimensions of Kellor's "experimental naturalism" in these articles as highlighting the artifice of both traditional naturalism and realism, producing knowledge kaleidoscopically and in a sense combining and fragmenting the visual work of the telescope and the microscope of Western enlightenment's scientific inspection and description that Kellor seeks to mobilize and reform in her project.

Chapter 2

Rescued Children and “Unfit” Mothers:

Dreiser’s Social Work in the *Delineator* Child-Rescue Campaign

In his January 1908 editor’s column for the *Delineator*, a middlebrow monthly women’s fashion magazine, Theodore Dreiser addressed his readership with language that mixed the familiar parlance of sentimental homemaking with the expectant observation of scientific investigation. Describing the *Delineator*’s newest feature, a “Child-Rescue Campaign,” in which readers could write to the magazine to adopt children whose photographs and stories were serialized in each issue, Dreiser writes,

We started, as you know, in the November number a campaign for the rescue of the child without a home. We put in, rather tentatively we admit, a picture of a little boy and a little girl. We had positively no method of knowing whether they would have an appeal or not – whether the great American public would care to adopt either a boy or a girl from the pages of a magazine. We hope it would; we believed it would; but along with our belief ran a strain of uncertainty. The rank and file of America is probably not as clear to us as it might be.¹⁴⁶

As he continues, sentimental imagery pervades Dreiser’s description of the *Delineator*’s experimental campaign: “this country has a great heart,” he observes, citing the many women that wrote in to the magazine to support the campaign and to open up their homes to the new form of adoptive motherhood the magazine offered.¹⁴⁷ At the same time, Dreiser implies that it is the “strain of uncertainty” and experimental “method” underlying the magazine’s campaign that enables his readership’s great heart to come into full view, and respond sympathetically to the “child without a home,” suggesting that science and sentiment may in fact be mutually constitutive. In so doing, the *Delineator* draws a line of connection between uncertain “social experiment” – a hallmark of

¹⁴⁶ Theodore Dreiser, “Concerning Us All,” *The Delineator* (January 1908), 67-68.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 68.

sociology as it emerged as an academic discipline in the early 20th century – and the figure of the sympathetic mother familiar from domestic sentimentalism.

While easy to overlook, this moment provides an entry point for better understanding how the intersection (and entanglement) between social science and maternal sentimentality as social science continued to develop in the 1910s, though as we've seen thus far in Kellor's work, sociologists painstakingly differentiated between the two discourses during the period.¹⁴⁸ Moving out from this curious pairing, this chapter explores the formal entwining between sociological inquiry and sentimentalized home and family in the *Delineator's* 1907-1911 "Child-Rescue Campaign." Through close analysis of the images and narratives about "dependent children" that the magazine circulated, I argue that attending to the *Delineator's* campaign sheds new light on how the developing discipline of social science was appropriated and textually circulated to reshape the relationship between kinship and citizenship in the years when Progressive Era reform began to gain momentum. As white middle class maternity increasingly became a focal point for cultural anxieties about the nation's newly modern future, social scientific reform was neither solely a tool for the empowerment of the "New Woman," who sought to buoy her authority outside the domestic realm through professional social work and study (as per Frances Kellor's career trajectory), nor purely a method for monitoring women's biological reproduction. Instead, the *Delineator's* exploitation of social science's interchange with sentimentalism demonstrates its capacity to at once envision new possibilities for the family form, while also generating new methods for policing that form.

From the outset of Dreiser's editorship, the *Delineator* developed a strong engagement with the Progressive Era's social scientific reform, aiming to provide its national audience with "new,

¹⁴⁸ For an account of the transition from benevolent charity efforts mainly spearheaded by women, to the professionalization of social work, see Regina Kunzel's *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945*, as well as Karen Tice's *Tales of Wayward Girls and Immoral Women*.

humanitarian energy,” as Dreiser put it in an editor’s column.¹⁴⁹ On the one hand, the *Delineator*’s vision was not entirely unique. After all, the magazine drew upon sociology’s vision of the home as the origin of national health: seemingly eschewing sentimentality, social scientists at the time, often newly professional women, sought to attain and perfect this domestic ideal through empirical study and scientific regulation. Think here of Frances Kellor’s efforts to unsettle the boundaries between the public and the domestic, while also relying on the construction and measurement of “home life” to better understand and reshape the modernizing landscape. On the other hand, however, the *Delineator* amplified and exploited the affective underpinnings of social scientific domesticity, highlighting its confluence with conventional middle class homemaking and maternity that the magazine regularly showcased. By accentuating maternal sentiment’s centrality to the production of sociological knowledge and situating its readers as “experts” in the science of child-rearing – an expertise which defined their authority and essential fitness as mothers – the *Delineator* presented its readers with a form of motherhood no longer purely dependent on biology, imbuing white, middle class domesticity with a new kind of flexibility, albeit one tethered to consumption and limited to the space of the home itself. At the same time, those domestic boundaries also increasingly functioned as an impermeable barrier for women outside the white middle class in the modernizing city. Imagined to lack the affective expertise that characterized proper maternity, these women were understood to be mothers only in a strictly biological sense, and their capacity for reproduction and child-rearing was increasingly subject to social scientific scrutiny, regulation and penalization that judged women’s “fitness” (or unfitness) for the privileges of motherhood.

The porous relationship between sociology and sentimentalism in the *Delineator* thus provides another window into social science’s complicated potential at the turn of the century, particularly as it worked to both reshape and police women’s social mobility and maternity. As I’ve

¹⁴⁹ Jerome Loving, *The Last Titan: A Life of Theodore Dreiser*, Oakland: University of California Press (2005), 187; Dreiser, “Concerning Us All,” *The Delineator* (January 1908), 67.

suggested previously, critics have tended to think of early 20th century social science – and its imbrication with the period’s realist literature – as rigid and interpellating, providing disciplinary scaffolding for the panoptical surveillance of newly modern life, and cultivating spectatorship of “how the other half lived” in order to depict the modern city’s slums as “self-contained” and far removed from the comforts of the white middle class.¹⁵⁰ However, the *Delineator*’s mobilization of sociological reform illuminates an alternate relationship between social science and American culture, one that turns on the burgeoning discipline’s pliable social experimentation and affective underpinnings, or its “strain of uncertainty,” as Dreiser has put it. In what follows, I explore the aspirations and unforeseen consequences of the *Delineator*’s child-rescue campaign. These consequences are as literary as they are ideological. While scholars have addressed how social science has shaped the realist novel (including, of course, Dreiser’s controversial *Sister Carrie*) and indeed, how the literary fiction sometimes served as a template for social scientific record-keeping (as we’ll see in the next chapter on the interchange between the novel and the case history), I show how the magazine campaign’s serialized photographs and case histories comprise what I call “child-rescue realism,” a representational and reading practice that emerges directly from the slippery line between sentimentalism and sociology.¹⁵¹ Rather than mobilizing social science within the women’s magazine to create and maintain distance between white domesticity and the classed and racialized other, the *Delineator* blurs the boundary between sociology and sentiment to promote a seemingly more flexible

¹⁵⁰ Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 97. In his treatment of Stephen Crane’s *Maggie, Girl of the Streets* as a seminal realist text, Seltzer writes, “the realist vision of the urban underworld posits and fantasizes a disciplinary relation between seeing (seeing and being seen) and the exercising of power: the realist investment in seeing entails a policing of the real” (Seltzer 96).

¹⁵¹ For accounts of the relationship between social science and early 20th century realism and naturalism, see Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, June Howard, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (1985). For a description of how social scientific case records sometimes drew from literature, see Karen Tice, *Tales of Wayward Girls and Immoral Women: Case Records and the Professionalization of Social Work*. For an account of Dreiser’s relationship to sociology in his literary fiction, see Priscilla Wald, “Dreiser’s Sociological Vision.” For an account of the relationship between social science and the novel, see Susan Mizruchi, “Fiction and the Science of Society” in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, eds. Emory Elliot and Cathy Davidson, New York: Columbia University Press (1991).

version of maternity, encouraging readers to imagine and enact direct intervention into the lives of immigrant and working class white children from the perceived “other half.”

I thus focus on three ramifications for the *Delineator*'s mobilization of social science in the early 20th century: the development of “child-rescue realism” as a reading practice that fosters a sense of maternal connection between its readership and “children without a home,” the more elastic definition of maternity based on affective attachment this reading practice engenders, and finally, the new modes of gendered and racialized policing that unfolded alongside this more expansive conceptualization of motherhood. I argue that the *Delineator* campaign's textualization and circulation of an ideal, inclusive home – in which readers imagine themselves as members of “the *Delineator* family,” able to rescue children in need into their homes – in fact participated in an extended web of extrajudicial institutions that worked to maintain racial segregation in the United States.

“Child Rescue” and the Professionalization of Social Work

As the *Delineator* developed a distinct engagement with social scientific reform, it increasingly spotlighted the plight of children subject to forces of the urban city and the energies of modern life. The cornerstone of the *Delineator*'s social scientific reform and “humanitarian energy” was its Child-Rescue Campaign, which Dreiser spearheaded during his years as editor. The Child-Rescue Campaign featured the “specific cases of children who need homes,” narrating about two to five children's experiences with misfortune and poverty, and publishing each child's pseudonym and photograph alongside these case histories. The *Delineator* children, as they were called, were offered to readers for custody and potential adoption: the magazine encouraged those moved by the children's stories to write in and apply for custody of that child.¹⁵² Often, if the desired child

¹⁵² Readers were also encouraged to donate to the bank account opened in the child's name. The magazine took care to point out to readers that a family might adopt one of the *Delineator* children only if their home passed an investigation by the social agency that had custody of the child.

featured in the magazine was not available to a particular family, the applicant was encouraged to adopt or foster another child in institutional care. The *Delineator* placed over 2,000 institutionalized children of white working class and/or European immigrant parents into private homes during their campaign, which ran from 1907 to 1911.¹⁵³ And while children that the *Delineator* featured in its pages were those who lived in orphanages, as historians of social welfare in the United States have observed, most children in orphanages were not actually orphans, but rather came from impoverished families.¹⁵⁴ By the end of the 19th century, children were not permitted into almshouses for destitute adults, but rather separated from their parents and placed in orphanages.¹⁵⁵ The *Delineator*'s Child-Rescue Campaign, then, participated in the beginnings of the progressive reform movement to reconsider and re-imagine the form that a family should take. In fact, the popularity of the *Delineator*'s campaign and the debate it sparked over how the American family form might be best policed and protected led directly to the first Conference for the Dependent Child at the White House in 1909, the forum that historians mark as the start of state legislation for mothers' pensions, which judged women's capacity for motherhood and which were administered through the nascent juvenile court system.¹⁵⁶

Despite Dreiser's deep involvement with the progressive reform movement by the end of the Child-Rescue Campaign, it was the president of Butterick Publishing, George Wilder, that first came up with the thought to harness the magazine's popularity to "rescue orphaned children"

¹⁵³ Julie Berebitsky "Rescue a Child and Save the Nation: The Social Construction of Adoption in the *Delineator*, 1907-1911," in *Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives* Ed. E. Wayne Carpp, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (2004), 124.

¹⁵⁴ Matthew Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage* Cambridge: Harvard University Press (2001), 17.

¹⁵⁵ Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in the United States*, New York: Basic Books (1986), 46, 113.

¹⁵⁶ See Berebitsky, "Rescue a Child and Save the Nation: The Social Construction of Adoption in the *Delineator*, 1907-1911," and Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage*.

(potentially also increasing the magazine's circulation and readership).¹⁵⁷ However, from his hire as editor of the *Delineator* and two other Butterick publications in 1907, Dreiser functioned as the magazine's "idea man," conceptualizing and implementing the *Delineator's* Child-Rescue Campaign.¹⁵⁸ After the controversial flop of his 1901 *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser saw his re-entry into the publishing world of respectable magazines as a chance to rehabilitate his reputation and mend his money troubles: social reform provided a platform to produce interesting and dynamic material, making a name for his editorial work, and restoring his good name more generally. As such, Dreiser described appropriate material to submit to the magazine to an interested colleague: "We like sentiment...we like realism, but it must be tinged with sufficient idealism to make it all of a truly uplifting character. Our field in this respect is limited by the same limitations which govern the well-regulated home. We cannot admit stories that deal with false or immoral relations."¹⁵⁹ To cultivate "uplifting" realism in the magazine's features, Dreiser also began to solicit progressive reform's direct engagement with the magazine. At the start of the "Child-Rescue Campaign," he hired staff that had been involved in juvenile reform to begin to connect with the emerging network of sociologists and reformers engaged in the mission and "science" of child-saving, increasingly the centerpiece for sociological research at the end of the first decade of the 20th century.¹⁶⁰

Sociological reform framed the units of the family and the child as fundamental to the study and transformation of modern social problems in the United States. As we've seen, in the early 20th century, social anxieties about the nation's racial composition and labor antagonisms had sharply

¹⁵⁷ Berebitsky, "Rescue a Child and Save the Nation," 124.

¹⁵⁸ Loving, *The Last Titan*, 187.

¹⁵⁹ Dreiser qtd. in Harold A. Jambor, "Theodore Dreiser, the *Delineator* Magazine, and Dependent Children: A Background Note on the Calling of the 1909 White House Conference," *Social Service Review* 32.1 (March 1958), 34.

¹⁶⁰ Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage*, 10.

increased, as major waves of immigration from southern and eastern Europe, as well as increased African American migration from the south, transformed the demographics of the urban north. To regulate the new and inchoate social order in the urban north, and the threat it seemingly posed to the national status quo, social reformers became preoccupied with monitoring and reshaping domestic life – especially maternity and child welfare – amongst the immigrant, migrant and working classes. Such reform seemed to offer a method for controlling the direction of the United States’ social future. Furthermore, as we’ve also observed in Frances Kellor’s work, sociology’s experimental methods were uniquely indebted to women social workers’ navigation of the tension between scientific objectivity and traditional domestic sympathy. Given sociology’s particular concern with family and children as fundamental units of social organization, women social scientists and social workers (mainly white and middle class) sought to carve out authority for themselves within the newly professional field. However, instead of framing their intimate knowledge of the domestic as a source of moral authority and benevolence, as women engaged in charity work had in the 19th century, women social workers took pains to demonstrate their careful adherence to scientific objectivity as they undertook sociology’s immersive investigations.¹⁶¹ By demonstrating their scientific innovation and competency in social reform, the logic went, women might prove their status as experts and actors in public life, developing a professional identity no longer completely tethered to their capacity for motherhood.

We can see, then, how Dreiser’s evocation of the Child-Rescue Campaign as at once experimental and sentimental drew on women sociologists’ navigation of – and influence on – the developing professional field. Indeed, in the issue that launched the *Delineator*’s Child-Rescue Campaign, the magazine followed the first case histories and photographs of the children available for “rescue” with a page of authenticating endorsements from leading women social scientists and

¹⁶¹ Karen Tice, *Tales of Wayward Girls and Immoral Women: Case Records and the Professionalization of Social Work*, Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois Press (1998), 1.

reformers, featuring the portraits and signatures of women from Alice M. Lincoln, a leader in Boston's tenement reform movement, to Mary McDowell, who headed the University of Chicago Settlement.¹⁶² Yet from the start of the campaign, the work of these women occupied a tenuous position in the *Delineator's* pages. While their negotiation of the boundary between science and sentiment proved supremely useful for Dreiser and his staff, as they looked to make social scientific reform accessible to a readership accustomed to articles on homemaking, women sociologists' efforts toward professional identities did not cohere with the magazine's more traditional vision of women's role in domestic life.

"Making Poverty Interesting": the Magazine and the Case History

On a national level the *Delineator's* child-rescue campaign was a logistical success, generating an enormous amount of interest not only from readers, but also from prominent members of the social science and reform communities, whose letters of support and dissent were incorporated into the magazine's pages throughout the campaign. "This world is full of misfits, which it is our business to set right," Jacob Riis wrote in a letter of endorsement, enthusiastically instructing readers that "the birthright of every child is to have one pair of loving arms around its neck," and lending credibility to the magazine's editorial edict that the "a child was the natural right of every home."¹⁶³ Moreover, social scientific authorities lauded the way in which the magazine brought "child-saving" to a broader public's attention. For example, Charles R. Henderson, a sociologist at the forefront of the progressive "child-saving" field, wrote in,

The *Delineator* has opened up a subject of universal human interest and with a singular skill in editorial presentation and illustration it is sure to attract and hold attention... with all the

¹⁶² "What American Womanhood Says" *The Delineator* (November, 1907), 719; Jambor 1958, 36.

¹⁶³Jacob Riis. "The Birth Right of Every Child is To Have a Pair of Loving Arms Around its Neck," *The Delineator* (January 1908), 100.

resources of gifted writers and artists you can do what we prosaic students of science and statistics can rarely do—make even poverty interesting.¹⁶⁴

Here, Henderson frames the magazine as an ideal outlet for sociological reform, which looked to systematically differentiate and attend to “populations” that did not adhere to the social and sexual norms of the bourgeois family – usually recent immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe – ultimately seeking to rehabilitate them into useful domesticity. By making the sentimental underpinnings of that vision explicit, or rather, conversant with the magazine’s domestic fiction, fashion, and home-fashioning features, Henderson suggests that the *Delineator*’s campaign would not only “attract and hold” the attention of a wider national audience of women, but might also enable that readership to imagine maternity as central to the production of sociological knowledge and the enforcement of national social reform.

The most important example of how the *Delineator* mobilized social scientific method is the case history of each *Delineator* child that the magazine featured in its campaign. The representational structure of the case history was a crucial tool in Progressive Era social work, as it served to mark out the problematic character of its objects of study, to tailor an individualized plan for their management and reform, and to produce a body of knowledge that might prevent future disorder and “dysfunction.” For example, the social scientific case history is described in a textbook for Progressive Era social workers as “furthering effective treatment for the individual clients,” that is, “deviant” individuals and their communities, while also “advance[ing] social betterment...by amassing evidence of typical maladjustment...they should show also the typical combinations of character traits or of circumstance and character which make for various forms of dependency.”¹⁶⁵

Within the pages of the *Delineator*, however, the case history’s social differentiation and control were

¹⁶⁴Charles Henderson, “Everyone Will Be Grateful to You for Recruiting Friends and Helpers of Children,” *The Delineator* (February 1908), 252.

¹⁶⁵Ada Eliot Sheffield, *The Social Case History: Its Construction and Content*, New York: The Russell Sage Foundation (1920), 13, 16.

animated to new ends: the magazine emphasizes how the future *Delineator* children might be transformed once ensconced in the motherly care of the magnanimous “*Delineator* family.”

As the magazine highlighted how maternal capability might shape the trajectory of each child’s life, the *Delineator* case histories assumed a kind of generic hybridity. From a sociological perspective, the case histories are factual narratives of each child’s origins, limning their family structure and moreover, underscoring the direction that the child’s life might take. Yet in the context of the *Delineator*, these stories are also positioned on the threshold of fiction, as the magazine changed the featured children’s names in order to make their experiences public. The editorial introduction to the campaign frames the format for its readers:

In telling the histories of these children it is deemed best not to use the child’s real name. For some of them are heart-breaking histories which it is better should not follow the child’s identity when he or she goes into the new home. So always when we are talking to you about a child it will be under his or her *Delineator* name. But the photograph we show you will be the real child as he or she looks.¹⁶⁶

Here, the fictionalization of the children’s histories – or their transformation into semi-fictional characters – works to remove the stigma of their parentage and to make them eligible for incorporation into a “new home,” and moreover, emphasizes the malleability of the children’s character, its potential for a new kind of construction and development. What’s more, the case histories meld the technology of photography – which functions to index the “real child,” providing a kind of measurement and verification of his or her character – with the “tragedy” of the children’s history, which in eliciting the reader’s sympathy and desire to rescue that child, actually functions to underscore the malleability of the child’s character, rather than its permanent stigmatization. The hybridity of the case histories’ presentation thus begins to reorient readers’ perception of both social science and domestic maternity: indexical evidence gives authoritative clout to “the great American mother-heart” (as the magazine characterized its readership), while the sentimentality of children’s

¹⁶⁶ “The Delineator Child-Rescue Campaign,” *The Delineator* (November 1907), 715.

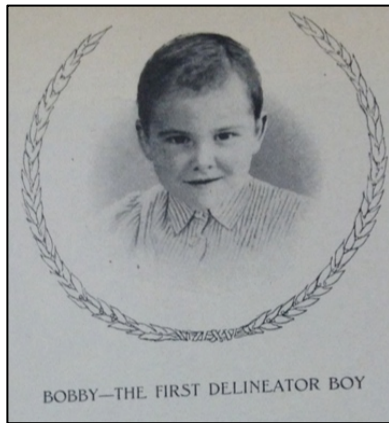
“tragic” narratives likewise make visible an affective crisis which the tools of social science might remedy.

The *Delineator* children were made publicly legible as characters whose explicit fictionalization – necessitated by the “tragic” stigma of their pasts – did not negate their measured potential for moral development under proper maternal direction. James Salazar has argued for the cultural and rhetorical importance of personal “character” across social scientific and literary discourses in the beginning of the 20th century, writing that conceptions of character during this period destabilized “conventional signifiers of race and character by detaching the materiality of race and gender from the indexicality of the physiological body and lodging it in performative acts of character.”¹⁶⁷ While 19th century racial discourse located the essence of social difference within the interior of the human body, in the early 20th century, Salazar observes that character’s interiority became “inextricable from and only known through its publication.”¹⁶⁸ The figuration of children, of course, was a constitutive element in the discourse of character especially from the 19th century on, as the child seemingly marked the beginning of an individual’s teleological development and his or her relationship to surrounding social structures.¹⁶⁹ But what’s important here is that the *Delineator* draws attention to the process of publicizing these children’s histories – in effect, dramatizing their characterization in the magazine – in order to stress the malleability of the children’s future development, deemphasizing the threat of biological heredity for the *Delineator* readers, and allowing those readers to imagine themselves as prospective mothers with untapped capacities for emotional

¹⁶⁷ James Salazar, *Bodies of Reform*, New York: New York University Press (2010), 4; Robyn Weigman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press (1995), 33.

¹⁶⁸ Salazar, *Bodies of Reform*, 7.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.



**Figure 8 “The First Delineator Boy”
The *Delineator*, November 1907**

largesse and familial inclusion.¹⁷⁰ Thus, the function of the *Delineator* children’s characterization in the case histories both dramatized and instructed the *Delineator*’s readership in the environmental cultivation of children’s character, construing the domestic realm as space whose affective abundance and safe enclosure that might transform a child’s character and act as a safeguard against social disease and disorder. In this way, the *Delineator* engendered a social universe peopled not only by characters that were comfortably “knowable,” but whose fictionality might be shaped and transformed – in effect, made real – by readers themselves.¹⁷¹

Take, for example, the case histories of the first profiled “*Delineator* boy and girl,” Bobby and Evelyn (see figure 1). The characterization of both depends on their representation as kind of social tabulas rasas and yet also their inherent receptivity to and potential for environmental acculturation. In this way, both case histories focus first and foremost on both the children’s loss of maternal care as well as their memory of those origins. Thus, after explaining that Bobby’s father could not support his family because “the home was without a mother” (whose absence is left unexplained), the potential shame and stigma of Bobby’s abandonment is converted into an innocent loss of memory, signaling his responsiveness to a new, and improved, mothering; the fictionalization of his origins will facilitate his transformation:

¹⁷⁰ For more on the relationship between heredity and character, see Cathy Boeckmann, *A Question of Character: Scientific Racism and the Genres of American Fiction, 1892-1912* (Montgomery: University of Alabama Press (2000) and Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*.

¹⁷¹ While Amy Kaplan has emphasized realist authorship’s construction of social persons and worlds that are knowable and non-threatening to middle class readers, developing a strata of writers designated as specialists in representing reality, the characterization of the *Delineator* children positions the *Delineator*’s reader as an expert in domestic development, drawing on, and lending its own affective knowledge to, the discourse of social science that sought to study and transform “social problems” in the urbanizing US.

Bobby does not understand why all this is so, for he is only a little boy. He knows that there are such things as mothers who have little boys in nice homes, and who love these little boys and spend lots of time in talking about all those things that little boys like. Bobby believes that some day he will have a mother just like others.

Evelyn, too, whose mother's death is detailed in a section entitled "A Little Epic of Everyday Life," is described as similarly innocent,

To-day that mother is dead, and Evelyn doesn't even know...they are sparing her the knowledge until the nebulous mists of childhood shall have hung their kindly clouds over the memory of realities. Even it may happen that an idealized conception of a mother may be transferred to another woman sent to take the dead mother's place, perhaps.

Here, the appeal to women readers to take on "the idealized conception of a mother" is explicit. As Robin Bernstein has noted, to be legibly child-like is to be oblivious to surrounding social realities and hierarchies.¹⁷² Yet at the same time, characterizing the children as innocently malleable here also places the reader in a position to share the knowledge of the child's origins alongside institutional caretakers. For instance, the last section of Bobby's case history, subtitled, "Bobby: The Right Sort," details these professionals' construction of his character:

Those who have had him under observation find him honest, sincere and sympathetic. These are qualities that mark him for the future as an executive and a leader among men. When the camera-lady arrived to take this picture of him, Bobby was delighted. He liked the camera-lady, who told him stories and who he thought had come to take him to her home. He liked to hold her hand and watch her.¹⁷³

Not only are Bobby's intrinsic characteristics made spontaneous in this display of affection, but the figure of the "camera-lady," who serves to document Bobby's character for institutional records, and to publicize it for the *Delineator*, is positioned in much the same way as the reader – as a potential mother – and it is through her that Bobby's character becomes intelligible.

Thus, maternity here is not only evoked as extendable and transferrable, but also as a driving creative force: the "camera-lady" directs the camera's gaze at Bobby but also holds his hand, and in

¹⁷² Robin Bernstein. *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood and Race from Slavery to Civil Rights*, New York: NYU Press (2011), 6.

¹⁷³ "The Delineator Child-Rescue Campaign," *The Delineator* (November 1907), 718.

turn, Bobby observes her as a potential mother. Evoking an intersubjective bond between mother and child, the case history does not form a linear record of static traits solidified by time, social data legible solely within institutional walls, but instead evokes the potential touch and attachment of the child to the reader, underscoring his or her potential for character formation. Furthermore, the evocation of this intersubjective bond makes clear that this development – the child’s yet-unwritten history (really, his or her future) – requires maternal intervention and affective attachment in order to be transcribed or made intelligible to the magazine’s readership, or in broader strokes, to actualize the child’s potential for public citizenship. In this way, the “great mother heart” or “mother-consciousness” as the magazine often puts it, seems to become necessary for social science’s technology and knowledge-production to function efficiently, re-forming future American citizens through a modernized, more expansive mode of domesticity that protects domestic strictures by making them more flexible.¹⁷⁴ Moreover, as the *Delineator*’s “child-rescue” realism evoked readers’ capability to mold children’s characters, invoking a maternal subject whose own character depended on her domestic expertise and affective amplitude, it also recast reading itself – the process of imagining a formative connection with the *Delineator* children – as an act of potential social intervention. By placing a sentimentalized account of maternity at the center of reformist empiricism, then, the “great mother heart” appears as fundamentally constitutive of sociological knowledge.

Character and Consumption

The burgeoning genre of the women’s magazine also amplified the interventionist reading practice that the *Delineator* encouraged among its maternal readers. According to Ellen Graber Garvey, ten cent magazines – including middle brow women’s magazines such as the *Delineator* and *Better Homes and Gardens*, for instance – emerged in the 1890s, as periodicals began to depend on

¹⁷⁴ “The Delineator Child-Rescue Campaign,” *The Delineator* (February 1908), 222.

revenue from advertisements rather than sales, introducing more varied material and technologies of presentation, whose form Garvey likens to browsing a department store, “where a shopper might shift focus from one display to another or see them all simultaneously while pursuing his or her own business.”¹⁷⁵ In this consumption-oriented model of reading, the magazine’s short stories and serial novels created worlds that complemented and even featured the commodities promoted in advertisements, engendering what Garvey describes as realism that depends on “finely calibrated, socially significant detail in which objects...stand in for their owners.”¹⁷⁶ However, what kind of realism is engendered when individual children’s lives are circulated as available for consumption in the *Delineator*: as at once fictionalized characters, potential sons and daughters, and actual material acquisitions for women’s homes?

Much like the relationship between advertisements and fiction that Garvey describes, the serialized profiles of child-rescue children fit seamlessly into the texture of the magazine’s other regular features: an expansive fashion section, domestic fiction, articles on home-keeping and bodily hygiene and beauty, and *The Delineator Jr.*, a puzzle and story section for children, all accompanied by appropriate advertisements throughout. But rather than functioning solely as goods signifying their owners’ character and capacity for self-fashioning, the individuated figures of the *Delineator* children mediated between the market and the bourgeois home, conceptualized as a space of affective abundance and non-commodification in a society whose economy was increasingly ruled by market value, as the mass market’s widening networks of commerce in the US depended on increasingly

¹⁷⁵ Ellen Gruber Garvey, *The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s-1910s*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1996), 5.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 14-15. In this sense, Garvey adheres to Margaret Cohen’s logic in *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, as she focuses on “how realist codes were shaped by the...contexts in which they appeared” (Cohen 5). Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (2002).

abstracted definitions of property and value.¹⁷⁷ To rescue the *Delineator* children from their status as not-yet-human, fictionalized by the shameful “tragedy” of their origins – to foster or adopt them and make real the materiality that the case histories evoke by giving scientific weight to a mother’s touch and baby’s bonding – paradoxically depends on the reader’s willingness to write in to the magazine as if ordering a good from a catalogue or (following Garvey’s analogy) purchasing an item from a kind of textual department store.¹⁷⁸ Thus, imbuing the structures of commercial exchange with the imagined affect of “the great American mother-heart” rendered humanitarianism and its social impact as a mode of sentimentalized consumption, a way of sustaining an idealized concept of the home as a space of humane nurturance and freedom while also grounding it in the credit economy’s increasingly abstract and modernizing systems of commerce. By highlighting the “children we offer you this month” (as the magazine puts it) as not yet human until “rescued” by the reader, the children’s characterization mediated the boundary between human and commodity, fostering a sense of enclosure from the market.¹⁷⁹



Figure 9, “Before and After”

In the magazine’s version of realism, the malleability of a child under a transformative maternal touch is indexed in illustrations of children dressed in the latest styles in the sartorial and

¹⁷⁷ See the first chapter of Stephen Best’s *The Fugitive’s Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* for a history of the legal concept of property’s transformation from physical objects in the antebellum era to “everything which has exchangeable value” as the dissent in the 1873 Slaughterhouse cases argues. Stephen Best, *The Fugitive’s Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (2010), 29-41.

¹⁷⁸ This department store comparison is actually telling when we consider the fact that while children initially were a major component of the labor force at departments (Marshall Fields, for example), but technology at the end of the first decade of the 20th century rendered their work unnecessary. See Viviana Zelizer’s *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (1985).

¹⁷⁹ “The Delineator Child-Rescue Campaign,” *The Delineator* (October 1908), 576.

sewing portion of the magazine (evoking the social possibilities of children's refashioning under their mothers' hands), in the chronicles of charming young child protagonists in the magazine's domestic fiction (suggesting the course of adopted children's development), and as we've seen, in advertisements for household and clothing products that might remold either the homeless child or the readers' children into respectability, and bolster the status of the bourgeois home.¹⁸⁰ Take, for example, photographs of children "transformed" by the home-placing adoption process that the *Delineator* included in its 1908 campaign feature (see figure 2). Laura Wexler has observed that the "before and after" photograph was not an uncommon trope in late 19th and early 20th century reform photography, as reformers documented the marked changes their methods produced in institutionalized children. However, read in the context of a serialized magazine dedicated to texturing the trends and evolution of women's and children's fashion, these photographs index not only the children's development into proper domestic codes, but also the maternal capacity to fashion these children's character (both affectively and materially) over time, as the regular intervals of the serial form dictate.¹⁸¹ This capacity for shaping children's temporal development in turn characterized the maternal reader as an arbiter of time and value in human growth, even if the magazine itself provided the conventional forms (such a sewing pattern) through which they might foster children's development.

¹⁸⁰ For a discussion of the haptic dimension of photography, see Tina Campt's *Image Matters: Archive, Photography and the African Diaspora in Europe*.

¹⁸¹ Wexler discusses the convention of "before and after" photographs in relation to boarding schools for Native American children in *Tender Violence*. Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press (2000), 109.

Finally, consider the layout of the child-rescue campaign section in the August 1909 *Delineator* (see Figure 3). The page's center photographic portrait of the baby "Anna," placed in an institution by her "impoverished" mother, is mirrored in the far right column by a similar portrait of a white-gowned baby in a large advertisement for a Lactomode pasteurizer. "Give Baby a Fair Start," the ad announces, promoting a product intended to pasteurize cow's milk for infants and reduce infant mortality (a major concern at the beginning of the 20th century). Read adjacent to the children's case histories, however, the advertisement also insinuates a relationship between the reader's purchasing power and the humanitarian uplift that taking in a *Delineator* baby – "giving baby a fair start" – might achieve. More than simply equating humanitarian intervention with consumption, however, here the magazine draws attention to the



Figure 10, "Give Baby a Fair Start," the *Delineator*, August 1909

goods available to the reader who might adopt such a child: the reader's capacity to rescue the child from its non-human status depends on the resources she has at her disposal, implicitly marking the spaces outside of the middle class home as deficient for raising a child (and associating that space with commerce).¹⁸² The *Delineator*'s circulation serializes this interdependence between children, household goods and self-fashioning, invoking a national domestic realm whose temporal reproduction depends in part on the reader's consumption (first of the magazine, second of its

¹⁸² In this way, "the *Delineator* family" that the Child-Rescue campaign engendered formed what Lauren Berlant might call an "intimate public," a social formation that defines itself in affective *proximity* to explicitly political structures, conscripting the political into personal narratives that obscure the structural totality of social relationships. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press (2008), 50.

featured commodities), but also on the construction of non-middle class social spaces as lacking the resources for child-rearing.

“However low her lot has fallen”: Stigma and Tragedy

The blurred line between the *Delineator*'s representation of children as fictional characters and available commodities illuminates the way in which the child-rescue campaign's textualization and circulation participated in the construction of racial and classed difference in the early 20th century US. The commodity form that the *Delineator*'s realism evokes is inextricable from the form of the modernizing domestic realm and the family structure it seeks to engender through the characterization of the malleable *Delineator* children. Thus, to understand the codification of difference in the Child-Rescue Campaign, it's useful to look more closely at the entanglement of this fictionalization – which seeks to transform the featured children into fully materialized, knowable characters for the magazine's reader – with the stigmatization of the children's origins. As we've seen, the *Delineator* case history's quest to make the needs of children legible (and imbue its audience with maternal expertise) depends on publishing their tragic narratives of early life, yet simultaneously safeguarding and withholding the record of those origins by explicitly fictionalizing them. In “The Child Without a Home,” Mabel Potter Daggett draws attention to the pay-off of this fictionalization, writing:

Every institution has its records, as marvelous as fairytales, about what has happened to fortunate foundlings adopted from its doors. There is a New York heiress who rides in a carriage on 5th Avenue; there is a daughter of a German baroness, and there is a daughter in a royal house in Europe, all of whom came from the ranks of New York's forsaken waifs. None of them even dream of their origin, which is a secret buried in the institution from which they came.¹⁸³

Keeping this knowledge of children's origins secret charges the reader – already identified as a kind of potential maternal figure – with upholding civic infrastructure, producing a kind of institutional

¹⁸³ Mabel Potter Daggett, “The Child Without a Home,” *The Delineator* (October 1907), 510.

knowledge that depends as much on readers' willingness to collaborate in constructing such fictive origins as it does on records' "burial" within the walls of the asylum or orphanage from which they came. Yet despite marshaling the sentimental to "obliterate all possibility of bad hereditary influence," as one case history puts it, the magazine's characterization of these children as fundamentally malleable depends on "tender violence" or "disciplinary intimacy" that reinforces racial formations as it seeks to destigmatize heredity.¹⁸⁴

For instance, the description of the histories of two *Delineator* children who "have not been properly reared" by their shiftless mother and grandmother explicitly mark the child-rescue project as working to codify the constituent terms of whiteness. The two sisters who "have run wild in the woods around their miserable cabin," the magazine notes, "have, like Topsy, 'just grown.'"¹⁸⁵ In invoking the trope of Topsy, the magazine draws on the hallmark of sentimental culture, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which the white child Eva's sympathetic affection and moral influence recast the enslaved black child Topsy as a legible human; as Robin Bernstein has observed, Eva's touch "restores Topsy to humanity...and childhood."¹⁸⁶ The *Delineator's* maternal readers do not occupy Eva's position, exactly – the magazine highlights the children's need for yet-unrealized potential for full civic personhood – but the insertion of Topsy's blackness also invokes the threat of the immigrant and urban working classes as racial other for the white middle class.¹⁸⁷ As Khalil Gibran Muhammad has pointed out, progressive reformers differentiated between the conditions of black and white poverty,

¹⁸⁴ Here, I am using Laura Wexler's term "tender violence" which both draws on and departs on the "disciplinary intimacy" that Richard Brodhead describes in his essay on sentimentalism and discipline. Richard Brodhead, "Sparing the Rod: Discipline and Fiction in Antebellum America." *Representations* 21 (1988), 67-96.

¹⁸⁵ "The Delineator Child-Rescue Campaign," *The Delineator* (August 1909), 133.

¹⁸⁶ Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 45.

¹⁸⁷ Robin Bernstein has argued that while Stowe's original characterization of Topsy was intended as a critique of subject production under slavery, by the late 19th century and early 20th century, Topsy "constituted an especially powerful vehicle for the newly juvenilized libel black insensateness." Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 51.

depicting white children, as well as immigrants from Europe, as the victims of industrialization and urbanization, while black children represented the “negro race’s” need to uplift and improve its own standards of morality.¹⁸⁸ In her reading of the afterlife of Stowe’s Topsy in the late 19th century, Bernstein has observed, too, that the divide between white children’s representation as angelically innocent and black children’s representation as unfeeling, “nonchildren,” calcified a conception of citizenship that was based on children’s capacity for suffering, and thus, their sentient humanity.¹⁸⁹ As the magazine creates a gradient of sentiment and capacity for feeling, publishing its subjects’ prior, tragic experiences in order to “obliterate” that history, black parents and their children are excluded from the *Delineator*’s narration of tragic poverty and recuperation into the mainstream middle class altogether, marking that space as white.¹⁹⁰

To characterize the *Delineator* children as available for incorporation into the realm of the white, propertied domesticity in this way, then, is also to articulate their prior history as inhuman and hence erasable, as children were “delivered from the bondage of an evil heredity,” as a *Delineator* article on home placement puts it.¹⁹¹ And, furthermore, it is potentially to construe their original parents as in excess to and outside the boundaries of this humanizing domestic arrangement. Thus, the motherly touch and affective bond that the *Delineator*’s readers imagined as they read were reserved for children who might be rescued into whiteness. While the campaign relied on this

¹⁸⁸ Muhammad, 160-61.

¹⁸⁹ Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 33-48.

¹⁹⁰ In fact, in his editorship of *The Crisis*, which began during the *Delineator*’s Child-Rescue Campaign, W.E.B. Du Bois introduced a yearly Children’s Number issue to combat such racist exclusion and caricature of black children. As Daylanne English notes, the issue included a “prize baby contest,” which “includes dozens of photographs, sent in by readers, of glowingly healthy, impeccably groomed children, with captions such as ‘One of Manhattan’s ‘Finest’ and ‘A great Grandfather’s Great Grandson.’...to document a high quality genealogical and relational narrative” (49). Daylanne English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (2004).

¹⁹¹ “The Delineator Child-Rescue Campaign,” *The Delineator* (April 1908), 610.

metaphorical invocation of Topsy's blackness to delineate the domestic, the magazine focused almost exclusively on children of European ethnicities in its child-rescue campaign.¹⁹² In this way, the case histories' fictionalization of children's origins also worked to construct a scale of value: a hierarchy of who may be assimilated into white citizenship and who may not, tacitly assigning lives worth or expendability, and invoking a white reading public as it constructed a flexible yet fortified domestic realm.

This racialized scale of value thus stigmatized those who did not conform to the requirements of white, middle class domesticity: children were rehabilitated for a better life while their parents (especially their mothers) remained within the degraded conditions that facilitated the child's removal in the first place. Flipping around the narrative of the child's rehabilitation into civic development, the Child-Rescue Campaign depicted degraded motherhood as inevitably tragic. "One of the saddest and hardest trials of child-rescue work is to part mother and child. Every effort is made to keep the two together, but sometimes for the child's sake—never for the mother's—it must be done," a *Delineator* case history instructs its readers, continuing, "the mother, however low her lot has fallen, surrenders her baby willingly, feeling, with the remnant of mother-love that lives within her, that her child must have a better chance in life than that which has come to her."¹⁹³ Here, this tragedy of separation implicitly links the mother's lack of middle class resources with moral stigma: the fallen mother's "low lot," with its suggestion of degraded and illicit sexuality, requires the severance of the mother-child relationship not only for the child's benefit, but also as a kind of

¹⁹² The case histories of the *Delineator* children only featured children that might be incorporated into whiteness; the child marked as furthest from this category is Mitsu, whose mother was a Japanese immigrant: the title of her case history reads "Mitsu is a Homeless Little Jap," and while the profile assures readers that "Our judgment would have placed her with her own people, if a Christian Japanese home could be found, where she could develop with her own race," the magazine also notes that "such a home has not appeared, and we shall most gladly accept the offer of those who recognize the call to become a blessed Providence to this homeless stranger" (Ibid, 609).

¹⁹³ "The Delineator Child-Rescue Campaign," *The Delineator* (July 1908), 114.

sentimentalized or willing penance for her own failure to create and maintain a proper family and home. Another case history similarly describes the process of a “little girl-mother...without home or friends...who has tried to take care of herself and failed” volunteering to make her child available for adoption: “But suffering and poverty teach the lesson of unselfishness...The mother does not want her own history repeated in the experience of her daughter, so the baby is offered for adoption, where environment will obliterate all possibility of bad hereditary influence.”¹⁹⁴ In this description, the mother’s agency and sympathetic feeling is figured only through her capacity to sacrifice and give away her child, inverting the terms of the simultaneously self-contained yet affectively abundant domestic realm of the middle class.¹⁹⁵

Thus, as the *Delineator* attempts to eliminate the stigma of heredity for children through the adoption and placing out process, it naturalized the original parents’ status as outside the bounds of middle class, reifying class divisions and displacing the child’s potential “degeneracy” onto the birth mother in particular, so that the child might fulfill her or his linear development into citizenship (rather than occupy the degraded zone in which their mother remained). When the *Delineator* situates the middle class mother (and *Delineator* reader) as the maternal witness to and collaborator in domestic social science, then, it also produces a second maternal subject: the mother outside the boundaries of middle class domesticity, who has failed to occupy the realm of propertied domesticity, working outside the home, having sex outside of marriage, and who may only atone for her degradation by giving away the centerpiece of the home itself, the child. In this way, the

¹⁹⁴ “The Delineator Child-Rescue Campaign,” *The Delineator* (June 1909), 805.

¹⁹⁵ While the break-up of poor families was not a new phenomenon in relief work – from the mid 19th century, children were placed instead in orphanages, away from the almshouses their parents occupied – here, the domestic realm’s integrity depends on its ability to rescue or rehabilitate children. Such rescue, in turn, hinged on its original mother’s depiction as deviant. For a history of family dissolution in relief work, see Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse* (113). Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in the United States*, New York: Basic Books, 1986. Another famous example of family dispersion in the urbanizing north: in the mid-to-late 19th century, Charles Loring Brace ran a campaign to transport 90,000 children from New York City to farms in the western US.

campaign figured motherhood and its attendant child-rearing as both a form of knowledge, and a privilege that could be removed according to that mother's unfitness, cementing its readers' status as experts in domesticity and thus potential judges of the value of other women's capacity for both work and motherhood (in particular, their ability to shape children's character). As social scientific technology needs middle class maternity's affective skills to function, casting middle class maternity's affective knowledge as a constituent of social science's representational technology, the problematic of biological, or "natural," heredity becomes associated with women outside of the white middle class.

In addition to the occlusion of black children altogether in the *Delineator*, its differentiation between maternal figures also functioned to maintain the association between propertied domesticity and whiteness through the potential severance of parental rights of those whose maternity does not occur within the strictures of that domesticity.¹⁹⁶ The case histories frequently conclude with narration of the child's plea for, or claim on, "every baby's inherent right" for a happy home to develop into "honest, cleanly citizenship" – and to be saved from "a possible existence of physical and moral degeneracy" and "possible crime, pauperism and vagabondage" to which their mothers seem to be indefinitely consigned – despite the fact that the majority of (if not all) children featured in the *Delineator*, were, in fact, native-born America citizens, theoretically already guaranteed citizenship through the *jus soli* of the 14th amendment.¹⁹⁷ Thus, the "honest, cleanly citizenship" the magazine constructs appears instead to refer to the child's incorporation into white domesticity

¹⁹⁶ Hortense Spillers has observed that in American culture, the space of the domestic constructs sexual and gender difference, articulating a kind of patriarchal symbolic order "grounded in the specificity of proper names, more exactly, a patronymic, which in turn, situates those people and 'covers' in a particular place"; according to Spillers, because enslaved women and men were denied recognition of family lineage and parental rights, black maternity was figured at once as the organizing and "illegitimate" principle of the black family. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 72.

