

2018

Framing Gender: Ellis Island Immigration Portraits

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Poremba, Lindsey, "Framing Gender: Ellis Island Immigration Portraits" (2018). *Art History Honors Projects*. 22.
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**Framing Gender:
Ellis Island Immigration Portraits**

2017-2018 Thesis Project

Lindsey Poremba

Introduction:

Currently, the United States is experiencing renewed debates over immigration and its immigration policy, which range between arguments for increased or decreased admittances. These conversations are not new; there is an uncanny familiarity in how arguments have remained the same over the span of a hundred years. Through looking at the historical representation of immigrants at Ellis Island in the early twentieth century, perhaps we can foster further critical dialogue about how we currently understand the “foreign” and the “other” with respect to gender. While this paper focuses specifically on gender subversion within the photograph versus typical representations of gender, it is also important to understand issues of race and disability at Ellis Island, as it was a site for the medical gaze to determine which bodies were fit to enter the United States. Within portraits of Ellis Island immigrants, we see a similar fascination with the “other” that mirrors the visual dissemination process of the institution.

Augustus F. Sherman (1865-1925) worked as an amateur photographer and clerk at Ellis Island between 1892 and 1925. Sherman’s body of work remains as a substantial visual archive of those who passed through the immigration station. Few have questioned these portraits as anything more than documentary evidence. Throughout my work, I will consider the representation of identity within the photograph *Mary Johnson* (Figure 1), taken by Sherman in 1908, through the frameworks of photography critic Roland Barthes and gender studies scholar Judith Butler. In Barthes’ work *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* he argues for examining photographs beyond their truth value. Barthes comments on the inability to separate the photograph from what it represents. Barthes suggests that people typically understand the “referent,” or the object/subject of the photograph, as inseparable from the photograph itself.

Photographs appear to capture reality which results in a lack of critical examination.¹ This line of thought is imperative to studying Sherman's portraits which tend to be viewed as documentary. Instead, in this essay, I consider Sherman's photographs both for what they represent and how they represent it.

My paper will focus on the issues of representing identity, a paradox within portrait photography. A photographic portrait seeks to accurately represent an individual, yet becomes a complex site in which truth is negotiated. Here, Barthes argues that

The portrait-photograph is a closed field of forces. Four image-repertoires intersect here, oppose and distort one another. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art.²

One could almost view Barthes' description of the image-repertoires as an arena between simultaneously opposing forces. Between photographer and subject there are conflicting power dynamics between what the photographer perceives and captures versus what the subject understands and projects. Likewise, this paper will look at the relationship between photographer and subject and how identity is negotiated through these opposing forces.

Judith Butler's conception of gender performativity helps me analyze *Mary Johnson*, Sherman's photograph of Frank Woodhull, who lived as an early twentieth-century transgender individual. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes transgender as an adjective: "Designating a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond to that person's sex at birth, or which does not otherwise conform to conventional notions of sex and gender."³

¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 5.

² Ibid, 13.

³ "transgender, adj. and n." OED Online. March 2018. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.lib2.skidmore.edu:2048/view/Entry/247649?redirectedFrom=transgender>. Based upon the documented evidence of Woodhull's life, this paper refers to him by his chosen name and he/him pronouns.

Drawing from Butler's explanation of gender as a performance, this paper looks at how Woodhull worked within the heteronormative boundaries of early twentieth-century America and negotiated identity through self-fashioning his body as masculine and performing masculine activities.

This paper will first examine the contextual history of Ellis Island, and Sherman and Woodhull's lives. Sketching the trajectory of the history of sexuality and gender will help explicate the relationship between Woodhull and the gender binary, as well as further explain how Sherman may have perceived Woodhull. To understand the disruption of Woodhull's portrait, I will compare it to Sherman's typical female representations, as he also classified Woodhull as a woman. There are two opposing narratives within the portrait; Sherman attempts to exert control over Woodhull's identity while Woodhull exerts agency over his representation. Furthermore, the photograph complicates the idea of gender as static or innate through masking and destabilizing the figure. His body becomes a complex site upon which gender meaning becomes superficial, unintentionally anticipating gender performativity decades before Butler named it.

Augustus F. Sherman

Relatively little is known about Augustus Sherman, though his collection of over two hundred photographs constitutes the bulk of visual evidence for the early years of Ellis Island's operation. Augustus Sherman was born on July 9, 1865, in Lynn, Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania, the son of a merchant. Sherman's family moved to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania in the 1870s and given their moderate success, Sherman's parents could afford education for their children. His brother Henry Handrick became a lawyer in New York City and Sherman followed

him to New York sometime between the early to mid-1880s.⁴ Yet, Sherman's early career and whereabouts in the city are not known. But in 1892, Sherman became a clerk in the Bureau of Immigration at Ellis Island, later promoted to senior clerk and personal secretary to the Commissioner of Immigration, the leader of the immigration station. With his elevated position, he took part in the daily Boards of Special Inquiry, which heard the cases of detained immigrants and determined whether they were allowed entry or deported.⁵ This position allowed Sherman closer proximity to both higher ranking commissioners and detained immigrants throughout his tenure at Ellis Island. Detained immigrants occupied a more precarious and uncertain future, making Sherman's subject choices ethically dubious.

Sherman became employed at Ellis Island when it opened in 1892 at a historic moment in America's immigration history.⁶ Prior to the 1891 Immigration Act, many state-run ports handled the flow of immigrants.⁷ The first federal immigration restriction began in 1875 with the Page Act, which limited entry of "undesirable" immigrants. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 coincided with the Immigration Act of 1882. The Immigration Act added three new undesirable groups to the mix: lunatics, idiots and those unable to care for themselves without becoming public charges.⁸ Next, the Immigration Act of 1891 banned, among others, paupers, criminals, polygamists and those suffering from contagious diseases.⁹ In addition, the law limited entry to the United States to only a few federal ports including the largest, Ellis Island.¹⁰ As professor and

⁴ Peter Mesenh ller, *Augustus F. Sherman: Ellis Island Portraits, 1905-1920* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2005), 7.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Anna Pegler-Gordon, *In Sight of America: Photography and the Development of U.S Immigration Policy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 107.