¹⁹⁷ "The Children We Offer You This Month," *The Delineator* (October 1908), 576.

through adoption statutes, in which the legal rights and obligations of birth parents are terminated and new rights and obligations are created between the child and adoptive parents, including the filial right to inherit property.

The *Delineator's* case histories therefore worked not only to naturalize adoptive kinship relationships, but also to enforce the connection between whiteness and bourgeois property and privacy during a moment when immigration and migration seemed to threaten the foundations of white domesticity with the possibility of unchecked racial amalgamation or, as Theodore Roosevelt put it, “race suicide.”¹⁹⁸ The magazine’s evocation of modern domesticity and its attendant civic privileges as natural displaced the possibilities for social disorder and inchoate crime onto the non-middle class mother. To construe the *Delineator* children as available for rescue into “cleanly citizenship,” stabilizing the boundaries of the white middle class, is also to consign their mothers to an ambiguous zone of “crime and vagabondage,” rendering these maternal figures problematic and representationally unstable.¹⁹⁹

The Magazine and the Police

¹⁹⁸ See Stephen B. Presser, “Historical Background of the American Law of Adoption” *Family Law Journal* 11.2 (1971-72), 464. The history of American citizenship has been bound up with moral “character” and its racializing project. In her discussion of debates over *jus soli* versus *jus sanguinis* citizenship, Mae Ngai observes that “both basic rules of assigning citizenship at birth are ascriptive, whether by geography or descent. . . In contrast to the native-born who hold passive citizenship, naturalized citizens and only naturalized citizens give explicit consent to citizenship and its obligations.” In the case of the *Delineator*, however, I am most interested in classes or gradients of citizenship that the term “cleanly citizenship” evokes. See Wexler, *Tender Violence* on the Dawes Act; Salazar, *Bodies of Reform*, on the rhetorical work of character in constructing American citizenship; and Mae Ngai, “Birthright Citizenship and the Alien Citizen,” *Fordham Law Review* 75.5 (2007), 2526.

¹⁹⁹ Here, Jacqueline Bhabha’s observation that, “the idealized and sentimentalized view of the child as the bearer of special entitlements to protection may reveal more about our notions of what sort of human an adult is” is applicable: in the context of the *Delineator's* campaign, child protection is mobilized to construct both the figure of the deviant, potentially criminal mother, as well as expand the middle class mother’s capacity for reform (Bhabha 1527). Jacqueline Bhabha, “The Child: What Sort of Human?” *PMLA* 121.5 (October 2006).

Thus, as the *Delineator* case histories position this “honest, cleanly citizenship” as their campaign’s end goal, their emphasis on cleanliness draws attention to embodied reproduction, even as they seek to expunge “evil heredity” and instead reinstall the natural enclosure and autonomy of the domestic. This paradoxical figuration inadvertently highlights the entanglement of the “private” domain of the family with the contours of public citizenship.²⁰⁰ Such an entanglement was not coincidental: as the color line was constructed and enforced in the postbellum US, the federal government granted individual states the authority to police social relations they deemed “natural” – that is, to infringe, if deemed necessary, upon citizens’ autonomy in order to protect the health and welfare of the national population and of “divinely sanctioned” and “natural” institutions such as marriage and the family, in order to facilitate racial segregation. Observing how the construction of the private worked to police the color line, Saidiya Hartman writes that “the withdrawal of law before sentiment, nature and desire and the attendant construction of the privacy” at once incorporated and isolated blacks, who “must prove themselves the same [as the white, masculine citizen subject], and therefore not dependent on the intervention of the state as space, or bear the stigma of difference,” carving out space for a white public as a whole, and in turn eliding class differences within this white social body.²⁰¹

In light of the law’s strategic acquiescence to “sentiment, affinity and natural distinctions,” and in order to better understand the child-rescue campaign’s preoccupation with maternal heredity, I am interested in how the *Delineator*’s campaign’s textualization and circulation of the domestic, as at once flexible and inherently white, participates in the “extended web” of extrajudicial institutions

²⁰⁰ Saidiya Hartman has identified this zone as “an amorphous and mutable domain that overlaps the divisions of family, civil society, and the state” (Hartman 170-71, 192).

²⁰¹ Ibid, 177.

working to maintain national purity and racial segregation.²⁰² As the case history for one young girl puts it, “through the pages of the *Delineator* she comes to claim her birthright,” illuminating the way in which this “birthright” (really, a place within white, middle class domesticity) was made natural through the magazine’s production and circulation, supplementing the formal equality of civil rights, allowing for the exclusionary violence of racialized citizenship.²⁰³ Given the way in which the federal government’s intervention was racialized during Reconstruction, the structure of early 20th century social relief for what Nancy Fraser has called “problematic needs” – needs that have “apparently (but not really) self-regulating domestic and official economic institutions of male-dominated capitalistic societies” – was diffuse, relying on an informal networks of charity organizations and local governance.²⁰⁴ My suggestion is that, in the absence of a uniform national system for the fostering and adoption of children, as *Delineator* made the domestic sphere public for a national audience of women consumers, it aspired to function as a textual substitute for a codified, national relief system.

²⁰² Ibid, 171.

²⁰³ “The Babies Who Want a Home,” *The Delineator* (February 1908), 270, 277.

²⁰⁴Nancy Fraser, “Women, Welfare, and the Politics of Need Interpretation,” *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press (1989), 156. Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 118. Public relief programming throughout the United States varied considerably as it was run mainly at the local level, and hence “unusually reliant on subnational units’ and ‘quasi-privatist machinery”” such as hybrid state-funded private agencies and philanthropic organizations to implement relief programming and any state and federal programming (Katz 31). Additionally, while courts in the second half of the 19th century worked to clearly define legal concepts of property in the postbellum era (torts, contract and corporate law), the realm of family law lagged behind in legal development and was less clearly defined (due in part to the liberal state’s conception of the domestic and family as ostensibly outside of the realm of the law). See Stephen B. Presser, “The Historical Background of the American Law of Adoption.” Finally, historians such as Molly Ladd-Taylor and Michael Crenson have noted that the absence of a unified labor or socialist movement in the US also shaped the loosely connected and decentralized civic structure for nascent “welfare” programs. See Michael Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage* Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare and the State 1890-1930* Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press (1994).

For example, in conjunction with the children offered for adoption, the Child-Rescue-campaign created a “National Rescue League” that its readers could join, and subsequently contribute donations to aid Child-Rescue efforts as well as reform efforts in their “local communities,” attempting to promote a uniform approach to children’s placement in appropriate domestic environments. In its regular magazine feature, the campaign reminds potential members of the league that child-rescue is “a matter of national sentiment;

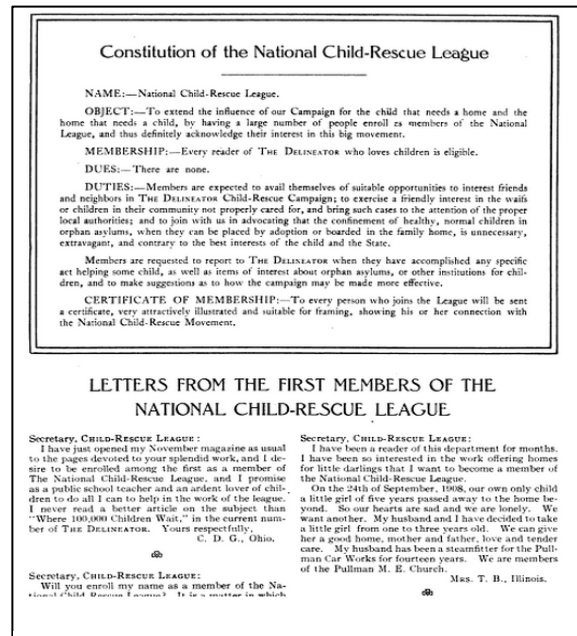


Figure 11 “Constitution of the National Child-Rescue League,” *The Delineator*, November 1908

the fused desire of millions of people is necessary to accomplish such an object.”²⁰⁵ Yet at the same time, the rescue league’s “constitution” (see figure 11) – describing a membership in which “every reader of the *Delineator* who loves children is eligible” and duties include “to exercise an interest in the care of waifs...in their community not properly cared for...and report [it] to the *Delineator*” – did not exactly aspire to substitute for, or advocate for, federal legislation. Rather, it emphasized “national sentiment” as the force that might unify civic development in the United States.²⁰⁶ Thus, beneath the National Child-Rescue League’s “constitution” in the *Delineator*, the magazine includes letters of support from its members, at once demonstrating the magazine’s national reach and substantiating its social force by displaying the campaign’s affective impact on its members. For example, one reader writes in, “The Child-Rescue Campaign should have every encouragement for

²⁰⁵ “The Delineator Child-Rescue League,” *The Delineator* (January 1909), 102.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

its beautiful work. I take the *Delineator* because of it. It is with great pleasure that I ask you to make me a member of the league, and I am going to interest my friends who have no children.”²⁰⁷

Thus, as the *Delineator* circulated this vision of national citizenship founded in maternal feeling, it mobilized the discourse of natural law – classically conceived of as “the law prior to inscription [into the state’s positive law]...an instantiation of Nature and Nature’s God” and deployed as the law “that refers to people places, and associations outside the state’s domain” – to texture the domestic dimensions of children’s “natural birthright,” but also to police the boundaries of their social associations.²⁰⁸ Historically, the police power evoked by natural law has been defined in the broadest of terms, as its purpose is to regulate threats to public welfare whose “character cannot be known in advance” and which exists outside the state’s sovereign domain and thus necessitates its extra-legal regulation.²⁰⁹ Bryan Wagner has noted that the inverse of this vague definition is also true, as “the discretionary license in the police power...excludes everything that might be known about its object besides its threat potential,” prioritizing the *prevention* of criminality and social disorder.²¹⁰ Writing about the use of natural rights discourse to justify the violence of colonization and enslavement, Wagner argues that by characterizing individuals and groups only through the threat that they seemingly pose to the social order, natural law’s police power thus blurs “the distinction between human and nonhuman,” as the reduction of an individual solely to a threat in effect makes that distinction irrelevant.²¹¹ How might natural law’s concern with threat potential

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 102.

²⁰⁸ Joseph Slaughter. *Human Rights Inc.* 62. Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing The Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power After Slavery*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (2009), 15.

²⁰⁹ Wagner, 6.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid, 17-18. A blurred distinction between prevention and punishment, Wagner moreover suggests, was at the core of lynch mob violence, which drew on a discourse of natural rights and self-defense to justify

also operate (in tandem) within the gendered and racialized dimensions of reproductive maternity we see in the *Delineator*?

As the *Delineator* highlights the “birthright” of “dependent children,” stressing how maternal readers might rehabilitate them into domesticity, the magazine also highlights the children’s potential for criminality if they remain beyond the reach of the domestic in which their humanness might be cultivated. In his monthly editorial address, Dreiser articulated how this child-saving movement’s logic restructured prior concepts of charity: “The one thing that should be noted...is that life does not need aid half as much in any one respect or instance as its evils need *prevention*.”²¹² As the magazine argued for children’s rescue, rendering these children’s characters as malleable and unknowable in advance, it simultaneously argued for the prevention of their future crime. The children’s “tragic” origins allowed the campaign to speculate not only about their potential for citizenship, but also about the future threat they might pose to the nation’s social order. While we’ve seen that the children’s malleability underscored the importance of the magazine reader’s maternal intervention, on the flip side, this speculative fictionality also provided a blank slate for whatever unlimited horrors and crimes the reader might imagine this not-yet-human capable of.

Thus, in Mabel Potter Daggett’s “The Child without a Home,” she explains that removing children from impoverished families and placing them, eventually, in foster homes, functions as “society’s own safeguard against crime. Thousands of little lives that would otherwise go to waste and weeds, are saved for fruit and flowers.”²¹³ In this formulation, the private domestic realm and its imagery of cultivated nurturance and bounty lead to proper civic development, while children who remain outside of the domestic realm remain in a state of nature and its inevitable destructive

violence towards black people – in this way, Wagner points out that the discourse of natural rights had a role in both the state’s jurisprudence and the animation of extra-legal social forms.

²¹² Dreiser, “Concerning Us All,” *The Delineator* (March 1908), 397.

²¹³ Mabel Potter Daggett, “The Child Without a Home,” *The Delineator* (October 1907), 508.

entropy, or its “waste and weeds,” which appear to threaten and encroach upon the social order simply through the seeming capacity to replicate without regulation. Furthermore, as I’ve suggested, this construction of the middle class home as elastic also construes the original mothers of the *Delineator* children as deviant or damaged. These maternal figures, incommensurate with the space of the domestic and shadowing the maternal reader who might rescue the child, remain suspended in this degraded zone, outside civil society’s protection, but at the same time, threatening to upset the civic order with their potential for reproducing unregulated and disordered forms of social life, rather than guiding the formation of children’s civic character (as the *Delineator* depicts its motherly readers). In this way, though rescuing the dependent child resolved the threat of that child’s imagined criminality, it also inadvertently draws attention to (rather than eliminates) the degraded zone in which the child’s mother continued to exist, underscoring her seemingly uncontrolled sexuality and its reproductive consequences. Through her failure to adhere to domestic codes and thus maintain the fictional enclosure of domestic’s private abundance, the wayward mother not only illuminates the nebulous zone of the social, but also threatens to upset and even discontinue the modern domestic realm – and its inherent whiteness – that the magazine seeks to protect and bolster. This figuration of uncontrolled reproduction seemed to demand a new mode of defining, detecting and policing a form of racialized criminality that threatened not only to transgress social norms in the future, but also to replace those norms altogether.

Dreiser Goes to the White House: The 1909 Conference for Dependent Children

As the child-rescue campaign took off, circulating new methods for policing the space of the social and protecting the integrity of the domestic realm, the magazine remained troubled by the unruly “waste” of dependency that this ordinary maternal figure came to signify. This mother, who supposedly violated the terms of domesticity – most centrally, having children out of marriage – rattled the representational symmetries the magazine invoked between reading, consumption and

humanitarian intervention in constructing the domestic realm for its readers. The reform community's contributions and debates within the magazine's pages thus reflected this anxiety over the deviant maternity of the children they sought to rescue and reform, arguing over whether child-rescue efforts should solely spotlight the child's needs, or target the form of that child's original family and the way in which it shapes the child's life. As such, the magazine, and the reformers published therein, grappled with how to best police the form of the family itself.

For example, in his letter to the editor, Hastings Hart, the superintendent of Illinois Children's Home and Aid Society, complicates the "tragic" but necessary separation of child and parent underpinning the magazine's representation of its child-rescue subjects. Requesting that Dreiser "undertake a study of the whole problem of the dependent child" (as his letter is titled), Hart essentially asks Dreiser to consider the factors that may have necessitated this separation:

The question of the separation of a child from its parents is one of great importance. Parents, under the stress of sickness or poverty or discouragement or bad advice, are often tempted to dispose of their children unnecessarily. The records of the child-helping societies show abundant instances where parents have repented bitterly and with fears. Thoughtless and indifferent parents often seek to shirk their parental obligations to the neglect of the child and the destruction of their own moral sense. The community must consider whether it will be party to such abandonment of duty.²¹⁴

In this formulation, Hart troubles the magazine's tragic formulation of the deviant mother as repenting for her failure to live up to domestic codes by dutifully giving up her child. Instead he asks the magazine to provide answers to, and coverage of, "practical questions" regarding the separation of parent and child: "Under what circumstances, and for how long a time, should children whose parents are in temporary distress receive temporary care? Should the mothers of illegitimate children be urged to bring up their own children or should they be relieved of them?"²¹⁵ Similarly,

²¹⁴ Hastings Hart, "Undertake a Study of the Whole Problem of the Dependent Child," *The Delineator* (January 1908), 103.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

the child welfare crusader Ben B. Lindsey, who established and served as judge of arguably the first juvenile court in the US, echoed these concerns of a number of other reformers in another letter, “Attack the Real Causes of Child Dependency.”²¹⁶ Addressing the editor, he highlights poverty as an industrial ill that separates parents from children and creates unstable homes:

Another case is typical of our industrialism: The father worked fourteen years in the mills; contracted lead poisoning, or perhaps through overexertion and bad food, the drink habit, and from one cause or another became useless or was slowly poisoned to death. The mother worked in the laundry for twelve or fourteen hours a day, contracted female trouble, became helpless, and the children drifted into crime, poverty and misery... So you see, Mr. Editor, that you cannot protect children unless you protect their parents as well, and you cannot do this unless you do justice in this world.²¹⁷

Lindsey does not frame the problem of the “child without a home” as one of an adrift “foundling” that encircling maternal love might correct, but instead describes the family as the most basic unit necessitating preservation; here, the mother is a “helpless” victim who may in fact be saved, and in turn, might save her children, eliminating all crime and misery altogether.²¹⁸

Thus, as the *Delineator*'s editor, Dreiser also had to balance the social science community's demands for a more structural picture of family poverty with the insistence of the Butterick company's owner and enthusiastic readers that the Child-Rescue committee continue. While Julie Berebitsky has argued that the tension between the child-parent separation that the magazine's

²¹⁶ John E.B. Myers, *Child Protection in America: Past, Present and Future*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2006), 67. Denver was tied with Chicago for the establishment of the first juvenile court.

²¹⁷Ibid, 101-2.

²¹⁸ The reform journal *Charities and the Commons*' feature on the *Delineator* campaign criticizes the easy symmetry the magazine draws between “child without a home” and its readers' “home without a child,” commenting that they “welcome the assistance of the *Delineator* in an educational campaign. At the same time a word of caution, lest in appealing to the popular interest, the campaign should cease to be educational. Serious harm has been done at times in the past by various children's home societies through spreading the idea abroad that all there is of child saving work is bringing together the ‘homeless child and the childless home.’ This is [just] one of the things that needs to be done.” *Charities and the Commons: A Weekly Journal of Philanthropy and Social Advance*. New York: Publication Committee of the New York Charity Organization Society, Vol. 19 1908, 1613-1614.

rescue campaign advocated, and professional reformers' call to address the structural concerns that dissolved families, was the result of the magazine's attempts to cater to both would-be adoptive mothers and professional reformers, "often result[ing] in articles with misleading, contradictory or inconsistent information," I would add that this unevenness was also due to the magazine's effort to enforce the fiction of a uniform domestic realm, which produced the specter of maternal degeneracy as it attempted to reach a national audience.

Thus, troubled but galvanized by the attention the campaign garnered, Dreiser and his Child-Rescue collaborator, James West, decided to go straight to the top with their child-rescue representational problems, requesting an audience with President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt, who had issued the famous directive to white women citizens to bear more children in order to prevent "race suicide," was enthusiastic about Dreiser and West's mission to reshape the lives of "waifs" who might grow to wreak havoc on American nationhood.²¹⁹ Thus, after meeting with Dreiser and West, Roosevelt sent out a summons on December 25, 1908 to two hundred of the most influential reformers involved in child welfare, with figures such as Lillian Wald, Booker T. Washington, Charles Henderson, Jacob Riis and Jane Addams eventually in attendance. The resulting meeting was the White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children, which from 1909 on met every ten years, until 1970.²²⁰ Despite his role in initiating and then orchestrating the

²¹⁹ Roosevelt first introduced the concept of "race suicide" in a speech to the National Congress of Mothers in Washington DC in 1905. Speaking against birth control and family planning for white American women who he believed must fulfill her maternal duty, he chided, "if the average family in which there are children contained but two children the nation as a whole would decrease in population so rapidly that in two or three generations it would very deservedly be on the point of extinction, so that the people who had acted on this base and selfish doctrine would be giving place to others with braver and more robust ideals. Nor would such a result be in any way regrettable; for a race that practised such doctrine--that is, a race that practised race suicide--would thereby conclusively show that it was unfit to exist, and that it had better give place to people who had not forgotten the primary laws of their being." Theodore Roosevelt, "On Motherhood," National Congress of Mothers, Washington, DC (March 13, 1905).

²²⁰ For a full account of Dreiser and West's interactions with Roosevelt and the "calling" of the 1909 Conference for the Care of Dependent Children, see Harold A. Jambor's "Theodore Dreiser, the *Delineator*

meeting with Roosevelt (and his role in the *Delineator* campaign more generally), Dreiser, not included in the ranks of scientific experts, practicing social workers, or government officials, was relegated to the press corps covering the conference.

The conference placed the character of the “dependent child” squarely in the spotlight; invoking the “natural home” that the *Delineator* posited as every child’s “birthright” in his framing remarks, Roosevelt reminded his audience, “Each of these children represents either a potential addition to the productive capacity and the enlightened citizenship of the nation, or, if allowed to suffer from neglect, a potential addition to the destructive forces of the community. The ranks of criminals and other enemies of society are recruited in an altogether undue proportion from children bereft of their natural homes and left without sufficient care.”²²¹ Thus, the conference’s debates revolved around the ethics and logistics of either institutionalizing or of “placing out” children without a suitable home, the need to make institutions themselves more “home-like,” the criterion for removing a child from its family of origin, and finally, methods for preventing impoverished homes and “dependent” children altogether. At stake in this set of questions was the ideal family form, as well as the way in which deviance and social disorder was produced through the relationship between a child and its mother, the figure that upheld the integrity of the domestic realm.²²² In the end, the conference did not come up with a single policy solution for the “dependent child,” but rather sought to redirect the hybridity of local government and private

Magazine, and Dependent Children: A Background Note on the Calling of the 1909 White House Conference.”

²²¹ “Proceedings of the Conference on the Care of the Dependent Child, Washington DC, January 25, 26, 1909” Washington: Government Printing Office (1909), 5.

²²² See Michael Crenson’s chapter on “The Perils of Placing Out” in *Building the Invisible Orphanage* for a discussion of the two camps in the conference’s debates. According to Crenson, two camps arose in these debates: one side argued for more “home-like” institutions, while the other supported adoption and “placing out” as the national response to children’s dependency.

charity into juvenile courts, loosely connected administrative bodies authorized to judge and individually treat each dependent child's "case," defining the child's need and its subsequent treatment, be it home-placement, institutionalization, or aid to the child's original family.

At the conference's conclusion, the attending members drafted and unanimously voted on a set of resolutions that Roosevelt took to Congress, encouraging "that such legislation be enacted as may be necessary in order to bring the laws and practices in regard to the care of dependent children in all federal territory into harmony with the other conclusions reached by the conference."²²³ These 14 resolutions worked to provide the blueprints for administrative structures that might facilitate the dependent child's welfare within a "natural" and fitting home, developing criteria about what constituted "deserving" motherhood and domesticity. Thus, while "children of worthy parents or deserving mothers should, as a rule, be kept with their parents at home," through monetary aid, if necessary, the conference attendees also recommended that "the home should only be broken up...only for considerations of immorality or inefficiency."²²⁴ To oversee and differentiate between "deserving mothers" and "immorality and inefficiency" in individual homes and for individual children, moreover, this set of resolutions also began to outline a system of informally connected juvenile courts that would collect and control sociological knowledge and data, so that children might be monitored and if necessary "placed" into the most suitable home situations. As such, the conference also resolved that "[c]omplete histories of dependent children and their parents, based upon personal investigation and supervision, should be recorded for guidance of child-caring agencies" and that in addition to a Federal Children's Bureau devoted to synthesizing the data from

²²³ "Proceedings of the Conference on the Care of the Dependent Child," 5.

²²⁴ *Ibid*, 6.

these records, “local child-caring agencies should cooperate and establish joint bureaus of information.”²²⁵

As judgment about children’s and mothers’ cases were expertly determined through the compilation of social data and construction of their “histories,” the “typical” character traits and environments that this casework synthesized and outlined were either rewarded or punished in order to prevent crime and social disorder. Thus, this model also made a distinction between “worthy” and deviant mothers (as in the *Delineator*), but sought to explicitly penalize and discipline mothers that did not adhere to domestic standards while providing financial aid for those who were deemed morally acceptable. The 1909 White House conference is often cited as the major turning point for the legislation and dispensation of mothers’ pensions in states across the US, that is, state aid to mothers “deserving” of that aid, such as widows or women whose husbands were ill or injured. As Molly Ladd-Taylor has noted, the administration of mothers’ pension differed from previous forms of private charity organization and relief, as the majority of states distributed this governmental aid through local juvenile courts, perceiving “a connection between ‘broken homes’ and juvenile crime.”²²⁶

Here, then, I am more interested in the significance of this emerging network of localized courts that sought to aid and police family formations by compiling social data, than I am in participating in the debate over whether or not these mothers’ pensions marked the formal emergence of the welfare state in the US. In particular, historian Linda Gordon has noted that the administration of mothers’ aid through the development of juvenile courts categorized single mothers and their children as commensurate with delinquents, thus making them subject to

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother Work*, 139. Interestingly, Ladd-Taylor also observes that “many of these states specifically required that women be appointed to the investigatory commissions or agencies that administered the pensions” (139). There is a debate surrounding the “beginning” of the welfare state and the 1909 White House Conference: See work by Michael Crenson, Theda Skodpol, Molly Ladd-Taylor, and Michael Katz.

the particularistic, punitive, and/or rehabilitative judgments in which the courts specialized. Most laws had 'suitable home' provisions, refusing aid to any mother who failed to provide an environment meeting social workers' standards. Such provisions, strongly supported by the child welfare establishment and the women's organizations that campaigned for these programs, gave relatively unfettered discretion to social work administrators and judges as to what constituted proper family life (45).

Gordon points out how social science's project of classificatory and individualized judgment became codified into an administrative system whose power to police familial relations was based on the administrators' discretion and intervention, their ability to read families and "home environments." Moreover, as the categories of delinquency and dependency became entwined in this system, in effect positioning those outside the white middle class as inherently threatening and criminal – or, reduced to their "threat potential," as we saw in the discussion of the *Delineator's* "National Rescue League" – this ability to distinguish between "deserving" and "immoral" mothers functioned to protect a domestic realm that provided a vehicle for the transmission of property rights and the imagination of the truly private, autonomous domestic sphere. While the maternal sentimentality featured so prominently in the *Delineator's* child-rescue campaign seems absorbed into the compilation of (and treatment based on) this social scientific data, we might read the prototypical juvenile court's form of judgment, intended to *prevent* social disorder and crime (before it actually occurred), as grounded in a sentimentalized understanding of maternity as purely an affective force for good, or a threat to the social health and purity.

Importantly, not only did the juvenile court system distinguish between "deserving" and "immoral" mothers, but it also excluded the admission of black youth and families altogether (much as we saw in the *Delineator's* project to construct and police white domesticity through a "national" child-rescue league). As Geoff Ward notes in *The Black Child Savers*, despite African American migration during the development of the juvenile court systems in urban centers in the north, they were usually not included in the rehabilitative interventions and the allocation of social resources

that progressive reformers developed to reshape the modern domestic realm.²²⁷ Ward also observes that while the newly functioning juvenile court “with its orbiting network of service agencies [and]...a more technical and autonomous system of social control” focused on “the racial project of white citizen and state building” it “diminished” access to the courts’ rehabilitative resources.²²⁸ In this way, the juvenile court system’s burgeoning networks also laid the groundwork for a racially differentiated definition and treatment of “delinquency.”

By making these connections between Dreiser’s editorial project at the *Delineator*, his participation in the White House Conference, and the beginning of the administration of mothers’ pensions, I do not mean to posit a directly causal relationship between the *Delineator*’s circulation and the emergence of the juvenile court system in the United States. The first juvenile courts had been developing since about 1900, significantly before the magazine’s child-rescue campaign, though these courts did not have formal governmental backing and funding and functioned as an experiment in separating out minors who had been arrested from the general adult population in the justice system.²²⁹ Rather, I explore these convergences because they illuminate how a mode of reading and producing knowledge potentially bolstered and provided the cultural backing for progressives’ form of governing “domestic” relations and policing access to the state’s resources. In short, I am interested in how the “child-rescue” reading practices engendered in the *Delineator*’s campaign imagined, and to some extent, enforced, the idea of a public in which readers meted out judgment and reward based on their expertise and affective fluency in the codes of domesticity.

²²⁷ Geoff Ward, *The Black Child Savers: Racial Democracy and Juvenile Justice*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2012), 78.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ See David Tanenhaus, *Juvenile Justice in the Making* Oxford: Oxford University Press (2004), and Anthony M. Platt, *The Child Savers: The Invention of Delinquency* Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1969).

As progressive reformers developed a juridical system based mainly in a discretionary power to intervene in domestic affairs, one in which, as Roosevelt put it in the conclusion of his remarks to Congress on the conference, “the government cannot do everything; there must always be help by individuals and associations outside; that religious and philanthropic associations of many different kinds must cooperate with Government or we cannot get the best results,” this system drew its policing authority from its ability to textualize, analyze and control the entanglement of dependency and delinquency – and this capacity in turn depended not only on philanthropic organizations but on extralegal forms of publication much like the *Delineator*.²³⁰ As Sophonisba Breckenridge, one of the founders of Chicago’s juvenile court, frames it in her guiding tract, *The Delinquent Child and the Home*, “For the first time in history, a court of law, the so-called juvenile court, reveals a great social situation and thereby bestows the greatest aid toward social justice which this generation comprehends – *the truth made public*.”²³¹ The discretionary, preventative system that relies on extralegal social work thus opened the door for an amplified police power, greater license of intervention and surveillance of social life in the city, and (as we’ll see in the next two chapters) a racist mode of policing and punishment that sought to punish black women and rehabilitate white women in the modernizing landscape. Yet in the chapter that follows, we’ll also see that literary authors also deeply engaged with social scientific study and juvenile reform – Theodore Dreiser (unsurprisingly), but also the novelist and sociologist, W.E.B. Du Bois – drew upon and attempted to redirect this discretionary system, and its reliance on developing textual forms such as the social case history. Both Dreiser and Du Bois sought to mobilize this textual apparatus to critique the norms reformers sought to impose and police, and to imagine a set of alternate social relationships that refigured property-ownership and racialized domesticity.

²³⁰ Roosevelt, “Proceedings of the Conference for the Care of the Dependent Child,” 6.

²³¹ Sophonisba Breckenridge, *The Delinquent Child and the Home*, New York: Charities Publication Committee (1912), 10.

Chapter 3

Reading the Wayward Case History:

Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt* and Du Bois' *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*

W.E.B. Du Bois' 1911 *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* is a novel about the life course of a “wayward” girl, whose seeming deviance from the auspices of proper home life sparks her developmental journey from violent segregation in the south to the north’s contradictory freedoms, and back again. We meet her briefly in the novel’s opening pages, as an “elf-girl” whose mystical “poetry of motion” as she runs through the swamp at night baffles the reader and begs the question: what might her “wild running through the dark” come to represent in the novel?²³² Yet the narration only fully introduces its heroine five chapters later, having first given its reader a panoramic glimpse into the social life and structure of rural Tooms County, Alabama, a place “fringed with dirty straggling cabins of black folk,” “two or three pert cottages and a stately house,” and “the very life and being of the land...great bales of cotton.”²³³ As the novel limns the social landscape of “cotton country,” it frames the fraught relations between black and white people in Tooms County as a sort of zero-level site for contestation over the meaning and treatment of what Du Bois referred to as “the problem of the color line” – moving it from “a glance of the new books and periodicals and talk of great philanthropies and reforms” to “closely and intimately in touch” with everyday black life shaped by economic exploitation, systemic criminalization and thwarted access to political and social resources.²³⁴

²³² W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, New York: Harlem Moon Random House (2004, 1911), 6, 11,7.

²³³ Ibid, 28.

²³⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, vii. Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, 14.

Having been given this ground-level perspective on the lived experience of the sociological “negro problem,” the reader thus comes to expect a similarly material explication of Zora’s role in the social world that Du Bois indexes; we sense we have learned about Tooms County in order to understand Zora’s character more keenly. Yet, when the narrator finally returns to Zora, her characterization remains somewhat opaque, never quite losing its initial mysticism:

Zora, child of the swamp, was a heathen hoyden of twelve wayward, untrained years. Slight, straight, strong, full-blooded, she had dreamed her life away in willful wandering through her dark and somber kingdom until she was one with it in all its moods; mischievous, secretive, brooding; full of great and awful visions, steeped body and soul in wood-lore.²³⁵

Here, the description of Zora evokes explicitly sociological terms: the narrator observes, for example, she is “wayward” and “untrained,” making note of her age and her seeming home origins in “the swamp.” However, immediately afterwards, the description swerves from sociological catalogue to a more lyrical and playful evocation of Zora’s waywardness, “wandering” much like Zora herself. Moving from careful description of this particular and problematic social world in the south, thus casting Zora’s “waywardness” as a reflection of troubling social forces, to a more fantastical mode in which waywardness seems to connote imaginative movement, and unsettle realist referentiality, the narration hovers between the seemingly real and unreal, mobilizing sociological precision to call its epistemological certainty into question. Zora’s characterization as a “willful wanderer,” at once figured as a discrete character (“willful”) and a being that seems to exceed or wander away from its normative constraints, suggests that the wayward girl’s figuration might not only limn an oppressive social environment, but also gesture towards how social worlds not yet brought into existence might be materialized or made legible.

This chapter pairs together two 1911 novels, Du Bois’ *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* and Theodore Dreiser’s *Jennie Gerhardt* – which until now have not been compared – and illuminates their shared reliance on the form of the sociological case record. I argue that both Dreiser and Du

²³⁵ Ibid, 33.

Bois mobilize the nascent and not yet stable form of the social case history – a record-keeping and research tool for Progressive Era social workers invested in tracking the origins and “wanderings” of the wayward girl – to limn structural violence in the modernizing US, and to draw attention to the potential the reorganization of social relationships. At first glance, the novels do not appear particularly similar: Dreiser’s *Jennie Gerhardt* focuses on the experience of a young woman from a German immigrant family and the costs of assimilation into American whiteness, and Du Bois’ *Quest of the Silver Fleece* explores how Zora resists and remakes the deeply entrenched racial violence of the American plantation system. However, when we consider how the novels chart out their protagonists’ trajectories, we begin to see that both deploy social scientific description and emplotment not to interpellate or diagnose their heroines, but instead, to envision alternate futures for both their protagonists and the web of social relations they come to symbolize.

As they invest in reimagining the future, rather than replicating the status quo, these wayward novels trouble the conventions of the period’s realism and naturalism, which, as a number of critics have noted, remain imbricated with social science’s mission to regulate how modern social life was ordered and known, “policing of the real,” as Mark Seltzer has put it.²³⁶ More recently, Jennifer Fleissner has compellingly argued that very often, “the case of the modern woman” and her seeming “stuckness” in place and in compulsive, repetitive motion in naturalist and realist texts, does not offer a “plot of decline,” as previous scholars have proffered. For Fleissner, this compulsion instead suggests an alternate narrative mode that marks the limits, or incompleteness, of dominant histories of progress and developmental teleology, while also gesturing towards future possibilities that openness engenders.²³⁷ “The case” of the wayward girl in Dreiser and Du Bois’ novels, however, not only gestures towards this openness and its potential for alternate futures, but redirects

²³⁶ Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 96.

²³⁷ Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 9.

and takes advantage of social science's seemingly coercive narrative structure to focus in on the forms through which these alternate social visions might actually be realized, drawing on the newly professional field of social work's aspiration to re-imagine power arrangements. In this way, while Avery Gordon has proposed that literary fiction complements and sometimes opposes the work of disciplinary sociology, enabling "other kinds of sociological information to emerge...[as] literature has not been restrained by the norms of professionalized social science, and thus it often teaches us, through imaginative design, what we need to know but cannot quite get access to with our given rules of method," I suggest that the early form of the sociological case history provided a framework for re-imagining social possibilities in literary fiction.²³⁸ As we'll see, the literary novel and social scientific case history both elaborated upon and borrowed liberally from one another's formal techniques and ideological aims in the first decade of the 20th century.

The previous chapters in this dissertation have explored how the social scientific and criminological investigation into the form of the wayward girl in fact offered tools and strategies for remaking forms of citizenship and social relation in the US, enabling unexpected identifications and affiliations across social groups, even as those visions end up reproducing new kinds of social violence, from Frances Kellor's newly designed carceral system for women and categorization of "negro crime," to the *Delineator* magazine's policing of the normative family form through its articulation of unfit maternity. Dreiser and Du Bois were both immersed in social scientific reform's experimental discourse. Dreiser wrote *Jennie Gerhardt* at the end of the "child-rescue" campaign that he edited at the *Delineator*, culminating with the social welfare debates in the Conference for the Dependent Child that the magazine initially helped organize at the White House. When Du Bois composed *Quest of the Silver Fleece*, he had just assumed editorship of *The Crisis* and was a prolific sociologist of black life in the United States. Steeped in contemporary debates over best methods

²³⁸ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1997), 25.

and practices for progressive social science and reform – particularly concerning new discourses on sexual crime and juvenile delinquency – both authors were cognizant of how the “wayward girl” had become a hinge figure in what was in essence a conversation about the nation’s changing racial composition at the start of the 20th century.

Despite their shared engagement with social scientific reform, however, the two authors brought distinctly different vantages on the “girl problem” to bear on the case history inspired novels that they composed. Dreiser had helped push the juvenile and family reform movement into the national spotlight, focusing on the plight of “dependent” white and immigrant families in the *Delineator*’s campaign. And Du Bois turned to sociological inquiry – from his landmark 1898 *The Philadelphia Negro* to his work in the Atlanta Conferences – to address the structural inequity and violence that shaped everyday reality for black communities in the United States, pushing back on the depiction of those communities as irredeemably criminal and deviant in white scientific discourse.²³⁹ But in their literary work, Du Bois and Dreiser both exploited the case history narrative’s preoccupation with reimagining the wayward young woman’s future – as women’s maternal and racial reproduction was seen to shape the nation’s fate – in order to reimagine how alternate social structures might take shape in newly modern life. As we’ll see, these literary “cases” shared a common structure, as well as an investment in reimagining and restructuring sociality in the US, though their actual visions for those forms of social life also diverge significantly.

Contextualizing the Social Case History

In the 1910s, the case history began to function as a standard tool for social workers and sociologists to record the “facts” about the lives of so-called deviant, dependent, or wayward women

²³⁹ By 1911, Du Bois was also the editor for the NAACP’s *The Crisis*, and, it should be noted, also developed an annual issue devoted to black children’s fitness, in a format not dissimilar from Dreiser’s *Delineator* campaign. See Khalil Muhammad’s “Writing Crime into Race” on Fredrick Hoffman’s *Race Traits* and Du Bois’ sociological response to Hoffman’s conflation of criminality and blackness in *The Condemnation of Blackness*.

and their families in the modern city. Reformers compiled this information so that it might be analyzed for patterns that revealed how this deviance was potentially transmitted in a family and/or shaped by environment, and thus, how it might be properly addressed or treated. Social workers placed wayward women suspected of so-called promiscuity and immoral associations, as well as “illegitimate mothers,” “at the vortex of a constellation of larger social problems that revolved around the state of morality and family life,” as Regina Kunzel has noted.²⁴⁰ Furthermore, as we’ve seen in the prior chapters, newly emerging relief networks in the progressive era depended on social scientific inquiry and analysis, rather than the more sentimental mode of scientific charity and accordant “friendly visits” that functioned to monitor and minister to the urban poor (even as sentimental discourse was re-instrumentalized in various ways in sociological discourse). What’s more, as we’ve also seen, this Progressive Era social science was deeply concerned with the quality and composition of domestic and social life in the modernizing city. To hone in on the construction of this social life, social workers used the case history’s record to closely monitor the young women seen to be at the nexus of family life, looking for any sexual indiscretion that might lead to pregnancy outside marriage – and hence reproduction outside the bounds of the color line. In the case of women who had children outside of marriage and/or lived without a husband, the case history also functioned to track the so-called fitness of maternal care and “maladjusted” home life, as reformers sought to carefully chart mothers’ influence on their children’s future development,

²⁴⁰ Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*, 50. For example, perhaps the most famous Progressive Era social worker, Jane Addams, framed the social scientific observation and reformation of the wayward girl – whom she described as “misdirected” but “a tremendous force, valuable and necessary for the foundation of the family” – as deeply connected to the possibility of a “purer” future for the modern city, “Let us know the modern city in its weakness and wickedness, and then seek to rectify and purify it until it shall be free at least from the grosser temptations which now beset the young people who are living in its tenement-houses and working in its factories.” Jane Addams, “Why Girls Go Wrong,” *The Ladies Home Journal*, XXIV.10 (September 1907), 13-14.

again policing the boundaries of “social associations” in the tenements, and attempting to preserve the family form as bounded and segregated by race.

Thus, the purpose of the case history was grounded in the progressive reform and policing project that sought to protect the nexus between domesticity and whiteness, and to surveil and shape the racial composition of the city as it was increasingly populated by European immigrants and black migrants from the south. In particular, case history records were used by the probation system, developed in tandem with the juvenile and women’s court systems, that worked to police “wayward” and “incorrigible” young women – without formally incarcerating them (such case histories were also used in institutions such as privately-affiliated “half-way” and maternity homes). Historian Ruth Alexander observes: “taking direction from a trained probation officer, they were supposed to learn to cope with the demands of work and family and to resist the temptations of the street.”²⁴¹ Case history records, then, functioned as quasi-official documents, occupying the liminal space between the court system and private relief agencies. And as Khalil Muhammad and Cheryl Hicks have noted, the supplementation of the Progressive Era’s developing public institutions with private philanthropic organizations allowed for the racist neglect of black migrants in the modernizing city, leading to their criminalization, rather than their access to social services and resources as per white immigrants’ treatment.²⁴² Thus, as we will see, both the form and function of the social case history was contested, as social workers sought to figure the urban landscape as flexible and pliant, while also enforcing racial stratification.

“To digress from accustomed lines of action”: The Social Case History’s Narrative Form

²⁴¹ Alexander, *The Girl Problem*, 52.

²⁴² As we’ll see later in this chapter, young black women were systematically excluded and underserved by the probation system. See Cheryl Hicks’ chapter on Grace Campbell’s probation work, “The Tragedy of the Colored Girl in Court: The National Urban League and New York’s Women’s Court.”

To understand the formal composition of the case history in this period, it is useful to pay attention to how “case work” not only related their subjects’ pasts – specifically wayward women’s social and familial history and environmental development – but also sought to shape the future direction that social experience might take in the modernizing United States. Through this newly social scientific methodology, sociologists and social workers looked to refashion (and demonstrate through their own precision) American social life as fundamentally progressive and forward-looking. At the same time, reformers studied and classified social difference in attempts to maintain traditional racial hierarchies, most centrally white supremacy, in light of unprecedented immigration and migration to the urban north in the aftermath of reconstruction. As Davarian Baldwin has written about black internal migration and immigration from southern and eastern Europe, “These immigrations and migrations were symbolic of larger processes, including the growth and expansion of industrial capitalism searching for new labor and markets and the long march of black resistance against subservience, offering new definitions of freedom and enlightenment.”²⁴³ Though driven in large part by modern capitalism, as Baldwin notes, the unanticipated consequences of this modernization – and the creativity and resistance in response to the capitalist social order and state violence in the US – deeply threatened white patriarchy’s conceptual foundations.

This tension between progressive reformers’ envisioned possibilities for the modern future and the desire to maintain the tenets of traditional power arrangements played out at the level of the case history’s formal structure. Both sociologists and practicing social workers strove to coherently account for the development of women’s “wayward” behavior – making judgments based on pre-existing norms for deviance – while also imagining a progressive future that transformed not only the woman in question, but also the social landscape that enabled her waywardness. In her work on the emergence of social work as a profession, Kunzel provides a succinct description of the case

²⁴³ Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (2009), 10.

history's two narrative tasks: describing the "client's" past while attempting to re-imagine and reshape her future. Kunzel writes, "Case work followed a step-by-step procedure of collecting information about a client's experiences and background or 'investigation,' followed by 'diagnosis' and 'treatment' of the client's problem."²⁴⁴ The case history's descriptions of a young woman, then, not only aspired to realistically record her particular life history and domestic "conditions" – producing a cogent social history – but also to provide a springboard for social agencies (usually, private relief organizations that worked in tandem with the state) to intervene in her home and neighborhood to reshape her life trajectory as was seen fit.²⁴⁵

Recently, critic Warwick Anderson has shown how the modernist case history, especially though not limited to the field of medicine, actually took two forms in the early 20th century: the administrative case file and the scientific case study.²⁴⁶ While the scientific case study is a closed and retrospective narrative, explaining individual psychological, social or sexual behavior that allows for a better understanding of the "interior self," the administrative case file, used in direct social work, is comprised of "interceptive, evolving, often 'heteroglossic' documents oriented towards the future, shaping the prognosis," and through these combined and abbreviated evaluations, making individuals into "normative collectives...rendering them bureaucratically knowable and serviceable."²⁴⁷ However, the emerging form of the case record in the early 20th century in fact mediated between these two cultural functions, studying and constructing a nuanced account of an individual woman's past in order to more radically reshape the future of the social landscape in the modern city. As Mary Wilcox Glenn, an early and influential social worker, remarked at the 1913

²⁴⁴ Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*, 6.

²⁴⁵ As Karen Tice observes, "Case records not only described but also represented clients and their situations, thus forming the basis for decisions about interventions and ultimately clients' well-being" (7).

²⁴⁶ Warwick Anderson, "The Case of the Archive" *Critical Inquiry* 39 (2013), 532.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 536.

National Conference of Charities and Corrections, “Case work deals with life lived unsuccessfully. Its business is to stir...women whose situation is markedly unfavorable to move on to a more remunerative plane or effort.”²⁴⁸ In this formulation, as the case history describes the development of deviance in the past, describing and analyzing its causes, it also provides a catalyst for individuals and families deemed “unsuccessful” to climb to a more bountiful but yet-unrealized “plane” of existence.

The mediating, and aspirational, nature of the social case history’s form, reflecting the way in which social work toggled between the fine-grained details of an individual woman’s past and the potentially transformed future of city social life, led to a great deal of debate over the representational conventions that “the case” should adhere to. The proper contours of the case history also became a site where antagonisms over professional power and identity played out, as sociologists and social workers sought to shape not only the future of the urban poor, but also ensure their own centrality in the progressive future of public life. White, middle class women social workers sought to establish their social and scientific authority, performing case work and gathering the data necessary for sociological knowledge. In her history of the development of the case record, Tice observes, women “caseworkers transformed clients’ biographies into professional representations shaped by emerging professional interests,” as the aspiration to intervene in and surveil the lives of the urban working classes (as I’ve previously noted, almost always white or European immigrant) in large part mirrored their aspirations to more fully participate in reformed and progressive public life, imagining a future in which they inhabited a more central and authoritative public role.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ Mrs. John M. Glenn, “Case Work Disciplines and Ideals,” *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections*, Vol. 40 (1913).

²⁴⁹ As Mary Poovey has put it, the records that comprised case histories functioned as “texts that mark the passage of women as objects of another’s discourse to women as subjects of their own,” though as we’ve

Thus, as women social workers mobilized the practice of case work and maintained case histories to establish professional credibility, they looked to “put an end to their vagrant professional status by emulating the ‘science’ of sociology,” as Tice has noted.²⁵⁰ These social workers sought to create social records whose descriptions of each woman’s history, as well as her plan for treatment, were “detached, impartial and...self-evident,” performing their capacity for objectivity and eschewing stereotyped feminine sentimentality even as they reported on domestic life. However, in response to social workers’ encroachment onto disciplinary turf, blurring the perceived boundary between the “hard” science of sociology and the more subjective and feminized practice of social work, professional sociology (populated mainly, though not totally, by white men) became critical of social workers’ precise and detached descriptions in their case records. These sociologists asserted that while social workers had imitated the objectivity that sociology required, their descriptions deeply lacked the local color and “human presence” of sociology’s descriptive methods.²⁵¹ For example, Tice quotes Thomas Eliot, an influential sociologist, who remarked that social workers’ case histories had “all the juice squeezed out, and [were] displayed, like a botanical specimen, from which even a soaking cannot revive a semblance of the original in its ecological setting.”²⁵² Similarly, leading social reformer Frank Bruno looked to combine sociology’s prized objectivity with social work’s record keeping practices when he observed that “the real objective test of social work [was] an honestly and dramatically described case story,” which took into account the nuanced narrative

seen, in progressive era reform, the identification between white women reformers and the women that they studied were fraught. Poovey qtd. in Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*, 8.

²⁵⁰ Tice, *Tales of Wayward Girls and Immoral Women*, 54.

²⁵¹ Tice, 65.

²⁵² Eliot qtd. in Tice 65.

“drama” of an individual life gone “bad” in order to reshape the broader social networks in which the wayward girl was central.²⁵³

In these on-going debates over professional and authorial expertise, then, social workers and sociologists came to equate the case history’s mode of description – its potential for providing a cogent history of the wayward girl’s development, while also marking her future as flexible and open – as a crucial tool for transforming the urban landscape. The authority to intervene in and shape social futures seemingly depended on the author’s style itself, as the case worker strove to develop objective norms to describe the “client’s” history while also presenting the lives in question in a way that evoked their capacity to change, enabling social workers to reshape the city. In her essay “Fiction and the Science of Society,” Susan Mizruchi has also noted how social science’s narrative form attempted to provide a sense of cultural cohesion at the turn of the century, writing that “sociology was an attempt to tell a certain kind of story about a particular historical reality. The burden of American sociology at its moment of origin was to reinscribe a conflicted and potentially explosive social reality as a terrain of consensus and integration.”²⁵⁴ To this end, social scientists professionalized the observational skills that writers also used to pen novels.²⁵⁵ For Mizruchi, though, sociology’s efforts to provide “consensus and integration” depended on “typological method” (which literary authors then imitated in realist literature): these “[t]ype categories invested individuals and social phenomena with some semblance of predictability and control...[and]

²⁵³ Bruno qtd. in Tice 65.

²⁵⁴ Susan Mizruchi, “Fiction and the Science of Society” in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, eds. Emory Elliot and Cathy Davidson, New York: Columbia University Press (1991), 190. For discussions of the relationship between sociology and literature in later periods in the US, see the following: Carla Capetti’s *Writing Chicago: Modernism, Ethnography, and the Novel*, Columbia University Press (2003) and Roderick Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (2003).

²⁵⁵ Ibid, 191.

mediate[d] the divide between social determination and individuality.”²⁵⁶ In this formulation, then, sociological description was fundamentally based in “scientific observation, rather than speculation.”²⁵⁷

The social case history’s relationship to narrative description, however, was somewhat different (in a sense due to professional contestations over who had the authority to reshape the urban landscape). While the social case history certainly sought to observe and precisely chronicle and assess the social development of the wayward girl, so that she might be properly diagnosed and treated, this treatment plan and its imagined impact on the wayward girl was distinctly future-oriented, adding a speculative dimension to its narrative. The speculative component of the case history, furthermore, had implications beyond the wayward girl’s singular future. Rather than providing specific “social types” to structure the social landscape with a predictable social hierarchy, the case history’s author illuminated the fluid web of social relations through which the wayward girl developed, highlighting how these malleable relationships would also metamorphosize (for the better) as the individual client’s “case” was reformed. In essence, the case’s individual descriptive history for the wayward girl also opened up the city’s social landscape and the possibility for its future transformation into a more harmonious and progressive social order.²⁵⁸

This formulation of the wayward girl’s case history as precisely descriptive while also imaginative and future-oriented appears in social workers’ writings and speeches for their colleagues

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 192.

²⁵⁸ The evidence I’m pointing to might seem to corroborate the arguments that Mark Seltzer makes about social scientific realism in the early 20th century, in which he argues that realist texts – including the sociological case – focus on the process of “making” an individual person in order to police the broader social landscape, creating an interminable back-and-forth or dialectic between individual body and mass machine culture. The developing case record for “wayward women,” however, seemed for reformers to promise to function as a tool for resolving the sexual waywardness that threatened to undermine white heteropatriarchal norms, while also marking the future as open to genuine progress, rather than remaining trapped in the dialectic that Seltzer describes. See the “Statistical Persons” chapter in *Bodies and Machines*.

at the time, as they sought to outline the case history's proper form and function. In a lecture at a sociological congress, Graham Taylor from the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy, pointed to leading social worker's Mary E. Richmond's conceptualization of the case history, "It aims to form, more than reform. It becomes an affirmative and constructive science," marked by its flexibility and emphasis on transformation.²⁵⁹ And in her influential textbook on the proper construction of a "social case history," Ada Sheffield shows how its "constructive science" hinges on conceiving of social relationships as dynamically interrelated and malleable (rather than a hierarchy of fixed "types").²⁶⁰ As she devotes a chapter in this manual to "The Narrative in Detail," Sheffield underscores how an in-depth description of "the client," or the wayward girl, also describes her fluid web of social relationships, thus evoking the modernizing cityscape and its potential transformation. Outlining the type of "facts" most important for social workers to highlight in their case records – the wayward girl's social relationships – Sheffield instructs, "These important or significant facts noted in the margin will often be one with evidence as to the client's social relationships. Since these relationships are the special field of the social workers, and since it is in these contacts that an individual develops and reveals personality, emphasizing facts of personality in the record would emphasize that part of the social worker's function which calls for the most insight and skill."²⁶¹ For the wayward girl at the center of the case history, Sheffield elaborates, "personality [is] identified by its response to the complex social environment of modern

²⁵⁹ Graham Taylor, address in *The Call of the New South: Addresses Delivered at the Southern Sociological Congress, May 7-12, 1912*.

²⁶⁰ Throughout the chapter, I often use the term "the social case history" –I am deliberately drawing on Sheffield's terminology from her influential *The Social Case History*, which refers to case histories constructed for sexually "wayward" women, and also emphasizes the connection between the individual client's development and the social networks that comprised the modernizing city.

²⁶¹ Ada Sheffield, *The Social Case History: Its Construction and Content*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation (1920), 178.

life, and as developed and expressed through its various social contacts.”²⁶² Finally, Sheffield also emphasizes that the investigation into and description of the wayward girl’s place in “modern life” should result in a “diagnosis” and plan for treatment that is not rigid but rather flexible and creative. Sheffield calls this interpretative process “where investigation ends and treatment begins,” mediating between description of the past and an intervention that imagines a better future for the wayward girl (and implicitly, for her “various social contacts”).²⁶³ Such treatment, Sheffield asserts, “does not mean that the worker should make a hard and fast plan and impose it on her client. The best plans must be held subject to constant revisings in one respect or another, and all treatment adapts,” framing the case history’s narrative as focused on a future that is dynamic and changeable.²⁶⁴

“The Art of Casework”: The Social Case History and Literary Form

Given the social case history’s future-oriented narrative form – and the dynamic social relations that it sought to evoke through its descriptions of the wayward girl’s development – the nascent social case history also charts a different relationship between sociological and literary representation, which, as critics have observed, were frequently intertwined in this period. In the first two decades of the 20th century, social scientists had already taken to disseminating “human interest” stories in the press to garner enthusiasm for their causes and to encourage those engaged in social research and direct practice themselves.²⁶⁵ Furthermore, as Priscilla Wald has noted, for social

²⁶² Ibid. Along these lines, Sheffield also writes “the interpretation of social facts, which in case work lie in many relations of the client’s life, relates them not to one concept but to what might be described as a *constellation* of concepts,” deemphasizing hierarchy and instead drawing attention to social relationship as more fluid and horizontal in nature (148, emphasis mine).

²⁶³ Ibid, 155.

²⁶⁴ Ibid, 160-161.

²⁶⁵ As Tice has noted, social work publications would occasionally hold story contests in which professionals were invited to send in fictionalized versions of the lives and circumstances they had encountered. Tice, *Tales of Wayward Girls and Immoral Women*, 62-63.

scientists in this period, the literary arts both provided social insight and better methods of communicating their findings, producing “a better understanding of how society worked [that] would lead to better social management” and perhaps an improved social order.²⁶⁶ And on the literary side, many authors at the time, from Stephen Crane to Paul Laurence Dunbar, drew inspiration from sociological study as they also sought to represent the seeming sexual and social disorder of urban slums; as per Mizruchi’s observations, the period’s literary realism and sociological inquiry shared an interest in “typological method” as a way to classify and control social life.²⁶⁷ In the context of the developing social case history, however, social workers showed how the case history’s adaptable and future-oriented narrative form was confluent with literature’s imaginative dimensions – the capacity to imagine things otherwise. At the same time, as women social workers in particular sought to carve out professional authority, they also differentiated between the social scientific and literary fields. They emphasized that while both narrative forms relied on flexibility and imagination, literary narrative solely provided aesthetic pleasure, while the case history’s social scientific narrative, moving from descriptions of the client’s social development to a flexible plan for treatment, afforded its author power to intervene into “human relations,” thus highlighting their ability to reshape the course of the wayward girl’s trajectory and future social life in the city.

Take, for instance, a lecture given by Mary Wilcox Glenn on “Case Work Disciplines and Ideals” at the 1913 Conference for Charities and Corrections. Glenn invokes the case history as an imaginative form that might remold the future of the “wayward” girl and her social relationships, highlighting how the construction of the case history functions as a kind of artistic practice.²⁶⁸ Like

²⁶⁶ Wald, “Dreiser’s Sociological Vision,” 184-185.

²⁶⁷ Mizruchi, “Fiction and the Science of Society,” 191.

²⁶⁸ Glenn had likely given this talk to women social workers in small venues prior to the conference – but was now giving for a more formal audience of “expert” sociologists as well as social workers. In the conference proceedings, Mary Glenn is described as Mrs. John M. Glenn.

Sheffield's case work manual, Glenn also stresses the case history's narrative adaptability. Beginning with the specific case of a "young woman who had an illegitimate child," Glenn recounts, "as the fact of this particular case were being carefully reviewed, we found ourselves reading a decision that seemed opposed in principle to the treatment of mothers with illegitimate children...Our decision seemed to me to become something apart from ourselves, to be wrested from its particular significance to take on a palpitating identity of its own."²⁶⁹ Unlike the "social typology" more frequently associated with social scientific measurement at the time, interpreting the facts of this woman's past required social workers to imagine a future treatment that did not match up with her "type," allowing instead for a "palpitating identity of its own" that illustrates how the case history's descriptive mode might give urban social life a truly new and progressive shape. This description that allows this "palpitating identity" to emerge, moreover, is neither too detached and clinical nor overly saccharine and sentimental – charges that women social workers frequently faced as they developed the case history's form.

Glenn continues on to draw more attention to how the case history's narrative form itself allows for collaborative interpretation and new social possibilities. As the social workers reviewed and pieced together the details of the case together, she reports that,

This sounds fantastic, but I had a sense at the time of exaltation, a sense of having shaken myself loose from a preconception of the way in which a particular case should be treated...we must recognize that we are free to digress from accustomed lines of action, provided that we are prepared to go deep enough with the individual or the family and hold on.²⁷⁰

Here, Glenn also suggests that social workers might render the wayward girl's development in fine-grained detail, going "deep enough with the individual or the family," while also re-imagining and drawing the terms of the wayward girl's future in the modern city into sharper relief as well. Rather

²⁶⁹ Mary Wilcox Glenn, "Case Work Disciplines and Ideals," *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections*, Vol. 40, 1913, 356.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

than “a mere rehearsal of the unrelated facts of a family’s situation,” Glenn concludes that a case that at once “goes deep” and provides a fine-grained social history of the wayward girl’s development, while also “loosening” itself from prescription, might “give style to the particular life under review” evocatively, opening possibilities for re-forming the urban future.²⁷¹ “Giving style” to the case history, and consequently, animating its wayward subject so that she, and her web of social relations, are reformed, requires a kind of artistry, one bordering on, and borrowing from, the literary field.

Take, for example, Glenn’s comparison between the composition of a case history and the process of playwriting. In her treatment of the two “arts,” Glenn highlights how case work borrows its formal strategies from literary composition. Moreover, in showing these practices’ correspondence and intersection, Glenn also delineates their fundamental difference:

[The playwright’s] philosophical exposition seemed to be sculpted as with the rough material of words he shaped his convincing ensemble. Now very humbly, very tentatively, very falteringly, I conceive of case work as an art gradually being shaped so as to produce something which has a coherent collective value. The vital difference, however, between the art of case work and any other form of art is that the medium is human nature, not ‘words and tones and colors and forms.’ The quintessence of case work is that... it should, as a mediator, evoke power. Its honor lies in putting no obstacles in the way of individual advance, its pretensions should fall short of acting for another.²⁷²

Like the playwright’s composition, which mobilizes select “words and tones and colors and forms” to choreograph an ensemble’s performance, in turn creating “coherent collective value” for a wider public or audience, the case history scaffolds the details of a young woman’s development and social relationships to transform the “collective value” of modern public life in the city. However, the crucial difference between literary and social scientific narratives, Glenn argues, is the possibility for truly intervening in the “human nature” that comprises modern social life, and sustaining that

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid, 361.

transformation. While the social “power” that the case history evokes is seemingly not coercive – power is imagined to lie in “putting no obstacles in the way of individual advance” – Glenn suggests that the case history’s direct and lasting impact differs from the fleeting reaction produced in a theatrical audience as they watch a play, or a reader, as she consumes a novel, asserting the social importance of social workers’ professional role while also protecting against charges of overly indifferent objectivity.

Leading social worker Mary Richmond also makes a similar distinction in her influential tract, *What is Social Case Work?*. As she describes the narrative skills of social case workers, Richmond observes that

the writer who strives to be an artist in his profession and the social case worker with similar ambitions have at least this in common – that each is dealing with a material which happens to be part of the warp and woof of everyday life. The one is an artificer in words, the other in social relations. The one must contrive to give a new stamp to counters worn smooth by our common speech; the other must be able to discover new meanings and possibilities in those familiar situations in which all are sharers, must find new stimuli in and for minds worn dull by habit or circumstance. It takes something more than a casual examination to bring to light in either literature or case work the originality of the new combinations effected, to realize the study and drill, the self-expression and self-effacement which lie behind the achieved result.²⁷³

Drawing a parallel with literature’s ability to give a “new stamp” to, or transform, the status quo, Richmond figures the case history’s narrative as a platform for intervention into the woman’s life and the re-imagination of the city itself, or “new meanings and possibilities in those familiar situations,” and as social workers became “artificers” in “social relations.” By formulating the case history’s descriptive method as drawing on the inventiveness of literary style (“words and tones and colors and form”) – but additionally, showing how that disciplined creativity had the capacity to reshape wayward lives and reimagine the modern urban future, social workers sought to evade charges of either cloying sentimentality or excessively dry and detached precision, and to secure their

²⁷³ Mary E. Richmond, *What is Social Case Work?: An Introductory Description*, New York: Sage Foundation (1922), 102.

professional role and (quasi-legal) authority to reshape modern public life. In this way, the case history's imaginative style did not function as fully "thick" description – what critic Heather Love describes as a sociological method for analyzing behavior modeled on the techniques of literary analysis – or as the opposing "thin" description, which "describe patterns of behavior and visible activity but that do not traffic speculation about interiority, meaning or depth."²⁷⁴ Instead, mobilizing the act of artistic re-invention, or "new combinations effected," as Richmond puts it, blurred the temporal boundaries between a wayward girl's past and future possibilities for the urban landscape, creating a malleable, dynamic space between the individuated subject and her social world that was neither discretely individualized and "interior" nor completely "thin" and detached from human behavior or meaning as per Love's formulation. This liminal space in turn provided an opportunity and a platform for social workers to exhibit their capacity to re-architect a more progressive and harmonious cityscape through their treatment of the wayward girl.

To be clear, I draw attention to this newly stylized form of case record-keeping not to suggest that these social workers had especially radical politics, or to recover this more flexible aesthetic to imply that these case histories somehow avoided contributing to social coercion and violence. As I'll discuss in a later section, the social case history's narrative construction (and the figure of the "wayward girl" herself) certainly contributed to the production of racial difference and criminality in the urban north. However, I believe that if we more carefully explore the formal implications of the case history's imagined flexibility and potential to fully transform social worlds – as we've seen, a process bound up with literary description and detail, though not simply reflective of that discursive field – we might also uncover how literary authors responded to and drew upon the social case history's seeming flexibility and "power" to transform, rather than police, the modern American landscape, and its vexed relationship to past forms of social difference. My claim, which

²⁷⁴ Heather Love, "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History* 41.2 (Spring 2010), 404.

I'll seek to flesh out in my readings of *Jennie Gerhardt* and *Quest of the Silver Fleece*, is that Dreiser and Du Bois, both deeply involved in progressive reform but also novelists in their own right, drew upon and reassembled both the social case history's narrative form and social impact, appropriating and redirecting its aspiration to reshape the modern landscape, instead drawing into relief visions for the American social future that exceeded the normative, harmonious – but still stratified – visions of reform that social workers ultimately offered.

Re-forming the Social Case History

It seems natural that writers involved in both social reform and literary circles would pick up on the extreme importance that reformers placed on the formal qualities of the case history to advance their visions of the modern social future, especially as social workers framed the case history as a kind of expertise bordering on artistry, and drew upon (while drawing distinctions from) the literary field to bolster their authority to intervene and reshape the social life in the urban north. As I've suggested at the beginning of this chapter, both Theodore Dreiser and W.E.B. Du Bois were directly on this fault line between the social work and realist literature; both discourses invested in evoking the newly modern social landscape – and in the case of social work, transforming or re-imagining that landscape altogether. Both authors wrote novels at the start of the 1910s (both *Jennie Gerhardt* and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* were published in 1911), a time when debates over the proper form of the case history began in earnest. As previously mentioned, Dreiser attended and reported on the 1909 Conference on the Care of Dependent Children –in fact, he and his *Delineator* staff member James West came up with the idea to bring together juvenile justice and “child-rescue” professionals to address not only the social problem of “dependent” children, but also the figures of the so-called illegitimate or unfit mother and wayward girl who were so often the focus of developing social case work. And not only had Du Bois authored numerous studies on “negro crime” and black social and family life in the previous year, aimed at combatting scientific racism

and racist presumptions about the experiences and capacities of African Americans post-emancipation, he also began to edit the newly founded N.A.A.C.P.'s flagship journal, *The Crisis*, which frequently covered “separate and unequal justice systems,” particularly in relation to juvenile justice.²⁷⁵

Given Dreiser and Du Bois' immersion in debates over how the case history might track the wayward girl while also fully reshaping and re-envisioning the modern cityscape itself, both authors draw heavily from the paradoxical and contested form of the case history in their 1911 novels, which both detail the life trajectories of young women, Jennie, the daughter of German immigrants, and Zora, the daughter of a former slave. But Dreiser and Du Bois do not simply draw from the thematic focus of the case history. Rather, I'll argue that Dreiser and Du Bois key into and exploit the case history's future-oriented and inventive narrative that social workers used to amplify their professional power, imagining instead that the novel itself had the capacity to envision and bring into reality new social formations. Furthermore, these literary re-appropriations of the social case history's narrative did not stop at imagining the modern landscape as at once harmoniously new, but still preserving capitalist norms (as per professional social work). Instead, both Dreiser and Du Bois sought to imagine a modern future untethered from capitalist stratification altogether, though their visions differed considerably.

In what follows, I will start with Dreiser's 1911 novel *Jennie Gerhardt*, which draws from white social workers' concerns with re-forming (or simply “forming”) the life trajectory of the “wayward girl” from European immigrant families. *Jennie Gerhardt* works to critique class structures and assimilation into whiteness in the modernizing United States, highlighting the hypocrisy of philanthropic liberalism and gesturing towards modes of social affiliation that classed violence prohibited in the US. I will then move to Du Bois' *Quest of the Silver Fleece*, examining how Du Bois

²⁷⁵ Ward, *The Black Child-Savers*, 164. See “Detailing the Crisis: Enter the N.A.A.C.P.” in “Institutionalizing Racial Justice.” See also Du Bois, *The Negro Family* and *The Philadelphia Negro*, et al.

presents a literary “case history” for a “wayward” young black woman, at a time African Americans were excluded or pushed to the margins of reformist case work, in order to draw connections between the historical violence of slavery and present criminalization, and to summon a social future no longer dependent on racial capitalism. While Dreiser mobilizes the case history’s aesthetic underpinnings to critique progressive reform’s underlying premises and draw into relief alternate social formations unhinged from domestic strictures, Du Bois uses the case history to suggest that young black women might also be provided with the civic and institutional resources that rehabilitative social work sought to provide, but in the process shows how this social work itself might be transformed to bring about a social order that does not replicate racist norms.

Jennie Gerhardt *in Context*

Theodore Dreiser wrote his second novel, *Jennie Gerhardt*, in the year that followed the 1909 White House Conference for the Care of Dependent Children. In 1910, Dreiser had an affair with the teenage daughter of a *Delineator* employee and consequently lost his job at the magazine. Rather than looking for similar editorial work, however, he chose to take up the beginning of a novel he had discarded in 1903, after the controversy over *Sister Carrie*’s “immorality” and appropriateness for publication. Originally titled *The Transgressor*, *Jennie Gerhardt* traces the trajectory of a young woman from a working class, German immigrant family who does not marry but raises her “illegitimate” daughter alongside her upper class lover. Fundamentally selfless and kind, Jennie sacrifices her sexual virtue to preserve her family: she is seduced by an influential US senator who helps her brother out of jail – subsequently giving birth to a child out of wedlock – and during a second family crisis, becomes the mistress of the privileged businessman Lester Kane, who in the face of social and familial pressure, eventually casts aside Jennie, her daughter, and the unconventional domestic life they have created together. The novel’s themes thus key into the period’s reformist debates over the unstable course of the “wayward girl” and maternal morality.

Yet Dreiser does not simply engage with a mode of narration in which a young woman's seemingly "wayward" or uncontrolled sexuality – especially her potential to give birth to illegitimate children and upset the color line – function as a blank slate onto which both social crisis and social possibilities are projected. Instead, as Dreiser reassembles the form of the case history (the form of which he would be quite familiar with), he highlights how class mobility and assimilation into white bourgeois domesticity are processes marked by violence and loss in the United States, shaped most fundamentally by the protection of private wealth. In this way, Dreiser sharply critiques reformers' vision of a totally progressive future that bridges past tradition with newly harmonious modern social life. And at the same time, Dreiser mobilizes Jennie's characterization as a wayward girl and "illegitimate" mother – and the network of social relations she is understood to represent, and which her re-formation is thought to affect – to call attention to forms of life no longer dependent on the exclusionary violence of a domestic realm based on private property.

In their assessment of the novel, most critics note that *Jennie Gerhardt* fits into the genre of the sentimental novel, thus avoiding the previous scandal (and financial disaster) that *Sister Carrie's* lewd "realism" precipitated. Leslie Fiedler has offered a particularly scornful gloss of Dreiser's second novel. "The fictional world of Dreiser is the *absolutely* sentimental world," Fiedler writes of *Jennie Gerhardt*, "in which morality has finally been dissolved in pity, and in such a world, Charlotte Temple is quite appropriately reborn. No theme but seduction can contain the meanings Dreiser is trying to express, no catastrophe but deflowering start his heroines on their way to total alienation," and yet, Fiedler notes, "those meanings are not translatable into any conventional theory of the class struggle."²⁷⁶ Moreover, Fiedler points to Dreiser's affinity with and attention to women's readership, Fiedler maintains, as evidence of his inability to carry out realism's social critique: "[i]t is no accident that for several years he was able to edit successfully the Butterick magazines, purveyors of fashion,

²⁷⁶ Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, New York: Dalkey Archive Press (1960), 253.

fiction and useful articles...to lower-middlebrow women...If Dreiser managed to please such a group of women, it was because *at the deepest level, he shared their values*...his novels are in fact ‘uplifting’—which is to say, sentimental rather than tragic.”²⁷⁷ Subsequent scholarship has qualified Fiedler’s fierce dismissal of *Jennie Gerhardt* as a novel of “sentimental uplift,” looking instead at how the novel appropriates subgenres of sentimental literature in relationship to realism, either asserting that the novel’s “tragic” resolution critiques sentimentalism in some form, or arguing for the critical force of that sentimentalism.²⁷⁸

Yet if we consider *Jennie Gerhardt* in relation to debates over social case work – and the role of “literary” description that the social case history negotiates and draws upon in order to intervene in and reshape urban life – we might excavate a different mode of literary narration altogether within the novel. Put another way, rather than attempting to orient the novel between the poles of realism and sentimentalism, we might read the text as drawing on the formal experimentation that the “innovative” case history theorized by social workers at the time attempted to offer, in which speculation about the future took the place of explicitly sentimental identification with, or detached clinical description of, the subject of the case history.

Take, for instance, reviews of *Jennie Gerhardt* upon its release in 1911. While the novel’s reception frequently highlighted its seeming mawkish sentimentality, in a sense anticipating Fielder’s later critique, this shortcoming was also often attributed to the fact that the novel seemed to occupy an intermediary position between social scientific expertise and literary expression. For example, in a 1912 treatment of Dreiser’s body of work in the *Nation*, a critic writes that “To our thinking, Mr.

²⁷⁷Ibid, 249. Fiedler in a sense builds upon Lionel Trilling’s charge that Dreiser’s “great brooding pity” sentimentalizes the working class (Trilling is also more concerned with the “ungainliness” of Dreiser’s prose). Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, New York: New York Review of Books (2008, 1950), 18.

²⁷⁸ For example, see Valerie Ross, “Chill History and Rueful Sentiments in *Jennie Gerhardt*,” and Cathy and Arnold Davidson, “Carrie’s Sisters: The Popular Prototypes for Dreiser’s Heroine,” both in *Dreiser’s Jennie Gerhardt: New Essays on the Revised Text. Dreiser’s Jennie Gerhardt: New Essays on the Revised Text*, ed. James L.W. West, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (1995).

Dreiser is far and away the ablest humanologist at work in the American field...It is in his expose of character and his constructive feeling for human drama that Mr. Dreiser is distinguished," in fact echoing the kind of language that social workers used to describe the "constructive" or "affirmative" science of the case record and its focus on charting and re-forming the wayward girl's character to refigure the broader social landscape.²⁷⁹ The reviewer goes on to suggest, however, that despite these merits, this liminal position between disciplinary fields was also a problem. He writes that Dreiser's "literary imperfections are many and glaring...his attempts to identify his story with a definite period in the past are strangely intermittent. Even more exasperating are his rambling incursions in the field of ethical speculation."²⁸⁰ With a keener understanding of the case history's innovative form during this period, however, we might see the *Nation's* praise of Dreiser's "humanology" and its criticism of the "strangely intermittent" and speculative sense of narrative time as part and parcel of the case record's form, as social workers attempted to at once describe the development of its central subject or "character," the wayward girl, in order to reshape social relations into a more harmonious future, or as the critic puts it, "the field of ethical speculation." In what follows, I'll try to show that Dreiser drew on the early case history's constitutive tensions – between precise description and intervening re-imagination – to both critique the existing social order and to imagine how social affiliations might exist otherwise.

The Case of Jennie Gerhardt

The beginning sections of *Jennie Gerhardt* most closely replicate the developing form of the social case history in the early 20th century, providing the foundation for the novel's subsequent

²⁷⁹ A review in *The Craftsman* makes a similar observation about the relational dimensions of Dreiser's characters in *Jennie Gerhardt*, "Not only are the characters worn by contact with the hardness of life, but by contact with each other" (459). "Book Reviews: Jennie Gerhardt: Theodore Dreiser's Second Novel of American Life" *The Craftsman*, Jan 1, 1912. H.L. Mencken, a friend of Dreiser's and a champion of his literary work, proclaimed *Jennie Gerhardt* the best work in American fiction since *Huckleberry Finn*, writing that "The reaction of will upon will, of character upon character, is splendidly worked out" (Mencken qtd. in West, xii).

²⁸⁰"Current Fiction," *The Nation*, 94.2477 (Dec. 19, 1912), 590-91.

redirection of the case record's form. This introductory section both chronicles Jennie's development into "waywardness" and foregrounds the social network of family relations that contributed to (and are impacted by) that development. *Jennie Gerhardt* opens by introducing Jennie and her mother, who are searching for work at a hotel in Columbus, Ohio. The narrator begins, "One morning...a middle-aged woman, accompanied by a young girl of eighteen, presented herself at the clerk's desk of the principal hotel in Columbus, Ohio, and made inquiry as to whether there was anything about the place that she could do...Together they presented so appealing a picture of honest necessity, that even the clerk was affected."²⁸¹ The novel's narration thus begins in media res: rather than starting at the very beginning of Jennie's development, the narrative's start point highlights divergence from teleological progress, emphasizing Jennie's seeming displacement from the shelter of the domestic realm, and in turn presenting her future, and that of her family's, as imperiled and tenuous, beginning to lay the groundwork for the need for social intervention and the radical reformation of Jennie's life course.

In this way, the novel's opening does not follow the established form of something like a medical case history, which, following Warwick Anderson's observations, looks to give a straightforward, causal narrative account of disease, or a psychological case study, which aspires to provide a long and total retrospective view of an individual's life. Instead, the novel concerns itself with at once exploring and reshaping Jennie's future as it unfolds in her social world, while also understanding and describing her past. Take, for instance, Ada Sheffield's instructions on how to open a case record in *The Social Case History: Its Construction and Content*; Sheffield underscores the necessity beginning with the "client's" current situation before delving into her past in the record. Sheffield writes that "Important to the social worker is a knowledge of a client's background, it has

²⁸¹ Theodore Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (1992), Harper Bros. (1911), 2. Citations in this chapter refer to the unexpurgated edition restored and published by the University of Pennsylvania in 1992.

significance only as the background *of the present situation*. In other words, the reader needs to know how things are with the client today, before he can judge what in the past has the most important bearing on the treatment of his present difficulties.”²⁸² Thus, as the novel’s opening onto Jennie and her mother accentuates their present “problem,” or “necessity,” as Dreiser puts it – in this case, their compulsion to look for work outside their own home – this in media res start to the novel also signals the novel’s interest in and initial adherence to the case history’s formal methodology and design to facilitate imaginative intervention into its subject’s life.

Having established the current “need” that Jennie and her mother face, by beginning to contextualize their circumstances for the reader, Dreiser’s narration immediately proceeds to explicate the longer history of the Gerhardt family, providing a succinct overview of their family’s circumstances and past. Their dislocation from their own home, the novel’s narrator tells us, is due to the forces of poverty, specifically brought about by the father’s illness:

[a] succession of misfortunes, of which this little scene might have been called the tragic culmination, had taken place in the life and family of William Gerhardt, a glass-blower by trade. Having suffered the reverses so common in the lower walks of life, this man was forced to see his wife, his six children, and himself dependent for the necessaries of life upon whatever windfall of fortune the morning of each recurring day might bring. He himself was sick in bed.²⁸³

The narration goes on to limn the interior details of the family’s domestic life, categorically describing each family member and their struggles to keep their home intact. For example, Dreiser charts out this family structure:

His oldest boy, Sebastian, worked as an apprentice to a local freight-car builder, but received only four dollars a week. Genevieve [Jennie’s full name], the oldest of the girls, was past eighteen, but had as yet been taught any special work. The other children, George aged

²⁸² Ada Sheffield, *The Social Case History: Its Construction and Contents*, 135. Sheffield also notes that “the first business of the record is so to arrange the facts in the client’s situation that they reveal the problem” (143). Interestingly, Ada Sheffield was the sister of TS Eliot.

²⁸³ Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt*, 4.

fourteen; Martha, twelve, William, ten; and Veronica, eight, were too young to do anything; and only made the problem of existence the more complicated.²⁸⁴

As Dreiser provides this brief but effective history of the family's genealogy and its course into poverty, we again see the novel's narration adhering to the descriptive method of social work's case history. An overview of such a history was also an essential component of the case record, and, according to Sheffield's textbook on the subject, should follow the initial presentation of the current problem the "client" in the case history faced, interpreting that history for the reader, so that the case worker might begin to formulate a plan for "treatment." Sheffield notes, moreover, that in this summative history for the client's case, "it should not be called 'interpreting' a case simply to select out from the recorded items any one or two causal factors" but instead "it is...the whole network of cause-effect items that constitute a case," later adding that "it is the social aspect of character, namely, conduct, relations with people, which should be emphasized."²⁸⁵ Similarly, the novel's basic account of Jennie and the Gerhardt family's experiences describes each family member's interaction with their difficult circumstances and with each other as it summarizes the family's "need": "One child, Veronica, was already forced to remain at home for the want of shoes. George, old enough to understand and suffer from distinction made between himself and those better dressed, often ran away and played 'hookey.' Martha complained that she had nothing to wear and Genevieve was glad that she was out of it all."²⁸⁶ In turn, in describing these interactive relationships, the novel also foregrounds the characterization of the narrative's wayward girl (that is, Jennie) as inherently embedded in and symbolic of a wider network of social relations that also stand to be shaped by the social worker's intervention.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Sheffield, *The Social Case History: Its Construction and Contents*, 135, 154.

²⁸⁶ Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt*, 4.

The social history that Dreiser provides for Jennie and the Gerhardt family, and its emphasis on a malleable network of “relations with people” that ultimately constitutes the wayward girl’s character, resonates with social workers’ and reformers’ rhetorical construction of European immigrant families – and specifically wayward girls emerging from those families – in the first decades of the 20th century. First, as Dreiser highlights the Gerhardt family’s need, he also stresses their status as deserving poor, victimized by the “windfall of fortune” – and thus capable of re-formation into newly modern domesticity and more harmonious urban life. For instance, the narration paints both Mr. and Mrs. Gerhardt as tragically heroic; their industry and goodness are undeniable, despite their unfortunate circumstances. Mr. Gerhardt is described as “absolutely honest,” despite his inability to pay “sums owed butcher and baker” and furthermore, “Mrs. Gerhardt was no weakling,” the reader is told, “for a time she took in washing, what little she could get, devoting the intermediate hours to dressing the children, cooking, seeing that they got off to school, mending their clothes, waiting on her husband and occasionally weeping,” underscoring the poignancy of her struggle to maintain domestic order and respectability.²⁸⁷ Strikingly, however, this domestic respectability is based in large part on old-fashioned tradition that has much of its roots in the “old world” – for the Gerhardts, Germany, which brings us to the second aspect of the diagnostic history that Dreiser offers towards the beginning of the novel. Just as reformist discourse sought to identify and reshape ethnic traditions that were supposedly incommensurable with modern American life – while at the same time preserving the norms of propertied domesticity so often associated with whiteness – the novel presents the Gerhardt family’s history as at once demonstrating potential for domestic normativity but also “tragically” held back by outdated beliefs. Take the description of the Gerhardt’s attempts to send their children to school, thwarted at once by poverty and by rigid traditionalism: “It was the ambition of both the father and mother to keep [the

²⁸⁷ Ibid, 4-5.

children] in school, but the method of supplying clothes, books and monthly dues for this purpose, was practically beyond solution. The father, being an ardent Lutheran, insisted that the parochial school were essential, and there, outside of the prayers and precepts of the Evangelical faith, they learned little.”²⁸⁸ In this way, much like the case history’s aspiration to identify and bridge the messy and non-conforming aspects of the past – which seemingly defined immigrants and migrants’ movement to urban centers in the US – with a modernized and newly progressive future, Dreiser’s history of the Gerhardts also draws attention to the family’s out-of-place traditions and seems to signal their need, as well as capacity for, refashioning into a newly improved social unit.

“The Glow and Stir of this Kaleidoscopic World”: Narrating Jennie’s Waywardness

However, it is in the novel’s tracking of Jennie’s specific path into so-called waywardness (as Jennie begins to work outside her home) and illegitimate maternity, that Dreiser begins to reorient the conventions of case history to draw attention to the structural violence and inequity that seem to necessitate Jennie’s so-called promiscuity, or constrained sexual agency, while at the same time stigmatizing that “promiscuity.” At first glance, this narrative does not appear to differ from progressive reformers’ discourse on the relative innocence and reformability of white and European immigrant women. Indeed, women social workers and criminologists at the time saw the newly developing institutional scaffolding (probation, and later on, women’s reformatories) for which the case history was a tool, as removing the social stigma of “waywardness” by reforming the wayward girl into a new and more wholesome and organic future. For instance, Katharine B. Davis, a pioneering reformer in the field of women’s crime, observed the damage wrought by this stigma, and the need to simultaneously account for, and scientifically rehabilitate, women’s “immoral history”: “[woman’s] immoral life is the fact, the offense for which she is sentenced, the thing that is a crime in the eyes of the law ...she is an outcast and she knows it....if any of her history is found

²⁸⁸ Ibid, 4.

out”; in a 1910 essay Davis touches on the “environmental” and social causes of the “delinquent woman,” writing that “with the growing recognition of social responsibility for the environment which reacts on character has come the realization of the duty of society toward those who are made what they are largely by society itself.”²⁸⁹ The new form of the social case history, then, was intended to draw the relationship between social “environment” and character into sharp relief, though as historian Ellen Fitzpatrick has observed, for the most part, these progressive era social workers stopped short of truly investigating or theorizing how capitalism and the state may in fact structure and produce social “disorder.”²⁹⁰ Not Dreiser, however. As he draws directly on the social case history’s attention to environmental detail and its influence on Jennie’s character as she “drifts” into waywardness, he takes his critique a step further, paying close attention to how these structural elements in large part generate Jennie’s wayward relationship with Brander.

Through his detailed description of Jennie’s experience in the hotel, Dreiser at once draws on and ironizes the case history’s description of both environmental “factors” and temptations in modern urban social life in order to properly intervene into the social life of the wayward girl. When Jennie first encounters Brander (who is the US senator for Ohio living at the hotel) on the staircase at the hotel, her perception is figured as a kind of innocent receptivity to the sensory sheen of material of luxury as she cleans the hotel stairs, taking in the sights and sounds of the hotel’s newly modern commerce; this social hub is described as “a rather remarkable specimen for the time and place,” in which a “whole raft of indescribable who, coming and going, make up the glow and stir of

²⁸⁹ Katharine Bement Davis, “Preventative and Reformatory Work. The Fresh Air Treatment for Moral Disease,” *Informal and Condensed Report of the American Prison Congress* (1906), 25.

²⁹⁰ Ellen Fitzpatrick, *Endless Crusades*, 100. Fitzpatrick writes, “Logic would seemingly dictate that if poverty, inequality and unemployment created crime, a revamping of social, political and economic institutions would help eradicate it. In the early decades of the twentieth century, many reformers could see their way to the first half of this equation, but not the latter” (100).

this kaleidoscopic world.”²⁹¹ This description of Jennie’s transfixed marvel at the glamor of modern social life echoes progressive social workers’ anxieties about the exposure to, and influence of, the modern urban environment on young women working outside the home.

Yet at the same time, the narration also draws the reader’s attention to how Jennie’s own labor is central to the production of the gleaming surfaces that the hotel offers to its guests. For instance, after Jennie glimpses Senator Brander and remarks to her mother about the beauty of the senator’s “gold-headed cane,” the novel’s description does not further dwell on the potential for Jennie’s infatuation with the senator, but rather, highlights the entwinement of her sensory enchantment with her work and the lack of resources that made that labor necessary: “Jennie fell to her task in silence, but the glamor of the great world was having its effect upon her senses. She could not help giving ear to the sounds, the brightness, the buzz of conversation and laughter surrounding her...She could only think that all of this was very fascinating, and wish that a portion of it might come to her.”²⁹² This sense of wonder, furthermore, intermingles with Jennie’s sense of shame at being conspicuously out of place in the grand hotel, working due to the needs of her own home, “not because it irritated her to work,” the narrator explains, “but because she hated people to guess at the poverty that made it necessary.”²⁹³ Following Jennie’s sensory experience of the hotel and of Brander’s presence therein, the reader is also made aware of the triangulation between the hotel’s luxurious beauty, Jennie’s labor, and the “shame” of her economic conditions, using Jennie’s innocent and malleable characterization (a generic feature of the social case history for white and European immigrant women) to underscore this uneven relationship, and suggest its exploitative nature. Jennie’s wonder is depicted not so much an eroticized desire for the material luxury, but

²⁹¹ Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt*, 6.

²⁹² *Ibid*, 9.

²⁹³ *Ibid*, 3.

rather illuminates the way in which the stratification of power – which produces Jennie’s domestic displacement – creates this aesthetic structure to begin with.

Thus, as the novel’s characterization of Jennie plays upon the case history’s emphasis on descriptive detail and its theorization of the wayward girl’s character – the notion that it is neither deeply interior nor wholly socially determined, but rather a central figure in a fluid network of social relationships – Dreiser instead highlights how Jennie’s inherent innocence is simultaneously “out of place” outside the realm of the domestic and in the modern (and faux domestic) space of the hotel, while also integral to the production of modern social life, with its systems of stratified wealth and labor. Social workers sought to make these divides more harmonious and cooperative, but they did not seek to do away with them. Drawing attention to Jennie’s sensory and social malleability to underscore how these uneven and exploitative relationships are produced, Dreiser also begins to imply that the whole of this class structure was pliable and had the potential to be remade altogether – more drastically and thoroughly than the urban landscape that social workers sought to re-mold and refine through the form of the case history.

Finally, Senator Brander’s characterization in relation to Jennie also initially adheres to but ultimately critiques the newly formed conventions of the case history, particularly as Brander is the literal cause of Jennie’s “illegitimate” pregnancy and shapes her subsequent experiences in the novel, where she becomes Lester Kane’s mistress. Indeed, Dreiser uses Brander’s role in Jennie’s development to criticize reformist social workers’ vague but seemingly progressive vision for the wayward girl’s social future. As the narrative illustrates how Brander singles out and attempts to provide aid and “intervention” for Jennie’s (and the Gerhardts’) predicament, it also highlights how Brander in fact is a major force in Jennie’s wayward trajectory and attendant stigmatization, or that the seemingly opposing concepts – philanthropic intervention, and so-called illicit sexuality or waywardness – are two sides of the same coin, or mutually constitutive. These divisions of labor and

distributions of wealth create the conditions for non-bourgeois sexual formations and relationships to emerge, which in turn provide the grounds for social work's scientific study, policing and reformation (producing new kinds of normative violence, even as reformers sought to transform modern social life and assimilate ethnic European immigrants into American whiteness).

Take, for instance, how Brander begins his relationship with Jennie. While the reader encounters the grandeur of the hotel through Jennie's appreciation of the aesthetic intricacies she helps to create but has no claim to, Brander, a guest in the hotel and already privy to this wealth (thus paying little attention to it), first encounters Jennie through her economic need, when Jennie and her mother inquire as to whether he is interested in their laundering services. Brander thus occupies the position of both employer, potentially investing his money in their labor, and a dispenser of charity, as he probes Jennie's mother for the basic facts of her family life, in effect mimicking the case history's initial and formulaic assessment of their familial history: "Is your husband alive?' What is his name?' 'Where does he live?' To all of these questions Mrs. Gerhardt very humbly answered. 'How many children have you?' he inquired very earnestly."²⁹⁴ When Mrs. Gerhardt accounts for her six children, Brander comments, "Well...that's quite a family. You've certainly done your duty to the nation," invoking social reformers' anxieties about the threat of white American "race suicide" in the face of uncontrolled sexual reproduction of immigrants who occupy a space adjacent to but not fully of white, bourgeois domesticity – a threat which the newly developed case history was intended to reform and harness to create a modern, harmonious social order.