⁸ Ibid, 105.

⁹ Ibid, 105.

¹⁰ Ibid, 107.

founding editor of the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* Jay Dolmage demonstrates the increasing restriction in the late nineteenth century entwined with racial and disability discrimination that effectively empowered officials to make visual judgments rooted in racial and other hierarchies.¹¹

Sherman took up photography in the late 1890s, with an early photograph showing the original wooden structure on Ellis Island before it burnt down in 1897. Scholar Peter Mesenh ller speculates that Sherman's acquaintance with Terence V. Powderly (Commissioner General of Immigration at Ellis Island), who was an amateur photographer himself, encouraged Sherman to take up the practice.¹² Sherman continued photographing alongside his normal work as the chief clerk until his death in 1925. Though Sherman's collection provides the most substantial portraits of immigrants at Ellis Island, he was not alone in his desire to document incomers. Photographer Lewis Hine learned and practiced photography at Ellis Island. While working as a teacher, Hine brought groups of his students to Ellis Island between 1903 to 1906, honing his skills of photography before moving to other progressive campaigns such as his series on child laborers.¹³

While we know little about Sherman including his intentions, or goals for the photographic archive, several troubling issues arise due to the conflicting roles of an Ellis Island official and amateur photographer. Unlike Lewis Hine, who was a visiting teacher and amateur photographer, Sherman held a position of power as an authority at Ellis Island. The immigrants,

¹¹ Jay Dolmage, "Disabled upon Arrival: The Rhetorical Construction of Disability and Race at Ellis Island," *Cultural Critique* 77 (2011): 38-39.

¹² Mesenh ller, *Augustus F. Sherman*, 7.

¹³ Katie Sampsell Willmann, "'Lewis Hine, Ellis Island, and Pragmatism: Photographs as Lived Experience,'" *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 7 (2008): 225.

wanting to get through the process at Ellis Island as quickly and easily as possible, would hardly have felt comfortable refusing an official at the station for a portrait. Furthermore, assuming most immigrants were not native English speakers, many may not have understood his request in the first place. Sontag asserts that photography is a form of appropriation, in which the photographer and photograph asserts agency over the subject.¹⁴ Considering Sherman's unequal relationship with his subjects, this appropriation becomes far more problematic through the imbalance of power. These issues concerning his photographic practice escalate when examining his body of work, which crafts a narrative of difference, disability, danger, and backwardness.

Ellis Island officials analyzed and classified incoming immigrants in a matter of moments through stringently employed methods of observation. Pseudoscience like eugenics shaped immigration medical policies which discriminated against disease and disability.¹⁵ Physicians inspected all immigrants for physical and mental illness as soon as they reached Ellis Island. Descendants of immigrants mythologized the journey of becoming an "American" in which travelling through the immigration station formed narratives of identity. However, this process was far from romantic; two percent of immigrants were deported, while twenty percent were detained for indiscriminate periods due to further investigation.¹⁶ Mesenh Iler speculates that Sherman specifically photographed detained immigrants, as it probably would have been too crowded on the Registry Room floor to single out individuals, and his status allowed him access to those pulled aside.¹⁷ As immigration officials were trained to root out difference and

¹⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador USA, 2001), 14.

¹⁵ Roxana Galusca, "From Fictive Ability to National Identity: Disability, Medical Inspection, and Public Health Regulations on Ellis Island," *Cultural Critique* 72 (Spring 2009): 149-150. Galusca does an excellent study of how eugenics ties into Ellis Island and impacted medical policies which shaped the conception of the nation as healthy and able-bodied.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 149.

¹⁷ Mesenh Iler, *Augustus F. Sherman*, 8.

disability, perhaps Sherman absorbed some of that visual discrimination process in his own fascination with the other.

Despite the widespread interest Americans held towards immigration, popular press and magazines did not broadly publish Sherman's photographs during his lifetime. Sherman's photographs were first published (without attribution) to accompany the book *Aliens or Americans?* by Howard B. Grose in 1906, for the "Young People's Missionary Movement."¹⁸ *The National Geographic* published Sherman's photographs as accompanying illustrations to two journal articles in 1907 and 1917, both written by Gilbert H. Grosvenor, the first full-time editor of the publication. Grosvenor outlines the history of immigration in the United States, analyzing statistics of groups of immigrants in May of 1907 in the article, "Some of our Foreign Born Citizens."¹⁹ In 1917, Grosvenor's article "Our Foreign Born Citizens," celebrates the passing of new legislation which required a literacy test.²⁰ Though one can discern the political leanings of the author, it is unknown whether Sherman shared similar views. Sherman again is not given recognition as photographer, instead, the articles attribute them to then Ellis Island Commissioner-General Frank Sargent and Commissioner of Immigration Frederic C. Howe, respectively. Though not attributed to Sherman during his lifetime, these photographs are recognizable from his collection at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. Likely, Sherman's position as chief clerk allowed him to form close relationships with the commissioners and share his photographs.

The photographs in these articles demonstrate the types of immigrants Sherman was interested in photographing. Sherman's work engages with conventional "type" photography, in

¹⁸ Ibid, 12.

¹⁹ Gilbert Grosvenor, "Some of our Foreign Born Citizens," *National Geographic Magazine*, May, 1907.

²⁰ Gilbert Grosvenor, "Our Foreign-Born Citizens," *National Geographic Magazine*, February 1917, 95.

which characteristics of nationality, race, and occupation are the focus of interest.²¹ For the most part, Sherman photographed his subjects in an indoor space, against a plain backdrop. He photographed sitters in a variety of portrait poses: full-body, profile and three-quarter views. In “Some of our Foreign Born Citizens,” the first page is preceded with Sherman’s photograph of three, rather intimidating looking, Cossack soldiers, clad in their traditional uniform (Figure 2).²² As author Grosvenor later writes in 1917, “In normal times Ellis Island might be called the World Congress of Costumes. Everything but the habiliments of Eden seems to pass muster there.”²³ The next two photographs in “Some of Our Foreign Born Citizens” portray *A German Family of One Daughter and Seven Sons* (Figure 3) and a *Scotch family of Seven Daughters and Four Sons* (Fig. 4). Here, while the *dress* is not noteworthy or “foreign,” Sherman curiously arranges the large families themselves into straight lines, descending in order of height.²⁴

Sherman’s photographs encompass a wide range of nationalities within the article, “Some of our Foreign Born Citizens.” The following photographs comprise only a fraction of the dozens included: *Finnish Girl* (Figure 5), *Russian Sisters* (Figure 6), and *Ruthenian Woman* (Figure 7).²⁵ There are *Arabs* (Figure 8), though accompanying captions assure the reader that only a few of “this people” come to the United States.²⁶ Corresponding with theories of eugenics, a hierarchy of race ranked nationalities and ethnicities with “Anglo-Saxons” at the top in the early twentieth century. This can be seen in the 1911 Dillingham Immigration Commission’s “Dictionary of Races or Peoples,” which created a hierarchy of race. It explicated the inferiority of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, and especially Africa, and differentiated “New” immigration

²¹ Messenholler, *Augustus F. Sherman*, 11.

²² Grosvenor “Some of our Foreign-Born Citizens,” 317.

²³ Grosvenor, “Our Foreign-Born Citizens,” 98.

²⁴ Grosvenor, “Some of our Foreign Born Citizens,” 318-331.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 320-330.

²⁶ Grosvenor, “Some of our Foreign Born Citizens,” 329.

from Southern and Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean from the superior “Old” (pre-1880) immigration from Northern Europe.²⁷

Sherman captures a wide variety of races and nationalities, photographing even those who may not constitute the typical Ellis Island immigrant. This correlates with his fascination with dress, which often enhances the “exotic” quality of the subject. Beyond race, Sherman looks for any subjects with a sense of novelty, evidenced by his portraits that arranged families of widely disparate size in height order. A more sinister pattern of his subjects emerges in the 1917 article, which supports limiting immigration from several nationalities like Armenian, Southern Italian, Slovak, and Hebrew.²⁸ Alongside Sherman’s photographs of immigrants wearing their native costume, there are two images of what Sherman may have considered “freaks.” One photograph depicts a Burmese dwarf standing beside a white man to delineate height differences. A final photograph depicts a *Russian Giant, standing beside Two Men of Normal Size* (Figure 9).²⁹ Along with race, family size and dress, Sherman photographed those considered to be abnormal.

From what is known, it appears Sherman did not intend to be an artist, or a social documentarian. He never claimed fame or authorship over the limited publication of his photographs. Nor is it known whether he was paid for the publication of his photographs. By the sparse evidence surrounding Sherman's life, he appears to be a passive observer of Ellis Island, perhaps capturing portraits in his spare time. Two hundred photographs over the course of a twenty-year career is not a lot. That is not to reduce the significance of Sherman’s photographs,

²⁷ Dolmage, “Disabled upon Arrival,” 40-42.

²⁸ Grosvenor, “Our Foreign-Born Citizens,” 95.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 130.

which contain both compelling subjects, as well as complex compositions. While Sherman's intentions are unclear due to the lack of scholarship addressing his perspective and biography, his photographs encapsulate the anxieties and tensions regarding the push-and-pull of change between immigration restriction, nativists and progressives, the advent of women's rights and the rapidly changing conceptions of race, gender and sexuality.

Within Sherman's body of work, the portrait of *Mary Johnson* (Figure 1) emerges as a subversive example of gender performance. As seen in the contextual history of Ellis Island, one can scarcely begin to discuss gender without addressing race or disability, as these issues intersect in the power dynamics between immigration officials and immigrants. While I choose to focus particularly on gender, that does not by any means limit the importance of these other issues. I focus on the portrait of Frank Woodhull as an example of an unprecedented disruption to the system of power at Ellis Island and to contemporary gender roles.

Identity and Typical Gender Roles

On October 4th, 1908, Frank Woodhull disembarked from the *SS New York* onto Ellis Island, returning from a trip to England in pursuit of family history and en route to New Orleans for work. As he walked through the immigration station with fellow passengers, a doctor's critical eyes halted his journey. Pulled aside due to his slight build, and suspected of having tuberculosis, Woodhull was taken to a detention ward for examination. Under pressure to disrobe, Woodhull had little choice but to disclose that his gender assigned at birth was not male, but female. He told doctors, "I am a woman and have travelled in male attire for fifteen years."³⁰

³⁰ Vincent Cannato, *American Passage: The History of Ellis Island* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 4.