At the same time, however, Brander's efforts to ascertain the necessary facts about the Gerhardt family's composition and "conditions" are disturbed by his focus on Jennie, the central fixture of that family (as per the conventions of the case history), a focus which the narration swiftly

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 14.

shows attraction to Jennie's innocent, seemingly unformed character – and her unguarded “wonder” at the comfort and material trappings of his room (which, as we saw earlier, redirects Jennie's environmentally inflected character to draw attention to formation of class divides). Rather than precisely focused research and a calculated response to re-imagine Jennie's future accordingly, along the lines of social case work, the narration notes that Brander: “could not keep his eyes off [Jennie]” and her “frank, unsophisticated gaze...for more than a minute of the time.”²⁹⁵ Later, Brander describes this attraction as “that same sensation which he seemed to always get from this girl—the far cry between her estate and his”; as “the girl's poor clothes and her wondering admiration for his state affected him,” Brander noticed her “innate potentiality.”²⁹⁶ Drawing attention to Brander's attraction to Jennie's domestic displacement and need, the narration begins to suggest that this interrelated observation and desire, from Jennie's wonder to Brander' attraction to that wonder, forms a circuit in which poverty becomes a source of pleasure and libidinal investment for those involved in governing access to wealth (as Brander does in his role as senator). The novel draws on the case history's focus on social interconnection rather than fixed essence or interiority of its characters, but amplifies the aesthetic dimensions of these social interactions -- perhaps playing with or reversing social workers' insistence that case records resembled but diverged from the aesthetic qualities of the literary. In turn, the web of modern social relations that the character of the wayward girl emblemizes illuminates the relationship between classes as a kind of circular violence, or indefinite crisis, calling into question the progressive bridge between the outmoded past and harmonious future that the form of the case history was intended to construct – even as Dreiser also relies on Jennie's symbolic “potentiality” to underscore that this social system is indeed malleable and might be radically restructured.

²⁹⁵ Ibid, 13, 22.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 30.

Finally, as Brander's attraction and attachment to Jennie grows, Brander in fact does begin to develop a "vague" plan to intervene in Jennie and the Gerhardts' lives, so that he might re-form (and eventually marry) Jennie – though the novel's narration deftly shows that this intervention stems from desire, rather than a more rational re-imagination of Jennie and the Gerhardt's future. As such, the narrative showcases Jennie's reformability or "innate potentiality" and "mould" that seemed to call for sculpting, even as she veered from domestic conventions, noting that "there was developing in [Jennie] that perfection of womanhood, the mould of form, which could not help but attract any man. She gave evidence of much that would develop into a fine matronly bearing later in life...All that she lacked was training and that assurance of which the knowledge of utter dependency despoils one."²⁹⁷ Brander thus comes up with a plan to formalize his relationship with Jennie: he suggests that he might send Jennie away for an education, thereby reshaping her "innate potentiality" into proper classed conventions, and proposes time at a convent or training school.²⁹⁸ "I believe you would write poetry if you were schooled a little," Brander tells Jennie, though he proceeds on to quickly collapse the distinction between poetry and Jennie's future-oriented, socially symbolic character itself, "You are poetry, my dear. Don't you worry about writing any."²⁹⁹ Jennie's poetic essence – her apparent representation of the "mould" of ideal femininity, preserving seemingly timeless norms while invoking the "potentiality" of more harmonious relations in the future – seems to present a link between Brander's growing age and past and idealized future, though the reader has already been made aware of the feedback loop between Brander's desire and Jennie's lower social status. This imagined symmetry, however, is fractured and disrupted by the Gerhardts' actual financial need. When Jennie's brother, Bass, is arrested for stealing coal, and

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 33.

²⁹⁸ Ibid, 49.

²⁹⁹ Ibid, 47.

Jennie, under duress, goes to Brander for money to bail him out, she and Brander have sex for the first time (during Jennie's most pressing crisis and at a moment when their imbalanced relationship is most explicit), despite Brander's intentions to "educate" Jennie before marrying her. Jennie becomes pregnant: thus, Brander's social work is also the source of her "illegitimate" maternity. Yet in a final irony, Brander passes away of a sudden illness, highlighting the fact that the temporal bridge that he imagined between his past and Jennie's future was a kind of illusion, and could not protect him from the vulnerabilities of aging; in Brander's absence, the narration further notes that "[t]he life of the girl he left behind him was now exceedingly bare."³⁰⁰ Indeed, Jennie's difficulties are ultimately increased by Brander's presence in her life – and the stigma of her pregnancy and final expulsion from her family home lays the groundwork for her next coercive affair with Lester Kane, and begins the Gerhardt family's dissolution.

Perhaps we could read the novel's account of Jennie's "case" – her path into waywardness – as calling for more precise and controlled system of reform and incarceration for young women, as per women social workers trying to avoid charges of either sentimentality or clinical detachment (while proving their professional mettle). But perhaps more likely is that as Dreiser draws on and intensifies the aesthetic and formal elements of the social case history that social workers saw themselves borrowing in order to critique both class formation in the modernizing US and attendant liberal reform, he elides the actual, historical workings of women social workers in the progressive reform movement. In the next section, I will suggest that it is Jennie's characterization in the novel's periodic asides or apostrophes that most fully illuminates Dreiser's appropriation and redirection of the case record's formal construction and seeming social innovation. Following the novel's chronicle of Jennie's family history and its account of her development into waywardness, these narrative asides draw on the explicitly future-oriented and open-ended elements of the social case history, as

³⁰⁰ Ibid, 61.

social workers sought to formulate a treatment plan for the wayward girl that was open-ended and subject to revision, rather than fixed and essentializing – “wrested from its particular significance to take on a palpating identity of its own,” as Mary Wilcox Glenn put it.

“Worlds of Color, Worlds of Sound”: Jennie and Nature

The narrative segments that most fully describe Jennie’s future-oriented and fundamentally malleable character are the points at which the novel’s narration pauses in a kind of aside or direct address to the reader. Critics have pointed to the particularly lyrical and florid asides in the novel as evidence of Dreiser’s blundering, clumsy writing style, as well as the novel’s failure to live up to realist critique. However, as we’ve seen, the novel’s narration worked to at first replicate and then critique the structural violence undergirding the conventions of the case history, illuminating how the bridge between past traditions and future harmony that progressive reformers imagined in fact reinforces divisive domestic strictures. Instead, the novel includes these moments of descriptive excess focused on Jennie’s character not just to call attention to the violence, and malleability, of class formations in the modernizing US (as per the previous deployment of Jennie’s character in the novel’s “case history”), but to mobilize Jennie’s pliable and future-oriented characterization to imagine how a different social order might be assembled.³⁰¹ Through his appropriation of Jennie’s idealized malleability and reproductive futurity – which social workers believed they could reshape through the social case history’s flexible and evocative form – Dreiser speculates about a social future in which Jennie’s concern for her family, and her subsequent maternity, were understood to be virtuous and socially beneficial.

³⁰¹ Interestingly, we might continue to read the form of the case history quite literally here, because even the asides and editorializing about specific facts about a woman and the formation of her character from a case record – written in the margins of that case by one social worker for other social workers to consider – were subject to professional formula in social work circles. Like the plan for treatment, which takes these marginal notes addressing other social workers into account, Dreiser’s asides about Jennie editorialize about the meaning of her character, while marginal to the rest of the narrative.

Thus, as the novel describes Jennie's state after being ejected from her family's home due to her pregnancy, it pauses to meditate not on Jennie's degradation and her need for re-formation, but on the creative resources that precipitate her so-called waywardness and sexual transgression (as she seeks to help her family), imagining social relations that do not depend on normative domesticity. As such, the narrative also begins to sketch a new version of temporality that moves organically, imitating social workers' aspiration to "loosen conventions" present a narrative open to revision, yet refusing to adhere to the teleology that social reformers sought to sculpt through the form of the case history, as they envisioned a progressive future that did not do away with capitalist structures. Take the opening of the novel's "aside" about Jennie's expulsion from the shelter of her family's home:

It is in such supreme moments that growth is greatest. It comes as with a vast surge, this feeling of strength and sufficiency. We may still tremble, the fear of doing wretchedly may linger, but we grow. Flashes of inspiration come to guide the soul. In nature there is no outside. When we are cast from a group or a condition we have still the companionship of all that is. Nature is not ungenerous. Its winds and stars are fellows with you. Let the soul be but gentle and receptive, and this vast truth will come home—not in set phrases, perhaps, but as a feeling, a comfort, which, after all, is the last essence of knowledge.³⁰²

Here, Jennie's status as out-of-place, transgressing domestic norms, magnifies what Dreiser suggests are her "natural" strength and affinity for connecting to the fluid social landscape around her, qualities that she already possessed but which are accentuated and brought to the foreground by moments of emergency. Rather than proposing a linear model of growth and reformation back into a proper place in a more harmonious modern home and shedding the outdated mores of the past, the narrative highlights how this judgment obscures the already existing forms of social life that exceed the strictures of the domestic. The possibilities for social life, or "companionship" as Dreiser puts it, do not depend on propriety and basis in property ownership, as "nature had no outside," nor did seeming removal from a "group or condition" demarcated by the familial boundaries of class

³⁰² Ibid, 93-4.

and ethnicity (as per the immigrant Gerhardt family) necessitate losing or policing that network of relations, as “we still have the companionship of all that is.” As he underscores the potential of Jennie’s pending maternity as well as her already existing creativity, Dreiser draws the reader’s attention to this broader nature’s “flashes of inspiration,” suggesting the potential for reshaping and redistributing what is socially “perceptible,” reconceiving of the construction of home altogether.³⁰³

Thus, this description of Jennie’s fluid and “gentle and receptive” character offers a different kind of epistemological lens through which to understand and assemble the social landscape, as the narrator observes that “this vast truth will come home” (underscoring the more capacious meaning of home and social belonging here). This “truth” does not consist of linear “set phrases” but instead “a feeling, a comfort, which, after all, is the last essence of knowledge.” As Jennie’s characterization draws into relief a social world that does not attempt to transcend the past, it frames the bodily vulnerability and intimacy of “comfort” and shared “feeling” as the fundamental cornerstone of its relationships. In this way, the novel’s “aside” draws on the future-oriented malleability that reformers sought to highlight and harness in the newly developed form of the social case history, though as we saw earlier in reformer Mary Glenn’s writings, social workers believed that the difference between “the art of case work and any other form of art is that the medium is human nature, not ‘words and tones and colors and forms,’” invoking power relations rather than aesthetic entertainment. However, by highlighting how the field of the aesthetic in fact structures the modern social relations that social workers were so concerned with transforming – think here of Brander and Jennie’s mismatched perceptions as the novel charts the development of Jennie’s

³⁰³ Here, I am drawing from Jacques Ranciere’s discussion of aesthetic forms in relation to political forms; Ranciere defines the “distribution of the sensible” as a “system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it”; Ranciere furthermore elaborates on this sensory distribution in relation to politics, writing “Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to spread, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (Ranciere 10, 11). Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing (2006).

waywardness, or the natural creativity attributed to Jennie's character. Re-directing the literary form that inspired the social case record's narrative, Dreiser's narration stresses how power and the aesthetic were inextricably and dynamically entwined. He mobilizes this interdependence to limn social arrangements that do not require stratification or regulation to create a better future. Take, for example, the novel's first "aside," which describes how Jennie's character draws into relief this unpartitioned "state" through aesthetic discernment, "the world of sound and the world of color": "opening their eyes, they see a conformable and perfect world. Trees, flowers, the world of sound and the world of color. These are the valued inheritance of their state. If no one said to them 'Mine,'" they would wander radiantly forth, singing the song which all the earth may some day hope to hear. It is the song of goodness."³⁰⁴ Here, it is the "world of sound and the world of color" that comprise and call into being social arrangements that are not based on the exclusions and stratifications of property "inheritance," a foundation of modern capitalism and that shaped assimilation into whiteness in the US. Dreiser invites his audience to share in this more generous interpretive practice and enact this harmonious, yet no longer stratified, vision for sociality.

Thus, the organic sociality that Jennie's characterization calls into being is certainly idealized, but it also reorients the representational work of the "fallen woman" in turn of the century fiction in an important way. Mark Seltzer has observed that the realist and naturalist novel – drawing on the emergence of social scientific case study – frequently includes both the figure of the hyper-visible prostitute and the figure of the "monstrously productive" mother as "a way of at once embodying and bringing to book, in both senses, the desire to see and the project of making 'the social' visible": the women's hyper-embodied spectacle draws into relief both the generative force of nature and the way in which this force is made legible and policed through the control technologies of visual

³⁰⁴ Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt*, 16.

surveillance and social science.³⁰⁵ Furthermore, Seltzer notes that “[t]he single figure projected...as escaping this way of accounting for persons is the utopian and transcendental figure of the *un*fallen girl. This is therefore not a material girl but something like a virgin of the slums: a utopian and transcendental but also impossible figure, impossibly untouched since, in the discourse of realism, having a character is precisely to internalize, personify or embody the social.”³⁰⁶ But Dreiser’s appropriation of the speculative dimensions of the social case history, through which he characterizes Jennie as fundamentally virtuous and good, despite her illegitimate maternity, in fact makes the paradoxical, “impossible” figure of this “transcendental, utopian” girl real and material. And Jennie’s characterization thus offers the reader a different theory about the constitution of the social (and the way in which it is policed). Rather than locked into a feedback loop between feminized natural reproduction and masculine technologies of social surveillance, as Seltzer might have it, here, Jennie’s virtuous yet illegitimate maternity does suggest “escape,” but in the sense that Fred Moten conceptualizes fugitivity – unsettling the social order’s normative frame, as it seeks to illuminate the possibilities for a more ethical social landscape.³⁰⁷

Dreiser’s conflation of Jennie’s wayward reproduction with a kind of natural creative process that might illuminate new forms of social relationship is indeed essentializing in its focus on Jennie’s idealized purity, and moreover, her capacity for motherhood, replicating the case history’s racialized focus on white maternity, even as it criticizes the structural violence of capitalist social relations in the early 20th century US. *Jennie Gerhardt*’s redirection of the social case history, then, does not fully exceed the normative violence it attempts to critique and redirect. However, its re-narration of the wayward girl’s future and her place in urban social life illuminates an alternate relationship between

³⁰⁵ Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 99-100.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 99.

³⁰⁷ Fred Moten, *Into the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota (2003), 202.

the novel and the case history, one that turns on both forms' perceived investment in imagination and experimental qualities. We'll see another iteration of this interrelation in Du Bois' *Quest of the Silver Fleece*, albeit with a focus that seeks to bring social work's exclusive focus on the course of the wayward girl in urban north to bear on modernization in the southern United States.

Du Bois and Social Scientific Investigation

W.E.B. Du Bois' *Quest of the Silver Fleece*, which also was published in 1911, similarly tracks the "wayward" trajectory of its protagonist, Zora, a young black woman living in the rural south. The novel also draws on and redirects the form of the social case history to bring into focus new possibilities for modern social life for African Americans – while at the same time highlighting the continuing violence of racial capitalism in the United States. At first glance, the novel does not appear to have a particular affinity with the social case history – after all, it is mainly set in cotton country in Alabama, seemingly far afield from modernizing urban space and the "social promiscuity" that reformers sought to harness and transform in the north through the case record's newly experimental form. Yet both the novel's emplotment and descriptive style mobilize the case history's investment in creating a bridge between past social norms and an improved social future through the figure of the wayward girl, speculating about her future and her capacity to transform the social order. This time, however, Du Bois underscores the interrelation between the historical experience of slavery and newly modern life in the US, illustrating how the realities of northern modernity and southern rural life post-reconstruction were in fact inextricably entwined. For Du Bois, the form of the social case history highlighted not only the wayward girl's social futurity, but also drew attention to the exclusion from social resources and the de facto criminalization of African Americans – including young black women – that facilitated racial violence and discrimination in both the northern and southern United States. Thus, as Du Bois appropriates the case history's

imaginative narrative form, he imagines a more equitable social order in the U.S. that leaves behind systemic racial exploitation.

To understand Du Bois' mobilization of the case record's generic conventions in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, however, it is useful to first examine his involvement in sociological research and reform during the period that he wrote the novel. By the time that Du Bois wrote and published the novel in 1911, he was a prominent sociologist, having authored many groundbreaking social scientific studies of black life, from the 1899 *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, which was the first in-depth study of black life in the urban north, to his renowned 1900 collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk*, to the many studies included in the Atlanta Conferences, which he convened during his tenure as a professor of history and economics at Atlanta University. As Aldon Morris has recently noted, Du Bois and his collaborators built "a sociological school that challenged scientific racism by generating findings suggesting that races were socially constructed and that social conditions largely determined racial inequality."³⁰⁸ Working against the racist studies of white social scientists such as Frederick Hoffman, whose widely-read *Race Traits* argued that blacks in the United States would eventually go extinct "due to inferior biology and self-destructive behavior," Du Bois mobilized empirical research to instead highlight how structural inequality, with its historical roots in systemic enslavement, shaped the lives of African Americans and stratified American society.³⁰⁹

Conceptions of criminality were frequently at the center of these social scientific debates, as Hoffman hinged his argument about black degeneration and self-destruction to crime statistics for black people post-emancipation. As Khalil Muhammad has noted, Hoffman's theory of black

³⁰⁸ Aldon Morris, *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology*, Oakland: University of California Press (2015), 3.

³⁰⁹ Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 90. While Du Bois refuted racial essentiality in his writings and sociological research during this period, he did not do away with class hierarchy, and understood black elites to be responsible for uplifting the "lower" classes.

criminality, or his “ideological response to black migration and crime remained a source of comfort to many northern and southern race experts seeking common ground in the spirit of white supremacy and national reconciliation.”³¹⁰ These “racial crime” experts mobilized social science to investigate how the “inherited qualities” of so-called black inferiority “made black harmful or helpful to America as citizens, not slaves. They set out to revisit and revise old race theories based on the new reality of freedom.”³¹¹ In a sense, then, Hoffman et al’s belief that African Americans’ civic enfranchisement was dangerous provided many within the white mainstream with a conceptual bridge between the United States’ history of enslavement and civil war, and its modern future as a united nation at the start of the modern 20th century.

Thus, Du Bois’ work on black crime in his sociological work focused on the social and economic conditions and the systems of governance that created this so-called “criminality,” instead indicting the systemic racism that made black people vulnerable to selective policing and harsher sentencing (as per his study of “the Negro Criminal” in *The Philadelphia Negro*), as well as violent and exploitative practices of convict leasing and disproportionate arrest in the south (as per his study *Some Notes on Negro Crime, Particularly in Georgia* published in 1904 in the Atlanta Conferences). These works showcase how both the north and the south enforced white supremacy and the color line: though their social landscapes were often quite different, both criminalized African Americans systemically, and the social relations of both had been shaped by the history of enslavement (the south as the site of enslavement, urban Philadelphia as the “gateway between the north and south”).³¹² Charting this criminalization was a way to highlight how African Americans were

³¹⁰ Ibid, 91.

³¹¹ Ibid, 20.

³¹² Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 25. In *The Philadelphia Negro*, for example, Du Bois frames his general method (as he analyzes arrest and sentencing statistics) when he writes that crime “is a phenomenon that stands not alone, but rather as a symptom of countless wrong social conditions.” W.E.B. Du Bois, *The*

racialized and subjugated in modernizing social structures, and furthermore, what the possibilities for black life might be should those structures be reimagined and re-formed.³¹³

Du Bois and Social Work

Like the white women social workers who championed the case history as a way to remold modern social life, Du Bois also turned to the progressive juvenile justice movement as he conducted his research, drawing attention to the need for institutional scaffolding that would allow “wayward” black youth – in particular, young women – access to the same social services that white working class and immigrant populations had access to in northern cities. Such a method for reform had the potential to open up new social possibilities that Du Bois saw as violently impeded by the current enforcement of criminal justice. In his 1909 *Efforts for Social Betterment Among Negro Americans*, written and published shortly before he began work on *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, as Du Bois summarizes the state of the reform movement, he highlights “rescue work for women and children” as a central to its mission, and also notes the central contribution of black clubwomen to these reform efforts for “wayward girls” and children.³¹⁴

Philadelphia Negro, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (2010, 1899), 248. In *Some Notes on Negro Crime, Particularly in Georgia*, Du Bois similarly points towards historical experience as he lists causes of “negro crime,” stating that “They are not racial traits but due to perfectly evident historic causes: slavery could not survive as an institution that and teach thrift; and its great evil in the United States was its low sexual morals; emancipation meant for the Negroes poverty and a great stress of life due to sudden change. These and other considerations explain Negro crime.” W.E.B. Du Bois, *Some Notes on Negro Crime, Particularly in Georgia*, Atlanta: Atlanta University Press (1904), 56.

³¹³ Alexander Weheliye points out that Du Bois’ sociological method was comparative and focused on relationships, observing that in “interrogat[ing] systematically the historical genesis of the Negro while not losing sight of the multiple ways in which this category stood in relation to other contemporary racial groups (Southern whites or recent European immigrants, e.g.) and social structures” and hence replaced “the Negro as a putatively given object of nature with the analysis of the increasingly complex methods of racialization at the turn of the twentieth century.” Alexander G. Weheliye, “Diagrammatics as Physiognomy,” 24-5.

³¹⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Efforts for Social Betterment Among Negro Americans* Atlanta: Atlanta University Press (1909), 133. Du Bois points out that “The work of rescue among women...is greatly needed...and has been neglected too long” (Du Bois, 133).

Indeed, in the urban north, black clubwomen and activists spearheaded the movement to include young black women in new systems of probation and reform offered to white and immigrant women mainly through private philanthropic organizations spearheaded by social workers such as Mary Richmond and Ada Sheffield. Black middle class clubwomen founded settlement homes for young black women who had migrated from the south to northern cities. These homes sought to protect young women from predatory and exploitative employment agencies in addition to “procurement” and prostitution, especially as black women were largely shut out from factory and storekeeping labor, and frequently relegated to difficult and dangerous domestic service.³¹⁵ However, while these settlement houses were devoted to social scientific investigation, their records were more concerned with employment placement. Due to lack of white philanthropic support, black women were largely excluded from social work agencies, halfway houses, and homes for “illegitimate” (i.e. unmarried) mothers that provided probation service and maintained case histories for their clients as they moved throughout the city; what is more, social agencies run by black women for black women were sometimes denied funding with the justification that their methods of record-keeping were inadequate.³¹⁶ Thus, case histories and case records for black women frequently came directly from officers and reformers involved in the criminal justice system itself, essentially constructing young black women’s waywardness as already criminal, rather than marked by the potential to either drift into an “immoral life” or to be properly re-formed under social workers’ seeming artistry.

³¹⁵ See Cheryl Hicks’ chapter “I Want to Save these Girls’: Single Black Women and their Protectors” in *Talk with You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice and Reform in New York, 1890-1935*. See also Hazel Carby’s account of the Working Girls’ Home Association/Phillis Wheatley Association in “Policing the Black Woman’s Body,” as well as Stephanie J. Shaw’s “Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Colored Women” and Linda Gordon’s “Black and White Visions of Welfare: Women’s Welfare Activism, 1890-1945” in *We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible: A Reader in Black Women’s History*, Brooklyn: Carlson Publications (1995).

³¹⁶ Tice, *Tales of Wayward Girls and Immoral Women*, 36.

Take, for instance, the work of Grace Campbell, a black woman who founded the Empire Friendly Shelter for black “unwed mothers” and served as a probation officer as well, seeking to compensate for the lack of social services for “wayward” young black women entangled in the criminal justice systems. In “The Tragedy of the Negro Girl in Court,” Campbell highlights the lack of state and institutional support for social case work for black women, asking whether “white probation officers do not care to give close probationary care to colored girls and women? Or, do they in some way feel themselves unfit to cope with the task?” and going on to assert that equitable programming should be developed to remedy this unjust discrepancy, “If this be true, there should certainly be colored probation officers in the Women’s Court, and experienced colored social workers placed there by colored people to co-operate with the court in the care of colored girls and women. White women offenders are not infrequently given probation even when second offenders, and if young or particularly unfortunate, even though committed, are oftimes sentenced to private institutions which refuse colored girls.”³¹⁷

In fact, Campbell highlights that the patchy and unfair criminal charges brought against “wayward” black women was usually the only “case work” provided for them, and a poor substitute for the seemingly more flexible and attentive case histories that sought to transform both the wayward girl and the modern urban future. In a kind of inversion of the careful tracking of the wayward girl’s social relationships in the innovated form of the social case history, Campbell describes the haphazard construction and distorted representational paradigm of these criminal cases. She writes in another piece in the *New York Age*:

The accused woman is brought before the court upon the complaint of a plain clothes officer of the special service squad whose work it is to hunt down women offenders. His statement against the women defendant is invariably corroborated by his brother officer. The woman rarely has a witness. Her word if ventured at all, is rarely corroborated save by

³¹⁷ Grace P. Campbell, “Tragedy of the Colored Girl in Court,” *The New York Age*, Saturday, April 25, 1925.

chance by a woman co-defendant who, like herself, stands accused. Thus the odds are against the women.³¹⁸

Here, rather than a longer view into the woman's social history and personal development – as collected in a proper case history, which, in the case of white women “assisted” by private agencies, might potentially be brought before the court by a social worker or probation officer – the woman in question is defined solely by a single instance of crime perceived by a police officer (untrained in social work). Thus, the police officer's frequently racist preconceptions about social “types” replace a finely calibrated account of the woman's social environment and past. In the case of black women in northern cities, who had little institutional support and faced discrimination, this account collapsed the woman's social past with her criminalized present, replicating and even amplifying the racist segregation and stigmatization black women were subjected to in northern cities, and moreover. As opposed to the seemingly “loosened” and flexible narrative that re-conceived case history sought to feature, the police's prejudiced and hasty case work – and its reproduction of black women as inherently criminal – created a mode of realist representation that replicated past racism within the modernizing city. Thus, describing how the “testimony in the various cases is much the same,” Campbell suggests black women's character is produced with a “rubber stamp likeness.”³¹⁹

Furthermore, rather than drawing on fine-grained accounting of the web of relationships that define the young women and the social landscape in which she is embedded, as in private agencies' case work for white women, in cases that the police and courts construct, sociality not only hinges on a confining and reductive “rubber stamp likeness,” but also altogether replaces accurate descriptions of these social relationships with distorted fictions. For example, Campbell describes

³¹⁸ Grace P. Campbell, “Women Offenders and the Day Court,” *The New York Age*, Saturday April 18, 1925.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

the central role of the court's anonymous informant or "stool pigeon," mentioned in the criminal complaint but absent from the courtroom. Campbell writes,

The writer has on some occasions, however, sought to locate such informants but with poor success. At times she has found the address incorrect and on other occasions found the name fictitious or no such person known on the premises.³²⁰

The court case's construction, then, does not draw on, or reassemble, literary description to create a kind of bridge to the newly reshaped and progressive future, as in the "formative" case histories that social workers proposed. Rather, these cases crudely narrate a reductive view of black social life – as Campbell shows, the identity of the informant was often "fictitious" – in order to criminalize the women on which they focus, replicating or keeping racism constant and circumscribing women's mobility and lived experience. Furthermore, this image of two women isolated (and brought together) "against the odds" of the court and the police's casework, also evokes pathos and the need for professional social work to intervene. Campbell thus mobilizes the absence of the social case history for black women itself as a springboard to call for, and imagine, a more equitable future for black women in the modern northern city, one in which they might also access the newly malleable social landscape that white social workers looked to invoke in their rethinking of the case form.

Based on his interest in juvenile justice reform, his knowledge of the activism of black clubwomen on behalf of women migrating to the cities, as well as his social scientific study of the urban north, Du Bois would have been aware of the lack of institutional resources that black women faced in the criminal justice system, as well as the case history as a tool in the progressive mission to reshape and re-envision modern social life. And although his conceptualization of black women was constrained by heteronormativity and an emphasis on maternal reproduction, it remained central to

³²⁰ Ibid.

his reformist vision.³²¹ Furthermore, likely due to his sociological research in both the north and the south, Du Bois argued that social work should not be limited to northern cities, as per most of white liberal philanthropism. Thus, combining his wide-ranging sociological study of black life with the particularly future-oriented narrative of the social case history (which rarely included black women as its main subject) Du Bois' *Quest of the Silver Fleece* merges his wide ranging sociological study of the conditions of black life and their history of enslavement, with the malleable futurity of the wayward girl.

In what follows, I will suggest that *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* makes use of the case history's form in its treatment of Zora, a young black woman whom the white woman teacher and aspiring philanthropist she encounters in her school characterizes as "startlingly bright...and so stubborn in everything...her classification in school was nearly as difficult as her classification in the world."³²² As critics have noted, Du Bois ultimately develops Zora's character into the kind of feminine ideal, though he also charts her course through sexual "degradation"; such a course, as we've seen, fits

³²¹ In *Efforts for Social Betterment*, Du Bois discusses the work done on "Refuges and Rescue Homes for Women," which he defines as "institutions that fall into two classes: those that try to protect decent girls, and those that try to reform fallen women," crediting black club women with this institution building (Du Bois 133, 100). While Du Bois indeed makes a distinction between the two "classes" of "decent" and "fallen" women, reinforcing a discourse of respectability, he also suggests that they both have the need for protection and reformation, highlighting how black women's domesticity would improve the social fabric of modernizing American life, which cut against the dominant racist discourse in mainstream white social work and philanthropy. This vision for black women's domestic life in a sense anticipates Du Bois' 1920 essay "The Damnation of Women" in which he criticizes American culture's puritanism, "The world must choose the free woman or the white wraith of the prostitute. Today it wavers between the prostitute and the nun" and goes on to critique the violent exclusion of black women in this formulation (Du Bois "Damnation," 953). While the history of slavery and the continuing experience of exploitation "degraded" black womanhood, Du Bois explains that ultimately "this history of insult...has birthed the haunting prostitute, the brawler, and the beast of burden; but it has also given the world an efficient womanhood, whose strength lies in its freedom and whose chastity was won in the teeth of temptation and not in prison and swaddling clothes" (959). W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Damnation of Women," in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, Ed. Nathan Huggins, New York: Literary Classics of the United States (1986). See also *Next to the Color Line: Gender, Sexuality and Du Bois*, Eds. Susan Gillman and Alys Eve Weinbaum, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota (2007). In particular, see Joy James' essay "Proto-feminism and Gender Elites: W.E.B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells-Barnett" and Hazel Carby's essay "The Souls of Black Men."

³²² Du Bois, *Quest of the Silver Fleece*, 57.

into both the form of the newly conceived case history and the reform movement for the inclusion of black women in developing systems of rehabilitative justice.

The Quest of the Silver Fleece in Context

The traditional critical reading of *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* in many ways resembles treatments of Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt*. Arnold Rampersad's oft-cited writing on *Quest*, for instance, points out the novel's "generic confusion," as it toggles between realism and sentimentalism, and his foreword for the novel notes that "By our standards of fiction to day *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* is in some ways a quaint, old-fashioned work of art...it is aimed at least as much at middle-class women...Because of that strategy, as well as for other reasons, the tale is often sentimental and idealistic" (think here of Leslie Fiedler's charge that "If Dreiser managed to please such a group of [middle-class] women [readers], it was because *at the deepest level, he shared their values*").³²³ More recently, critics have also sought to recover *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*'s "generic confusion" as deliberate strategy and innovative experiment. For instance, Maurice Lee has argued that "Du Bois' mediation of romance and realism is skillful and strategic...with careful, even subversive, attention to issues of language and form, Du Bois appropriates novelistic discourse for his own artistic and political ends."³²⁴ In an argument closest to the focus of this chapter, Maria Farland has also shown how Du Bois painstakingly combined his sociological and political work with domestic fiction, arguing that Du Bois places the empirical data and details of his lost scientific study, "Negro Labor in Lowndes County," a social survey of black life in rural Alabama, in the novel itself.³²⁵ Rather than

³²³ Rampersad qtd. in Maurice Lee, "Du Bois the Novelist: White Influence, Black Spirit and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*," *African American Review* 33.3 (Autumn 1999), 389; Rampersad, "Introduction," *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, xi.

³²⁴ Lee, "Du Bois the Novelist," 389.

³²⁵ Maria Farland, "W.E.B. Du Bois, Anthropometric Science and the Limits of Racial Uplift," *American Quarterly* 58.4 (December 2006), 1019. Farland describes Du Bois' "Negro Labor in Lowndes County": "the study of the predominantly black Lowndes County aimed to amass extensive empirical evidence of black

suggesting that Du Bois appropriates the form of the novel for political purposes, Farland argues that as the novel combined novelistic genres, it also “provides an alternate venue for Du Bois’ controversial findings in the wake of his frustrated efforts to secure a place in professional scientific culture.”³²⁶ In effect, Farland suggests, Du Bois employs a strategy of “transvaluation” to “employ the categories of the dominant scientific discourse to change the valuations attached to them” placing sociology’s “racial concepts” to “unanticipated use in a domestic fiction of racial uplift.”³²⁷ In this way, the novel’s “generic confusion” is instead its capacity for re-orienting seemingly rigid and interpellating social categories.

Yet if we consider the established affinity between the case history and the novel itself, as social workers drew on the novel’s model for evocative description to better reshape the lives of their “wayward” clients, we might also see that the novel not only provided a discursive space for refashioning normative social science (though it often did serve that function). Instead, the interchange between the novel and the case history allowed Du Bois to mobilize the novel’s emplotment and descriptive style to imagine and design a modern social future in which black Americans charted out a program of uplift that exceeded the strictures of racial capitalism (while also not papering over past oppression). Like Jennie’s characterization in *Jennie Gerhardt*, Zora’s “wayward” yet central presence in the novel’s action facilitates this creative work. While Du Bois’ social scientific research, especially his survey of Lowndes County, as Farland points out, provides an impetus for *Quest of the Silver Fleece*’s form, Du Bois wrote the novel at a hinge moment in which the form of the case history began to replace the form of the social survey as the central tool in

American vitality and health through house-to-house canvassing of more than twenty-five thousand homes underrepresented in the 1900 census, collecting data on thirty five thousand printed schedules concerning Negro schools, homes, land ownership and mortality” (1017).

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid, 120.

social scientific investigation and regulatory social work, as the social case history could be used as an instrument for both academic investigation, and the direct impact of social work itself.³²⁸ By transitioning to the form of the case history, which sought to bridge an individual's past in a social order to reimagine that social landscape altogether, Du Bois not only focused on the specifics of the rural south, but showed how the past and future of the modernizing north and the seemingly backward "old" south were interconnected. In the following sections, I'll explore how Du Bois re-orientates the social case history's formal dimensions not only to implement racial uplift – imagining a rehabilitative system of social work that included black women, rather than shut them out – but to repair slavery's violent history of exploitation and loss that structured social life in the US. As we'll see, Du Bois draws on the case history's characterization of the wayward girl's malleability while also disordering and troubling her employment in progressive social work.

"Wild running through the dark": Narrating Zora's Waywardness

The Quest of the Silver Fleece opens with a startling interlude, titled "Dreams," and hardly resembles the kind of careful formula of family history that we saw imitated in Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt*. Rather than taking stock of a family in need of social relief – assessing their status as deserving poor and identifying the "wayward" young woman who would be at the center of social workers' reform efforts – the narrative begins by introducing Zora's waywardness with little contextualization, dropping the reader into a mythical southern swamp and immediately establishing her kind of malleable and untrained character – while also raising questions about the nature of the social landscape in which she is embedded. Following the course of a young boy lost in the swamp, the narrative begins:

³²⁸ Later sociologist Harriet Bartlett recounts this shift in the development of social work, "In the charity organization movement this meant investigation of the individual case, whereas in the social survey a whole group of community problems is investigated...With this was associated the practice of record-keeping...It not only allowed for better service to the client, but for the first time offered a body of material on human behavior under conditions of poverty and distress." Harriet M. Bartlett, "The Social Survey and the Charity Organization Movement," *American Journal of Sociology* 34.2 (September, 1928), 339.

Yet now he was alone; the empty night was closing all about him here in a strange land, and he was afraid....Then of a sudden up from the darkness came music. It was human music, but of a wildness and a weirdness that startled the boy as it fluttered and danced across the dull red waters of the swamp....Amid this mighty halo, as on clouds of flame, a girl was dancing. She was black, and lithe, and tall, and willowy. Her garments twined and flew around the delicate moulding of her dark, young, half-naked limbs. A heavy mass of hair clung motionless to her wide forehead. Her arms twirled and flickered, and body and soul seemed quivery and whirring in the poetry of her motion. As she danced she sang. He heard her voice as before, fluttering like a bird's in the full sweetness of her utter music. It was no tune nor melody, it was just formless, boundless music.³²⁹

In this introductory passage, we see how Zora is immediately introduced as the kind of “poetic” figure that Jennie also emblemized in Dreiser’s novel (the phrase “poetry of her motion” closely echoes Dreiser’s descriptions of Jennie), and her aesthetic “moulding” connotes the possibility for reimagining and reshaping the social landscape in which she is embedded. However, Jennie’s character in *Jennie Gerhardt* represents and is in harmony with an already ideal natural world, as Dreiser takes advantage of the case history’s construction and assumption of white women’s innocence and their fundamental capacity for goodness and rehabilitation. In the context of *Quest of the Silver Fleece*, on the other hand, Du Bois uses the natural world and Zora’s similar embedment in this environment to begin to signal Zora’s malleability and potential for re-formation as a young black woman, but also to outline Zora’s character – formative and full of dream-like, unrealized potential, or a “delicate moulding” – as threatened and in need of protection. This first section of the novel, then, works to establish Zora’s social futurity as open-ended, but also imperiled.

Along these lines, the natural world in which the reader finds herself and Zora immersed in the novel’s first pages is both a space of both potential beauty and danger. When Zora’s dream-like introduction is complete, for example, Bles, the young man who meets her in the woods, “awoke to swamp and night and fire, while a white face, drawn, red-eyed, peered outward from some hidden

³²⁹ Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, 6.

throng within the cabin.”³³⁰ While the novel’s narration only indirectly hints at the root cause of this threatening presence and danger, here, Du Bois amplifies the reformist discourse of the wayward girl’s threatened femininity and social potentiality, the “formless, boundless” potential that social workers sought to shape and refine, much like literary authors, as we’ve seen. At the same time, he also inverts the supposed threat that “out of place” young black women posed to the modern social landscape – Zora is neither essentially promiscuous nor a hapless victim of the forces of modernization – highlighting instead the stakes of Zora’s un-actualized creativity and generativity, as an unnamed and hence more menacing kind of sexual predation, “stealthy creeping hands and arms and whispering voices,” poised to overtake the “poetry” and “utter music” that Zora presents.³³¹

Indeed, the sense of historical time that the novel introduces in its very beginning differs from the organic temporality that Jennie’s figuration invokes. In Dreiser’s lyrical asides to his reading community, after having critiqued liberal techniques for social relief and governance, he draws into relief the alternate and more equitable social possibilities that Jennie’s “waywardness” represents, showcasing the natural forms of life and social relationship that already exist despite efforts to stigmatize and re-form them in the “progressive” race to protect white domesticity and property transmission. In *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, however, lyrical interludes structure the narrative right away, to highlight the aesthetic creativity and social potentiality of Zora’s character. This lyricism, or “formless, boundless music,” however, is immediately interrupted: “All darkness was sudden light; dazzled, he crept forward, bewildered, fascinated, until with one last wild whirl the elf-girl paused. The crimson light fell full upon the warm and velvet bronze of her face....and all the

³³⁰ Ibid, 7.

³³¹ Ibid. See Hazel Carby’s “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context” on representations of black woman migrants as pathologically unable to protect themselves from sexual immorality (Carby 739-40).

music dead.”³³² Zora’s song is disrupted and silenced by a “white face, drawn, red-eyed,” as well as “an old woman---short, broad, black and wrinkled...[with] red, wicked eyes.”³³³ We learn much later in the novel that these two figures – Zora’s mother, who runs a brothel in her cottage in the woods, and Harry Cresswell, the corrupt and lascivious son of the former plantation owner Colonel Cresswell, who frequents that brothel and exploits Zora – are the source of Zora’s so-called sexual fall, which has occurred before she met Bles (the young man running through the woods and her eventual romantic partner). The narration, however, strategically withholds these facts in the initial introduction of Zora’s wayward malleability, instead foregrounding not only her idealized beauty, but her seemingly untrained aesthetic creativity, in order to upend assumptions about young black women’s so-called promiscuity. The narrative not only calls attention to Zora’s potential for re-formation, but also to her capacity for reshaping the social landscape around her – which in Du Bois’ narration, is a kind of generative absence, signified by the “wildness” of the swamp itself, where Zora meets Bles and they eventually begin to work towards cultivating its fecund soil.

As the dramatic suspension of Zora’s lyricism accentuates the need for her protection, the question of her relation to these two foreboding and almost monstrous figures creates a narrative tension that continues for the first half of the novel, positioning the reader as a kind of investigator into the currents “conditions” of black life in the rural south, to better understand Zora’s striking and unsettled figure, as well as the menace posed by the two figures that seemingly bookend and potentially foreclose Zora’s “poetry in motion.” Cresswell has perpetuated the sexual violence and domination that white men inflicted on black women during slavery, and, (for Du Bois) Zora’s mother upholds black women’s supposed promiscuity or more fluid familial relationships in enslavement. Thus, the novel also implicitly opens up the question of Zora’s relationship with

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid 7, 11.

recent history, structure and experience of slavery, suggesting that future possibilities which Zora represents might be subsumed in the repetition and replication of the slave past. Thus, the social fabric that the novel evokes (drawing on the case history's temporality) is revealed to be a kind of threatened sociality, in which the figures of Zora's mother, Elspeth, and Cresswell, menace the possibilities for Zora's social trajectory, even as her companionship with Bles represents a brighter future.

Zora's ensuing absence from the chapters that follow, then, re-arrange the emplotment of the social case history. Zora's wayward characterization – and then conspicuous absence – functions as a kind of narrative frame through which Du Bois draws attention to the pernicious lack of institutional and state resources through which Zora, and the network of social relationships she represents, might be supported (as opposed to the developmental narrative we might see right away in a social case history for white or immigrant women in the urban north). Furthermore, as the narrative establishes both Zora's malleable waywardness and the absence of fully enfranchised resources, it also provides an opportunity for Du Bois to test out other methods for investigating, describing, and attempting to reform, the broader social panorama of rural Alabama within the “cotton belt,” as well as that region's connection with northern modernity, ultimately exhibiting the inadequacies of these methods. Zora's characterization provides an entry point for the sections that follow, which trouble the different discursive perspectives on how to re-form and regulate modern black life, not only showcasing the different ways in which it “stood in relation to other contemporary racial groups...and social structures,” but also measuring the perceptual blind spots that constituted each overlapping discourse, and limning the web of social relations that reformers interact with but cannot fully account for.³³⁴

“Close within touch and sight”: Unsettling Reform in the South

³³⁴ Alexander G. Weheliye, “Diagrammatics as Physiognomy,” 24-5.

Unlike Dreiser's novel, in which Brander's intervention into Jennie's family life serves as the foundation for the critique of social work's progressive vision, mimicking and redirecting the case history's developing format (while eliding the actual labor of white women social workers), in *Quest*, Du Bois more carefully reproduces the philanthropic, reformist and economic discourses to examine and also critique the production of the "negro problem," showing how these discourses fail to capture the complexity and potential of black life, and often (intentionally or not) engender or enforce structural violence. While Du Bois uses this contrast to highlight the violence these discourses frequently engendered, he also accentuates the need for social relief and governance unencumbered by racism.

After it has established Zora's wayward, malleable and mysterious character in the its first pages, the novel introduces the reader to the rural southern landscape through the eyes of Sarah Smith, the dedicated schoolteacher who, as a white woman from New England, has run a schoolhouse for the children of former slaves and sharecroppers for decades. Figured as a kind of holdover from idealistic reform movements during reconstruction, Smith sizes up the development of "the Negro school" over the last thirty years, juxtaposing the disappointment and difficulty of efforts to combat structural racism in the south, with the social potential of her students, highlighting the importance of their thwarted futures. She reflects,

Yet somehow the struggle then with all its helplessness and disappointment had not seemed so bitter as today: the failure meant but little, now it seemed to mean everything; then it meant disappointment to a score of ragged urchins, now it meant two hundred boys and girls, the spirits of a thousand gone before and the hopes of thousands to come. In her imagination, the significance of these half dozen gleaming buildings perched aloft seemed portentous – big with the destiny not simply of a county and a State, but of a race – a nation – a world.³³⁵

The account that Miss Smith gives, then, does not feed into an easy narrative of "decline," as white social and racial scientists sought to label the struggles of black people to claim enfranchised

³³⁵ Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, 13.

citizenship post-emancipation. Rather, Smith elaborates on the crisis produced by the continuance of racial capitalism in the south, and the difficulty of locating resources to begin to remedy and repair this violence, suggesting that the black belt in the rural south connected to and indeed were necessary for the transformation of the wider modern nation (rather than limited simply to the particulars of the rural south).