Woodhull gave his story in front of a panel of Ellis Island officials, as well as to the *New York Times*. Outside of the immigration station, Woodhull's entry into the United States caused a stir which was recorded in the *New York Times*, with the title, "She Posed as Man for Fifteen Years: 'Frank Woodhull,' Passenger on the New York, Was in Fact Mary Johnson."³¹ This article, quoting Woodhull, provides an unusual amount of information for an incoming immigrant who disappears from records upon entry. Quoted in the article, Woodhull says:

My life has always been a struggle. I come of an English-Canadian family, and I have had most of my fight to make it all alone. Thirty years ago, when I was 20, my father died and I was thrown entirely on my own resources. I came to this country a young girl and went West to make my way. For fifteen years I struggled on. The hair on my face was a misfortune. It was often the subject of rude jest and caused me awful embarrassment. The struggle was awful but I had to live somehow, and so I went on. God knows that life has been hard, but of the hardness of those years I cannot speak. Then came a time fifteen years ago when I got desperate. I had been told that I looked like a man, and I knew that in Canada some women have put on men's clothes to do men's work. So the thought took shape in my mind. If these women had done it why could not I, who looked liked a man? I was in California at the time. I bought men's clothes and began to wear them. Then things changed. I had prospects. My occupation I have given here as a canvasser [political canvassing, though unclear for whom], but I have done many things. I have sold books, lightning rods, and worked in stores. Never once was it suspected that I was none other than Frank Woodhull. I have lived my life and tried to live it well.³²

The *New York Times* responded favorably to Woodhull's narrative, calling him an "honest, hard-working woman" despite the shocking behavior of cross-dressing.³³ Woodhull claims he adopted male clothing for professional purposes. He could find more opportunities and higher paid work as a man than as a woman.³⁴ This economic justification, though unusual, allowed for a positive

³¹ "She Posed As Man For Fifteen Years," *New York Times* October 5, 1908

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

appraisal of Woodhull. It is unclear whether he tells the truth, or tailors a narrative that will keep him safe during a time in which it was considered unacceptable for women to wear pants.

Woodhull's gender identity caused enough consternation to disrupt the binary classification system at Ellis Island. Immigration officials detained Woodhull overnight and placed him in a private room, as they were unsure whether to put him with male or female detainees. Eventually, he was admitted to the United States.³⁵ News outlets recorded his story, seen as fantastic in the eyes of contemporary readers. However, once Woodhull was free to continue, he lived a life of anonymity. It is speculated he may have moved to New Orleans, as was his original intent. But he was not heard from again. Though Woodhull later slipped into anonymity, his portrait endures in the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.

Though the language around transgenderism, and the term transgender itself comes after Woodhull's time, individuals almost certainly lived what we might call transgender identities prior to the naming. We may never know whether Woodhull would identify as transgender, but we can still examine the ways in which he subverted typical gender traditions during his time. Judith Butler helps us understand gender as performative, involving ritual behaviors and repetition that is determined through passed down cultural and social hegemonies:

As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation.³⁶

³⁵ Cannato, *American Passages*, 4.

³⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 140.

Woodhull defies typical ritual behaviors expected in his time. While being born and assigned the female gender, he chooses to perform typical male behaviors of his contemporaries instead, performing a twentieth century transgender identity.

With the textual evidence from the *New York Times*, we also know that Woodhull took on typically masculine occupations, which often excluded women. Woodhull worked many odd jobs, from canvassing, to selling books and lightning rods, and working in stores. Though the industrial revolution impacted America by bringing more middle-class women into the workplace, the traditional role of women remained in the home and household.³⁷ At Ellis Island, Woodhull travels unaccompanied by a partner or children. Beyond his occupations, Woodhull subverts gender through rejecting a typical trajectory for women involving marriage, children and home making.

To Sherman, encountering one such as Woodhull in Ellis Island must have seemed an exceptional circumstance, and Woodhull an exceptional subject. Ellis Island, an institution designed around classification, struggled with receiving an individual who fell outside the binary of male and female. However, women dressing as men, or vice-versa, certainly occurred in historical records even though it was not widely accepted as a practice.³⁸ By Woodhull's arrival in 1908, the awareness of such individuals was already growing significantly in contemporary medical and scientific schools of thought.

³⁷ Nancy Foner, "Immigrant Women and Work," in *From Ellis Island to JFK: New York's Two Great Waves of Immigration* (New Haven; London; New York: Yale University Press, 2000), 108.

³⁸ Peter Boag, "'Known to All Police West of the Mississippi': Disrobing the Female-to-Male Cross-Dresser," in *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past* (University of California Press, 2011), 23. Boag has done considerable work outlining historic examples of female-to-male crossdressing.

Sexual Inversion: Medicalizing “Deviance”

We do not know Frank Woodhull’s sexual object choice, nor might it seem relevant to current viewers; we now know that transgender identities do not indicate sexuality, yet this was not true during Sherman’s life. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century experienced an explosion of medical literature regarding sexuality, and therefore gender.³⁹ Even in the newest theories of leading psychologist Sigmund Freud and sexologist Havelock Ellis, sexuality and gender roles remained deeply conflated. While we do not know whether Sherman followed medical literature, he exhibits some similar anxieties over gender. Through tracing the historical understanding of sexuality and gender, we can understand how Sherman may have viewed Woodhull. We also gain a greater appreciation as to the extent that Woodhull subverted contemporary expectations. Through examining the historic trajectory, we find that although Woodhull may have never expressed his sexual object choice, it is likely Sherman viewed Woodhull as a lesbian which in turn made him an increasingly deviant subject.

The turn of the twentieth century experienced a massive growth in psychiatry and a fascination with gender, sexuality and identity which coincided with the shifting roles of women. Women began to challenge social structures by wearing menswear or clothing styles inspired by menswear. Further, some women began performing “masculine” work outside of the home. While some women began imitating masculine characteristics in hopes of liberation, men rarely performed feminine activities.⁴⁰ Historian George Chauncey argues the anxious reaction towards

³⁹ Gregory Herek, "Sexual Orientation Differences as Deficits: Science and Stigma in the History of American Psychology," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5, no. 6 (2010): 694.

⁴⁰ Jennifer Blessing, *Rose Is a Rose Is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2006), 23.

social changes may have contributed to or partly driven the medicalization of sexuality and gender roles, as a method of scientifically affirming social hierarchy.⁴¹

Though sexual orientations like heterosexuality and homosexuality existed throughout history, sexuality used to be categorized as a choice, rather than an orientation. It was not until 1868 that the word “homosexuality” was first used by Hungarian writer Karl Maria Benkert. In the early nineteenth century, religious and moral teachings valued heterosexual relationships (specifically marriage) for procreation, while anything else fell under the category of sodomy. This included bestiality, homosexual relationships and masturbation. It even included heterosexual behaviors which again occurred outside the boundaries of marriage, like extramarital affairs or sex between man and wife outside of vaginal intercourse.⁴² In this conception of sexuality, one was not innately homosexual. Rather, one’s deviant behavior was a choice, an immoral one.

Victorian views conceptualized men and women as diametrically opposed and complementing one another. Men were the hard, aggressive, and potentially violent sex, while females were soft, docile and submissive. Gender behavior represented biological sex and vice versa. Gender and sex reaffirmed a binary spectrum that generally confined women to spheres of domesticity, in which her role typically was confined to the household as daughter, then wife and mother. Conversely, men played a more public role in which they were responsible as the sole financial supporters of the family.

The biological division between men and women that determined gender roles also determined sexuality, or lack thereof in the case of women. According to Chauncey, “The major

⁴¹ George Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance,” *Salmagundi* 58/59 (Fall 1982-Winter 1983): 115.

⁴² Herek, “Sexual Orientation Differences,” 694.

current in Victorian sexual ideology declared that women were passionless and asexual, the passive objects of male sexual desire” which resulted from the idea of women being the passive, submissive sex.⁴³ Medical professionals, who believed that women unable to produce any passion for natural heterosexual relationships, struggled to justify women expressing sexual desire not only towards men, but to other women. In general, medical professionals viewed female sexual desire as pathological, as women were characterized as so passive. The medical field “explained” lesbian relationships through the concept of sexual inversion.

The first medical article describing “sexual inversion” appeared in Germany in 1870 and resurfaced in America within the decade.⁴⁴ It was not until the 1890s that awareness of nonconforming gender behaviors became commonplace in America; the new discipline called sexology categorized “deviant” identities like homosexuality under the umbrella term “sexual inversion.”⁴⁵ Women “inverted” their typical gender roles to produce sexual desire for other women. Essentially, they became like men, assuming the characteristics of aggressive masculinity and acting as the “man” in lesbian relationships. We can immediately see then, how Woodhull’s performance of gender may have caused his contemporaries to view him as a sexual invert, and an aggressive woman probably sexually attracted to other women.

In 1908, Woodhull arrived at Ellis Island during a time when the scientific study of sexual inversion was changing, though not in his favor. Leading sexologist Havelock Ellis, and psychologist Sigmund Freud began to distinguish the difference between sexual object choice from gender roles and characteristics.⁴⁶ Homosexuality and gender roles began to be

⁴³ Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality,” 117.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 115.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 119.

⁴⁶ Herek, “Sexual Orientation Differences,” 694. Freud viewed the natural state of humans to be bisexual. Homosexuality, while not optimal, was not unnatural. Despite this, the American medical field would come to a consensus that homosexuality was a disease by the 1940s.

differentiated, in that behavior no longer determined sexual object choice. This transition was far from sudden or abrupt. The terminology remained interchangeable to some doctors, with sexual inversion still in use as an umbrella term for deviance.⁴⁷ While Havelock Ellis, leading sexologist, emphatically differentiated male transvestism from male homosexuality, he did not extend the same critical differentiation for women.⁴⁸ In Ellis' book, *Sexual Inversion*, published in 1915, he continually connects transvestism with female "deviance" as well as "masculine characteristics," while narrowing discrete behaviors for male sexual inverts. Havelock writes:

The commonest characteristic of the sexually inverted woman is a certain degree of masculinity or boyishness. As I have already pointed out, transvestism in either women or men by no means necessarily involves inversion... There is, however, a very pronounced tendency among sexually inverted women to adopt male attire when practicable. In such cases male garments are not usually regarded as desirable chiefly on account of practical convenience, nor even in order to make an impression on other women, but because the wearer feels more at home in them⁴⁹

While Ellis recognizes that male crossdressing did not necessarily relate to male homosexuality, he often cited examples where female crossdressing signaled female homosexuality and inversion.⁵⁰ Thus, behavior and the performance of gender was inseparable from sexuality for women even during the tumultuous growth of medical literature. Furthermore, misbehavior was equated to deviance and sexual inversion.

In examining the historical trajectory of sexual orientation and the conception of gender, we can see that women were unable to assume masculine behaviors without the association with homosexuality and deviance. Though we do not necessarily know how Sherman may have responded to Woodhull, it is likely that Sherman viewed him as sexually aggressive and a

⁴⁷ Chauncey, "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality," 124.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 122.

⁴⁹ Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Inversion* (Philadelphia: F.A Davis Company: 1915), 245.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 122.

lesbian, because of his “inversion” of gender roles. This may have contributed to Sherman’s deep anxiety towards encountering Woodhull and his subsequent attempts to exert control and classify his identity.

We can more clearly see Sherman’s anxiety towards Woodhull through a comparison of Sherman’s typical representations of immigrant women. Comparing Woodhull’s portrait to other female portraits reveals a disruption in how the photograph constructs gender. Within his body of work, Sherman reduces women’s identities into two themes: mothers and what I term, “mannequins.” Sherman often reduces women’s bodies to their reproductive ability as mothers which is a traditional understanding of women. We can study this through an example like *Slovakian Mother and her Two Children* (Figure 10) which captures a woman with her children and textually identifies her as a mother. However, other examples such as *Italian Woman* (Figure 11) may not have such a literal approach. But dress emphasizes this figure’s breasts, visually reminding the viewer of fertility and motherhood. For both *Slovakian Mother and her Two Children* (Figure 10) and *Italian Woman* (Figure 11), women essentially become models for traditional costumes and, therefore, ethnicities. The word “mannequin,” which usually refers to a dummy model seems appropriate when studying Sherman’s work, where photographs carefully display distinctive ethnic dress. Sherman expresses comfort with these modes of depiction, which we can see in the stability of the compositions. Both female portraits express the concept of women as models of ethnicities through their clothing. But beyond the racial implications of dress, dress also functions to deepen the divide between masculinity and femininity.