As such, Miss Smith is forced to “call upon” a wealthy white heiress from the north; unlike *Jennie Gerhardt*, her potential benefaction is not the source of violence, but instead, its withholding is the source of hardship and injustice (though Miss Smith does note that her request for financial help was “so little beside what this woman squandered,” critiquing the capitalist system in general).³³⁶ As the heiress, Mrs. Vanderpool, responds to Smith’s request, the reader is in turn exposed to social scientific treatments of the “negro problem” popular in mainstream white culture. Mrs. Vanderpool refutes Miss Smith’s request, asserting that her students can only be trained as “deft and tractable laboring-folk.”³³⁷ Moreover, Mrs. Vanderpool echoes Frederick Hoffman’s statistical pseudoscience on blackness and criminality, reminding Miss Smith that “statistics show” the futility and danger of education for African Americans, thus illustrating how Hoffman’s social scientific speculations about black crime justified racist exclusion from economic resources that undergirded the developing social safety net in the US.³³⁸ Smith’s democratic vision that counters the distorted narrative that Vanderpool presents (and also provides an alternate model for social scientific observation or “counting”) – “I don’t want us to count to be the only ones that count. I want to live in a world where every soul counts – white, black and yellow – all” – falls on deaf ears.³³⁹

³³⁶ Ibid, 13.

³³⁷ Ibid, 14.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Ibid.

To dramatize this unresolved need and antagonism, moreover, the conversation between the two white women is punctuated by the arrival of Bles Alwyn, Zora's future paramour, who has arrived at the school seeking an education: "And then on the porch she was suddenly aware of the awaiting boy. She eyed him critically: black, fifteen, country-bred, strong, clear-eyed."³⁴⁰ As Smith observes Bles' potential as a student and invites him into the school, the narration more concretely shows the stakes of disregarding and inhibiting the potential of African Americans in the south.

While Miss Smith is unable to fully pull her school out of the racist system in which it is mired, stuck between the exploitative treatment of black people in the south and willed obliviousness and collusion from northern economic powers, the next reformist perspective that the reader encounters is that of Mary Taylor, who represents a seemingly modern approach to reform and uplift. A young white teacher from the northeast, Taylor sees her employer as "represent[ing] the older New England of her parents – honest, inscrutable, determined, with a conscience which she worshipped, and utterly unselfish" – while Taylor herself, educated in new social scientific approaches to the "Negro Problem" "wanted a glance of the new books and periodicals and talk of great philanthropies and reforms."³⁴¹ Taylor appears to transport the promises and resources of professional social work to the south. And yet, when Mary Taylor encounters the "negro problem" in her everyday life, that is, "closely and intimately in touch with these dark skinned children" as she attempted to teach in the under-resourced schoolhouse, she observes that "great as the 'Negro Problem' might be as a world problem, it looked sordid and small at close range."³⁴² In essence, the increasingly professionalized and studied approach to solving social problems that appeared

³⁴⁰ Ibid, 15.

³⁴¹ Ibid, 18.

³⁴² Ibid.

“distant” did not provide the theoretical bridge between the outmoded and troublesome mores of the past, and the progressive modern future that reformers envisioned. Instead, bringing the reformist discourse of northern liberals “intimately in touch,” with lived experience in the south, generates unanticipated consequences. While Mary Taylor becomes more acutely aware of “the veil” between herself and the black students that she taught, her prejudices and assumptions are made more explicit, and she is forced to grapple with her own subject position as a white woman, rather than having these relationships transformed into a more harmonious modern social arrangement (as per social workers’ aspiration for their new discursive tools – especially the social case history). For Taylor, experiencing this intimacy only solidifies her sense of black life in the south as a puzzling cipher or problem: “The longer she thought, the more bewildered she grew. There seemed no analogy that she knew.”³⁴³

Instead, Mary Taylor’s puzzlement and discomfort, and her desire to transcend the difficult reality of working in Tooms County ends up providing a platform for bridging more modern industry from the north with the “backwards” traditions of the south, to disastrous results. In fact, Mary’s strained proximity to black life combined with her distant theorizing of the “negro problem” leads to a kind of shallow reading of, and engagement with, the landscape in which she is immersed. As Mary searches for a way to feel significant in her new environment, she agrees to acquire information about the social make-up of the community for her brother, John, an aspiring northern industrialist who seeks to make money off of the cotton trade in the south: “He wanted information, very definite information, about Tooms County cotton; about its stores, its people – especially its people. He propounded a dozen questions, sharp, searching questions, and he wanted the answers tomorrow.”³⁴⁴ Mary travels into town to both gather this social “information” and send it north – in

³⁴³ Ibid, 22.

³⁴⁴ Ibid, 23.

a way, conducting a survey of the county's demographics. As she encounters some of the town's inhabitants, Mary asks about their lives in the county, as well as about the Cresswells, who were the county's slave owners prior to the civil war, illuminating vignettes or fragments of sociality in Tooms County, which begin to highlight the power relationships and stratifications in the county, but do not fully illuminate the structural connections.

For example, as Mary's buggy approaches an elderly black woman, she is described as emerging from the town's topography itself: "The road turned now and far away to the eastward rose the first straggling cabins of the town. Creeping toward them down the road rolled a dark squat figure. It grew and spread slowly on the horizon until it became a fat old black woman, hooded and aproned....Her face was heavy and homely until she looked up and lifted the drooping cheeks, and then kindly old eyes beamed on the young teacher."³⁴⁵ When the woman, Aunt Rachel, talks to Mary, she tells her about her sons' potential conviction to the chain gang as punishment for vagrancy, and notes that the presiding judge is a man that she cared for during his childhood. When Rachel seems to ask Mary to help her make a case for her sons, however, like Mary, the narration recedes from Rachel and her urgent request, stopping short the possibility of analyzing and potentially repairing the problem (or her own role therein): "Miss Taylor tried hard to think of something comforting to say, but words seemed inadequate to cheer the old soul; but after a few moments they rode on, leaving the kind face again."³⁴⁶ While Mary's trip into town brings her into close proximity to Rachel, it does not yield intimate knowledge – rather Rachel remains a figure without much significance or complication for Mary, her plight and position seemingly fixed in the town's landscape.

³⁴⁵ Ibid, 27-28.

³⁴⁶ Ibid, 28.

Leaving unexamined Aunt Rachel's request for aid combatting her sons' criminalization, this unresolved need is juxtaposed with Miss Taylor's attempt to retrieve economic information from the general store. The white storeowner, Mr. Caldwell, cautiously relays basic facts to Taylor, an outsider, until she responds to his account of cotton production, "The Negroes are not, then, very efficient?" to which Caldwell opines,

'Why we just have to carry them and care for them like children. Look yonder,' he pointed across the square to the court-house. It was an old square brick-and-stucco building, somber and stilted and very dirty. Out of it filed a stream of men—some black and shackled; some white and swaggering and liberal with tobacco juice; some white and shaven and stiff... 'Court's just out,' pursued Mr. Caldwell, 'and them n-ggers have just been sent to the gang—young ones, too; educated but good for nothing. They're all that way.' Miss Taylor looked up a little puzzled.³⁴⁷

In Caldwell's directive to look at the courthouse, we again hear echoes of Hoffman's edict that educated African Americans are in fact more inclined to crime. Mary Taylor does not connect Rachel's worry about her son's convictions for quotidian offenses with Caldwell's virulent racism about black laborers' "inefficiency" and the chain gang as a technology for continued labor conscription and exploitation post-enslavement. Instead, Mary receives this information without comment as potential fodder for a report to her brother, and mails her first letter to him hastily. By recording these details as useful data but refraining from making these connections, Mary contributes to her brother's agenda to unite northern industrial production with southern labor relations by mobilizing and making it part of the racialized logic of slavery post-reconstruction. Thus, John Taylor, who as the narrative notes "purposed going into business...to apply his knowledge of the world's nakedness and of black men's toil in such a way as to bring himself wealth," mobilizes Mary's fragmentary impressions of social life and hierarchies in the south to engineer a plan for its investment and exploitation.³⁴⁸ Mary Taylor's letters, John Taylor observes, "intimated very strongly her intention not to return to Miss Smiths' School; but they also brought

³⁴⁷ Ibid, 30.

³⁴⁸ Ibid, 43-44.

information – disjointed and incomplete, to be sure – which mightily interested Mr. Taylor and sent him to atlases, encyclopaedias, and census-reports.”³⁴⁹ In this way, while methods of observation and scientific technologies were used to describe and newly link the south’s agrarian resources and the north’s seemingly evolving industry, they also served to enforce white supremacy and a labor system firmly entrenched in racial violence. Thus, the novel’s narration highlights the need for a new reformist discourse – one that might truly shift the interlocking social structures and lives that its narration simultaneously draws into relief.

Zora’s Training

It is the narration of Zora’s “case” that provides this new mode of reform. Once Zora does enter the novel’s action more fully several chapters into the novel, her character is developed through two juxtaposed lines of narration, which elaborate upon the disconnect between reformers such as Mary Taylor, and the creative, yet threatened, social potential that Zora represents, heightening the stakes of these competing modes of seeing and interpreting the past, present and future of the social worlds of which Tooms County is a part. Exploiting the case history’s efforts to evocatively describe and reshape the trajectory of the wayward girl, the novel juxtaposes a developmental narrative about Zora’s “training” – organic and flexible much in the way that the social workers theorized the case history’s narrative – while also showing how her growth is thwarted by the dangerous combination of the traditional southern plantation system and “modern” philanthropism and industry. Finally, in light of the structural violence that threatens to shape Zora’s life trajectory, the novel introduces a variation on the plan for intervention characteristic to the case history. Zora herself effects her own “rescue” by constructing social arrangements that draw at once upon the generative sociality that her originary “waywardness” represents, while also building a solid pathway to a future that does not simply reconcile past norms with future

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

advancement, but rather mines her creativity and past experiences to imagine a modernity that is both socially flexible and ethical.

To begin, once Zora is reintroduced into the novel, the narration continues to develop her apparent waywardness, or path outside the domestic realm, as both a source of aesthetic creativity and as indicative of her need for proper protection and resources to enable her imaginative vision to come to full fruition. For instance, after introducing Zora using the explicit terminology of waywardness and its attendant need for reform – “Zora, child of the swamp, was a heathen hoyden of twelve wayward, untrained years” – the narration also stresses the social potential for reshaping that waywardness: “Slight, straight, strong, full-blooded, she had dreamed her life away in willful wandering through her dark and somber kingdom until she was one with it in all its moods; mischievous, secretive, brooding; full of great and awful visions, steeped body and soul in in wood-lore. Her home was out of doors, the cabin of Elspeth her port of call for talking and eating.”³⁵⁰ Not only is Zora displaced from the propriety of the domestic realm (as we see Jennie and her mother at the start of *Jennie Gerhardt*), but the invocation of Elspeth’s cabin as her “port of call” suggests that Zora had not fully occupied that space to begin with, once again positioning Elspeth as symbolic of the potential inheritance of slavery’s systematic degradation and exploitation of black women’s sexual reproduction and domestic labor. At the same time, Zora’s way of knowing and experiencing the swamp as a more capacious home beyond the racialized constraints of the domestic, her “willfull wandering,” is also rendered as an escape from this continued violence and a space for new possibility, “great and awful visions,” despite its danger.

This tension is drawn into relief in the depiction of Zora’s growing friendship with Bles, whose caution and puzzlement over Zora’s “untrained” years in the swamp, as well as his devotion to her vision for growing cotton in the swamp, serve as a kind of normative foil for her “wayward”

³⁵⁰ Ibid, 32.

creativity; Zora's life in the swamp has exposed her to both violence directly descended from slavery and to creative survival strategies.³⁵¹ For example, as Bles encourages Zora to learn how to read, drawing on the discourse of education and racial uplift that Sarah Smith has encouraged at her school, Zora also illuminates an alternate epistemological method for reading and conceiving of black life. When Bles explains that “[White people] know things that give them power and wealth and make them rule” to persuade Zora of literacy's value, she responds, “No, no. They don't really rule; they just thinks they rule. They just got things—heavy dead things. We black folks is got the *spirit*. We'se lighter and cunninger; we fly right through them; we go and come again just as we wants to. Black folks is wonderful.”³⁵² Here, Zora begins to suggest that the system of property and possession that white supremacy is organized around, “heavy dead things,” might not be permanent or a system of totalizing control – even as it has structured her experiences with Cresswell and her mother – and that black people in the south have developed its own strategies, technologies and cultural forms that exceed the violent constraints they were subject to, calling into question reformist discourse's need to classify and constrain black social life that we saw in the earlier sections of the novel. Like Dreiser, Du Bois uses the case history's formulation of waywardness as malleable and representing a wider network of social relations to draw into relief an alternative way of imagining and rearranging social futurity. But here, Du Bois also seems to draw particular attention to Zora's potential for training (following the conventions of the case history); the social possibilities that Du Bois imagines through Zora's “case” depend on a more responsive and attenuated version of reform, showing how Zora might adapt the new discourse of social work, and its aspiration to flexibility, for her own ends.

³⁵¹ Take, for instance, Zora and Bles' initial conversation about cultivating the cotton in the swamp, in which Bles voices farming expertise in contrast to Zora's imaginative vision: “‘A pretty tough proposition for clearing and ploughin,’ said Bles, with practiced eye. But Zora eagerly surveyed the prospect. ‘It's where the Dreams lives,’ she whispered” (Du Bois 63).

³⁵² Ibid, 35.

Even as the novel illuminates these possibilities for alternate social arrangement in Zora's imaginative visions and "dreams," however, it does not do away with the perceived need to shape and guide Zora's potential maternity, or reproductive futurity, which lies at the heart of reformers' concern with women's "waywardness." Zora's capacity for motherhood is shown as developing alongside the cotton field that she tends with Bles, yet this maternity is invoked as a carefully symbolic metaphor, demonstrating its malleability, and hence, the possibility for its re-direction. In depicting the pair's struggle to cultivate the "silver fleece," as they call the cotton, Du Bois showcases the ideal kind of partnership, or "companionship," as the narrator puts it, between Zora and Bles, as they work together for self-sufficiency that would enable Zora to pay to go to school (she also studies on her own to learn how to read). But as the narrative invokes the importance of this relationship, it also takes pains to invoke its chasteness, showing how Zora's centrality to shaping the social future is due to her re-formability, refuting racist assumptions about black women's essentialized promiscuity and foreclosing the possibility for their friendship to foster "illegitimate" maternity. And in addition to the virtuous camaraderie between Zora and Bles, the reader watches Zora struggle to maintain her "purity." Living outside of Elspeth's cabin in a kind of bower in the cotton swamp (built by Bles, of course), Zora grapples with an unnamed threat that seemingly emerges from the natural world itself – which, as I've been suggesting, represents the sexual predation that originated during slavery, as the narrative later reveals Cresswell, the white aristocrat, as having raped Zora when she was younger and living with Elspeth): "Out of the night came voices and laughter...The hag whimpered and snarled. Far down in the field of the Fleece, Zora lay curled beneath a tall dark tree asleep. All night there was coming and going in the cabin; the talk and laughter grew loud and boisterous and the red fire glared in the night."³⁵³ To avoid this danger, however, Zora does not look explicitly to Bles for protection, but instead begins to stay with

³⁵³ Ibid, 80.

Miss Smith, who teaches her “new and unknown ways of living and dressing,” and forms an “undemonstrative friendship” with Zora. This intimacy also allows for Miss Smith to monitor Zora’s relationship with Bles to maintain its “purity,” “delicately, too, but gradually, the companionship of Bles and Zora guided and regulated.”³⁵⁴ In this way, Du Bois’ narrative illustrates the positive impact of a kind of social worker to direct and guide Zora’s “development” – though Zora’s growth itself remains organic and of her own doing.

In fact, the narrative assumes the kind of evaluatory framework of the case history when observing, and indeed, measuring Zora’s developmental growth, taking stock of both her current “tendencies” as well as her potential for future development into “full-blooded” maternity (and suggesting that external obstacles could “hinder” her realization of “womanhood”):

The change in Zora, however, had been neither cataclysmic nor revolutionary and it was yet far—very far—from complete. She still ran and romped in the woods, and dreamed her dreams; she still was passionately independent and ‘queer.’ Tendencies merely had become manifest, some dominant. She would, unhindered, develop to a brilliant, sumptuous womanhood; proud, conquering, full-blooded, and deep bosomed—a passionate mother of men. Herein lay all her early wildness and strangeness...All this lay growing and developing; but as yet she was still a girl, with a new shyness and comeliness and a bold, searching heart...In the field of the Silver Fleece all her possibilities were beginning to find expression. These new-born green things hidden far down in the swamp, begotten in want and mystery, were to her a living wonderful fairy tale come true. All the latent mother in her brooded over them; all her brilliant fancy wove itself about them. They were her dream-children, and she tended them jealously.³⁵⁵

While this growth is clearly portrayed as a process of natural growth and maturation, in this description of Zora’s path from untrained waywardness, to “brilliant, sumptuous womanhood...a passionate mother of men,” Du Bois seems to dissolve waywardness’ imaginative possibilities, or Zora’s “passionate independence” and “queerness,” into her generative yet respectable capability to bear children, as the burgeoning cotton field becomes “new born green things,” and “dream-children.” In this sense, Du Bois’ exploitation of the case history’s formal conventions resembles

³⁵⁴ Ibid, 102.

³⁵⁵ Ibid, 102-103.

Dreiser's choice to tether the social redistribution he imagines through Jennie's characterization to her normative maternity. Furthermore, we might read Du Bois as synthesizing social workers' conceptualization of their role as "artificers of human relations" in composing the case history, with Zora's creativity, and now potential for motherhood. Like Dreiser, Du Bois exploits the social case history's ambition to intervene and artistically reshape modern social life to reveal an alternate social order, but he takes it a step further; Zora's malleable potential for re-formation also marks her ability to act as an "artificer of human relations" herself, transforming the social landscape in accordance with her own vision.

After thoroughly establishing and tracking Zora's generative and growing capacity for maternity, however, the novel also shows how that generativity was endangered and thwarted by the combination of philanthropy and industrialism that Mary Taylor helps cultivate in Tooms County (counteracting Miss Smith's educational project with an accommodationist approach that would provide a compliant labor force). When the Cresswell heir and Mary Taylor begin their relationship, for example, Cresswell suggests to Mary that she exclude Zora from the school's resources due to her "depravity" (citing his expert familiarity with life in Tooms County, later ironized by the revelation that he frequented Elspeth's brothel and abused Zora). Miss Taylor then translates this accusation more fully into the language of social reform, remarking to Miss Smith that Zora is not only "utterly depraved" but also "positively—*immoral*."³⁵⁶ The interchange and indeed, mutually reinforcement between Cresswell's disingenuous racism, portraying Zora as "depraved" in order to mask his own violence and to preserve the sexual exploitation of black women inaugurated in slavery, and Mary Taylor's well-intentioned but shallow social work, ultimately results in the dissolution of Zora and Bles' pure companionship and budding romance. When Mr. Cresswell and Miss Taylor encounter Zora and Bles at the edge of the swamp's wood, Cresswell, seeking to

³⁵⁶ Ibid, 71.

establish himself an authority on the social order in his county, especially in front of his new paramour, proclaims, “Keep your—your philandering to the woods, or I shall have you arrested,” telling the passengers in his buggy (as well as Zora and Bles) that “the girl is—notorious.”³⁵⁷ In this way, not only is Zora’s relationship with Bles pre-emptively criminalized and negatively sexualized (another occupant in the carriage asks, “Are kisses illegal here?”), but this interpretation of Zora’s “waywardness” shows how both southern insistence on supposedly genteel traditions, and sentimental northern reform, interlock to both continue slavery’s violence and potentially produce a new or modern social order that renders black women vulnerable to sexual violence while excluding them from institutional and social resources.

Zora and Bles’ break up heralds a new phase in the novel’s plot, and in Zora’s trajectory. The interruption of Zora’s course to “full womanhood” alongside Bles serves as a platform through which Du Bois highlights Zora’s own capability to “rescue” or intervene in her own life trajectory, rather than simply functioning as the object of social work’s re-formation. In this way, Du Bois re-directs the form of the case history to show how the record’s subject might also eventually guide her own course (or truly “take on a palpitating identity of its own,” as Mary Wilcox Glenn put it in her lecture on the art of casework). The final segment of Zora’s path in the novel hinges on Zora’s own desire to “reshape” not only her own life but the social landscape around her, deliberately refocusing her imaginative visions. Zora cultivates and picks the remainder of the “silver fleece” or cotton crop that she and Bles tilled together, despite their parting, as Zora embraces work as a way to redress the injustice of Bles’ abandonment and Cresswell’s abuse. Yet, when Zora finally does gather all of the cotton and attempts to sell it, she is met with further injustice, as Harry Cresswell and his father mobilize the contractual sleight-of-hand that kept black people indebted to the former slave-owners, calculating that she and her mother owed them as their tenants: “They had stolen the Silver Fleece.

³⁵⁷ Ibid, 141.

What should she do? She never thought of appeal to courts, for Colonel Cresswell was Justice of the Peace and his son was bailiff. Why had they stolen from her? She knew. She was now penniless, and in a sense, helpless. She was now a peon bound to a master's bidding. If Elspeth chose to gin a contract of work for her to-morrow, it would mean slavery, jail or hounded running away."³⁵⁸ Here, we see Zora as stigmatized for her alleged promiscuity (which the reader is instructed is in fact sexual violence inflicted by Cresswell), while at the same time treated as a masculine "criminal" suited for punitive labor and discipline, rather than reform and rehabilitation, as we've seen in northern social workers' treatment of white women. As Sarah Haley argues in her study of black women's criminalization in the south during the Progressive Era, the punishment system in southern states "constituted [black women] as subjects outside the protected category 'woman,'" demanding their compliance as gendered domestic workers for white homes, yet refusing the protection that the category of feminine "womanhood" would seem to promise.³⁵⁹

However, it is the moment when Zora faces the Cresswells' theft and her structural subjugation which Du Bois marks as Zora's most visionary, as she reflects, "And yet they should not kill her; they should not enslave her. A desperate resolve to find some way up toward the light, if not to it, formed itself within her...Somehow, somewhere lay The Way. She must never fall lower."³⁶⁰ Here, Zora explicitly rejects the replication of past subjection ("they should not enslave her"), and instead searches for "The Way," a kind of futurity that does not recreate the violent norms of the past but still draws on her creative knowledge. Zora leaves Tooms County for the north, completes a kind of cultural education through her work as a companion to the wealthy Mrs. Vanderpool (this section begins with a chapter titled "The Training of Zora"), becoming well-read

³⁵⁸ Ibid, 161.

³⁵⁹ Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 2.

³⁶⁰ Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, 160.

and well-traveled. Eventually she decides to return to the south despite the opportunities and increased mobility that she had in the north, in order to help her community (here, we see that Du Bois highly romanticizes the experience of migration – insisting on Zora’s return to her southern origins even as he highlights the entwinement between northern and southern modernities – Zora remarks that New York City “reminds me of the swamp...I mean, it is moving, always moving”).³⁶¹

“The Vision of Zora”

Once Zora arrives back in Tooms County, she is determined to put her formalized education to use, building her own kind of reform movement to supplement Sarah Smith’s schoolhouse. In direct contrast with Mary Taylor’s harmful social work and its ineffectual methods for perceiving and describing social relationships, for example, Zora recognizes the plight of Aunt Rachel’s sons immediately, as they face sentences on the chain gang, and seeks to help testify on their behalf in court, despite her prior tangle with the Cresswell’s debt peonage system. Zora’s return to town is thus described as crucial for both representing and solving the social crises that exist in the community:

At the same time the oppressed blacks and scowling mill-hands could not help recurring again and again to the same inarticulate thought which no one was brave enough to voice. Once, however, it came out flatly. It was when Zora, crowding into the village courthouse to see if she could not help Aunt Rachel’s accused boy, found herself beside a gaunt, overworked white woman. The woman was struggling with a crippled child and Zora, turning, lifted him carefully for the weak mother, who thanked her half timidly. ‘That mill’s about killed him,’ she said. At this juncture the manacled boy was led into court and the woman suddenly turned again to Zora. ‘Durned if I don’t think these white slaves and black slaves had out ter git together,’ she declared. ‘I think so, too,’ Zora agreed.³⁶²

In this passage, the juxtaposition between the lives that the reader encounters – the impoverished white woman and her child in close proximity to the manacled young black man – does not serve to

³⁶¹ Ibid, 211.

³⁶² Ibid, 344. Here we see an echo of the populist movement of the late 19th century; see Du Bois’s chapter “The Price of Disaster” in *Black Reconstruction*. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part in which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America* New York: Russell & Russell, 1935.

underscore Zora's perceptual failures (as per Mary Taylor or Mrs. Vanderpool in the novel's beginning sections), but rather her ability to apprehend the dynamic network of social relations that produce racial stratification and economic exploitation without flattening their complex texture of affiliation and difference. It is Zora's formal education (which empowers her, rather than increases her so-called criminality) in combination with her deep and creative understanding of social experience in Tooms County – her training and her origins – that enables her to adequately address these interlocking social structures, creating real change.

In fact, Zora stages her own “intervention” into both her future and the network of social relations of which she is a part by returning to the courtroom to advocate for her ownership of the land (formerly the swamp, now yielding cotton) that she purchased from the Cresswells (who believed that she would be unable to provide them with the money, as per their debt system). Despite the Cresswells' abuse and exploitation – from Harry Cresswell's accusation of Zora's sexual “notoriety” and prostitution to the threat of debt peonage, meaning “slavery, jail or hounded running away” – Zora presents her “case” in court. She serves as her own representation, insisting on her right to contract and demonstrating the power of her education, which includes her knowledge of the swamp's value and potential social significance, her sharply honed reading and writing, and her understanding of how northern industrialism and southern neoslavery both connect and diverge (indeed, the former plantation-owning Cresswells misread their northern business associate's willingness to fabricate testimony in court, helping Zora to win her case). The narrator describes: “The trial proceeded, and Zora stated her contention. She told how long her mother and grandmother had served the Cresswells and showed her receipt for rent paid...I went to Mr. Cresswell and asked him to sell me two hundred acres of land. He consented to do so and signed this contract in the presence of his son-in-law.”³⁶³ In this way, Zora's new form of social work, Du

³⁶³ Ibid, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, 359.

Bois seems to suggest, might enable a shift from the “tragedy of the colored girl in court” (as Grace Campbell put it), showing how this advocacy might result not simply in inclusion in a system that still conflates whiteness with property ownership, but instead contribute to the repair of racial violence and the transformation of modern social structures themselves.

Thus, on the purchased and cultivated swamp, Zora also extends Sarah Smith’s original schoolhouse, building a multi-faceted progressive settlement for the black community (and sometimes poor white workers), despite continuing racial terror in Tooms county: “Down in the swamp, at the edge of the cleared space, had risen a log cabin; long, low, spacious, overhung with oak and pine. It was Zora’s centre for her settlement-work. There she lived, and with her a half-dozen orphan girls and children too young.”³⁶⁴ Here, Zora (much like African American club women at the time) works to provide extra-legal and institutional support and a kind of “rescue home” for young women, albeit one that includes children and does not partition home life into strict roles, Bed or impose familial enclosure or domestic labor. In fact, this social arrangement invokes and extends some of Zora’s younger “waywardness” and imagination: “all day the music of children’s glad crooning and the singing of girls went echoing and trembling through the trees.”³⁶⁵ In addition to the more flexible sociality this social work engenders, however, we also see how Zora’s settlement house also begins to transform social life and land formerly part of a plantation empire. The cotton in Zora’s swamp is shared and worked together, restructuring concepts of labor and ownership, and thwarting racial exploitation.

Yet despite the transformations that the novel imagines through Zora’s social work, its ending preserves its radical vision for the transformation of labor and property, but not this more flexible sociality: the plot concludes with Zora and Bles’ engagement, seeming to resolve Zora’s

³⁶⁴ Ibid.,331.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

open-ended narrative into a more traditional romance, in which she truly realizes her “brilliant, sumptuous womanhood” as “a passionate mother of men.” Still, as the novel leaves this marriage pending, we might look back at and read Zora’s “independent” and “queer” “wanderings” within the text as moments that exceed even Du Bois’ redirection of the case history’s conventions to envision social life no longer founded on racial violence. The next chapter will focus on the writings – and institutional case files – of women sentenced to prison for forms of sexual “waywardness,” exploring how these authors also imagined and formulated alternative forms of social relationship that exceeded the strictures of racialized domesticity in New York City.

Chapter 4

“My Future is to be Better Now”:

Reading Case Files from the Laboratory of Social Hygiene at Bedford Hills

A case file for a young woman incarcerated for “incorrigibility” at the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills in 1917 is thick with yellowing sheets of tissue, carbon copies of typewritten notes and forms, with sturdier blocks of stationery dispersed through the onionskin records; these handwritten letters sometimes angle outside the collective corners of the folder. When you read the case file, flipping each fragile sheet over slowly, so that it doesn’t tear, the records follow loosely the same order of many of the reformatory’s files from around the same time. First, the formally lettered criminal complaint from court. Next, a “history blank,” in which the woman’s answers to a set of formulaic intake questions about her wayward past are recorded. This is swiftly followed by an identical document, a “verified history” that shadows the “girl’s statement,” providing information that staff sociologists have methodically obtained from neighbors, employers and family. Then, a proliferation of tests and evaluations that seeks to pin down the woman’s “type” – her “mental age” and IQ – and determine whether the prison can truly reform her. The middle section densens with the records of time then spent under the institution’s watch: when you leaf through matron’s reports, you might also encounter anxious letters from the inmate’s mother to the prison superintendent; the parole evaluation and required correspondence between the paroled young woman and the superintendent is sometimes punctuated by confiscated notes to a lover, either inside Bedford or beyond its walls. These intercepted missives might be torn into small pieces that the reformatory staff had pieced back together, or you might need to put them back together yourself to interpret their meaning. And finally, while no case file has the same end, many conclude with a repository of official letters from Bedford, sent out to city factories, hospitals, or schools that may have housed the woman, asking for more information and an assessment of her character, and

signed “Sociologist.” Many of the letters remain unanswered, and thus, while the files ultimately circle back to the woman’s past, they also end with a question.³⁶⁶

I sketch out the form of Bedford’s case files because regardless of how much time one spends in the prison’s archive, even a cursory read through the finite progression of the case file’s documents underscores that the story of individual reformation in the institution exists as one narrative in a jumble of voices, addressing, undermining and arguing with each other, and often seeking a response beyond institutional walls. The manila folder holds conflicting visions of the woman’s past, present and future in close quarters. Put another way, the trajectory for women’s lives that the institution imagines and attempts to enforce – a girl gone astray, or out of place, and her rehabilitation into a “fitting” social role – gives form to the case file, and establishes its constitutive parts; yet at the same time, these integral pieces do not remain locked in place. The case file’s records solicit and record the accumulated details of the woman’s everyday life in order to reshape that life: the answers received are filtered through institutional layers (from the prison’s founding narrative of sexual waywardness and rehabilitation, to the many preconceptions of the Laboratory’s staff, to the inevitable uneven conversations between the incarcerated women and their evaluators), and the reformatory sediments that information into an assigned cottage in the prison, a work assignment, and finally a parole release to an appropriate position, either in domestic service, or in the woman’s own family home. But as the case files attempt to capture each woman’s relationship to the fluid organization of the city, as well as the essence of her character when isolated

³⁶⁶ Of course, there’s no guarantee that the progression of documents in the case file preserves its arc when it was first compiled at the beginning of the 20th century – in fact, it is pretty likely that the records have been disturbed and rearranged not only during their time as “live” records in reformatory, but through the century that followed. According to archivists at the New York State Archives, the case files were housed in a basement on Bedford’s grounds – in what is now known as the Bedford Correctional Facility for Women – till the 1980s, when the case files were moved to the State Archives, due to a flood in that basement that destroyed many of the case files, including the files from the first fifteen years of the reformatory’s existence (from 1901 to 1916). Furthermore, as will be discussed later on, the case files that do remain are often missing telling documents related to scandals at the Reformatory.

from urban temptations, their structure still remains deeply dependent on the voices and movements of the people that comprise the landscape of both the city and the prison. Thus, the file also becomes a site of contact and friction, because as it attempts to narrate the women's wayward history, and imagine and enforce her straightened-out future, the voices it relies on do not always adhere to the norms Bedford's reformers envisioned, turning those norms askew or imagining alternate terms for organizing social life altogether, even as the prison attempted to foreclose, contain or eliminate those alternate visions and forms of life.

In this chapter, I attempt to trace the entwined narrative threads that constitute Bedford's case files in the first decades of the 20th century, examining both Bedford's legal underpinnings and the social experimentation that occurred in the prison that produced the case files' heterogeneity. In tracing the multiple experiments with the narrative of women's reformation developed within Bedford, as well as outlining the formal components of the case file in the archive, I am aiming hopefully not to fetishize the archive itself, nor to obscure, or re-abstract, the women's lives that the files bring into view. Rather, I draw attention to the case file's form to explore the entwinement of representation and discipline that grounds its generic composition: can we make sense of how the files at once force women's lives into specific social trajectories, recording the concrete and injurious consequences of that coercion, while also attending to the ways in which even within the case file's containment, the terms of that narrative are disrupted, redirected or reassembled towards different ends by different authors, including the incarcerated women themselves? Put even more broadly (and abstractly): how might tracing the tensions and contradictions inherent in the Bedford files – which emerge from the reformatory's initial mission to investigate and reshape the social and sexual constitution of the wayward girl and her place in the city, and the frequent failure or incompleteness of that undertaking – change our understanding of the way in which both forms of discipline and forms of representation developed in tandem in the modernizing US?

Each chapter in this dissertation thus far has examined how, as women’s crime was articulated and codified as a pressing social “problem,” necessitating new forms of legal surveillance and correction at the onset of the 20th century, different authors drew on social science’s classificatory system and cultural authority to offer alternate scales of value and bring new social norms into focus, unsettling critical assumptions about the increasing deterministic character of modern life.³⁶⁷ In particular, we’ve seen how the formal components of the case study or case history – fundamental to the social scientific project of measurement, documentation and control of deviance – have been repurposed by literary authors, from Theodore Dreiser to W.E.B. Du Bois – to critique social hierarchies and to begin to reimagine new forms of social relationship and intimacy. In this chapter, for the first time, I will focus on the material form of the case history itself (rather than the early experiment with its methods, as in Frances Kellor’s work, or its repurposing as the narrative frame for a novel, as in Dreiser). Exploring the different ways in which Bedford claimed its new authority through textual production and circulation, I suggest that the genre of the case file, often thought of as epitomizing rigidity, didacticism and control – and indeed, the Bedford files are concrete records of carceral violence – might also contain inventive, unstable and divergent forms of experimentation.³⁶⁸ As Bedford, and especially its Laboratory of Social Hygiene, sought to function as “the most active penal experiment station in America,” trying out new methods for re-forming

³⁶⁷ For example, in *Seeing Like a State*, James Scott refers to “high modernism” to describe the trend that began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, “the administrative ordering of nature and society...raised to far more comprehensive and ambitious level” (87). “If...the simplified, utilitarian *descriptions* of state officials had a tendency, through the exercise of state power, to bring the facts in line with their representations,” Scott writes, “then one might say that the high-modern state began with extensive *prescriptions* for a new society, and began to impose them” (90). James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. See also Mark Seltzer’s *Bodies and Machines*.

³⁶⁸ “Experiment” is a frequently used term in the Progressive Era, one with many different resonances during the period. Here I’m trying to highlight two different, but interrelated meanings: Bedford Reformatory’s experiments in measuring and reforming young women, whose aspirations towards a more progressive society had violent underpinnings, and the experiments that Bedford’s inmates conducted in reorienting, wrecking or remaking the reformatory’s structures to imagine or call into existence social relationships no longer contingent on the prison’s violence.

women's lives, its records illuminate not only those experiments, but also how incarcerated women re-oriented Bedford's coercive classification to their own ends.

What made it necessary for the New York State Reformatory for Women and its administrators and reformers to draw in particular on textual production and circulation to enforce its vision for both penal and social reform? The reformatory sought not only to enforce status quo conventions in the modern city, but also to imagine and enforce more progressive and harmonious social formations, engendering an institutional structure that was future-oriented, but also unstable as it attempted to materialize these ambitions. Bedford's initial reformers and administrators, mainly women, figured the "wayward girl," or more broadly speaking, the women who seemingly wandered beyond their assigned stations as wives and workers as they lived in and moved throughout the modernizing city, leading "lives of sexual irregularity," and that these women presented as the entry point to the apparent chaos and disorder of modernizing urban space.³⁶⁹ As Regina Kunzel has observed (and as we've seen in Frances Kellor's earlier work), this emphasis on social scientific expertise functioned to carve out greater public and professional authority for white women reformers.³⁷⁰ From positing the prison as a space whose experimental model and rehabilitative effects on women's waywardness might be performed within the reformatory and displayed and circulated throughout urban culture (as we'll see in Bedford's early development), to amassing data about women's "social histories" in the institution's case files, in support of the institution's bid to replace judicial sentencing altogether and instead place this power in the hands of (women) criminological experts, the matrons and social scientific experts that operated Bedford supported their idealistic yet precarious vision (and their own niche in civil society) through the circulation of

³⁶⁹Katharine Bement Davis, "Introduction" in Jean Weidensall, *The Mentality of the Criminal Woman: A Comparative Study of the Criminal Woman, the Working Girl and the Efficient Working Woman in a Series of Mental and Physical Tests*, Baltimore: Warwick and York, 1916. xi. For an account of Bedford's scientific reform, see Ellen Fitzpatrick's "A Most Scientific Institution" in *Women Social Scientists and Progressive Reform*.

³⁷⁰ See Regina Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*.

texts that at once drew from the city's social landscape while also seeking to dramatically transform it. Perfectly calibrating the social exchange between the city and the reformatory, reformers believed, would eventually eliminate the need for imprisonment altogether.³⁷¹

Yet, as Bedford's initial plan for incarcerating women in an ideal social environment (the reformatory) seemingly failed, resulting in recidivism and the prison's overcrowding, it became clear that the institution depended on (as much as held authority over) the modernizing cityscape to substantiate its vision of organic modern life. Thus, the reformatory developed what it called the Laboratory of Social Hygiene in 1916 to cement the relationship between New York City and the prison. Collecting and analyzing data about each incarcerated woman's family, social and sexual history, as well as physical and mental evaluations, the Laboratory's experts used these findings to determine the necessary length and "type" for each woman's sentence, depending on whether they were deemed "fit" for return to society.³⁷² While the Laboratory was never fully granted the power to sentence convicted women, it determined release from the prison and also recommended parole assignments, designating what kind of labor and environment each woman would be best suited for. Yet, while the Laboratory seemingly granted more legal authority and scientific expertise to reformers, as it attempted to classify, segregate and control women at Bedford, its project became more explicitly racialized and more enmeshed in carceral violence, even as its purported goal was to eliminate the need for punishment altogether. Usually, the Laboratory allowed young white women to return to their family homes or marriages and more desirable employment, while black women

³⁷¹ Katharine B. Davis, the reformatory's founding superintendent, observed, "State institutions will have to exist until the times come when, through preventive measures, of which the education of both men and women in self-restraint, purity, and social consciousness form the chief part, we shall have brought about the righteousness for which we all are working together in our individual fields." Katharine Bement Davis, "A Plan of Rational Treatment for Women Offenders," *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* 4.3 (Sep., 1913), 408.

³⁷² See Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Partial Justice: Women, Prisons and Social Control*, New York: Transaction Publishing (1999), 71. Mabel Fernald, *A Study of Women Delinquents in New York State*. New York: The Century Company (1920), 4.

served longer sentences and were more frequently assigned to domestic labor in white families' homes.³⁷³

Not surprisingly, Bedford's inmates pushed back on the ways in which the Laboratory attempted to sort, segregate and subject their lives to "indefinite sentencing," or release dependent on their social life inside and outside the reformatory. Women ran away from Bedford's open air campus, protested, and caused disturbances in their cottages; they smuggled letters to lovers and friends outside of the prison and formed new intimacies with other women inside the prison, which often lasted post-parole. Their files record some (though definitely not all) of this trouble, under the auspices of diagnosis and disciplinary reports. The case files generated by the Laboratory of Social Hygiene, then, provide a record of both reformers' attempts to mold their charges' lives to bring about the ideals they envisioned, as well as incarcerated women's efforts to redirect and imagine their own futures. At stake was the direction of the women's futures and the nature of their social experience.

Take the role of narrative in the file of Lydia Michaels, whose case I will focus on at further length towards the end of the chapter. Lydia was a sixteen-year-old incarcerated in 1917 for disorderly conduct and incorrigibility: she frequently ran with "bad company," and after staying out all night, her mother made a complaint to the police and Lydia was sentenced to Bedford. In the transcript for a meeting in which prison staff evaluated Lydia's reformability, a prison matron observes that Lydia was "about as mean a little storyteller as I have had in some time. Has been in

³⁷³ See Cheryl Hicks, "I don't Live on my Sister, I live of Myself" in *Talk With You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice and Reform in New York, 1890-1935*. Hicks notes that "Black women were often held to different standards and subject to different judgments from white and immigrant women. In particular, black women's treatment was shaped by administrators' fundamental disapproval of the black community. Their distrust was often the determining factor when they denied black women parole or cited them for parole violations; their decisions were often different when the parolee was white or foreign-born. Black women not only bore the ordinary burdens of parole but were also sent into domestic service rather than factory jobs. And although administrators promoted marriage for white parolees, they believed that matrimony for black women would produce more financial insecurity than stability" (238).

punishment twice for telling stories. It is almost impossible for her to tell the truth.”³⁷⁴ Lydia’s problem, the root of her incorrigibility, according to the staff, is that she is unwilling – or, as the staff suggest in their initial diagnosis, perhaps unable – to take seriously her “sexual offenses” and give an account of herself correctly, a symptom of her unruly desires and inability to conform to social convention. Ultimately, the staff agrees that with some “mental guidance” “[Bedford] would be the only place” for Lydia, but the records of Lydia’s time under state supervision do not reflect a steady evolution into self-disciplined truthfulness.³⁷⁵ The case file reflects her frequent punishment within the institution, as well as her evasiveness during parole: in the Laboratory’s summary of the “patient’s conduct,” Lydia’s behavior at Bedford is described as “Very troublesome, sly and deceptive, an undercurrent. Requires frequent discipline. Fond of white girls, and had an undesirable friendship with Clara Field.”³⁷⁶ Because the Laboratory of Social Hygiene was designed to punish and prevent sexual relationships outside the classed and racialized boundaries of domesticity, the “undesirable friendship” that the two young women, Clara white and Lydia black, developed within the space of the prison itself, certainly transgressed the boundaries that the Laboratory attempted to enforce and confirmed their assessment of her “undercurrent” of untruthfulness. When Lydia was returned to Bedford in 1926 for parole violation and possession of a firearm, her case file notes that she participated in “disturbances” at the reformatory during the years that the Laboratory was in full operation, and that she would be a bad influence at the

³⁷⁴ “Staff Meeting September 29 1917,” Case No. 2503, Series 14610-77B Bedford Hills Correctional Facility Inmate Case Files, 1915-30, Records of the Department of Correctional Services, New York State Archives and Records Administration, State Education Department, Albany, NY. To comply with the NYS Department of Correctional Services regulations for restricted records, I have created fictitious names for the incarcerated women. I will, however, cite the case number for each file.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ “Information Concerning the Patient,” Case No. 2503.

institution: she was ejected from Bedford as an “undesirable inmate” and transferred to another state prison.³⁷⁷

But more than disrupting or transgressing the re-formed trajectory that the Laboratory’s staff and administrators envisioned for their “patients,” Lydia’s “undesirable friendship” also gave her incorrigible “storytelling” a different valence, as the case file preserves her writing, from personal letters to poetry. While Lydia’s writings were collected as evidence of her essential incorrigibility – her “deception” or inability to tell the truth, and in turn, her inability to control her wayward impulses and desires – these writings also illuminate Lydia’s own literary production under the institution’s supervision. The case file contains love notes and poetry written on toilet paper during Lydia’s time in isolation likely for “being active in disturbances and rioting in Bedford,” and Lydia’s letters to the superintendent during parole, which attempt to conceal her relationships, including her continued relationship with Clara, post-imprisonment. I will argue that the case file’s evidence inadvertently documents how Lydia conducted a different kind of experiment through the “stories” she told: for example, in the notes confiscated by reformatory staff, her seemingly clichéd love poetry blends into her descriptions of the friendships and alliances forged between women who pushed back against Bedford’s classificatory structure, reorienting the Laboratory’s social schema to summon social relations no longer dependent on gendered and racialized norms.³⁷⁸

Bedford Reformatory (and its archive) has been the subject of a number of different historical studies; this chapter is hardly the first to investigate the reformatory (as the archivists at the New York State Archives often reminded me when I requested boxes and pestered them with questions). Because the Reformatory at Bedford Hills was one of the first pioneering prisons designed solely for women, and because its relatively detailed archive remains intact, it has itself

³⁷⁷ Letter from Amos T. Baker to Walter N. Thayer, Case No. 4092.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

become a kind of case study itself for historians interested in women's crime and imprisonment in the United States.³⁷⁹ Though this chapter is also concerned with the social history that the case files illuminate (and as academic writing, will no doubt replicate the form of the case history to some extent as well), this chapter will instead draw into relief the literary production contained within the case files, more thoroughly attending to the affective, rhetorical and aesthetic dimensions of those files for the first time. By paying close attention to Bedford's multiple aesthetic experiments (which culminate in the form of the case file) – and examining Bedford's scientific reform and incarceration, in order to more fully illuminate the way that women at Bedford sought to reimagine the terms of their imprisonment – I believe that we might learn a new method for reading the prison's archive, following the lead of the women who experienced and sought to reassemble the Laboratory of Social Hygiene's classification and regulation. The intervention that this chapter makes is two-fold: first, it contributes to a critical conversation about incarceration in the US, which tends to interpret writing emerging from the prison as either directly enforcing or resisting the “cadaverous” or “inhuman world” of the prison; as women incarcerated at Bedford asserted narratives for their lives that ran counter to the institution's expectations, they drew into relief forms of agency predicated neither on autonomous freedom nor on dehumanizing imprisonment.³⁸⁰ And second, with these forms of agency in mind, it also considers a growing critical conversation about the “social science” of reading, in which critics either hold up the “thin” descriptions of social scientists (who were

³⁷⁹ See Estelle Freedman's *Their Sisters' Keepers*, Ruth Alexander's *The Girl Problem*, Cheryl Hicks' *Talk with Me Like a Woman*, Nicole Hahn Rafter's *Partial Justice*, and Fitzpatrick “A Most Scientific Institution.” In her account of women's prisons in the 19th and 20th centuries, L. Mara Dodge makes the important observation that the majority of women in the US have been incarcerated in penitentiaries, rather than specialized reformatories. Her point is well taken, but I also think that Bedford's experimental reform helps us to better understand how sexuality and race shaped the development of incarceration in the US. See L. Mara Dodge, *Whores and Thieves of the Worst Kind: A Study of Women, Crime and Prisons, 1835-2000*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press (2006).