Self-Fashioning Identity

The act of dressing functions as an expression of identity crucial to Woodhull’s self-fashioning of his exterior representation. Dress both divided and defined masculinity and

femininity. As Jennifer Blessing, Senior Curator of Photography at the Guggenheim, discusses the “Great Masculine Renunciation” first termed by psychoanalyst John Flügel to describe the historical shift in masculine dress through rejecting flamboyance in favor of “sober” dress at the end of the eighteenth century. She argues:

The harshly drawn sexual distinctions of modern masculine and feminine attire—in which male clothing came to represent moral seriousness and feminine dress remained the sole domain of sensuality and play—are both symptom and cause of an increasing self-consciousness about self-presentation, artifice, and the dividing line between the sexes.⁵¹

Dressing in a masculine style not only signaled biological sex but also reinforced the characteristics associated with the male sex like morality and rationality. Dress, therefore, is a carefully constructed method of defining oneself by opposing the “other.”

In *Italian Woman* (Figure 11) and *Slovakian Mother and her Children* (Figure 10) dress emphasizes the idea of the feminine body. Both the Slovakian mother and the Italian woman wear veils, covering their hair. This makes the figures appear demure, perhaps modest. The Italian woman wears a loose, white blouse that softens her silhouette. Her jewelry, two strands of pearls, accentuates the shape of her breasts, reminding us of her reproductive capabilities as well as perhaps enhancing her beauty. It also creates curved, organic shapes, which contrast with the geometric shapes of Woodhull’s masculine suit. Likewise, *The Slovakian Woman and her Children* (Figure 10) emphasizes femininity through dress. We can see the rich, embroidered details of her tiered skirt as the photograph captures her full figure. The gendered differences of her dress are clear when compared to the clothing of her young son standing beside her, who wears pants, a buttoned-down, collared shirt and a wide-brimmed hat. Of course, we can see that

⁵¹ Jennifer Blessing, *Rose Is a Rose Is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2006), 20-23.

the Slovakian woman follows the traditional gender trajectory when the photograph visually captures her motherhood; she holds one child, really a bundle of blanket, while the other child grasps at her skirts.

In Sherman's portrait, Woodhull wears a black suit, tie and bowler hat which visually codes as masculine. Moreover, clothing enhances typical masculine forms which supports Woodhull's gender performance. The three-piece suit modifies Woodhull's body by broadening and sharply defining his shoulders, unlike the soft, rounded shoulders of the Italian woman, clothed in a less stiff and tailored fabric. We can see this hypermasculine form in Sherman's portraits of male immigrants, such as *Enrico Cardi* (Figure 12). This portrait, and the stiff, tailored cloth of the military uniform enhances the subject's shoulders producing a sharp, geometric silhouette. In the case of *Cardi*, only fourteen, clothing imparts a more mature and masculine appearance. Sherman's typical depiction of immigrants reinforced the sharp division between masculine and feminine through capturing dress.

If we rethink dress as signaling gendered traits of morality and rationality for men versus sensuality for women (ironic as women were considered less sexual), Woodhull's dress gains even greater meaning. He projects masculinity which associates with rationality and morality through sober dress. Thus, though Sherman may have found him deviant, his clothing says otherwise. Furthermore, Woodhull exerts agency over his appearance through growing out a mustache, rather than engage in hair removal practices. Through self-fashioning, Woodhull exerts agency over his exterior representation, which Sherman cannot control.

Sherman's Construction of the Other

The caption that Sherman superimposes atop Woodhull's photographic representation challenges what we see. In a clerical style, Sherman records simple statistical information.

Sherman notes Woodhull's Canadian nationality as well as the arrival date and ship. These short descriptions remind the viewer Woodhull is foreign, not American. The immigration system identified immigrants daily, so this is not entirely unsurprising. In addition, Sherman's work as a cleric may justify the addition of this information. While Woodhull's biological sex constitutes the more surprising information found in the caption, his immigration information links foreignness to possible deviancy.

Tension exists between the agency of the subject, Woodhull, to manifest gender and Sherman's attempts to exert control over gender. Sherman constructs a visual spectacle between what we see in his portraits and the "reveal" of the caption. These captions explicate what may not be visually clear to the viewer. One cannot see Woodhull as transgender as he passes as male in his portrait. Sherman captions the portrait of Woodhull, "Mary Johnson, 50, Canada – came as 'Frank Woodhull.' SS 'New York' – Oct 4 – '08. Dressed 15 yrs in men's clothes. Lived 30 yrs. In U.S." His caption betrays Woodhull's private life, stating that he lived for fifteen years in men's clothing. It casts aside the identity of Frank Woodhull by listing Woodhull's preferred name in quotation marks and prioritizing the name Mary Johnson first. Effectively, Sherman asserts authority through this caption by attempting to control Woodhull's name and record his gender practice.

To Sherman, Woodhull was very much a woman. The thought that Woodhull *did* pass for male despite his biological sex likely caused Sherman a great deal of anxiety. To Sherman, gender was likely fixed and innate. Biological sex determined exactly how one should look, act and dress. In this way, Woodhull posed a dangerous threat to Sherman's understanding of gender. Woodhull subverted the very rigid boundaries of male and female, challenging individuals like Sherman as well as contemporary medical professionals like Ellis.