³⁸⁰ Caleb Smith, *The Prison and the American Imagination*, 23.

frequently interested in studying “deviance”) as providing literary studies with a more effective lens, or decry the loss of the human in such perspective.³⁸¹

Finally, reading the case files for the methods that women incarcerated in Bedford interpreted, redirected and refused institutional strictures, I will suggest, also gives us a new way to understand the relationship between the law and women’s “wayward” lives. Bedford’s case files, which were generated by reformers’ experiment in amplifying and augmenting the law’s discretionary powers (who themselves attempted to reshape the law to realign American social life with their progressive visions), also provide a record of the law’s fundamental instability, the unexpected effects its intended coercion and control sometimes took, as well as the methods for its resistance and reassembly.³⁸² What kind of cultural production did this instability spark, and if we read the archive that Bedford for competing, collaborating and conflicting visions of social life, what do we encounter?

Figuring the “Wayward Girl”: Policing Urban Social Life

The New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills was founded in 1901 for women ages 16 to 30, and was one of the first prisons for women in New York state and in the US. According to the institution’s founding superintendent, Katherine Bement Davis, “[T]he reformatory was intended to take care of young women offenders who were of a reformable type and for whom the state could afford to expend the necessary amount for education and industrial training, in the hope of them becoming useful women.”³⁸³ However, as we’ve seen over the course of the last chapters, what constituted a “reformable” and “useful” woman was highly contested

³⁸¹ See Heather Love, “Close Reading and Thin Description,” *Public Culture* 25.3 (Fall 2013), and “Close But Not Deep.” This work participates in a conversation sparked by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’ provocations in the essay “Surface Reading.” Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108.1 (Fall 2009).

³⁸² Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” *Diacritics* 25.2 (Summer 1995), 12.

³⁸³ Katharine Bement Davis, “Introduction,” *The Mentality of the Criminal Woman*, ix.

during the first decade of the 20th century. From child-rescue campaigns that privileged the white, middle class mother's influence on domestic environment, to case studies of maternally transmitted criminality (think here of *The Jukes*), as modern industry increasingly blurred what were imagined to be clear cut boundaries between the home and the market in the early 20th century, reformers and politicians paid more and more attention to the sanctity of the domestic realm. As we've seen in Chapter 3, the figure of the "wayward" or "incorrigible" girl – who "drifted" between the urban market place and home, exposing both as potentially porous and entwined, and moreover, threatening to have sex and indeed, children, outside of the domestic home – came to emblemize anxieties about the character of the modern city in the US and its future social fabric. Young women from working class families, often recent immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, as well as African American migrants from the south, performed wage work in the city, frequently experimented with the limits of parental control and marriage, and enjoying new forms of leisure, intimacy, and affiliation in the modernizing city.³⁸⁴ And young working class women's movement through the urban economy and their seemingly unorthodox modes of relationship – and for parents, social workers, philanthropists, and politicians, their potentially unregulated sexual reproduction – explicitly challenged the bounded family form that reformers held up as a social ideal.

³⁸⁴ Young women negotiated the constraints of labor available to them, generally factory, shop, and domestic work within middle and upper class home – factory jobs and shop work were far more available to white women and immigrant women from Europe than to black women. And they also negotiated uneven sexual power dynamics, from the exchange of sexual favors and consumer goods, called "treating" in youth culture, to sex work as a supplement to or replacement for wage work's usually meager income. Inside the home, too, young women balanced parental authority with their family's economic needs, as well as the new autonomy that wage labor potentially afforded them. So, too, did women from middle and upper class families; however, these leisure activities were less connected with wage labor and often placed within a framework of respectability. And when young middle class women were found to be sexually transgressive, their families had the resources to protect or conceal damage to a young woman's "reputation." See Ruth Alexander, *The Girl Problem* (in particular "The Lure of City Streets" and "Reformers Confront the Girl Problem"), Hazel Carby "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," and Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press (2001).

Specifically, in this section, I will elaborate on how the figure of the “wayward girl” was culturally scripted – mainly by social reformers and state officials – as a metonym that stood in for, and made knowable, the seemingly opaque and rapidly transforming urban landscape, and will also examine the newly developing system of (gendered and sexualized) policing and incarceration that this figuration structured. Urban reformers needed a figure or “part” to stand in for, and make visible – and policeable – this landscape’s seemingly “intermingled” racial composition, which threatened to dissolve the domestic realm’s reproduction of whiteness’ propertied privileges.³⁸⁵ As Cheryl Harris reminds us, in the 19th and 20th century US, whiteness ensured and protected property ownership, and functioned as a kind of property itself, with “exclusive rights of use, disposition and possession, with possession embracing the absolute right to exclude.”³⁸⁶ Furthermore, the conflation of whiteness with property ownership and autonomy turned on the ideal of domestic privacy and maternal reproduction as the space and function of whiteness as well.³⁸⁷ The figure of what Priscilla Wald calls the “unattached woman,” deftly navigating and drifting through “promiscuous spaces” of the modernizing city, where “traditional segregation according to race, religion, sexuality, gender nationality held no purchase,” then, reduced both national and local community’s “lack of control of its spaces” – especially the racialized distinction between public and private spaces and their

³⁸⁵ In “Four Master Tropes,” Kenneth Burke writes about metonymy, “any attempt to deal with human relationships after the analogy of natural correlations becomes necessarily the reduction of some higher or more complex realm of being to the terms of a lower or less complex realm of being” (506).

³⁸⁶ Cheryl Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (June 1993), 1736.

³⁸⁷ As Elizabeth Maddock Dillon notes, in the (19th century) American imaginary, “the white woman’s place in the domestic sphere becomes sacralized: political authority...is located in a tightly symbiotic relationship between private and public spheres in which domesticity produces a kind of privacy that serves as an origin for the fiction of [white] liberal masculinity.” Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere*, 18. Furthermore, as she writes about the punitive domestic service that black women were forced to perform in white women’s homes in the early 20th century, Sarah Haley not only highlights white women’s domestic role in reproducing whiteness, but also points out that womanhood itself functioned as property for white women, a “social, material and physical benefit,” to the violent exclusion of black women. Sarah Haley, “‘Like I was a Man’: Chain Gangs, Gender and the Domestic Carceral Sphere in Jim Crow Georgia” *Signs* 39.1 (Autumn 2013), 72.

resultant reproduction of whiteness (and prevention of miscegenation) – to individual young women’s “wayward” sexuality, and their seemingly difficult or uncorrected will.³⁸⁸

And while Wald tends to focus on the passage of “unattached women” who are white and working class from rural homes to the industrial city (which also included women immigrating from southern and eastern Europe), and the cultural anxiety they provoked; as we’ve begun to see, black women’s migration from the rural south to northern cities also sparked “moral panics.”³⁸⁹ In her historical account of this migration, Hazel Carby draws into relief not only issues of mobility, but also flight: young women coming from the south sought to leave behind racial and gendered violence and exploitation, which perpetuated the white supremacy and domination founded in slavery. But as they arrived in the north, Carby notes, “the urban presence of apparently uncontrolled black women was symptomatic of and referenced aspects of the more general crisis of social displacement,” as black women migrants’ seeming waywardness also was understood to threaten both the “progress of the race,” “congenial black and white middle-class relations” (and the segregated knowability of the city), not to mention fears about miscegenation.³⁹⁰ This panic again turned on conceptions of the individual will; as Carby points out, “If a black woman can claim her freedom and migrate to an urban environment, what is to keep her from negotiating her own path

³⁸⁸ Priscilla Wald, “Dreiser’s Sociological Vision,” 178, 183. Wald usefully draws our attention to the emerging and important character type of the “unattached woman” in early 20th century sociology and fiction, pointing how she functions as the counterpart of the white, middle class “new woman” whom Theodore Roosevelt famously scolded for failing to have children, hence committing “race suicide”; the working class “unattached woman,” Wald suggests, evokes similar anxieties about the nation’s reproductive future through her threat of illicit, and, I would add, potentially miscegenated, pregnancy and reproduction.

³⁸⁹ Hazel Carby, “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context,” 741.

³⁹⁰ Ibid. Furthermore, in *Interzones: Black/White sex districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century*, Kevin Mumford notes that due to the “diversification of northern urban populations...the continuing contradictions of racial classification, and the threat of racial passing combined to intensify the anxiety and panic in the North,” resulting in hearings for, and often passage of, “antimiscegenation statutes” in northern states (166).

through its streets?”³⁹¹ In this way, reformers’ preoccupation with the uncorrected will and trajectory of “wayward” women stood in not only for the seemingly opaque fabric of the modernizing city, but also issues of social agency and social control in the postbellum contractual economy, or what Saidiya Hartman has called the “the elusiveness of freedom when slavery was no longer its antagonist.”³⁹² Reformers and officials sought on the one hand, to hold up the autonomy and choice of liberal individualism, and on the other, to preserve and enforce the privileged status of whiteness.

Thus, the wayward girl was scripted as standing in for the modern city’s contradictory possibilities and limits. In her work on the form and history of the nation-state, specifically, labor and globalization in the Philippines, Neferti Tadiar has observed that “by way of organizing social relations of power and production, gender, race and sexuality not only structure the practical, material relations and practices of the nation-state and the world economy, but also shape and set limits to political imaginations of change.”³⁹³ In the case of the modernizing United States, the so-called wayward sexuality of young women who had migrated to, and moved within, northern urban spaces was imagined to upset both the ideals of the contract economy and the enforcement of racial hierarchy, and thus seemingly threatened to shift power and production in the US. Thus, to control the perceived impact of the wayward girl’s course in the city, and seemingly, the nation’s future course, state officials and social reformers reduced women’s sexuality to the figure of their individual “will,” imagining this will as standing in for the city’s social fabric. For reformers, this wayward will became the element most in need of discipline and rehabilitation as they attempted to control labor relations and racial composition in the city. This metonymic, and violently reductive, understanding

³⁹¹ Carby, 746.

³⁹² Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 137.

³⁹³ Neferti Tadiar, *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization*, Durham: Duke University Press (2009), 104.

of young women's "wayward" willfulness was the basis for the legal regime developed to control sexual – and interracial – "vice" in the city.³⁹⁴ It also formed the conceptual foundation for attempts to "harness" and re-channel young women's social importance at Bedford Reformatory as the prison sought to both contribute to social progress, while simultaneously partitioning the city along racial lines. And, finally, as we will see in writings preserved in case files from the reformatory, women incarcerated under this legal regime also engaged with the metonymic relationship between sexual "waywardness" and the nation's social future imposed on their lived experiences in prison and in the city, though they redirected, refused and sometimes shattered the symbolic weight with which they were burdened.

The broad-reaching legal category of what I'm calling "waywardness," which reformers and officials developed to police and correct the unruly character of the wayward girl, included the sexualized offenses of vagrancy, disorder conduct and incorrigibility. As reformers worried about "promiscuous" interracial contact in urban neighborhoods unsettled by migration and industrialization at the start of the 20th century, they sought to frame the "wayward" course that the "vagrant" or "incorrigible" girl took through the city as the key to controlling and remolding the supposedly opaque forms of social life in the city's "interzones."³⁹⁵ In their zeal to monitor the city's racial composition and status quo, reformers had attempted to eradicate the sex trade in so-called red light districts in the city; however, their attempts at prohibiting prostitution had inadvertently

³⁹⁴ Kenneth Burke has noted the reductive character of metonymy in "Four Master Tropes": compared with synecdoche, which "stresses a *relationship* or *connectedness* between two sides of an equation," in metonymy's figuration, "reduction follows along this road in only *one* direction" (Burke 428).

³⁹⁵ Drawing a direct equivalence between these "environmental conditions" and the sex trade to control racial and gender norms in fact generated new social formations that were even more illegible and threatening to reformers. Reformers and police sought to remove prostitution from public view by shutting down saloons, "disorderly houses" and more generally, red light districts. Kevin Mumford writes, "Rather than eradicated, prostitution had scattered in different directions and relocated in new neighborhoods...[it] migrated deeper into African-American neighborhoods. The movement was more pronounced in Chicago than in New York" (23-4). See also Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 133, and Hazel Carby "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context."

shifted the sex trade to the interior and more private spaces of the city tenements. Taking the agency of the “wayward girl” as a stand in for the sexual and social upheaval catalyzed by migration to the city, or what Roderick Ferguson has highlighted as “the gender and sexual confusion unleashed by capital,” the laws that were developed to combat “waywardness” took aim at preventing this imminent “deviance” altogether, reducing the social fabric of the city to young women’s potential to engage in sexual transgression (think here of the “preventative” disciplinary structure of the juvenile court discussed in chapter 2). This metonymic reduction of urban social life to the character of the wayward girl and her need for surveillance enabled the creation of greater discretionary powers for the police as they had license to arrest women perceived to have the potential to engage in illicit sexual relationships. And in turn, this metonymic structure appeared also to provide both state officials and social scientific reformers an opportunity to establish the wayward girl (and, gradually, the social make-up of the city) as fundamentally malleable and re-formable; honing in on individual “waywardness” allowed reformers to begin to reabsorb the wayward girl’s threatening agency into the reproductive future of the nation-state.

As they sought to control and re-envision the city’s burgeoning social life, reformers thus imagined the figure of the “wayward girl” to occupy a liminal space between uncontrolled sexuality and “hardened” prostitution. Take, for instance, a report for the Committee of Fifteen (a committee of philanthropists who commissioned the investigation of “vice” in New York City), which elaborates on the “class of prostitutes” found in the US:

[They are] made up of those who cannot be said to be driven into prostitution either by absolute want or by exceptionally pernicious surroundings. They may be employed at living wages, but the prospect of continuing from year to year with no change from tedious and irksome labor creates discontent and eventually rebellion. They, too, are impregnated with the view that individual happiness is the end of life, and their lives bring them no happiness, and promise them none. The circumstances of city life make it possible for [young women]

to experiment with immorality without losing such social standing as they may have, and thus many of them drift gradually into professional prostitution.³⁹⁶

Here, the passage draws little distinction between women's "experiment with immorality" and "professional prostitution," as the description of a young woman's seamless "drift" from one state to the other suggests. Instead, it appears that the young woman's will – her ability to control her desires and sexual impulses, and to perform productive labor – is itself off-kilter and unsound. Even as women seek pleasure, "their lives bring them no happiness, and promise them none," seemingly destabilizing the structure of contractual promise. Women's waywardness, then, is figured as a crisis of unlicensed pleasure (or at least desire for pleasure) and unchecked autonomy, as young women outside the home's enclosure are "impregnated" with the desire for "individual happiness." What's more, this description invokes the specter of uncontrolled reproduction ("impregnation"), and with it, the possibility for miscegenation, thus also calling into crisis the racialized transmission of property that domesticity worked to protect (and which undergirded the capitalist economy in the US), and conjuring a future unhinged from social norms.³⁹⁷ The wayward girl thus stood in for this unruly sociality and its potential threat as reformers and officials ascribed a kind of troubled or problematic will to individual women, who were understood in effect to personify urban social life.

³⁹⁶ Ibid, 12. The Committee of Fifteen was disbanded in 1901 after making their report, and was succeeded by the (more well known) Committee of Fourteen, which was founded in 1905. The Committee of Fourteen existed till 1932, and hired investigators from immigrant and black neighborhoods to provide reports on "vice conditions" in areas in New York (many of these investigators performed their work as undercover investigators).

³⁹⁷ Regina Kunzel has drawn a distinction between early 20th century benevolent reform efforts that sought to save "fallen" prostitutes from their victimization, and the later social scientific focus of women social workers on unwed mothers and "illegitimate" childbirth, framing illegitimate maternity as a problem that might be solved through social scientific study and treatment. Yet, when we start to pay closer attention to the laws designed to prevent prostitution and "female sexual delinquency" – as well as the social scientific discourse that emerged to measure and regulate that sexual delinquency – we see that this codification, in fact, hardly distinguished between "illegitimate" relationships that led to pregnancy outside of marriage, and the specific exchange of money for sex. See *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*. Also, my intent in this section is not to obscure the fact that many women did engage in sex work in the modernizing city during this period, but rather, to call attention to how new laws strategically did not distinguish or drew little distinction between waywardness and prostitution to better police social relationships in the city.

The wayward girl whose problematic will placed them “upon the border-land of vice and virtue,” thus provided a persona that might be made visible and reformable, recalibrating their seeming excessive desire and distorted relationship to pleasure into acceptable affiliations and reinstalling the bounds of marriage for sexual reproduction.³⁹⁸ In turn, reformers and officials were able to imagine urban space as reshapable.

This construction of the wayward girl’s troubled will also granted the police greater legal discretion. In the 1915 amendment to New York state’s vagrancy statute, which became a central instrument for arresting and incarcerating young women perceived as potentially engaging in sexual activity. Its formulation produced a relationship between the state and urban space in which the wayward girl, standing in for wider networks of illicit sociality, was viewed as embodying sexualized willingness, while the police force was granted both greater access to social life in the city as well as a kind omniscience and clearance from the entanglements of those social relationships.³⁹⁹ When prostitution and solicitation were formally criminalized at the turn of the century, police did not have the authority to enter into the tenement buildings’ private domiciles; similarly, police had to gather material evidence about women’s unemployment (as required to charge women with prostitution). The amended definition of a “vagrant,” however, changed the level of evidence necessary for an arrest:

A person who offers to commit prostitution; or...c) who loiters in or near any thoroughfare or public or private place for the purpose of inducing, enticing, or procuring another to commit lewdness, fornication, unlawful sexual intercourse, or any other indecent act; or d) who in any manner induces, entices, or procures a person who is in any thoroughfare to commit any such acts; or e) who receives or agrees to receive any person into any place, structure, building, or conveyance for the purpose of prostitution, lewdness or assignation or knowingly permits any person to remain

³⁹⁸ Committee of Fifteen, *The Social Evil*, New York: GP Putnam’s Sons (1902), 7.

³⁹⁹ Alexander, *The Girl Problem*, 54.

there for such purposes...or g) who is a common prostitute who has no lawful employment whereby to maintain herself.⁴⁰⁰

Here, the act of “soliciting” or “enticing” another to “commit lewdness, fornication, unlawful sexual intercourse” was enough for a police officer to arrest a young woman; such a definition elevated the importance (and police officer’s ability to perceive) the so-called vagrant’s willingness to engage in promiscuity to the level of evidence itself. Addressing the criminalization of vagrancy in the late 19th century, Amy Dru Stanley has observed that reformers developing laws to target “voluntary idleness” exalted “volition,” while “they spoke in the same breath of coercion,” as the forced labor to which people begging for money on the streets were subjected was designed “to transform beggars into hirelings.”⁴⁰¹ The vagrant, Stanley argues, illuminated “the dependence and compulsions implicit in the wage contract itself.”⁴⁰² As we’ve seen, however, the figure of the wayward, or vagrant girl stood in for, or personified, not only potential contractual malfeasance in city life, but also how urban social relationships might undermine the structure of domesticity, revealing and upsetting the purported “natural affinity” of American citizens for members of their racial group. Sexualized vagrancy thus addressed volition differently, necessitating a form of coercion that justified police intervention, while also maintaining and enforcing the fiction of “natural affinity” that undergirded the domestic.⁴⁰³

In this configuration of vagrancy, to “solicit” is not to beg for alms, but instead depends on the young woman’s problematic willingness to engage in a yet unrealized, imagined sex act (with or without the exchange of money). In “soliciting,” the young woman’s willingness has a two-fold

⁴⁰⁰ Section 887.4 New York State Penal Code qtd. in George Worthington and Ruth Topping, *Specialized Courts Dealing with Sex Prosecution: A Study in Procedure in Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia and New York*, New York: Frederick H. Hitchcock (1925), 225.

⁴⁰¹ Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1998), 114.

⁴⁰² *Ibid*, 106.

⁴⁰³ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 203.

meaning: she is understood as both existing in a state of availability for sex (willingness), while also actively “enticing” others to engage in sex with her, “willing” the event to happen.⁴⁰⁴ In this way, the vagrancy statute scripts the wayward girl as distinguished by her will, or more specifically, her willingness – but not precisely as an agential actor, as the sex event she supposedly “wills” never actually comes about. Instead, the vagrancy statute holds the woman responsible for her incomplete and unfocused will – and the imagined damage it might wreak – while obscuring actual sexual activity from view and removing it as a direct referent for crime. The construction of the vagrant woman’s character as “willing,” then, paradoxically attempts to hold young women responsible for their wayward desires by figuring those desires as both a perpetual threat – yet never fully realizable. A study of the prosecution of “sexual delinquency” in New York describes the vagrancy statute’s circular logic: “When it is proved that the woman has solicited, *she establishes her character as a common prostitute*” (emphasis not mine).⁴⁰⁵ Thus, the law’s orientation towards the horizon of this future event (which is always looming but never really occurs) defines the wayward girl’s character by her desiring and imperfect will alone. The ability to detect this solicitation, or willingness, granted law enforcement a sense of totalizing vision and agency (they gather and provide evidence “that the woman has solicited” through their own perception of that “willingness” alone); it also retroactively assigned culpability to the “vagrant” woman. And in turn, this assignation of culpability – characterizing the woman in question as “a common prostitute” solely through the perceived act of solicitation – signaled that the young woman’s faltering will necessitated external interpretation and intervention. Finally, this process of characterization, distinguishing women by their “willingness” yet foreclosing their ability to follow through on that seeming commitment, flagged the necessity (and state’s authority) for remolding or straightening out each woman’s will in the future, quelling

⁴⁰⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “to solicit” as “to entreat or petition (a person for), or to do, something.” “Solicit,” Definition 2a, *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2016).

⁴⁰⁵ “Annual Board of Managers” qtd. in *Specialized Courts Dealing with Sex Prosecution*, 285.

fears about desires to have sex outside racial boundaries, as well as their potential to participate properly in contractual promise.

The vagrancy statute's figuration of the police as able to discern women's "willingness" to have sex functioned in two (interrelated) ways: first, it continued to imagine a sexual economy in which young women alone were made culpable for desire, and second, it licensed police intrusion into social spaces that the state did not access previously. The Bureau of Social Hygiene's study of the prosecution of sexual delinquency notes that "The peculiar advantage of this law [the vagrancy statute], from a law enforcement perspective, is the establishment of the offense without any immoral act on the part of the complaining witness," that is, the police officer assigned to patrol for vagrants.⁴⁰⁶ Basically, police officers did not have to have sex to prove that a woman was a prostitute, positioning officers as fully agential and in control of their desire – a rhetorical move that emphasized that possibility to direct that desire towards the correct object, thus foreclosing the possibility for both miscegenation and nonmarital sex (or at least framing both as unnatural, and a failure of the individual woman's will). This sense of self-containment and control (constructed in opposition to the wayward girl's incomplete will), moreover, bolstered and supported the new authorization for police to enter into purportedly private spaces, the supposedly "clandestine" social life of city tenements, under the vagrancy statute (which specified that vagrancy might occur in either a "public or private place for the purpose of...enticing...another to commit lewdness, fornication, unlawful sexual intercourse"). As the Bureau of Social Hygiene also notes, "justification for the entering of the premises, however, is focused upon the theory that a crime is being committed and that a portion of the crime has been committed in the view of the officers," that is, that the police officer needed only to perceive the woman's willingness to have sex to follow her

⁴⁰⁶ Worthington and Topping, *Specialized Courts Dealing with Sex Prosecution*, 286.

into private spaces.⁴⁰⁷ Furthermore, by directing attention to the need to intervene on the “vagrant” woman’s behalf, the amended vagrancy statute also smoothed over its intrusion into the space of the social, which theoretically lay beyond the reach of the law.⁴⁰⁸ In this way, the testimony of the police was imbued with enough evidentiary force not only to make an arrest, but also to facilitate the woman’s conviction in the courts, ascribing the act of narrating woman’s waywardness as having the power to access social life in the city, furthermore raising the question of how that social life might be remolded.

Finally, this configuration of vagrancy also allowed police officers to practice entrapment, drawing on preconceptions about both urban neighborhoods’ racial composition, as well as non-white women’s propensity for sexual licentiousness (and in effect enforcing those assumptions). As Ruth Alexander notes, “Undercover police officers and paid informers looked for young women who lived alone or without kin in poor and minority neighborhoods,” and became friendly with young women, frequently insinuating that they would pay for sex, and then arresting the women, often in their private residences.⁴⁰⁹ In fact, evidence for solicitation could include “the character of the neighborhood” itself, solidifying the metonymic relationship between the wayward girl’s character and the social life of the tenements, and insinuating that urban spaces considered to enable “promiscuous” social contact should be reformed and properly segregated.⁴¹⁰ The vagrancy statute, alongside a collection of other laws meant to combat “sexual delinquency” (incorrigibility, disorderly conduct) allowed police to target both black women and immigrant women not yet considered

⁴⁰⁷ George E. Worthington and Ruth Topping, “The Women’s Day Court of Manhattan and the Bronx,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* Vol. 8 (1922), 418.

⁴⁰⁸ See Hartman’s treatment of the relationship between the social and the legal in the chapter “Instinct and Injury: Bodily Integrity, Natural Affinities, and the Constitution of Equality” in *Scenes of Subjection*.

⁴⁰⁹ Alexander, *The Girl Problem*, 56.

⁴¹⁰ Worthington and Topping, *Specialized Courts Dealing with Sex Prosecution*, 285.

white, as officers could approach women they suspected of vagrancy and solicitation based on their own racist presumptions about which women were more inclined to so-called promiscuity. Because black women increasingly migrating to northern cities were not afforded the same opportunities for factory and store labor as white and European immigrant women (more frequently taking lower paid and contingent work in domestic service), they occupied a more vulnerable position in urban social life; not coincidentally, black women in New York City were arrested for vagrancy and prostitution at a higher rate than white or immigrant women.⁴¹¹ As Sara Ahmed has observed in her history of “willfulness,” “the will is unevenly distributed in the social field”: similarly, attempts to prevent of “promiscuous” social relations in city neighborhoods were applied unevenly across the women who moved among urban streets and tenements, as women of color were disproportionately targeted by police.⁴¹² In this way, while the New York State Reformatory’s mission was to produce “useful women,” broadly defined, its legal scaffolding hinged on the perception of race.

In *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power After Slavery*, Bryan Wagner describes the rhetorical construction of police power as mimetic, or having to “stage continuously its

⁴¹¹ Drawing on a report by political scientist Willoughby Cyrus Waterman, in *The Girl Problem*, Ruth Alexander reports that by 1932 “African American women were arrested at a rate far exceeding their proportion in the city’s general population” (Alexander 58). In *Talk With You Like a Woman*, Cheryl Hicks writes more generally about police perception and the arrest rate of African Americans during migration to the urban north, “White New Yorkers’ fears influenced how police officers responded to black people. According to historian Marcy Sacks, black residents’ arrest rate doubled from 2.5 percent in the 1890s to over 5 percent after 1900, even though black people made up 2 percent of the city’s population” (Hicks 48). In *Interzones*, Kevin Mumford also notes that “by 1920, the majority of prostitutes in prison were African-American women” (Mumford 112). In addition to police perception of women’s unlawful “willingness,” laws were developed that drew only on the testimony those embedded within urban neighborhoods: for example, parents (and relatives) to report young women for “waywardness” or incorrigibility under the Wayward Minor statute, in which “disobedient or immoral females between the ages of sixteen and twenty one could be adjudged wayward minors solely on the testimony of their guardians,” thus seeming to enlist the support of the “community” under scrutiny (Alexander, 52). As these laws simulated the “will” of community networks, then, they also gave the state greater access to social relationships in urban slums; Hicks has noted that, “[u]nequal power dynamics between the state and the working class usually resulted in parents and guardians losing their natural and legal authority over their female kin,” making the young women more vulnerable to sentencing and (lack of) rehabilitative programming that fell along racial lines (Hicks 203).

⁴¹² Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*. Durham: Duke University Press (2014), 17.

inevitability before the public,” constantly rehearsing and intensifying the inevitability of threatened violence if not immediately quelled through extra-legal intervention: this staging and “rhetorical intensification” was intended to maintain the racial status quo and subjection of African Americans that originated in antebellum slavery.⁴¹³ What differs in the evocation of the “wayward” or “vagrant” woman as a threat requiring intervention, and moreover, as the entry point for making “clandestine” social relations visible and policeable, was that although it also functioned as a tool for racial stratification, the state projected a new vision of (properly segregated) social life onto the city’s future, as the wayward girl’s narrative trajectory at once posed a threat but also was figured as remoldable in the future. This work of “policing of the real,” as Mark Seltzer puts it, or representing the composition of the city, it is not only an interminable oscillation between the embodied social life of the “slums” and the rational surveillance of the police, but instead posits social life itself as radically malleable, even as reformers and officials sought to create a more secure and knowable future.⁴¹⁴ As we’ll see in the next sections, the legal experiment in rendering the social life of the city as knowable, but also reshapable, through the figuration of women’s waywardness had unanticipated results, especially for the development of the New York State Reformatory for Bedford Hills, whose administrators sought to exploit and redirect the open-ended narrative of women’s waywardness that the vagrancy statutes facilitated to promote their own vision of civic life.

Bedford Reformatory’s Beginnings and the Establishment of the Laboratory of Social Hygiene

The New York State Reformatory for Women was founded in 1901 to provide industrial and domestic training for “wayward” young women, mainly from New York City. Its founding superintendent, Katharine Bement Davis (who continued to have a hand in guiding the institution even after her departure to run the NYC Department of Corrections in 1914) imagined that the

⁴¹³ Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace*, 20.

⁴¹⁴ Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 96.

reformatory was a space where incarcerated women might learn new kinds of social usefulness. In turn this self-discipline would allow them to live in visible harmony in the modernizing city, essentially transporting a more wholesome and progressive mode of social relation to urban life. Davis' founding schema for the institution thus elaborated upon the metonymic relationship that laws articulating women's waywardness and vagrancy posited: the figure of the "wayward girl" not only stood in for the city's sociality, which appeared opaque, illegible and threatening to reformers, but also provided the key to transforming the city's future social fabric. Inverting the logic of laws designed to police sexual delinquency, which enabled access to the tenements' interior life by figuring young women's "willingness" to have sex as necessitating surveillance and intervention, Davis attempted to create an environment within the prison that might rehabilitate both wayward girls, and by proxy, the modern city landscape.

The environment that Davis envisioned departed from the conventional domestic training that characterized institutional houses of refuges for "fallen women."⁴¹⁵ Davis initially understood women's sexual waywardness as a combination of labor discrimination, and impoverished living conditions, which in her view, made the sex trade an appealing option for women. Part of an emerging group of women in the US who eschewed a traditional domesticity for new kinds social reform work (as we saw in Frances Kellor's career), it is likely that Davis and the women she employed as matrons and professionals at Bedford to an extent identified with the limited agency of the women incarcerated at Bedford. Reflecting on the "sex crime" that she believed to shape the lives of women incarcerated at Bedford, Davis asserted,

[Woman's] immoral life is the fact, the offense for which she is sentenced, the thing that is a crime in the eyes of the law...after a woman leaves an institution, she has to face conditions that no man

⁴¹⁵ See Regina Kunzel's first chapter, "The Maternity House Movement," in *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*.

has to face...she is an outcast and she knows it...if any of her history is found out.⁴¹⁶

At Bedford, then, Davis viewed industrial and domestic education as a chance not only to truly transform her wards' self-regulation and productivity, but also to represent and make public women's social usefulness more broadly.⁴¹⁷ Rather than shaming women for their past missteps, the prison might recalibrate women's futures, retraining their physical and moral sensibilities and skills in order to circulate the "fact" of women's new social usefulness as Bedford's residents were released to the city. As reformers and lawmakers ascribed young women responsibility for social "mixing" in the slums, and subjected them to vagrancy and waywardness statutes that made them culpable for their perceived sexual availability, Davis imagined Bedford as the proper space and agent for correcting women's futures, which provided a sort of blank canvas for their reformist visions. Women that "graduated" (Davis' favored term) from Bedford's carefully curated environment would, through their reformed character, transfigure the social topography of the city itself.⁴¹⁸ Placing sexualized vagrancy statutes on the books granted police (and by proxy, reformers) the discretion to perceive and begin to organize urban space in a new way. The Bedford administration took their relationship to such police power as their capacity to re-form and indeed, re-author women's futures in a kind of creative process, in which the text of incarcerated women's life course might be re-circulated in the city, demonstrating women's potential to facilitate social harmony and co-existence, while preserving the tenets of racialized domesticity.

However, the laws that allowed for the prosecution of "incorrigible" or "vagrant" young women suspected of practicing prostitution ended up disrupting Davis' plan for inmate classification

⁴¹⁶ Katharine Bement Davis, "Preventative and Reformatory Work. The Fresh Air Treatment for Moral Disease," *Informal and Condensed Report of the American Prison Congress, Albany NY Sept. 15-20 1906* New York: American Prison Congress (1906), 25.

⁴¹⁷ Here again, we see reverberations of Kellor's career – whose work in fact inspired Davis to pursue criminological reform. See Ellen Fitzpatrick, *Endless Crusade*.

⁴¹⁸ Ellen Fitzpatrick, *Endless Crusade*, 102.

based on individual merit and character, and reform based solely on environmental influence. As this so-called sexual misconduct came under greater scrutiny, the rate of arrest and reformatory sentencing in New York City far outpaced Bedford's resources. The prison became overcrowded and understaffed. Furthermore, the subjective and racist methods of policing and sentencing that relied on police and judge's discretion allowed the court system to place young women that Bedford social scientists considered most "reformable" – young white women who had not been previously arrested – on probation, while disproportionately sentencing non-white women to the three year reformatory sentence at Bedford, in addition to women considered recidivists. Finally, to the administration's dismay, many of the reformatory's initial inmates did not display the "social usefulness" that Bedford meant to inspire once they returned to the city; the prison also became crowded with women who broke their parole or were arrested for new offenses.

Most alarming to the matrons and administrators, however, were the sexual relationships that developed between the incarcerated women. This "harmful intimacy" or the "undesirable friendships" between women at Bedford became the subject of state and media attention due to both inmates' and staff's complaints about understaffing and harsh punishment.⁴¹⁹ Ironically, then, the sexual delinquency laws scaffolding an institution such as Bedford, which were intended to make visible and police urban social life and sexual relationship that transgressed the color line, seemed to instead to reformers and the wider public to facilitate new permutations of "promiscuity" within the prison.

In response to the institution's seeming difficulties, Davis explained both the reformatory's congestion and "harmful intimacy" as a problem of classification. The courts had failed to properly distinguish inmates that were "reformable types" from those who were, as Davis termed it, "feeble-minded," "defective," or "degenerate," supposedly child-like in their inability to control their

⁴¹⁹ *Annual Report of the State Board of Charities of the State of New York* v. 48 (1914), 853.

impulses, and unresponsive to training for self-control.⁴²⁰ Davis reimagined Bedford as an institution that had the unique responsibility (as well as the capability) to determine the different “types” of women and their proper sentencing and institutionalization. By 1911, Davis had begun plans (with funding from philanthropist John D. Rockefeller) for a Laboratory of Social Hygiene on Bedford’s grounds, both a “criminalistic institute” and “clearinghouse,” where women “would be carefully studied by a trained corps of experts” on dimensions of “social” life, “education,” “industrial efficiency,” “physical condition” and “mental condition” upon admittance to the reformatory, recommending the proper institution for each woman as well as producing a body of criminological knowledge for better designing those institutions.⁴²¹ The foundation of the Laboratory of Social Hygiene, then, was intended to enable Bedford’s administration and staff to more scientifically shape the circulation of social life between the city to the prison – aspiring to assume the court system’s interpretive and sentencing powers, and in a sense harnessing the subjective judgment that underwrote the laws criminalizing women’s sexual waywardness. To fully understand the Laboratory’s function in Bedford, it is important first to examine the reformatory’s new focus on the

⁴²⁰ Davis drew on (and collaborated with) research about “feeble-mindedness,” developed by turn of the century eugenic psychologists such as Henry Goddard and Charles Davenport, who associated women’s sexual behavior with incapacitated or so-called defective judgment. In *Creating Born Criminals*, Nicole Hahn Rafter writes that “feeble-mindedness” as a category came to replace the 19th century term for “idiot,” becoming more widely applied and elastic as the field of “mental hygiene” became a source of professional legitimacy; Rafter also notes that the definition included “people in whom...impairment was [believed to be] ethical rather than intellectual” (Rafter 65-66). Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals* Champaign Urbana: University of Illinois Press (1998). Davis also remarked that women not “fit” for reformation were being sent to Bedford, framing the prison’s failures as the courts’ misreading: “the judges and the magistrates’ courts put on probation every woman where they feel there is the least shadow of a possibility of a chance that she will keep straight. I have not a word to say against that. But the result is that the institution is filling up with those who cannot be much helped by it” (Davis 345). Katharine B. Davis, “Moral Imbeciles,” *Proceedings of the Annual Congress of the National Prison Association Albany NY Sept. 15-20 1906* Indianapolis: Wm. B. Burford Printer (1906).

⁴²¹ John D. Rockefeller, “Letter to Nicholas Murray Butler,” January 19, 1912. Rockefeller Family Collection, Record Group 2, Rockefeller Board Series (Box 6, Folder 31), Rockefeller Archive Center. (Butler was at the time the president of Columbia University.)

category of “feeble-mindedness” as a method for properly regulating women’s desire and “will,” and in turn attempting to police and re-form urban social life.⁴²²

“Feeble-mindedness” and the Composition of Urban Social Life

Bedford’s staff and administration worried that the “undesirable relations” between women – especially between black and white women – in the reformatory replicated the interracial relationships in the city that the prison intended to prevent. As such, they did not believe that attraction and attachment to women of a different race was a temporary phenomenon within the prison; instead they framed the source of “harmful intimacy” at Bedford as an issue of women’s “feeble-mindedness,” or inability to properly exercise their will. In *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality*, Regina Kunzel notes that a common strategy to account for same-sex sexual relationships in prison and thus the “tendency of prison to unsettle notions of ‘true’ sexuality,” its “apparently queering effects,” was to argue that “the lives of prisoners had nothing to do with the lives of those outside prison walls.”⁴²³ Yet in the case of Bedford, an institution dedicated to the re-education of women in “self-restraint, purity and social-consciousness,” straightening out their sexual waywardness and properly reshaping the urban environs, reformers and administrators understood the city’s sociality itself as the source of this deviance and queerness within the prison. For example, in the 1914 State Board of Charities hearing, the prison’s board of managers, James Wood, described the “undesirable friendships” among women incarcerated at Bedford as an “addiction” (a term, as Eve Sedgwick has observed, that has

⁴²² I engage with the specific details of this clearly violent and pathologizing system of classification because, although scholars such as Ruth Alexander and Nicole Rafter have noted, its definitions and terms were vague and mutable, the system’s shaky and dubious conceptual scaffolding gave concrete shape to women’s lives inside and outside of the reformatory, and help us to understand the discourses of race and sexuality that shaped the women’s prison.

⁴²³ Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (2008), 13-14.

historically stood in as a counterpoint for healthy autonomy, a function of a defective will) that occurred under the cover of seeming urban disorder.⁴²⁴ He explained that these relationships,

are known to be not uncommon among the people of this class and character in the outside world, and when inmates addicted to these practices come into the institution it is practically impossible in some way or another to confine them. These opportunities have been much more frequent and general in the past year or two, because of our overcrowded condition and the fact that the inmates are thrown together with less personal supervision that would be possible in a normal situation...the parties engaged in them have been separated and every effort made to prevent their continuance.⁴²⁵

Interracial desire, intimacy and sex between women (“these practices”) were “impossible to confine” because they were in a sense intrinsic to the “character” of a class of women who move through the urban world outside of the prison, participating in the interracial “promiscuity” and non-normative heterosexuality that the modernizing city enabled. In Woods’ description, it was not just that women drew on racial difference to provide the contrast researchers believed was necessary for sexual attraction. Rather, Woods believed that women engaged in interracial and same sex relationships possessed innately flawed “wills.” In this formulation, the city provided conditions for such undesirable “practices” to develop, but in the end the urban environment itself retained the potential for remolding. Instead, the blame lay squarely with the particular “class” of women who had not been properly classified and confined, who moved between the city and the prison, causing chaos in both spaces. Similarly, Julia Taft, Bedford’s assistant superintendent, testified in the State Board of Charities hearings that the “sex trouble,” often between “white and colored girls...is the foundation of most of the trouble along disciplinary lines,” continuing on to note that in the city, “a good number of white people have been with colored people outside and they are always friendly with the colored people outside the institution.”⁴²⁶

⁴²⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, Durham: Duke University Press (1993), 132.

⁴²⁵ *Annual Report of the State Board of Charities of the State of New York* v. 48 (1914), 857.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid*, 864.

Yet while Woods lumped this innately deviant “class” of women into one category, the conceptualization of “feeble-mindedness,” or the capacity to correctly exercise one’s will, had a different meaning and material effects for white and black women in the reformatory. Siobhan Somerville has observed that in the early 20th century, social scientists who studied sexual relationships between black and white women in reformatories and training schools (what one sociologist termed a “perversion not commonly noted”) believed that incarcerated women substituted racial difference for sexual difference within institutional confines.⁴²⁷ What’s more, historians have also noted that in this configuration of “abnormal” and tabooed desire, scientists at the time assumed that black women held an appeal to white women due to their supposedly more “masculine” features, thereby reinstating or recovering white women’s inherent femininity despite their tabooed object choice.⁴²⁸ Within Bedford, however, the emphasis on mental “capacity” took this logic to a more extreme end, as the developing Laboratory of Social Hygiene sought to identify women whose “feeble-mindedness” prevented them from controlling their impulses or correctly exercising their will at all, and moreover, to confine those women indefinitely.

In her work on the cultural dimensions of the eugenics movement, Elizabeth Yukins has observed that white women were the focus of the eugenics campaign against “feeble-

⁴²⁷ Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Inversion of Homosexuality in American Culture* Durham: Duke University Press (2000), 34. Margaret Otis, the author of one of these earlier studies (which Somerville cites), wrote, “The difference in color, in this case, takes the place of difference in sex” (Otis 113). Margaret Otis, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” *The Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 8.2 (June-July 1913).

⁴²⁸See Kunzel’s “Every Prison Has its Perverts” in *Criminal Intimacy*, Somerville’s *Queering the Color Line*, and Hicks’ “‘A Rather Bright and Good-Looking Colored Girl’: Black Women’s Sexuality, ‘Harmful Intimacy’ and Attempts to Regulate Desire, 1917-1928” in *Talk with You Like a Woman*. In her study of relationships between incarcerated women at Bedford, Sarah Potter makes the argument that that “Rather than making distinctions between gender inversion, homosexuality, and heterosexuality, reformers made class-based distinctions between sexual passion and control” (6). Sarah Potter, “Undesirable Relations?: Same-Sex Relationships and the Meaning of Sexual Desire at Women’s Reformatory During the Progressive Era,” *Feminist Studies* 30.2 (2004).

mindedness.”⁴²⁹ Scientists sought to pinpoint “feeble-minded” white women as the hereditary source of any deviance and criminality within the white race as it was conceived. Thus, the concept functioned to protect notions of white racial superiority as a whole, pinning any hint of “inadequacy or fallibility” on individual women’s so-called defectiveness, what was figured as their total inability to exercise self-control.⁴³⁰ This logic held true in the development of Bedford’s Laboratory: for example, in a lecture bringing the theory of “feeble-mindedness” to bear on the disciplinary issues at the reformatory, Katharine Davis asserts that while “foreign-born” immigrants and “negroes who come from the South” are in fact more “hopeful” cases. Davis writes, “give them industrial and mental training and the colored girls realize their highest ambition and are satisfied and the foreign girls when they learn our standards are willing to live law-abiding lives.”⁴³¹ When Davis describes native-born white women, or “girls of American parentage,” on the other hand, she writes that despite often appearing “bright and obedient,” “it seems impossible for them to distinguish between right and wrong when it concerns themselves...[and] cannot see why it is not right for her to do that things that seem right to her.”⁴³² This inability to distinguish right and wrong implied that the woman was unable to choose the “natural” or appropriate sexual partner, and hence unable to “live law-abiding lives.” Davis fretted that these women’s disordered judgment, which she described as a “congenital defect—physical weakness, lack of will-power,” was hardly detectable (due to women’s

⁴²⁹ Elizabeth Yukins, “Feeble-minded White Women and the Spectre of Proliferating Perversity in American Eugenics Narratives” *Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature and Culture, 1880-1940: Essays*, Eds. Lois A. Cuddy and Claire M. Roche, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press (2003), 165-66.