Disrupting Binary Constructs of Gender through Performativity

The setting of Sherman's photographs drives our attention to his subjects in the portraits. Sherman photographed Woodhull in front of a plain, gray backdrop present in many of his portraits. We see the same shadowy background in *Italian Woman* (Figure 11) albeit with a bit more depth and shadow. Sherman photographs *Slovakian Mother and her Children* (Figure 10) outside, perhaps a little more unusual, though not exceptional, in his body of work. However, this outdoor space functions much like the backdrop in that it isolates the figure. She and her children stand upon a set of steps which fade away. The photograph lacks any indication of other architectural structures or details and no clear sense of place. The simplicity of the setting of all three of these photographs drives the viewer's attention towards the subjects, Frank Woodhull, the Italian Woman, and the Slovakian woman, especially their facial expressions.

The composition drives our eyes towards the faces of the subjects. In *Italian Woman* (Figure 11), the portrait subject gazes upward with an angelic countenance, as though peering towards the sky. Perhaps we may associate her gaze with passivity; this reinforces the binary association of the female sex with a docile demeanor. However, to add complexity to this thought, examples of female portraits making eye contact also exist in Sherman's body of work. For example, in *Slovakian Mother and Her Children* (Figure 10), the mother meets our eyes with a determined gaze, despite being surrounded by her children. She makes eye contact while demonstrating traditional gender roles of motherhood. If we look past mere eye contact and widen our understanding of the expression, we can see the *Italian Woman* (Figure 11) and *Slovakian Mother with her Children* (Figure 10) present their subjects' expressions and facial features with great clarity. We can even see the delicate hairs of the Italian woman's eyebrows. Because of this visual clarity and the emphasis on the subjects' faces, we cannot judge these

portraits as entirely reductive. The subjects appear to retain some sense of character and dignity despite the difficulty of immigration. As photographic portraits, it seems rather obvious that this would be the most essential feature of representing individuals and their identity.

The compositional opposition between dark clothing and light skin draws the eye to the most central feature of the portrait, Woodhull's face. Frustratingly, though the eye is drawn to the face, the photograph obscures visual information there. The large, dark bowler hat casts a shadow over his eyes, which blurs the expressions and details of Woodhull's visage. Woodhull's features, unlike the sharp, linear qualities of the hat, suit, and spectacles, are the softest aspects of the photograph. There is some shading and tonal quality which makes the face the most three-dimensional, and weighted part of the photograph. Yet, while being drawn to this bodily shape and weight, we cannot read the expression of Woodhull. The line of his mouth is sharp and tight-lipped, while his eyes are in shadow. While perhaps Woodhull can see the viewer clearly through his spectacles, we cannot do the same. The portrait constrains eye contact, which in turn limits the psychological relationship between viewer and subject.

The viewer clearly sees the visual signifiers of gender in the portrait. Woodhull's dress, from the silhouette of his suit to the contours of his hat, appear sharp. Even his spectacles interrupt the face with relative clarity, forming dark and visible lines. However, the body of Woodhull appears unclear to the viewer. For the most part, dress cloaks the body; his hands reach below the frame of the composition. Dress shadows his face and obscures his features. This tension between visual clarity and obscurity between trappings of gender versus the body poses an interesting dilemma. To Sherman and medical contemporaries, the natural body acted as an essential sign of gender through sex. This photograph suggests otherwise. Rather, while constructed, performed gender like dress appears clearly readable by viewers, the body remains

hidden. In effect, the body does not appear a significant determinant of gender though people at the time would have expected this clarity. As viewers, regardless of Woodhull's body, we view him as male. The dynamic between body and construct within the photograph points towards a premonition of Butler's work to come, which demonstrates that gender is performative, rather than innate or "natural." The instability of Woodhull's body in the composition supports the relevance of Butler's theories in Sherman's portraits.

Within the composition, Woodhull's body lacks weight and vitality, which becomes clear when comparing him against Sherman's other female portraits. The Italian woman presumably sits before the same bland backdrop as Woodhull, though because of the more dramatic shading in the photograph her body occupies the space with a truer sense of weight. Likewise, we see the entire body of the Slovakian mother standing upon a set of steps with her children. Although the steps fade out, and we cannot see the building behind them, we do gain an understanding of her figure, three-dimensional and heavy despite the space around her. Sherman appears to understand these women and confidently photographs their bodies as feminine and foreign.

When comparing Woodhull's portrait to the portraits of these women, we gain a better understanding of how unstable his body appears. Like *Italian Woman* (Figure 11), the composition of *Mary Johnson* (Figure 1) places Woodhull in the center of the composition. Woodhull's body, however, occupies more space within the photograph than the Italian woman. His shoulders stretch to the sides of the frame, emphasizing the width of his shoulders. However, they do not quite touch, leaving just a sliver of negative space. We can understand the body of the Italian woman. On a practical level, we see more of it. We can tell she is seated, and see her hands clasped in her lap. She carries weight and shape and her form appears tangible. In comparison, Woodhull's body appears oddly two-dimensional. The background of the

photograph is a bright white to the stark darkness of Woodhull's suit. The edge of Woodhull's suit creates a sharp line and silhouette. The lack of gradient shading makes Woodhull appear two-dimensional, almost as though we can peel him off the page. His body appears superficial.

Woodhull's body may appear less substantial than other female portraits; this comparison also holds true against Sherman's male portraits. In the portrait *Peter Meyer* (Figure 13), we see that Sherman's construction of Woodhull also disrupts the portrayal of men. Though Woodhull and the Danish man's clothing appears similar, the similarities end there. Meyer wears more of a military style jacket and hat. He grows out a larger beard and mustache than Woodhull. Their self-fashioning may appear similar, but their respective portraits treat their bodies differently. Like the female portraits of the Slovakian mother and the Italian woman, Meyer appears clear to the viewer. We can see the details of his tailored coat down to the seams and the curly texture of his beard. The camera captures his masculine dress with confidence and his body carries weight with a sense of clarity and dimension emphasized with his shadow appearing on the back drop. The photograph of Woodhull not only breaks with depictions of women but also men. In the body of Sherman's work, Woodhull's portrait diverges from both men and women, signifying a break in how gender might be understood.