⁴³⁰ Yukins writes that “Dominant whiteness was threatened with the specter of inadequacy and fallibility within its own racial borders. In order to account for this difference and still maintain the ideology of white superiority, eugenicists developed a hereditarian explanation based on individual genetic weakness rather than racial inferiority” (167).

⁴³¹ Katharine Bement Davis, “Moral Imbeciles,” 346. here, we see that Davis emphasizes the racial harmony in earlier visions of Bedford’s purpose, as well as the moldable potential of young women’s “will,” though it is important to note that Davis makes a distinction between the kind of reformation that “foreign” and “negro” women are capable of.

⁴³² *Ibid*, 347-48.

appearance as “normal,” associating this conventional appearance with whiteness).⁴³³ Without proper detection, it threatened to replicate itself in future generations produced by women’s seeming sexual promiscuity. Thus, she advocated for the need for custodial institutions (as opposed to reformatories) in which women who “are not superficially different from other women but have the minds of children” would be permanently prevented from “bringing into the world illegitimate children, who if the laws of heredity mean anything, are liable in their turn to become a burden upon the community.”⁴³⁴ Bedford’s emphasis on a tenuously hereditary “feeble-mindedness,” then, assigned the women it classified as “socially unfit” with a kind of incapacitation that explained the women’s sexual waywardness while also removing culpability for “immoral” choices.

Along these lines, then, white women’s sexual relationships with black women in Bedford were invoked as largely the result of “feeble-minded” white women’s incapacity for proper self-control (the exercise of their will), explaining their threatening potential to engage in interracial “promiscuity” both inside and outside the prison. In this formulation, there were two options for white women: they could be rehabilitated into an appropriate form of labor and domestic life, or instead be removed from society indefinitely.⁴³⁵ When we look at Bedford’s institutional archive, furthermore, though the categorization of feeble-mindedness was applied to both white and black women who were tested, only white women were actually removed to custodial institutions from the reformatory. In the (incomplete) files from the Laboratory of Social Hygiene that have been preserved in the New York State Archives, the staff classified the majority of black women as some

⁴³³ Davis, Katharine B. “Reformation of Women – Modern Methods of Dealing with Offenders,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 36.1 (July 1910), 38.

⁴³⁴ Davis, Katharine B. “Plan of the Rational Treatment for Women Offenders,” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 4.3 (1913), 408.

⁴³⁵ In “The Reformation of Women,” Davis writes that women with “various degrees of feeble-mindedness” are often “unfit for difficult or continuous labor,” drawing a binary between proper domesticity and total incapacity (“Reformation” 38).

degree of “feeble-minded.”⁴³⁶ Yet, as the Laboratory’s scientists developed a plan for implementing the “mental tests” to categorize and treat the women at Bedford, and studied the initial results of the data they collected, they specifically excluded black women who had been tested from their research.⁴³⁷ Furthermore, none of the black women classified as “feeble-minded” were transferred to custodial institutions, despite the Laboratory staff agreeing in several cases that (in recorded transcripts) that those institutions would be most “appropriate.”

Instead, black women remained in the Reformatory, but were segregated in a separate cottage, regardless of the classification of “type” the Laboratory of Social Hygiene assigned to them. What’s more, the reformatory’s resources and programming for education were allocated much more stringently. Black women could not attend much of the training for professionalization and, according to inmate testimony, black women were prohibited from attending the reformatory’s basic academic classes as well.⁴³⁸ Finally, as Cheryl Hicks has noted, after their time at the reformatory expired, the Bedford’s parole board, acting in large part on recommendations from the Laboratory

⁴³⁶ Of the 54 case files remaining from the Laboratory of Social Hygiene, recorded for women entering the institution in 1916-17, there are ten files for black women; the Laboratory’s staff classified six of those women as feeble-minded to varying degrees. See case files 2507, 2505, 2504, 2503, 2497, 2493, 2490, 2466, 2480, 2486 in Series 14610-77B Bedford Hills Correctional Facility Inmate Case Files, 1915-30, Records of the Department of Correctional Services, New York State Archives and Records Administration, State Education Department, Albany, NY. See also “Brief Case Histories of Twenty-one Women Recommended for Custodial Care chosen from among 100 consecutive admissions to the New York State Reformatory for Women, in the Year 1917,” Committee of Fourteen Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, in which five of the twenty one cases “recommended for” (though almost certainly not committed to) custodial institutions were of black women.

⁴³⁷In *The Mentality of the Criminal Woman*, Jean Weidensall writes that the preliminary researchers administered tests to 100 women committed to Bedford as they entered the institution, “omitting only the colored women and the few who were discharged...or were too ill” to take the tests (Weidensall 9).

⁴³⁸ At a special hearing for the State Commission of Prisons, Loretta Michie, a black woman incarcerated at Bedford, testified that black women were not allowed to attend classes regularly with the white women in the reformatory: “When asked if the negro women in the institution were treated as fairly as the white, [Michie] said that only one (herself) was permitted to attend school. The rest were forced to work in the laundry.” “Doctor Assails Stringing Up of Bedford Girls” *New York Tribune* (December 14, 1919), 14. Furthermore, in *The Girl Problem*, Ruth Alexander notes that “informally, black inmates were denied access to the reformatory’s courses in stenography and book-keeping” (Alexander 92).

of Social Hygiene, paroled black women more frequently to low-paid domestic work, often in the suburbs of New York – far away from their families and communities.⁴³⁹

Thus, when the category of feeble-mindedness was applied to black women within the reformatory without the same kind of institutional assignment and attention (e.g. sending them to a custodial institution, or classifying women per their measured “reformability”), and indeed, with no differentiation between black women who were supposedly “feeble-minded” or “normal,” these women were consigned to an intermediary penal space. Marked as possessing a kind of defective will, they also remained subject to the reformatory’s most stringent regime of discipline without the privileges bestowed on white women deemed “normal” or reformable. In this way, the Laboratory’s organizing framework held black women at Bedford responsible for their supposedly “defective” will, figuring a different kind of sexual waywardness in which black women were culpable, rather than incapacitated. Furthermore, while the classification of “feeble-minded” when applied to white women indicated their capability (or total incapacity) for respectable domesticity or total unfitness for sexual reproduction and family life, the mediated form of agency ascribed to black women justified their assignment to contingent labor within domestic spaces, while also signaling that they were not fit for full-fledged domesticity. In a sense, classifying and constructing black women’s “willfulness” as at once defective and culpable worked to stabilize the binary between incapacity the Laboratory staff used to explain and justify white women’s institutional treatment.

The mental and social “hygiene” discourses that underwrote much of the Laboratory’s research, as well as efforts to enforce a specific disciplinary regime at Bedford, thus engendered a new framework for understanding the relationship between race, sexuality and crime. The classificatory system that the Laboratory developed – which focused on “feeble-mindedness,” and its purported potential to facilitate “harmful” interracial intimacy – allowed for distinctions between

⁴³⁹ Hicks, *Talk with You Like a Woman*, 238.

reformable and “unfit” whiteness, figuring those deemed “feeble-minded,” and hence sexually indiscriminating, as the product of exceptionally “defective” heredity; this in turn, preserved “normal” white women’s fundamental morality and potential reform into proper domesticity. “Environment and heredity are so closely related that it is difficult to draw a line,” Katherine Davis wrote in her essay that distinguishes between the “two classes” of “women offenders,” concluding that, “society is getting to recognize these facts, and is getting ready to shoulder its responsibility.”⁴⁴⁰ However, this distinction also produced a liminal subject position for black women, as they were consigned to an ambiguous zone between deviance understood to be a biological exception and waywardness that might be remedied via environmental reform. Their capacity to exercise their will was not completely negated, but instead rendered more vulnerable to both state and extra-legal violence (in fact, revealing their synchronicity), from harsh discipline and segregation within Bedford’s institutional space, to relegation to contingent domestic service labor. Along these lines, the Laboratory attempted to produce “reformable” women and isolate the truly “incapacitated” to remold the city’s landscape, but it also returned black women back to the city, or its surrounding environs, without the same hope (and support) for assimilation into the privileges of the domestic, or the fortified independence of relatively high-paid work in a store or as a clerk. Young black women were subject to higher levels of scrutiny while given far less opportunities for both wage work and homemaking. Black women’s exclusion from the reformatory’s concepts of disability or rehabilitation helped to stabilize the construction of white women as never essentially criminal (instead, either incapacitated or reformable), and to justify their assignment as contingent and disposable labor.

Far from bringing about the narrative of progressive “social harmony” that underwrote the reformatory’s original mission, Bedford’s efforts to assess and control the trajectory of each inmate’s

⁴⁴⁰ Davis, “The Reformation of Women,” 38.

future thus helped to engender an uneven urban topography and more violently enforced an economic and social hierarchy which excluded black women from the privileges of domesticity while also relying on their exploited labor. While Katherine Davis may have designated “negroes who come from the South” as “hopeful cases” for the reformatory’s mission (which she saw as upholding her own family’s history of abolitionist idealism), the Laboratory of Social Hygiene’s disciplinary system – its construction of a racialized hierarchy of “willfulness” – helped shape the constraint and exploitation of a new racist order in the modernizing city, despite young black women’s migration to escape southern systemic racial violence and coercion that so often resembled slavery’s power relations.⁴⁴¹

Reassembling the Prison Case File

In the previous sections, we’ve reviewed the legal and classificatory apparatuses that attempted to mobilize the figuration of the wayward girl’s “will” to reshape the city’s landscape. The legal construction of “waywardness” reduced young women to a metonym for the seemingly opaque and inaccessible character of urban sociality, and in their efforts to re-imagine and re-sculpt the city’s social landscape, the reformatory’s classificatory system assigned black women a more culpable “willfulness,” justifying their displacement from the social networks formed in the city, as well as justifying their consignment to domestic labor. In what follows, however, we will explore the formal composition of the Laboratory of Social Hygiene’s case files themselves, tracking how the files not only document the Laboratory’s racialized violence, but also inadvertently record how incarcerated women redirected and refused the prison’s social scientific terms to imagine and assemble modes of

⁴⁴¹ Fitzpatrick, *Endless Crusade*, 15. For an interesting contrast to my argument about the racialized construction of “willfulness” and incapacity, see Andrew Dilts’ discussion of how the construction and invocation of mental disability has been used to disenfranchise and criminalize African Americans in the 19th and 20th centuries. In the context of the women’s reformatory, in which the policing of sexual desire and gender roles was central, the construction of disability and capacity was less straightforward, in fact depending on black women’s exclusion from categories of disability or rehabilitation. Andrew Dilts, “Incurable Blackness: Criminal Disenfranchisement, Mental Disability and the White Citizen,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32.3 (2012).

relationship that exceeded the coercive and violent classification they were subject to during their incarceration.

The Laboratory of Social Hygiene began its initial research in 1912.⁴⁴² The founding plan for the Laboratory was to model a district “clearing house...[which would] have a staff consisting of an expert physician...a psychologist, and field workers. As a result of their study of the individual cases, the women would be assigned by the commission to the proper institution,” and furthermore, those carceral institutions would be able to determine the proper term of each woman’s sentence, as “all sentences for women should be absolutely indeterminate.”⁴⁴³ By taking hold of the institutional power to sentence, the Laboratory’s staff attempted to shape the trajectories for women incarcerated at Bedford and to truly reshape the urban landscape.⁴⁴⁴ The Laboratory would distinguish between feeble-minded and normal inmates through a series of mental tests, as well as investigate each woman’s social background and history, her own account of her history and “sexual misconduct,” and physical exams. In turn, the Laboratory might determine which women had the “capacity to absorb training and to attain equilibrium and self-control” for reformatory training and those who were irredeemably “unfit,” or in other words, not “intelligent and stable enough to adapt...to ordinary social and industrial conditions.”⁴⁴⁵ And the Laboratory would thus develop a more comprehensive data set to formulate even more specialized treatment plans for “woman offenders” – as the Laboratory also compiled information about the social fabric of the city itself.

⁴⁴² Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals*, 154.

⁴⁴³ Katharine B. Davis, “A Plan of Rational Treatment for Women Offenders,” 406.

⁴⁴⁴ The reformatory was not able to actually enforce this indeterminate sentence, but because all women sentenced to Bedford were under state supervision for three years, the staff could recommend when women could be released to parole.

⁴⁴⁵ Weidensall, *The Mentality of the Criminal Woman*, 3.

Creating a battery of tests, interview questions, and “history blanks” (forms for recording facts about each woman’s personal, sexual, industrial, and family histories) to supplement and harness the law’s discretionary power, then, was intended to enable the Laboratory’s expert staff to imagine and assemble a case file that diagnosed each woman’s potential for reformability, while also documenting her progress towards realizing the “will-power” the staff believed her capable of. For instance, in their initial interview, the Laboratory’s staff took stock of how each young woman described her own history and how she came to “wrongdoing,” judging her capacity to meet social norms and to appropriately reform by judging not only the “quality” of her family and social environment, but also whether or not the woman was willing or “unwilling to admit that she has been bad,” hence perceiving the “seriousness of her sexual offenses.”⁴⁴⁶ Following the Laboratory’s initial assessment of each woman, the case file collected (and monitored) letters from family, records of infractions and behavior in her cottage and work assignments, and finally a parole report which summarized the woman’s course in the reformatory. Once the file reaches its concluding parole report, Bedford’s staff summarize and interpret the documents that have come before, molding the usually fragmented and contradictory events and communications the file contains into a cohesive narrative that confirms their initial diagnosis of the young woman’s “capacity” and “will power.” This final and recursive assessment then provides justification for the young woman’s parole assignment, as the staff attempts to assign her a position they believe appropriate for reshaping the city’s future. In his treatment of the administrative case file, Warwick Anderson has observed that its form contains “interceptive, evolving, often ‘heteroglossic’ documents oriented towards the future,

⁴⁴⁶ Case 2486, Case 2465. Davis explained the elements that constituted Laboratory’s evaluation procedures: “first, consideration in performance of mental examination; second, reference to the social history; third, the total impression made on the examiner.” Katharine B. Davis, “Some Institutional Problems with Dealing with Psychopathic Delinquents,” *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* 10.3 (1919), 388.

shaping the prognosis.”⁴⁴⁷ Indeed, the Laboratory of Social Hygiene’s case files were future-oriented, but more rigidly so. Based on their initial Laboratory procedures and examinations, the institution attempted to impose their specific vision of each woman’s future through her assignment to a specific type of incarceration in the reformatory, and to a parole assignment that matched up with the Laboratory’s preliminary “diagnosis.” As such, the staff members also attempted to curate these files so that they reflected and corroborated the Laboratory’s expertise and classificatory system, constructing white women’s “willfulness” as either a syndrome of their incapacity or reformability, while representing black women’s will as evidence of deviance or culpability.

Not surprisingly, the women incarcerated at Bedford resisted the ways in which they were subjected to intelligence testing and the Laboratory’s investigation into, and regulation of, their personal histories and social relationships, as the institution used such information to potentially send women to other institutions indefinitely, to extend their time at the reformatory, and to determine their placements during parole. As the Laboratory of Social Hygiene’s classificatory system shaped their experiences in Bedford, women in the reformatory increasingly rebelled against the institution’s harsh discipline and stringent allocation of resources, as well as its ability to determine their release date and destination (including the possibility of being sent to a custodial institution).⁴⁴⁸ As such, women destroyed elements of their cottage, breaking the windowpanes and furniture in their rooms, and they also created disturbances by fighting with matrons and other women. And the incarcerated women continued to form intimate and sexual attachments amongst each other (and sometimes with those outside the reformatory), despite the staff’s best efforts to police their social relationships. Women wrote notes to one another to communicate within the

⁴⁴⁷ Warwick Anderson, “The Case of the Archive,” 536.

⁴⁴⁸ In *Creating Born Criminals*, Nicole Hahn Rafter has observed, “the prisoners’ rebelliousness may also have stemmed from fears of intelligence testing. Poor test scores could lead to transfers to civil institutions for the feebleminded” (154).

divisions of the cottage system, and carried on correspondence with those outside of the prison who pretended to write as an aunt or a brother. Ironically, despite the Laboratory's self-conception as operating on the scientific cutting edge, the reformatory's staff used more and more violent measures to quell inmate resistance, from lengthy solitary confinement in Rebecca Hall, the reformatory's "prison" or disciplinary building, to immersing women's heads in water, to handcuffing women above ground, a process called "stringing up" by the women at Bedford, and later, by the press.⁴⁴⁹

Thus, the Laboratory's case files are also shaped by the antagonisms, failures and contradictions that riddled the institution, unsettling and rerouting the separate (yet interdependent) trajectories that the prison imagined and attempted to enforce for black and white women. Though the Laboratory's staff attempted to impose a specific order on the documents they generated during the women's imprisonment (and indeed, because of their attempts to monitor the minutiae of the women's everyday lives and social relationships), we can also read the files for the alternate modes of narrating social experience within the prison, resisting and reformulating the prison's classificatory system and its attempts to re-conceptualize and regulate race and sexuality in the modernizing city. In my readings of the cases that follow, then, I attend first to the Laboratory staff's initial efforts to construct a coherent narrative for each woman's trajectory through their incarceration and their

⁴⁴⁹ The Laboratory's researchers came up with yet another designation that sought to account for the women who deviated from their original calculations during the time in their reformatory, often causing trouble despite testing into the category of "normal" intelligence. The staff referred to them as "borderline cases," on the cusp of rehabilitation and "feble-mindedness."⁴⁴⁹ In a study published as early as 1913, Davis laments the large number of "distinctly border line cases," and explains that "this is the group which gives the most trouble in all reformatory institutions. It is safe to say that 90 percent of all disciplinary difficulties come from cases of this sort" and describing these borderline cases as either women "whose general intelligence is low, but who perhaps be able to learn a certain amount of manual labor; these cannot 'stay good' any length of time" or "those who do well in school...but who have no moral sense of continuity of purpose" (Davis 197-98). The case files that follow are for women that were classified as "borderline." While none of the Bedford case files cohere precisely with the classificatory system the Laboratory attempted to enforce, these files especially illuminate both the Laboratory's efforts to implement their experimental and racialized carceral system and enforce their vision for a reformed urban landscape, as well as the myriad ways that women at Bedford resisted the prison's classificatory violence. Katharine B. Davis, "A Study of Prostitutes at Bedford," in George Kneeland, *Commercialized Prostitution in New York*, New York: The Century Co. (1913).

future in the city, reading “along the grain” of the institutional documents, as Laura Ann Stoler has put it.⁴⁵⁰ And second, I read for the methods through which incarcerated women (and often those close to them – their families or lovers) disrupted these institutional narratives, imagining new forms of social relationship and personhood that exceed the prison’s divergent construction of the will for black and white women.

“truthful and honest but one of the most difficult girls”: Laura Page’s File

Laura Page’s case file is the earliest file that exists from the Laboratory of Social Hygiene, and from the reformatory more generally. Laura was sentenced to Bedford in 1913 for prostitution, released in 1915 and returned to the reformatory twice: once in 1918 for a parole violation, and again for a drug charge in 1926.⁴⁵¹ Though its documents are in relative disarray (missing many of the Laboratory evaluations that the other files include, for example, and including extraneous letters from Auburn Prison, where Laura was also incarcerated), the file documents the reformatory staff’s idealistic initial vision for Laura as a young white woman. But this mismatched collection of official documents also records the wayward course that Laura herself charted, insisting on her incommensurability with Bedford’s scientific categories and reformist ideals, and imagining and enacting social relationships that undermined and exceeded the reformatory’s disciplinary norms.

In her initial assessment at Bedford, Laura was classified as a hopeful case. The Laboratory’s form that summarizes her “sociological laboratory report,” with an abstract of her history, family, and industrial history as well as a summary of her mental test, casts Laura as the

⁴⁵⁰ In her reading of administrative archives from Dutch colonialism, Stoler helpfully observes that these bureaucratic records were not simply fixed and totalizing but, “are records of uncertainty and doubt in how people imagined they could and might make the rubrics of rule correspond to a changing imperial world” (Stoler 4). Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (2010).

⁴⁵¹ Case file 1785, Series 14610-77B Bedford Hills Correctional Facility Inmate Case Files, 1915-30, Records of the Department of Correctional Services, New York State Archives and Records Administration, State Education Department, Albany, NY.

prototypical wayward girl eligible for rehabilitation into full-fledged domesticity. Painting a picture of home life gone bad, Laura is depicted as the victim of environment forces that fractured her family (“Father and mother separated. Father heavy drinker. She kept house for father and brother”), and corrupted her sexually, as she “was perfectly moral until about 18,” when she met a man who preyed on her innocence. Such potential for rehabilitation is also apparent in the summary of Laura’s mental test, in which she is classified as normal, despite her waywardness. The staff “sociologist” notes that Laura “has an excellent mind” and “deeply deplores the loss of early school life,” flagging her constricted opportunities – as well as the reformatory’s ability to retrain or reeducate Laura.⁴⁵²

However, according to disciplinary reports, during her first sentence at Bedford, Laura was “a constant source of trouble”; staff observed that she “could not be hustled at all but behaved fairly well outwardly.”⁴⁵³ Though Laura was assigned to a cottage to be “given a chance” to prove her potential for reformation, however, matrons observed that “Laura now boasts that she smoked and made money in Huntington [cottage] the same as she did on the streets,” that “We felt sure she was flirting with the men [who worked as construction workers at the reformatory] and getting tobacco constantly” and “Laura told the new girls not to be good and instructed them in all the bad things that could be done here to annoy the officers. She was so clever with her badness that it was almost impossible to catch her.”⁴⁵⁴ Indeed, Laura frequently attempted to escape from the reformatory.⁴⁵⁵ As Laura invoked “the streets” in her interactions with Bedford staff, she maintained that she might continue her so-called sexual and social promiscuity within the reformatory itself, and moreover,

⁴⁵² “Parole Report,” Case file 1785.

⁴⁵³ “Disciplinary Reports,” Case file 1785.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

reproduced those conditions, by “incit[ing] the other girls to cause trouble” and replicate her behavior (participating in the sexual economy that Laura sought to implement). Laura thus began her tenure at Bedford by insisting that the institution’s attempts to police the social fabric of the city – by reshaping women’s social relationships within the reformatory – in fact cut both ways. While the institution sought to analyze her past social and sexual history in order to rehabilitate and reimagine her future, Laura sought to claim that history and continue along her original trajectory (“She said she had always solicited in Bedford and had always smoked – and she was not going to stop now,” a matron notes in the report).⁴⁵⁶ Furthermore, Laura illustrated that even on the bucolic grounds of the reformatory, the social and sexual promiscuity that reformers attempted to prevent could continue, as Laura “was reported to be always sitting in her window as the men went home from work,” and frequently dropping notes to those who entered and left the reformatory. Laura’s relationships played on reformers’ fears about interracial intimacy, moreover, as she made and received overtures from men working at the institution who were (as another disciplinary report notes), mainly Italian immigrants, and in reformers’ view, not yet considered assimilated into whiteness.

Yet, despite their records of Laura’s “misbehavior,” the prison’s staff continued to attempt to write her time at Bedford into a sentimental narrative of improvement and uplift that underwrote the Laboratory’s treatment of “normal” reformatory inmates. Laura’s supervising matron reported that Laura was frequently assigned to the disciplinary building for “smoking tobacco and writing to the Italians,” yet with the aid of “many heart to heart talks, [Laura] decided that it did not pay to be bad”; once removed from the disciplinary building, she gave “a perfect record, never joining in any disturbances (Because she gave me her promise).”⁴⁵⁷ Here, Laura’s own capacity to give an “honest”

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ “Cottage Matron’s Report,” Case file 1785.

account of herself is necessary to indicate her reformability, but also becomes dissolved into the matron's own narrative of Laura's reform, explicitly motored by the matron's enactment of a kind of "heart to heart" intimacy between them, perhaps in a sense, substituting the illicit sexual intimacy intimated by Laura's disciplinary reports with a kind of sanitized intimacy reflecting the matron's professional capability. As this "heart to heart" invokes a kind of sympathetic identification between the two women, it is not surprising that the matrons parole Laura to her sister, rather than assigning her to domestic service away from her family. Furthermore, the matron's characterization of Laura as a subject finally able to properly contract, to "give her promise," participating in training for respectable domesticity and industry, scripts Laura into a proper contractual economy (as opposed to the illicit sexual economy she asserted that she participated in both inside and outside of the reformatory). Together, the preliminary assessments summarized by the "sociological laboratory report" that indicate Laura's potential for rehabilitation, and the evaluations of Laura's conduct throughout the course of her sentence at Bedford, stage the institution's ideal process of reform: Laura's "Character and Conduct Within the Institution" records both an "attitude" and "ability" of "willing, plus," on top of her sympathetic matron's report.⁴⁵⁸ "She is truthful and honest but one of the most difficult girls I have ever had to deal with," the matron concludes on Laura's parole report, emplotting Laura's development at the reformatory as a progressive narrative, in which Laura's underlying capacity for self-regulation and "honesty," her potential to be straightened out, was struggled for and eventually won over.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁸ "Parole Report," Case file 1785.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

Laura returned to Bedford due to a parole violation (for which she served time at Auburn Prison).⁴⁶⁰ Once Laura returned to the reformatory, she was set on demonstrating her refusal to adhere to the narrative of “going straight,” or attaining a kind of innocent respectability that Bedford’s reformers set out for her.⁴⁶¹ In turn, Laura’s insistence on conducting herself “as she always had” – her own kind of unswerving trajectory of refusing the reformatory’s relational norms – generated writing from the matrons themselves that undercut and threw into relief the incoherence of their own mission for scientific reform.

For example, take the statements of reformatory staff reporting their experiences with a fight between Laura and two cottage matrons in 1918. Though the accounts of Laura’s altercation with the matrons seek to document her wrongdoing and the injuries she inflicted on reformatory staff, the file also inadvertently records Laura’s critique of Bedford, as well as the excessively emotive responses of the matrons (who were supposed to express a kind of expert sympathy or sternness with women in the reformatory). According to the staff statements, when asked to return to her room and leave the cottage corridor, where she was “visiting with Louise Reeh, formerly an inmate at Auburn Prison with her,” Laura “said she was here to do time owed the State, not to obey rules.” She then threatened to attack the assistant matron, Alice Gillchrist, with a chair, and then with a jar of beans from the cottage kitchen, finally succeeding in throwing hot water on Gillchrist. In these accounts, the matrons depict Laura as rejecting the terms of the reformatory’s

⁴⁶⁰ The documents that follow the “promising” narrative of Laura’s parole back to self-supporting industry and respectable home life introduces an abrupt break in the initial trajectory the institution imagined for May. In 1918, the year that the Laboratory of Social Hygiene temporarily closed due to lack of funding, and the institution’s unrest climbed to a high pitch, Laura’s institutional history records that she has returned to the reformatory for violating her parole, after serving a year in Auburn Prison for grand larceny. In a letter to the reformatory’s superintendent, Helen Cobb, sent from Auburn that year, however, we see that Laura had requested that she be allowed to count her sentence at Auburn as time served for her parole violation (which would send her back to Bedford officially for six months – though the reformatory’s attempts to implement indeterminate sentencing meant that the sentence might also be extended until Laura was deemed rehabilitated); Laura’s request was denied. “Letter to Helen Cobb,” Case file 1785.

⁴⁶¹ “Going straight” was a phrase often used by women incarcerated at Bedford to signal their reformability; see Alexander, *The Girl Problem*, 146.

disciplinary structure, insisting on sustaining social connections she has made within another more explicitly punitive institution.⁴⁶² At the same time, she also explicitly rejected the indeterminate sentencing – based on each woman’s classification and supposed reformation – that the reformatory sought to implement. Laura’s retort that “she was [at Bedford] to do time owed the State” invoked the reformatory as a space of state violence and punishment, despite the staff and administration’s belief that it existed to scientifically treat and prevent criminality, rather than punish “woman offenders.” Here, Laura reverses the contractual language used in the prison’s description of reformed women who had “promised to be good,” highlighting instead how her imprisonment positions her as indebted, and more vulnerable to the state, and the intensely subjective (rather than scientific) judgments on which her sentence is based.

Laura’s refusal to “go straight,” or climb towards normative white femininity – and her insistence instead on undeviating refusal and resistance – reverses the intimacy and identification the reformatory’s staff imagined between “normal” incarcerated women and matrons. Laura reframes Bedford’s aspirations to treatment and reformation as explicit violence (which she counters in kind, using the cottage’s benign domestic objects as weapons). In response, the matrons’ statements about their experience of Laura’s antagonism also shift, becoming unhinged from the initial script in their earlier recommendation for Laura’s parole. Rather than projecting a sense of mutual understanding between matron and cottage resident (at once sentimentally appropriate and scientifically calibrated), as the matrons describe their injuries, they assume the more traditional script of white, middle class femininity, i.e. that of hysteria. Alice Gillchrist, who locked herself into the cottage bathroom to protect herself from Laura, wrote, she was “given some spirit of ammonia as I was very nervous and

⁴⁶² Auburn, a penitentiary that had a women’s department, was exactly the model of punishment that reformers such as Davis sought to abolish, as it did not classify its inmates or tailor their treatment, barely separating them from the men. For a discussion of Auburn Prison, see Cheryl Hicks’ Chapter 4 in *Talk With You Like a Woman*.

very much overcome over the affair,” visiting the Laboratory’s hospital.⁴⁶³ And Hannah Moore, the senior matron, also wrote of her “condition of nerve strain,” and the assistant superintendent, Julia Minogue, recorded that both matrons were “on the verge of hysteria and completely exhausted. I felt that Miss Gillchrist and Miss Moore were at this time in no condition to discuss the case further.”⁴⁶⁴ In creating a record of Laura’s antagonism, then, these filed statements also document how Bedford’s staff attempted to enforce the classificatory system and as well as form a kind of empathetic bond with the incarcerated woman, yet when the material conditions of the prison were turned against the women running the reformatory, they fell back on a narrative based on sentimental femininity that separated their capacity for sentience and injury from the women classified and incarcerated at the institution.

Finally, surrounded by the disciplinary reports I’ve cited above, Laura Page’s file concludes with several undated love letters preserved by the prison’s staff, preserved to surveil the sexual and social “promiscuity” that Laura insisted she might maintain during her sentences at the reformatory (perhaps saved, as well, to document her evolution into proper domestic norms instead). Rather than solely critiquing the carceral violence underwriting Bedford’s reformist mission, these notes, I’d like to suggest, set askew and rearrange the narrative of “going straight” in which Bedford’s matrons sought to emplot Laura, in order to refuse its normative conventions.

To begin, the letters present the reader with an indistinct entrance into the romantic relationship they address, likely to protect both the author and recipient from discovery and detection (it’s unclear whether Laura’s paramour is a construction worker at the reformatory, or the

⁴⁶³ “Alice Gillchrist Report,” Case File 1785.

⁴⁶⁴ “Hannah More Report,” “Julie Minogue Report,” Case File 1785.

prison guard that is later noted to have followed her to NYC when she was paroled).⁴⁶⁵ This indirect form of address marks Laura's subject position as shaped by her relationships, much like the reformatory's staff's assessment of her family and social histories, but works instead to reinstate the threatening social opacity that the institution sought to combat and re-form. In a first note intended for Laura, the author addresses Laura as "Vera," thus collaborating with Laura to avoid detection by prison staff.⁴⁶⁶ Moreover, this fictionalization of Laura's identity – her malleable character – in a sense plays upon Bedford reformers' attempts to resculpt their charges' characters within the prison while also pinning down the "verified" details of each woman's past.⁴⁶⁷ The second note (written in the same penmanship) also presents Laura's identity as strategically opaque, as its address opens, "My Dear tell me yours first name Because you not want tell me? You understand my address, my first name it is this John Moschella Box 154 Mount Kisco New York." Alluding to knowledge of the reformatory's strict rules about its inmates' contact or communication with anyone outside of their families, the writer continues, "you tell your friend that I am yours cousin you tell that you are yours cousin and not friend. You tell me if you sleep with yours cousin. I sleep with my cousin" (another practice that women incarcerated in Bedford used to evade the prison's censors and rules about communicating with people outside their family unit was to have correspondents write them pretending to be family members). Here then, the author still exploits the scientific system that Bedford's staff set up in order to forge a relationship with Laura, and to bridge her location in prison to the so-called "promiscuous" social life in the city, his vernacular use of English itself tilting

⁴⁶⁵ "Institutional History, Case file 1785. The report notes that as of October 21, 1918, "Had relations with one of the Guards at the Reformatory, a married man, who followed her to New York. She is at present in the Work house, creating her usual disturbance."

⁴⁶⁶ To add to the confusion, I have fictionalized Laura's actual name in the case file to comply with state archive policy.

⁴⁶⁷ The use of aliases was in fact a common practice for this reason when young women provided police and prison staff with information about their family and social life.

the formal and supposedly precise terms of the reformatory askance, suggesting a different mode of social relationship than the prison attempted to make legible and enforce. Finally, as the letters attempt to bridge and reorient this carceral system of confinement, they end with a reference to the distance between themselves and their addressee (Laura), noting that “if you like give me somethink and I remember you over time. I think you ever time” and “Some day I can give you this kiss”; both notes also actually end with a long series of drawn “x” marks, dramatizing kisses, of course, but also through their excessive proliferation on the page, dramatizing the divide between the author and addressee as well as how that space might be filled or reshaped. In this way, the letter’s textual composition is certainly shaped by the prison’s institutional violence, but also demonstrates once again how the institution’s structuring of social relationships might be altered, twisted around, or diverted, in this case by those who were not actually incarcerated but attempting to derail the prison’s attempts to stratify and surveil the city’s social worlds.

Laura’s response to these letters, framed by a brief note from a matron stating that the missive was “written by Laura Page – to worksman – note torn up – pieced together” is a longer and more detailed account of a meeting between the two lovers that the prison authorities thwarted, as well as a plan for Laura’s escape.⁴⁶⁸ In fact, each page had been carefully pieced back together by the staff who recovered it. In this way, what appears to adhere to the conventions of heterosexual romance and domesticity provides a vehicle for fluidity and flight, as the traditional form of the love letter itself is written for the express purpose of being destroyed and fragmented upon its receipt.

The letter begins by describing the impossibility of arriving at the agreed upon meeting place, as Laura was locked in her room for punishment, looking out at the letter’s addressee. And the note highlights the simultaneous proximity and enforced divisions that the reformatory engendered, as she juxtaposes her adjacency to her love with her antagonism with prison staff: “I

⁴⁶⁸ Love note, Case file 1785.

was in heck watching you and [you do] not see me. Darling I am here in my room punished I was mad at the cop.” Laura next relates how she envisioned her correspondent during their thwarted meeting; her imagination is fueled initially by anger and then by the thought of reconvening, recuperating the meeting’s romantic potential: “I was feeling angry of everything and picturing you dear in that place waiting for me and calling me...But my dear you can’t feel half as bad as I feel tonight. I have been thinking you most frequent [since I] first saw you Saturday Morning. I shall feel darling your kisses on my eyes, lips and throat.”⁴⁶⁹ What is constant in this passage is Laura’s insistence on her own affective experience (from “you can’t feel half as bad as I feel” to her tactile imagination of kisses); she does not attempt to frame her subjective experience as either wholly rational and disciplined (as Bedford’s newly professional staff), or as traditionally feminine, assuming a passive position in heterosexual romance. Instead, as Laura narrates her subjective experience as essentially moving fluidly from one script to another, telling her paramour that “it is so good to have a real man make love after being with women 1 year and a half. I do not mean by that dear that I am easily suited as far as men are concerned. But there comes sometimes a man who appealed strongly to me and you are the one. I would pass the remainder up if I were outside.”⁴⁷⁰ Here, even as Laura compares her sexual experiences and proclivities inside and outside of prison, she does not describe the prison as a temporarily queering space, but rather as a function of her own preferences, or what she is “suited” to. In a sense, her claim echoes the Bedford’s administration conceptualization of the “class” of women involved in harmful intimacy who transported those “vicious practices” both to the reformatory and back out again. Yet, Laura also reframes Bedford staff’s understanding of incarcerated white women’s sexual activity as their inability to correctly operate their will, because Laura explicitly asserts control over her relationships (“I would pass up the remainder if I was

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

outside”), and further insists on describing her desire as dynamic, and her imagination of her love object as active and deliberate, even if she existed in an institution that attempted to regulate, channel and often sever social relationships and sexual desire.

In this vein, the letter concludes with Laura’s specific plans for her escape; here, Laura insists not only on sexual fluidity but on her capacity to perform masculinity when necessary, instructing, “Please dear do what I tell you and bring a suit of your clothes along and a long coat and hat as I will take a chance as a man and I can leave these grounds much easier that way.”⁴⁷¹ As opposed to Bedford’s institutional experimentation with masculine labor for its inmates (limited to the confines of the reformatory, and ultimately for the benefit of the reformers’ professional credit), Laura assumes a masculine guise in order to escape the confines of the prison altogether, at once performing her incommensurability with the categories of womanhood the Laboratory had outlined, while also exploiting and redirecting the conventions of the normative white masculine subject that those categories (and white femininity) were in a sense shaped around and in response to. Thus, Laura’s work to evoke the dynamism of her desire, eluding scientific interpellation and incarceration, manifests in a material plan for escape. This fluidity culminates in the letter’s material performance of form-shifting and escape, as Laura closes with instructions for the letter’s recipient to tear up the missive once having read it: “Goodnight – dear xxxxxxxx for you destroy when finished. From L.”⁴⁷²

“Just a line or two to ask you what was the trouble with Margaret”: Margaret Johnson’s File

The next case file that I will explore is that of Margaret Johnson, an African American nineteen-year-old sent to the reformatory in 1917 for giving birth to an illegitimate child and stealing

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

clothing from a laundry line.⁴⁷³ Because the case file is from a later year when the Laboratory of Social Hygiene's operations were at full tilt, the file preserves material from the series of tests and investigations that the Laboratory performed for each woman. Moreover, the file's disciplinary reports illuminate how the scientific investigation and classification that took place at the reformatory did not prevent and often enabled violent discipline and neglect in the reformatory, especially, as I've argued, for incarcerated black women, who were placed in a markedly vulnerable position both, during and post, imprisonment. Laura Page's file performs a kind of incommensurability with the figure of the reformable white woman that the prison attempted to design and enforce. Margaret's file, as well, draws into relief how her experiences and trajectory within and without the institution did not match up to the category assigned to her. But as the documents from her case illuminate the segregation and excessive punishment that black women experienced in the reformatory, they also record how her family (and other members of her community) critiqued the specific violence Margaret experienced in the institution, and how her family sought to evoke and maintain social formations that exceeded Bedford's reformers schema for modern urban life – that is, sociality that does not exclude, fracture and exploit black social life

In the intake forms, evaluations and summary reports that the Laboratory of Social Hygiene developed for Margaret, the staff frame her as a “case” whose waywardness was in large part caused by her incongruity in the urban social landscape altogether (rather than a woman who might be simply retrained into proper domesticity, as we saw in the staff's initial depiction of Laura Page). As we've seen, in the classificatory schema that the Laboratory of Social Hygiene developed, black women were figured as occupying a nebulous space between incapacity and capability; culpable, but not eligible for the reformatory's rehabilitative resources. The double bind this attitude presented

⁴⁷³ Case file 2466, Series 14610-77B Bedford Hills Correctional Facility Inmate Case Files, 1915-30, Records of the Department of Correctional Services, New York State Archives and Records Administration, State Education Department, Albany, NY.

for black women at Bedford is evident in the staff's treatment of Margaret's capacity to give an account of herself and her past experiences. In the Laboratory's initial mental examination and "information about the patient," the narrative notes that Margaret "gives information about herself willingly, but seems rather stupid," observing that "Patient feels that she has been punished, if not unjustly, at least too severely... is evidently of low intellect and does not take the sexual offense seriously."⁴⁷⁴ Here, the Laboratory staff interprets Margaret's account of the external forces, or environmental influence that lead to her criminalization, as signifying her dangerous inability to comprehend proper social mores altogether. Her critique of her punishment is absorbed into her diagnosis itself.

The case file's diagnosis of Margaret also figures her as culpable for her "waywardness." In the Laboratory staff's meeting minutes regarding their preliminary impressions and evaluations of each woman's abilities and the institution to which they would be ideally assigned, the staff psychiatrist, Cornelia Schorer, diagnoses Margaret her as a "borderline case, tending to high grade moron type."⁴⁷⁵ In justifying this diagnosis, Schorer remarks that "She rather surprised me by answering right a question which several girls don't know," but continues on to note with skepticism that she also, "gave story of being raped by father of first child."⁴⁷⁶ Despite demonstrating her conventional "intelligence," Margaret's framing of her sexual experience as rape, rather than sexual waywardness, again provides evidence of her inability to correctly account for herself. Finally, having established a sense of Margaret's culpability for her waywardness, the laboratory staff go on to discuss the correct institutional placement for Margaret; the lack of probation agencies or halfway

⁴⁷⁴ "Information Concerning the Patient," Case file 2466.

⁴⁷⁵ "Laboratory Staff Meeting, June 24, 1917," Case file 2466.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

houses for “colored girls” in New York, in fact, cements and reinforces their interpretation of Margaret as wayward or “out of place” and necessitating incarceration:

Dr. Schorer: I think this [Bedford] should be a quite a good place for her.

Miss Dawley: The probation officer thought that this would be a good place to send her and did not think that she should be without supervision

...Miss Cobb: I should think so too, don't you, Dr. Halleck?

Dr. Halleck: Yes.⁴⁷⁷

Here, as Margaret's culpability for her seeming “out of placeness” in the city is institutionally cemented, the staff perform a process of scientific collaboration, synthesizing the various elements of what they perceive as Margaret's social world, and quite literally “performing” (as the scripted form of the meeting minutes suggests), their authority to remove Margaret from the urban landscape.

As the Laboratory determined her developmental history, measuring the causal relationship between her domestic upbringing and her sexual transgression, Margaret's self-representation became a symptom of both her deviant judgment and her culpability for that deviance. The Laboratory recorded each woman's preliminary statement in a “history blank” so that Laboratory staff might begin to uncover the “true” details of her past familial and sexual relationships, domestic “conditions,” and work history (with generic blanks for each question that Laboratory staff filled out for each woman), and field workers would later investigate the veracity of those findings. In Johnson's statement, she cautiously describes the “moral standards of her ‘home conditions’” as “always good,” praising her mother's parenting as she navigates the reformers' expectations and standards of conduct, “Mother is not a ‘crank’ but always wanted her children to be respectable.”⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁸ “Statement of the Girl,” Case file 2466.

The staff member transcribing the statement notes thus that Margaret “seems rather fond of her family.”⁴⁷⁹ Rather than her upbringing and relationship with her family, it was instead her “first sexual offense,” as the form puts it, which interrupted her moral development; Margaret informs the sociologist that she was raped at age 15 (the specific questions on the form are “First Sexual Offense,” followed by the choice of “Rape or Consent”).⁴⁸⁰ Strikingly, despite telling the initial probation officer that she had been raped the first time she had sex, and despite relating this to Dr. Schorer as well, and finally, having actually pressed charges against the man in question, Margaret is recorded on the form as having consented to this sexual experience. This strange and violent shift from claiming injury to “admitting” consent accentuates the staff member’s ability to cajole the truth from Margaret, suggesting that Margaret deliberately lied about and concealed this “offense.” Thus, despite Margaret’s attempts to frame her narrative in a way that might anticipate Bedford staff’s index of respectable domesticity (and the statement’s omission of Margaret’s earlier account of rape that would bolster the sense of innocence and decorum she evoked), her capacity to give an account of herself instead is read as evidence of guiltiness. While the form of the “history blank” used for interviews with the women was inherently suspicious, intended to expose and purportedly diagnose women’s waywardness, it also ideally worked to expose the conditions that created that deviance so that reformers could demonstrate how they transformed the wayward girl into a reformed and rehabilitated young woman (think of the sympathetic depiction of Laura Page’s childhood and family life in her recommendation for parole). In Margaret’s file, however, we see that the history blank’s suspicious form instead begins to scaffold a sense of Margaret’s intrinsic fault, which required more punishment than sympathetic rehabilitation.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

Margaret's official history, re-recorded in a "Verified History" form, gives further force to this tautological loop between Margaret's narrative and her blame-worthiness, as the Laboratory staff present a version of the history blank form that provides the results from their field work investigations. Here, Margaret's family structure is also called into question, not solely as a unit that might be reformed into proper domestic norms (as in the reformers' approach to many European immigrant families).⁴⁸¹ Again reporting that Margaret's first sexual offense was by consent, the report elides any potential injury; the verified statement instead provides a history in which Margaret's supposed waywardness is due to her mother's moral shortcomings, which Margaret replicates, thus producing a kind of genealogy that justified separating and obstructing familial affiliation (Margaret's father had passed away, in part explaining the reformers' focus on her mother). For example, in the verified statement about "home conditions," the investigator reports in the "moral standards" blank that these are "Questionable. Mother professes to have good moral standards but there is some doubt about them."⁴⁸² These "doubts" were in fact culled by the Laboratory's field workers, who interviewed Margaret's mother in her home (thus also implicitly inspecting the household), as well as her neighbors, producing pages of reports materializing these sociologists' expertise in evaluating the city's social life (which were then summarized in the verified history). Of the interview with Margaret's mother, the investigator writes, "Seems to be fairly intelligent and makes a good impression as far as her morals and standards of honesty are concerned, but was not particularly frank. Her attitude during the interview was very listless," rendering her honesty itself as potentially

⁴⁸¹ Margaret and her family had migrated from Virginia, thus the question of the family's place within the city.

⁴⁸² "Verified History," Case file 2466. Such judgment also echoes the probation worker's initial report about Margaret; the probation officer writes, "Defendant's mother is well spoke of as a hard working woman but defendant will never improve if she is left with her mother for there is a man named Smith boarding with the defendant's mother; he has been there for four years and defendant's mother is known as Mrs. Smith...it is not to be wondered at that defendant has no moral sense."

suspicious.⁴⁸³ The investigator concludes that “undoubtedly she has been lax in supervising in supervising patient.”⁴⁸⁴

Furthermore, the statements taken from neighbors and employers “in the field” provided much of the evidence that the Laboratory staff cited to cement Margaret’s mother’s status as less credible. As the field workers inquired about her mother’s reputation, her employers and neighbors divulged suspicions about her life and behavior, substantiating the Laboratory staff’s belief that her respectable appearance and employment was a ruse (and potentially evidence of her deviance). For instance, a woman who employed Margaret’s mother work in her house reports that she “Considers her intelligent and hard-working but has recently heard that her moral reputation is not as good as it might be,” while a neighbor tells the field worker that “patient’s mother appears to work hard but she goes by several different names, which informant considers peculiar.”⁴⁸⁵ Several times people have come to the house asking for Mrs. Smith and when redirected upstairs apparently found the woman they were looking for.”⁴⁸⁶ By nature of her domestic work in multiple locations (as a Laboratory worker put it, she “has traveled around quite a little while at service”), Margaret’s mother was more vulnerable to this social speculation and judgment within the Laboratory’s schema. Though the narratives these interviews generated provided the field workers only with hearsay, by placing stock in this second hand information and transfiguring it into sociological fact, the reformers buttressed their authority to both re-form and to police urban life. In the Laboratory’s representation of Margaret Johnson’s family, moreover, this surveillance only concretized the notion that Margaret’s mother had passed along a tendency towards willful transgression or deceit to her

⁴⁸³ “Patient’s Mother,” Case file 2466.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

daughter, marking their social configuration as not only in need of reform but also potentially of penalization.

Yet as their everyday lives were placed under the Laboratory staff's lens, incarcerated women and their families were well aware of both the authority and the artifice of the reformatory's judgments, and to the social separation it sought to selectively facilitate. In her correspondence with the reformatory's assistant superintendent, Margaret's mother, whose morals were called into question in the field investigation and her daughter's "verified history," draws on the circulation of information in Harlem to condemn Margaret's incarceration and call into question her experiences within Bedford. In its address to the institution itself – guaranteeing its inclusion in the prison's bureaucratic technologies such as the case file – the form of the letter summons the kind of protection (and a sense of fairness) that the prison did not provide for Margaret.⁴⁸⁷

Johnson writes to the reformatory superintendent after traveling to Bedford and being prevented from seeing her daughter during the visitation period (because, as the superintendent later explains, Margaret was in punishment), relating a report about her daughter's mistreatment that she has heard from an acquaintance formerly incarcerated at Bedford, mirroring the Laboratory's method of extracting neighborhood hearsay. She writes, "Dear Miss Cobb, Just a line or two to ask you what was the trouble with Margaret that she was screaming was you whipping her I saw a woman and she say you treat my daughter as if she was a dog."⁴⁸⁸ This sentence condenses the letter's two points of contention (and their interrelated violence): that Johnson was not allowed to see Margaret when she traveled to visit, and that she heard that Margaret had been physically abused

⁴⁸⁷ As Margaret's disciplinary record notes, she was frequently sent to the disciplinary building, or prison, for long periods of time, mainly for "writing notes" and "disobedience"; the fact that matrons found "writing paper, stamped envelopes" in her room earned her a week in a disciplinary cell, suggesting the suspicion and harsh punishment that black women were subject to in the reformatory, and (interrelatedly) the more intensive separation from and monitoring of their families. "Disciplinary record," Case file 2455.

⁴⁸⁸ "Dear Miss Cobb," Case file 2455.

at the reformatory. The news of Margaret's violent punishment from women she ran into in Harlem, and first-hand, from the screams that she heard when she visited Bedford, which she speculated belonged to her daughter.

First, as Johnson stops in Harlem, assumedly on her way home to Staten Island, moving through different city neighborhoods, she writes to Cobb that "on my way home I stop uptown and these girls were telling me about it," drawing on the story they related about Margaret's injury and mistreatments yet at the same time, refraining from identifying the women (at least one of whom had been imprisoned at Bedford) for validity and authority.⁴⁸⁹ Johnson's mother invokes their anonymity as a kind of shield that allows for the assembly of social relationships that exceeded the reformatory's schematic surveillance and drew their impact and force from this semi-opacity; these women they spoke from their experiences in the prison, yet did not adhere to the norms that the reformatory imagined for them, threatening to undermine the social underpinnings of the prison. Second, as Johnson interprets the screaming that she heard while visiting Bedford as her daughter's voice – "I heard her and I want to know was you whipping her" – she in a sense inverts the method she used to screen the women in Harlem's identities, instead insisting on recognizing her daughter's voice despite the fact that the prison had barred her from making contact with Margaret.⁴⁹⁰ In this way, her mother seeks to include her daughter in the social assemblage that exceeds the reformatory's violent and volatile materialization of its schematics, even as she addresses the institution's superintendent (as she cannot address Margaret). She pinpoints her daughter not to single her out as a culpable subject, as per the Laboratory of Social Hygiene, but instead to imagine or summon her as a member of a collective. Rather framing them as evidence of criminality and unruliness that necessitated control, as Johnson discerns her daughter's screams, she connects them

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

to the prison's violent regime of punishment, invoking the injuries that women there experienced, and, as I've suggested, positioning their subject as a member of a social body that exceeds the tools and measurements with which Bedford and the Laboratory of Social Hygiene operated; a community or collective that might more effectively provide the redress denied by the reformatory.

Thus, as Johnson confronts the superintendent with this second hand narrative disseminated by "those women" in the city, as well her own impressions of the violence inflicted on Margaret, instead of attempting to convert these suggestive narratives into authentic/authenticating fact as per the Laboratory staff's methods of interviewing and consolidating information in the case file, Johnson's mother uses it to draw attention to and critique the prison as a space of unstable violence whose authority was scaffolded by the circulation of second-hand narratives and speculation. She writes, "I want you to know it for it made me sick to know such cruel people was up there I can't believe it will you give Margaret this note you read it if I put anything in there that is not right cross it out."⁴⁹¹ By transmitting the "knowledge" of Margaret's injury, her mother implicates the superintendent in producing such violence. Furthermore, Johnson's mother's suggestion that if her account "is not right cross it out" anticipates the censorship integral to the reformatory's method of constructing a "verified" narrative of Margaret's criminality (and her family's faults), revealing the "verification process" to be an act of violent elision, a way to justify the severance of family and social relations, as much as a method of scientific fact-finding.⁴⁹² Her mother's insistence that her note be given to Margaret reaffirms her connection to her daughter despite her incarceration (and the Laboratory's castigation of her parenting), and the information from the woman formerly at Bedford highlights that the prison might shape urban social life, but not always with its intended effects. Thus, Johnson's letter points to how the social narratives justifying her daughter's

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² This self-censorship also acknowledges the reformatory's strict monitoring of inmates' mail, which only allowed certain content from close family members.

imprisonment might be re-directed to both critique the prison's violence and to invoke and insist on the presence of, and possibility for, social life that the reformatory could not contain: her critique and condemnation of the reformatory's violence operates in tandem with her imagination and invocation of social formations that might operate otherwise.

Finally, Margaret's case file contains little of Margaret's own writing besides her testimony for her initial Laboratory statement, which quickly becomes distorted and disfigured. The single note that the file does retain from Margaret is the one letter required of her on parole; because her sentence was so punitive, she served most of her time at Bedford, rather than being released on parole.⁴⁹³ In this letter, Margaret writes to the same superintendent her mother addressed, Helen Cobb: "Dear Miss Cobb, Just a few lines to let you know that I received my discharge papers and thank you very much for them. Yes I am more than glad to have finished that 3 years. By the time I get the next [perhaps documentation of discharge] I'll have green apples growing on my feet." Though the missive is brief, the attention it draws to Margaret's lengthy sentence alongside her unusual imagery of "green growing on" (or perhaps under?) her feet, evoking a more organic social existence in tandem with Margaret's flight from the reformatory's reach. Reading the Laboratory of Social Hygiene's initial descriptions of Margaret and her family alongside records of Margaret's experiences in Bedford, and her mother's engagement with the reformatory's disciplinary mechanisms, allows us to glimpse how the institution's aspirational social scientific discourse not only had concrete effects, but also how its modes of description and discursive violence were critiqued and re-harnessed to imagine membership in social formations invested in redressing, rather than replicating, violence.

"It doesn't pay to be a good fellow in this joint": Lydia Michaels' File

⁴⁹³ "I received my discharge papers," Case file 2503.

Finally, consider the case file of Lydia Michaels, an African American teenager incarcerated in 1917 for disorderly conduct and incorrigibility.⁴⁹⁴ As I've noted, in the transcript for the Laboratory's staff about Lydia, a prison matron observes that Lydia was "about as mean a little storyteller as I have had in some time. Has been in punishment twice for telling stories. It is almost impossible for her to tell the truth." Lydia's waywardness, according to the staff, stemmed from her refusal to take her wayward actions seriously (staying out all night, stealing money to pay for a costume to wear to a cabaret audition); more damning in the eyes of the Laboratory staff, Lydia was unwilling to give a repentant account of that waywardness. Unlike Laura's case, in which staff members interpreted her "waywardness" as signifying potential for rehabilitation, a narrative that resolved with the prediction that Laura would indeed "go straight," as a young black woman, Lydia was held responsible for her apparent incorrigibility: her wayward narration was interpreted as a symptom of her intrinsically deceptive character. Moreover, Lydia's "case" vexed the Laboratory experts, as her results on the Laboratory's intelligence tests showed that she was of "normal mentality" (undermining the Laboratory's racist presumptions about black women's intelligence). For example, as the Laboratory's psychiatrist attempted to reconcile Lydia's test results with her perceived criminality, he noted that she was "very responsive but lacks emotional control, responds impulsively and thoughtlessly," once again drawing into relief the tension between the set of expectations and classificatory schema that the laboratory attempted to enforce and the incarcerated women's incommensurability with those categories. Thus, the question of narrative capacity in relation to the evaluation of Lydia's character again looms large, as Bedford's staff mobilized her account of herself to confirm their views about her essential waywardness and need for surveillance and punishment. In this file, however, Lydia's narrative account of herself is linked to her individual

⁴⁹⁴Case file 2503, Series 14610-77B, Series 14610-77B Bedford Hills Correctional Facility Inmate Case Files, 1915-30, Records of the Department of Correctional Services, New York State Archives and Records Administration, State Education Department, Albany, NY.

incorrigibility, rather than her potential reformation (and failure to live up to those expectations for white women, as in Laura Page's file), or the transmission of waywardness through family genealogy (as in Margaret Johnson's file, though Lydia's relationship to her family is also judged harshly).

Yet as we examine the records that comprise Lydia's case file, from field workers' notes to Lydia's own correspondence, I want to ask: what happens when we consider Lydia's wayward "storytelling" not solely as a label the Laboratory devised to enforce racial segregation (though of course, it is), but also as a narrative mode in its own right? Clearly, Lydia's "storytelling" is not a function of her so-called deviance, as those compiling the Laboratory case file would have their contemporaries believe; and certainly it is a rhetorical strategy that Lydia deploys to navigate the reformatory's power structures. Instead, I'll argue that Lydia's wayward narration, the fact that according to Bedford staff "it is almost impossible for her to tell the truth," also constitutes a kind of literary production that enables an alternate epistemological framework to take form within the case file's coercive constraints, despite the record-keepers' surveillance of everyday life inside and outside of the institution. In this way, Lydia's storytelling is similar to what Kevin Young, writing about African American art and literature, calls "storying," a "tradition and form" that takes the "truth," so often used to oppress and stratify, and "explore it and expand it," to take a seemingly "transgressive behavior...and redeem it as a literary value."⁴⁹⁵ When, for instance, buried in the midst of the file's many observations about Lydia's "untruthfulness," a staff member describes her as "very emphatic in stating that she feels she was sent here unjustly," we glimpse the alternate purpose and aesthetic strategy of Lydia's storytelling, as she imagined and insisted on a different social world than what the prison's reformers sought to enforce.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹⁵ Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On The Blackness of Blackness* Minneapolis: Grey Wolf Press (2012), 27.

⁴⁹⁶ "Lydia Michaels" August 7, 1917, Case file 2503.

The difficulties that Lydia's "stories" created for Bedford reformers, frequently recorded in her file, highlights how the Laboratory staff's construction of Lydia's character is itself a product of tenuous narrative as well (despite the Laboratory's insistence on factual objectivity), while also laying the groundwork for Lydia's invocation of new possibilities for social relationship, despite her frequent punishment and isolation within the reformatory.⁴⁹⁷ The form of Lydia's case, then, is more than a record of her institutional rendering into a "statistical person," available for newly modern surveillance.⁴⁹⁸ Instead, the file documents both the institution's, and Bedford reformers', efforts at supervision and control as violent yet incomplete. Traces of Lydia's storytelling, included in the file to justify her punishment, exceed the case file's seeming rigid terms and disrupt their classificatory force, drawing into relief a differently imagined trajectory for women's lives, one that allowed them to develop relationships in which racialized domesticity as imagined by the Laboratory – white and immigrant women as home-makers and mothers, and black women as domestic laborers in white households – no longer functioned as the basic building block for social organization.

To understand how Lydia's storytelling unsettled this classificatory process, however, it is useful to trace in more detail how Bedford's reformers encoded Lydia's narration as the fundamental indicator of her intrinsic criminality in her case file. To begin, in the initial form for "Information Concerning the Patient," a staff member gives a fairly generic account of a young girl's "waywardness" for the time, observing that Lydia "seems to have no steadiness. Is fond of music and moving pictures. Has been associating with bad company for some time."⁴⁹⁹ The reason for Lydia's arrest was staying out all night at a dance hall – "she says she sat by herself and did not have anything to do with any men," the staff sociologist quips – and she was turned in to the authorities

⁴⁹⁷ "Character and Conduct in Institution," Case file 2503.

⁴⁹⁸ Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 100.

⁴⁹⁹ "Information Concerning the Patient," Case file 2503.

by her parents with the hope that she might be rehabilitated (and perhaps frightened) into respectable behavior. Indeed, both the reformatory and the wayward minor statute under which Lydia was convicted and sent to Bedford purported to provide protection from corrupting city influences, as well as proper rehabilitation into domesticity for women deemed too “incorrigible” for their parents’ control.⁵⁰⁰

Yet as the Laboratory’s staff investigates Lydia’s “case,” her parents’ desire for her reformation, as well as her protection from “bad associations,” is quickly translated into evidence of Lydia’s essential deviance and irredeemable criminality, justifying the regulation not only of Lydia herself, but also (as we will later see) of the web of social relations understood to constitute her character. For example, the Bedford staff members seized upon the fact that Lydia had been adopted by her parents – highlighting in particular that her adoptive mother was not sure of her exact age – to demonstrate Lydia’s characteristic deviance from proper domesticity and family order. As such, the Laboratory’s reports emphasizes how Lydia differs from her foster parents (who are deemed to “have very good standards and a good reputation in the community”), and take her refusal to repent for her “wayward” behavior as evidence of deliberately “pretending” to be younger than she is.⁵⁰¹ In Lydia’s initial psychological evaluations, the mental examination form records Lydia’s “emotional tone” as “showing no depth. She is apparently quite unconcerned and does not feel deeply the separation from her parents,” casting this supposed shallow emotional attachment to her parents as a symptom of Lydia’s willfully deceptive account of herself. The psychologist continues on to describe Lydia’s claims to youth and innocence as performative pretense (despite

⁵⁰⁰ For example, in an interview with a field worker, Lydia’s mother remarks that “she felt that [Lydia] ought to be sent away before she became any worse as she had started on a very decided downward course.” “Information of patient’s foster mother,” Case file 2503. See Cheryl Hicks, “In Danger of Becoming Morally Depraved?: Single Black Women, Working Class Families, and New York State’s Wayward Minor Laws, 1917-1928,” 151 *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 2077 (2003) on how wayward minor statutes were used to place black and immigrant working class families under state control in the 1910s and 1920s.

⁵⁰¹ “Staff Meeting” Case file 2503.

the fact that her parents intended her reformatory sentence to protect her innocent youth from “harmful” influences), the “patient appears very immature. She grimaces quite a good deal when talking and evidently takes pleasure in ‘acting’ a child much younger than she is. At the same time she tries to explain away her offenses and to make herself out a little innocent girl.”⁵⁰² Separated from her family and isolated in the reformatory’s intake quarantine, as Lydia gave an account of herself, the Laboratory staff construed this necessarily performative act of narration as evidence of intrinsic bad character.

Moreover, the equation of Lydia’s seemingly duplicitous storytelling with her supposedly innate criminality provides grounds for Bedford’s staff to survey social life in the city, scaffolding their own imagined narrative of urban reform. Descriptions of Lydia’s deception proliferate in pages of interview statements taken by the Laboratory’s field worker, who investigated home and neighborhood conditions, and compiled comments about Lydia’s character, accentuating her history of duplicitousness (no matter how minor): family, neighbors and former employers provide the field worker with “facts” about Lydia’s “wild stories”: “that her word cannot be relied upon at all,” that “she is clever and foxy, a terrible liar, not to be relied on in any way” that she “has told stories about certain people in the neighborhood, while, they are all true, should not be mentioned as they have caused lots of trouble.”⁵⁰³ These interviews of family and neighbors whom the Laboratory calls informants, of course, are filtered, or “verified,” in the Laboratory’s parlance, through an uneven power gradient, as the investigator questions each interviewee and records her answers, passing judgment on the social arrangements and individual lives encountered in “the field,” and justifying

⁵⁰² “Mental Examination,” Case file 2503.

⁵⁰³ “Information of the Patient’s Foster Mother”; “Information of Mrs. Graham”; “Record obtained from S.P.C.C. Yonkers,” Case file 2503.

Lydia's long-term removal from her family's influence, despite being reported as having "very good standards" in the "colored" "community."⁵⁰⁴

For example, as the investigator interviewing Lydia's mother probes her about Lydia's "disobedience" and "wild stories," she also records that Mrs. Michaels "is quite naïve and not particularly intelligent but very good-hearted and affectionate. Seems honest and respectable and has probably been a hard worker... [but] Apparently has a very poor understanding of patient and has been entirely unable to control her," justifying Lydia's separation from her mother by characterizing Mrs. Michaels as capable of domestic labor yet not of proper maternal regulation and control. In this way, Lydia's mother herself becomes a subject in need of supervision, and her account of Lydia's conduct in need of correction. By contrast, the investigator describes the white woman for whom Lydia performed domestic labor (who in her statement labels Lydia as a "terrible liar") as "a large, stout woman, intelligent and good-hearted... Her information is undoubtedly reliable. She probably did her best for patient and was a kindly and considerate employer," corroborating the authority of white women both to most capably judge the black women they employed and, of course, to benefit from this labor relation.⁵⁰⁵ Creating this elaborate record of Lydia's deceptive storytelling, then, serves as a foil for the field worker's authority to make objective judgments about both Lydia and the social worlds she inhabits, rendering that social life at once knowable and malleable for reformers invested in shaping the city's future, while maintaining racial segregation, and labor exploitation, through the surveillance and often forced dissolution of black

⁵⁰⁴ "Staff Meeting," Case file 2503. Lydia's case file also documents that she served the full three years of her "indeterminate" sentence at Bedford, when other young women sentenced to the institution (usually white) were frequently allowed to serve much of those three years on parole rather than imprisoned. Lydia's mother also wrote to Bedford's superintendent multiple times to ask for Lydia's release to parole, ultimately enlisting the aid of Traverse A. Armstrong, a Justice of the Peace in the neighboring Mount Pleasant, to request Lydia's parole on her behalf (all of these requests were denied). See "Letter from Traverse A. Armstrong to Bedford Reformatory," August 16, 1918, Case file 2503.

⁵⁰⁵ "Information of the Patient's Mother," Case file 2503.

kinship. In this sense, the field notes, interviews and diagnoses serialized in the case file summon and “organize publics,” as Lauren Berlant has noted in her writing on the case. In this context, Bedford’s reformers conceptualized “storytelling” as a marker of deviance that solidified their own expertise as interpreters and authors of a reformed urban landscape, and justified racial stratification.⁵⁰⁶

However, despite this meticulous compilation of fine-grained details about Lydia’s social history and constitution, the Laboratory’s attempts to fully diagnose and decide upon the proper institutional course of treatment for Lydia cannot fully resolve the “problem” of Lydia’s “wild stories,” even as the institution in large part depends on Lydia’s storytelling as the most compelling evidence of her need for incarceration and surveillance. It is in the case file’s record of the Laboratory Staff meeting, during which the staff assesses the information amassed by the prison’s investigators, that we see most clearly how Lydia’s supposed “sly” and untruthful nature unsettled and upset the intricate categorizations the social scientists running the institution crafted in the hope of asserting control over the modernizing cityscape. The meeting is recorded as a transcript, and details the dialogue between the Laboratory’s sociologist, physician, field workers, psychologist, superintendent, and prison matrons. This transcript documents the literal performance of the reformers’ authority and expertise, while also inadvertently illustrating the difficulty of making an account of Lydia’s culpability cohere.

The conversation between staff members begins with a discussion of Lydia’s age – rendered suspect by Lydia’s perceived inability to tell the truth about her age, as well as her supposed performance of immaturity and innocence – and whether she legally belongs in the reformatory (as the cut off age for incarcerating girls and women was 16). To determine the appropriateness of the reformatory, they turn to Lydia’s menstrual history as an indicator of sexual maturity. The

⁵⁰⁶ Lauren Berlant, “On the Case,” *Critical Inquiry*, 33.4, (Summer 2007), 663.

reformatory's superintendent, Helen Cobb, suggests that the fact that Lydia has just recently begun menstruating does not indicate her youth, a nonsensical observation made (apparently) logical only through reference to Lydia's blackness:

Miss Cobb: Don't these colored girls menstruate rather early?

Dr. Grover: Well, some of them don't. This girl strikes me, however, as rather immature in her general actions and I am inclined to think that she is not more than 14.

Dr. Johnson: By the Yerke-Bridges Point Scale she made 85 points, making a coefficient of mental ability of 1.01, -based on 16 years. By the Stanford Revision her mental age is 12 years, 4 months, making an intelligence quotient of 0.77.

Miss Dawley: I wish it were possible to get her correct age. If she is only 14 it seems too bad to have her committed here.⁵⁰⁷

Here, we see how each expert animates their respective discourse to account for the puzzle of Lydia's age and related culpability, while at the same time drawing on presumptions about the biological and social characteristics of "colored girls." Yet even as each staff member attempts to make partially legible Lydia's age and corresponding criminality, citing intelligence statistics and medical observations, the transcript reveals their generalizations about Lydia's racial characteristics to be unstable and speculative, as the staff cannot systemically come to a conclusion – as Almena Dawley's wistful wish for accurate knowledge evinces – and the document records each expert talking at or adjacent to, but never quite in connection with, the other's field of expertise, failing to draw a complete and accurate portrait of Lydia's character, and more concretely, enabling the institution to incarcerate a young girl who (in the staff's own opinion) was likely no more than 14 years old. Indeed, Lydia's "storytelling," which called her age into question in the first place, seems instead to characterize the Laboratory's scientific ensemble itself as chaotic and unstable, drawing

⁵⁰⁷ "Staff Meeting September 29, 1917," Case file 2503.

attention to the Laboratory's systems of categorization as a series of competing and conflicting narratives that depend on social performance for their substantiation. In the end, the Laboratory staff members bracket their various disciplinary affectations to engage in the same basic analysis of Lydia's propensity for storytelling itself. Edith Spaulding, the Laboratory's psychiatric expert, resolves the issue by announcing rather casually that Lydia is "evidently intellectually capable of realizing that what she has done is wrong but has not exerted herself much in using her intellect."⁵⁰⁸ Thus, the staff thus decide that Lydia should remain at Bedford, despite the suggestion that she might be younger than sixteen, cementing Lydia's racial categorization with her supposedly deviant account of herself, through her assignment to prison (rather than probation or a training school). As Lydia's "storytelling" remained at the center of the Laboratory's purportedly scientific measurement of her character, however, the record of her institutionalization also followed its wayward movement, and illuminates how Lydia imagined and assembled new forms of social relationship alongside other young women in the prison.

As I've noted, much of Lydia's case file reflects her frequent punishment at Bedford. As the reformatory's staff struggled to maintain order and execute their classificatory system on the prison's grounds, the records of Lydia's "conduct" in the institution continue to hinge around her perceived deception and unwillingness to adhere to the reformatory's mores. In a matron's report, Lydia's behavior is described as "very troublesome, sly and deceptive, an undercurrent. Requires frequent discipline. Fond of white girls, and had an undesirable friendship with Clara Field," while her recommendation for parole indicates that during her tenure at Bedford, she was "very troublesome. She has been in Rebecca Hall and the Disciplinary Building. In punishment continually. Friendships with the white girls." In these records, Lydia's "friendships with the white girls," or "harmful

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid. Spaulding conducted extensive research into "psychopathic delinquents" at the reformatory, focusing almost exclusively on incarcerated white women as subjects. See Edith Spaulding, *An Experimental Study of Psychopathic Delinquent Women*, New York: Rand, McNally and Company (1923).

intimacy” are elided with her devious storytelling and guile, rather than the failure of the reformatory to effectively enforce the rehabilitary narrative and substantiate its scientific expertise. As her “sly...undercurrent” was framed as necessitating special surveillance and punishment, Lydia was subject to the reformatory’s punitive disciplinary regime while also shut out from much of its resources. In fact, according to the *New York Tribune*, Lydia testified in the 1919 hearings for the State Commission on Prisons on “allegations of cruelty to prisoners” at Bedford.⁵⁰⁹ She reported that she frequently experienced the reformatory’s practice of “string up” young women, or handcuffing them with their hands above her head; in addition, as a young black woman, was often prevented from attending educational classes at Bedford, which prepared women for motherhood, as well as provided training for clerical office work (rather than manual domestic labor to which black women were frequently relegated post-parole).⁵¹⁰ Thus, as I’ve been arguing, in building a case around Lydia’s intrinsic waywardness, the prison’s experts and matrons also inadvertently generated a record of the prison’s incomplete and often violent efforts to classify and segregate women at Bedford; what’s more, these records also document the social organization that women incarcerated in Bedford devised to evade the reformatory’s violence – and to do justice to their own lived experience and relationships.

One such result of Lydia’s surveillance at Bedford was a matron’s confiscation of a note, written on toilet paper, that Lydia penned to another inmate while isolated in punishment, retained in Lydia’s file. Lydia’s note, written in her cell in the solitary confinement of the “DB” (Disciplinary

⁵⁰⁹ “Message to the Legislature: Investigation of Management and Affairs of Bedford Reformatory, Transmitting Report of John S. Kennedy,” March 18, 1920, Papers of Alfred E. Smith, Vol. 2 1919-1920, New York: J.B. Lyon Co. (1921).

⁵¹⁰ At a special hearing for the State Commission of Prisons, Michaels testified that black women were not allowed to attend classes regularly with the white women in the reformatory: “When asked if the negro women in the institution were treated as fairly as the white, [Michaels] said that only one (herself) was permitted to attend school. The rest were forced to work in the laundry.” “Doctor Assails Stringing Up of Bedford Girls” *New York Tribune* (December 14, 1919), 14.

Building), or “the prison” (as it was called by women in Bedford), suggests the failure of the prison’s scientific innovation, as Bedford’s staff fell back on the “old-fashioned” methods of corporal punishment and confinement, usually disdained by progressive reformers, to control women incarcerated at Bedford (hence Lydia’s time spent in isolation from her letter’s addressee and romantic interest). Although perhaps never read by its intended recipient (it had been confiscated by staff and possibly placed in Lydia’s file before it was properly relayed and received), the note’s hybrid composition – part love letter, part account of rebellion at the prison, part poem – unsettles and re-orientes Bedford’s classificatory system to imagine social relationships that no longer hinge on women’s supposed “fitness” for domestic life. The material of the note itself, toilet paper, suggests a literal messiness and uncleanliness that the Laboratory of Social Hygiene could not contain, despite its confiscation and inclusion within the bounds of the case file itself. And similarly, the letter’s content, or Lydia’s storytelling within this note, disturbs and rearranges the form of the case file, through which the Laboratory’s matrons and experts intended to stratify and control the shape of urban sociality, imagining seemingly progressive, yet segregated, modernization in the city.

First, Lydia’s missive complicates the Bedford reformers’ preoccupation with its inmates’ social relationships inside and outside of the prison, calling into question the prison’s narrow focus on sexual reproduction and racialized domesticity. Instead, the note begins by blurring the script of heterosexual romance with the constraints of the institution itself. The letter’s opening lines are at once a generic complaint from a jealous lover and a stream-of-consciousness meditation on Lydia’s isolating confinement, “Well, sweetheart I hope that you won’t mind, I really don’t know what I am writing I am a little bit upset you will have to excuse this paper as you know that I am runned in and cannot get another kind. Well your missive did cheer me dear I not only know that you sit with M.G. but that you are with her. Now don’t deny it.”⁵¹¹ Lydia frames her initial address with the

⁵¹¹ “My Devoted Pal,” Case file 2503.

observation that “I really don’t know what I am writing,” starting in media res and unsettling the case file’s developmental narration of each young woman’s personhood. Yet despite her claim that she doesn’t really know what she is writing, Lydia goes on to limn a system of social organization within the reformatory, one that may initially have taken root thanks to the prison’s confinement, but which featured its own codes for communication and relationship (i.e. the intricate connotations of sitting with M.G.) that provisionally adapt to the prison’s strictures, while ignoring its codes of heteronormativity and racial segregation.

While Lydia abides by principles that at first appear to resemble domestic romance and respectability, but she nevertheless directs her jealous anger not towards the object of her affection, or the meddling M.G., but at the reformatory officials and the obstacles they pose to her attachment to the letter’s recipient and their experience of intimacy, following her lover’s complaint with the observation: “Really I get so utterly disgusted with these g—d— cops I could kill them They may run Bedford and they may run some of these pussies in Bedford but they are never going to run Lydia Michaels.”⁵¹² Here, Lydia offers a defiant account of her own self-regulation; while the Laboratory has conflated her capacity for narration with her essential incorrigibility, Lydia’s narrative frames her willfulness as a refusal to adhere to the reformatory’s violently repressive domesticity, which functioned to rehabilitate white women while consigning black women to manual labor. Furthermore, while Lydia identifies herself in full in her account (not dissimilarly from the Laboratory’s history of each woman, which aspired to provide a complete account of her identity), she anonymizes the women working at Bedford as “cops,” denouncing the professional identities that many reformers at Bedford attempted to build as they also constructed narratives for each of Bedford’s inmates. Grouping together and categorizing these experts as “cops,” moreover, makes the violence that underpinned Bedford’s system of classification explicit, highlighting its replication

⁵¹² Ibid.

of an oppressive status quo despite its matrons' and researchers' intent on scientific experiment and progress. Finally, in contrast with her underlined identification of "Lydia Michaels," and despite her explicit defiance towards the prison's staff, Lydia chooses to censor her description of those "g— d— cops" with conspicuous dashes. Perhaps Lydia anticipates her recipient's sensibilities, or gives a sardonic nod to the letter's possible interception. Either way, we might read this self-censorship as performing Michaels' ability to adhere to the codes of propriety she chooses, while actively rejecting others, illuminating the different registers from which she drew as she narrated and reconceived the terms of her agency.

Lydia continues to both expose and redirect the institution's classificatory violence by recounting an alternate history of her time in the reformatory, based on social relationships that are not bound to the domestic nor to the normative family unity, as in the Laboratory's investigation of women's "social conditions" and the compilation of "verified" histories in the case file. Unsettling the Laboratory experts' attempts to maintain the color line in the city by assessing the character of incarcerated women's neighborhoods and "associates," Lydia instead counters this racialized conception of domesticity by measuring her "good" character in terms of the time she has spent in the reformatory's designated disciplinary building, a place used to punish women deemed especially unruly or incorrigible: "It doesn't pay to be a good fellow in a joint of this kind, but I don't regret anything I ever done I have been to prison three times and...may go again soon a few others and myself always got the Dirty End."⁵¹³ What's more, Lydia shifts her focus to the structure of the prison itself, providing a history that examines the development of the institution's violence, rather than the women it takes as the object of analysis. Highlighting how staff at Bedford conceived of black women as inherently culpable, and subjected them to violent discipline, Michaels observes how she and a group of women, likely those living in the cottage for black women which was

⁵¹³ Ibid.

segregated from the rest of the reformatory's inmates, were frequently blamed and punished for disturbances in the reformatory (i.e. subject to the "Dirty End"): "Everytime prison would cut up in 1918 or 1917 when police came up whether we were cutting up or not but we [were] always where she come in."⁵¹⁴ Yet, it is in the "prison" unit itself, Lydia writes, that she finds the terms of her dissent and self-expression recognized and reciprocated by others, as they wreak havoc together in confinement. Lydia summons this "good gang" of women from the "prison" unit by name: "Trixie & Helen Bryant & Spanish & Ethel Edgecombe & Jockey & myself & about two other they would always string us up or put us in the Stairway sheets but we would cut up all the more."⁵¹⁵ As Lydia registers the violence to which the women were subject, she chooses to recount the group's collaborative destruction in turn (rather than simply their victimization) as the hinge of their relationship, turning the reformatory's discipline in on itself ("cut up all the more"). Furthermore, Lydia also makes the women illegible to the reformatory's instruments of classification, mixing formal full names with nicknames, and combining the classificatory descriptions of the Laboratory case file with informal but exclusive codes. Making these seemingly destructive acts the basis of social relationship, Lydia acknowledges and evades the reformatory's attempts to evaluate the social associations upon which women's character were based, but also uses these disciplinary measures, from the material space of confinement and punishment to the reformatory's system of classification, to assert a mode of social relation whose terms are opaque to the reformatory's norms.

Lydia elaborates upon this different mode when she turns back to the letter's initial romance, closing by including a poem that imagines a different form of relationship than Bedford envisioned or allowed. Several verses of the poem are Lydia's variation on the chorus of a popular song

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

composed by Abe Olman, with lyrics by Earl Haubrich.⁵¹⁶ Within the context of the case file and specifically, partially transcribed in Lydia's note to her paramour, however, the meaning of the lyrics shift to fit Lydia's circumstances in solitary confinement, as she addresses an audience whose identity is both concealed and at a remove:

Sweetheart in dreams
I'm calling
I Love you best of all
when shadows of
twilight are falling.
I miss you most of
all
Sunshine of joy in your
smile I can see.
In each winking star
Your sweet face I can
see.
You're all of my heart
so don't let us part
Sweetheart I'm calling
you.⁵¹⁷

Drawing attention to the uncertainty of its receipt and readership, the poem begins with the speaker's objectless "calling," a kind of apostrophe rather than a fully realized address to a loved one. Furthermore, when the speaker does describe the object of her affection, both that object and that desire are essentially opaque, defined by shadow and liminality: "I Love you best of all/ when shadows of/ twilight are falling." As Lydia highlights this not quite intelligible figure into the poem's romantic script, she in turn suspends its sentimentality (a source of the violent domestic scripts enforced in Bedford) and makes space for a more speculative form of intimacy, one that is defined by an unresolved absence, "I miss you most of/ all," and in which object and action are unsettled, as in "Your sweet face I can/ see." Furthermore, the verses draw little distinction between the speaker's own gaze, her object of affection, and the natural landscape: "Sunshine of joy in your/

⁵¹⁶ Abe Olman and Earl Haubrich, "Sweetheart, I'm Calling You," Chicago: Forster Music Publishing (1917).

⁵¹⁷ "My dearest pal," Case file 2503.

smile I can see. In each winking star/ Your sweet face I can/see.” In this way, not only is the poem’s addressee concealed from surveillance, but Lydia also refuses to make this relationship legible in the prison’s terms: her attachment belongs neither to the seeming harmony of the domestic realm, nor to the thrill of its transgression, but seemingly remains both natural and undefined, calling attention to its malleability and its possibility for re-making, rather than Bedford’s ideal of reformation (which, as we’ve seen, despite its aspirations to a more wholesome social future, remained tethered to, and resulted in, the violent enforcement of racialized norms). Lydia concludes the poem by ironizing this indistinction between nature, the addressee, and Lydia herself as author – a dynamic chain of relation – as she writes “you’re all of my heart, so don’t let us part,” as in fact she is isolated in punishment and already separated from her object of attachment. With this break, rather than simply replicating Lydia’s own self-definition and subjectivity (or reinstating a set of social norms), Lydia instead highlights her capacity for imagination and collaboration with another, “calling” for the possibility of their repaired relation that would necessarily exceed the social terms on offer at Bedford.

If, as Barbara Johnson has noted, what links the poetic form of the lyric (as Lydia draws upon here) and the form of the law are their mutual use of anthropomorphism, or the known properties of the human underlying the citizen-subject, here, Lydia draws on the normative and indeed seemingly clichéd form of love poetry to at once expose the violence that “knowing” and categorizing that subject produces, while also calling attention to the break or discontinuities in that subject, which might be repaired and rebuilt through different forms of social relationship.⁵¹⁸ Lydia’s poetic address, then, is a critique of Bedford’s violent norms, but it also stages its own experiment in “calling” into being forms of social relationship that perhaps may not be institutionalized through

⁵¹⁸ Barbara Johnson, “Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law,” *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities*, 10.2 (1998).

normative violence, but whose subjects' imagination of new social narratives signaled their capacity for repair and regeneration.

In keeping with Lydia's insistence on the formation of different modes of relationship within Bedford's disciplinary space, after her release from Bedford (in which she served a particularly long sentence, during which her parents attempted and failed to petition for her release), Bedford staff were forwarded an anonymous tip that Lydia was spotted and identified as, "a pregnant girl begging her way through this part of the country [White Plains, NY]" and that "a white girl, named Catherine, also an ex-Bedford inmate, is usually with her."⁵¹⁹ While Bedford's administration did not apprehend the two women, Lydia eventually returned to the reformatory after she was arrested in 1926 for possession of a firearm outside a nightclub, with which, according to newspaper coverage, she had intended to shoot a man who she had been romantically involved with (though there is no statement from Lydia in her file or in press accounts as to her motives).⁵²⁰ Her initial intake sheets include little information, but Lydia was able to list Catherine Caufield as a close friend in her social and family history form, ironically looping the relationship she formed in defiance of Bedford's rules into their classificatory structure (even as she was still subject to that discipline). Lydia was in fact quickly transferred from the reformatory to a state penitentiary, because, as the current superintendent wrote, she had been involved in the "riots" at Bedford, and might inculcate other incarcerated women with her incendiary attitudes – a decision, we might surmise, which was reached due to the fact that Lydia testified against Bedford's administration during her first sentence in 1919. In this way, Lydia's narration was once again held up as evidence of her criminality. There is no

⁵¹⁹ "Church Mission of Help Letter to Amos Baker," May 11, 1921, Case file 2503.

⁵²⁰ Case file 4092. See also "Singer Too 'Tight' for Reformatory" *The Afro-American* (June 26, 1926), 5 and "[Lydia Michaels], Noisy, Transferred to Jail," *Variety*, (June 16, 1926), 31. The Variety reports that Michaels was a "colored cabaret singer and musical comedy show girl" (31).

information in the historical record about the circumstances of Lydia's early death in 1943.⁵²¹ While her refusal of the classificatory system found in her file did not prevent or protect her from the continued experience of carceral violence, its imaginative labor redirects the many breaks, absences and unanswered questions of the case file into a question and call for its reader: how best to document and respond to her collaborative vision?

⁵²¹ "Tarrytown obituaries," *The Chicago Defender, National Edition*, (August 7, 1943), 19A.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to return to the Bedford file for Ruth Long, whose “case” I opened with in the introduction of this dissertation. Having worked through the social conflict and antagonism that shaped life at the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills, (and in turn, women’s experiences in modernizing New York), we might begin to see even more clearly how her writings – those that remain in her prison case file, and those that are alluded to but absent – illuminate the divergent and discordant visions that reformers and incarcerated women at Bedford had for their future trajectories and social relationships. For instance, Ruth wrote her play, “In the Woods,” which at first glance appears as a light, pastoral treatment of life in the woods, as flora and fauna interact and teach an unnamed man life lessons, in August 1920. However, this date was days or weeks after women incarcerated at Bedford rebelled against the increasingly violent discipline and segregation that occurred in the prison, and state troopers were called into the institution to “quell” the so-called “riots” on the reformatory grounds.⁵²² Though Ruth’s file itself makes no explicit mention of this “unrest” (as we saw in the previous files, it takes piecing together the prison’s attempts at enforcing its classificatory system, from the laboratory investigations to its disciplinary reports, to begin to understand the prison’s everyday violence and resistance to that violence), like Lydia Michael’s love note, considering the constraint under which it was written might shape our understanding of the text’s strategies and creative vision. Like Lydia Michael’s love note, moreover, Ruth’s play calls its audience to participate in a kind of collaborative re-imagination of their circumstances and confinement in Bedford.

For example, in the play’s opening lines, Ruth dramatizes how the play’s protagonist, first characterized as “weary with life and care,” transfigures his seemingly oppressive and dreary environment through imaginative work, recasting this despair as a different way of seeing and

⁵²² “Race War of Women in Reformatory,” *Boston Daily Globe*, July 25, 1920.

understanding the world, or an alternate lens that the audience (which would be comprised of women also imprisoned at the reformatory), too, might share in viewing their experiences. The play's protagonist observes, "All nature seemed to be alive, -- heart, soul enjoying life,/ Whilst I oh man, was grumbling at pain and strife./ I heard the song of the turtle dove as it sang to its mate tenderly,/ I almost felt the love he sang as I listened attentively," drawing attention to the potential of both the natural world, and its aesthetic form, to render an inhospitable and violent space livable (as the protagonist "almost felt the love he sang"), highlighting its possibility for transformation, or at least, flexibility.⁵²³ Rather than turning to the conventions of "man," as the hero is simply named, he instead looks to characters from nature itself – a robin, a nightingale, a butterfly, a turtle dove. On the surface, or at first glance, these figures might seem to represent clichéd sentimentality (or even the prison's staff's efforts to enforce institutional harmony). But in the space that the play's protagonist encounters (and which Ruth stages), these simple characters create room for social possibilities that the reformatory sought to totally prohibit and eradicate: the man listens to the turtle dove announce to his mate "We are happy you and I, dear,/ Happy, happy as can be!/ Loving each other with nothing to fear/ Because I love you and you love me."⁵²⁴ The ability to "love each other with nothing to fear/ Because I love you and you love me" runs counter to (perhaps in direct opposition to) the reformatory's aspiration to re-form each incarcerated woman into her proper position, and set of relationships (both sexual and social), in the modern city, ultimately along racial lines – a logic against which many women in the prison rebelled that summer. In staging these lines, the play also suggests this possibility to its intended audience, the women incarcerated at Bedford, creating a kind of assemblage that might imagine, and potentially enact, the dynamic flexibility that the play's protagonist perceives.

⁵²³ "In the Woods," Case File 2778, 2.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

What is the responsibility, then, of the contemporary reader, research and writer, then, when she encounters Ruth's vision for alternate social relations that the women's prison attempted to foreclose in the early 20th century US? First, the play calls for the work of historical contextualization – to do the historical research necessary to understand the motivations and experiences of the different authors writing material for Ruth's case file (by this, I mean by Ruth and the prison staff), and how the reformatory shaped Ruth's lived experiences, as well as those of her peers. While this project is impossible to wholly complete, it is necessary to understand Ruth's strategies for navigating both the confines of the prison, as well as the larger carceral regime developing in the city itself, and envisioning forms of social relationship that exceed its racist and heteropatriarchal norms.

And second, as Ruth's writings evoke and imagine presents and futures that do not adhere to the life trajectories that the newly established women's prison attempted to enforce, I'd like to suggest that it is also important to examine our contemporary moment, and its potential futures, though in this conclusion, I will only have space to gesture towards this analysis. In the United States in 2016, the women's prison has existed well over a hundred years as an institution, and the population of women imprisoned in the United States is the fastest growing in the country; women of color are overrepresented among these numbers.⁵²⁵ Moreover, recent activism, especially within the Black Lives Matter and the #SayHerName campaign, has brought attention to carceral and police violence against women of color, following in the tradition of black women activists such as Angela Davis and Assata Shakur, among many others.⁵²⁶ We might draw a line of connection

⁵²⁵See Lauren E. Glaze and Danielle Kaeble, "Correctional Populations in the United States, 2013," U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin (2014). Glaze and Kaeble note that "Female jail, prison and probation populations grew at a faster rate than the male populations between 2000 and 2010" (6).

⁵²⁶ See Homa Khaleeli, "#SayHerName: Why Kimberle Crenshaw is fighting for forgotten women," *The Guardian* (May 30, 2016).

between the institutional forms of violence engendered by women's criminalization and incarceration in the early 20th century (often in the name of reform, as we've seen), and our current moment's structures (characterized by systemic mass incarceration, militarized policing, and racialized capitalist exploitation, among other dimensions) to better understand their both similarities and divergences. But perhaps most important for this dissertation, focused on the literary history of women's criminalization and incarceration, we might connect the radical visions engendered within and against the women's prison in the early 20th century, and the current struggle against the carceral state, in order to honor and amplify those visions, and in order to continue to imagine and enact possibilities for a more just collective future.

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