Mary Johnson (Figure 1) creates ambiguity, despite our initial reading of the photograph as simply male. While we see Woodhull in the photograph, we must question to what extent we really *see* Woodhull. To explain this, scholarship surrounding French artist Claude Cahun provides helpful discourse. Sherman was not the only photographer to capture transgender or crossdressing subjects. Perhaps also responding to the anxieties over gender and identity in the early twentieth century, artists like Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp engaged in gender play

through their photographs.⁵² Unlike cisgender men taking portraits of transgender and crossdressing identities, French artist Claude Cahun took self-portraits wearing a variety of costumes and personas.⁵³ Though born Lucy Schwob, they took the first name Claude because the name is gender ambiguous in French.⁵⁴ While Sherman attempted to control Woodhull's identity through the portrait, Cahun exerted agency over their gender and identity with portraiture. Sharla Hutchinson, when studying Cahun's self-portraits, concluded:

However, this particular figure of ghostliness and its combined distorted form also calls attention to the fragile nature of not only the mind's inability to create and sustain meaning but also the body's inability to create and sustain meaning—in particular, gendered meanings.⁵⁵

When studying how Cahun's photographs removed visual signifiers of femininity and masculinity, Hutchinson noted that this effectively reveals fragility between the mind and body.⁵⁶ Or, in this case, viewer and subject. While Sherman's photograph codes masculinity, the textual evidence of Sherman's caption (which so desperately wants us to see Woodhull as a woman) challenges this assumption. This tension and visual spectacle questions our own ability to perceive gender and ascribe gender meaning.

Cahun viewed identity as a masquerade, which lent her self-portraits a theatrical air; at times they literally wore a mask. Cahun once wrote, "Beneath this mask another mask. I will never be done lifting off all these visages."⁵⁷ In this way, we can think of Woodhull's body

⁵² Blessing, *Rose Is a Rose Is a Rose*, 28. Though Blessing utilizes she/her pronouns in her discussion, I intentionally utilize gender neutral pronouns in response to Cahun's gender neutral name.

⁵³ "cisgender, adj. and n." OED Online. March 2018. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.lib2.skidmore.edu:2048/view/Entry/35015487?redirectedFrom=cisgender>. Here, cisgender refers to those whose sense of personal identity corresponds to their assigned birth sex.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 37.

⁵⁵ Sharla Hutchinson, "Convulsive Beauty: Images of Hysteria and Transgressive Sexuality Claude Cahun and Djuna Barnes," *Symplokē* 11, no. 1/2 (2003): 222.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 222.

⁵⁷ Blessing, *Rose Is a Rose Is a Rose*, 37.

within the portrait as a similar gender performance, one in which multiple meanings, personas and “masks” can be ascribed. The photograph cloaks the eyes and facial features of Woodhull. In this way, the photograph acts as a “mask.” Rather than conferring a static gender upon Woodhull, the portrait becomes a site upon which gender is imagined.

The photographic portrait of Woodhull encapsulates the gender theory of Butler decades before the publication of *Gender Trouble*. Woodhull’s body, weightless and two-dimensional, appears superficial. His shadowy expression can be assigned multiple meanings from the viewer. His body is not innately gendered through sex alone. Woodhull’s body becomes a complex site where gender performativity ultimately succeeds. Though Sherman attempts to impose gender through biological sex, his efforts prove unsuccessful. Woodhull wins this performance of gender, conveying to the viewer that he is a man through exerting his agency and self-fashioning his exterior. Unintentionally, it appears Sherman made a case for gender performativity long before that concept existed and contradicted his worldview.

Conclusion

Our understanding of immigration representation across visual media requires further studying and analysis. In the case of Augustus Sherman, his photographic collection requires further critique regarding how he represented ethnicity and disability. In addition to the example of Frank Woodhull, who I expounded upon at length, there are other alternative examples of gender subversion within the collection that could also be examined. The portraits *Eleazar Kaminetzko* (Figure 14) and *Emma Goldman* (Figure 15) capture behaviors considered unusual, inverting the binary construction of gender. Emma Goldman was a notable anarchist and feminist

and Sherman labelled Kaminetzko, a lesser-known immigrant, as vegetarian.⁵⁸ These behaviors appear to impart some concept of gender as well, with Goldman, considered dangerous and aggressive for a woman, and Kaminetzko, considered effeminate perhaps for a dietary choice largely critiqued as weak.⁵⁹ It would also be wise to further consider how dress functions within these photographs, as an expression of immigrants' identity versus how Sherman may have viewed their dress. I did not fully explore the meaning of traditional dress to incoming immigrants in terms of their agency. Nor have I fully examined how institutions like the Ellis Island Immigration Museum utilize Sherman's photographs today, as art, documentation or advertisement.

The photograph of Frank Woodhull, though not widely distributed during Sherman's lifetime, shows enduring current significance. His photograph reinforces the presence of either transgender or other nonconforming gender identities historically. The portrait also delicately captures tension between photographer and subject. We see the oppositional forces of what Sherman, and his peers, believed he saw and how Woodhull saw himself. While we can see these two constructions of identity, ultimately, the photograph reveals how superficial and fluid gender identity truly is. The photograph questions our eye's ability to discern or assign gender meaning, as well as the body's ability to sustain gender meaning. Rather, we see that the body is performative. We see multiple identities and perspectives of identities, affirming that identity is a continual construction, rather than fixed. Though the photograph may be fixed in time, it

⁵⁸ Alice Wexler, *Emma Goldman: An Intimate Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984). Wexler provides one biography of Goldman's unconventional life.

⁵⁹ James Whorton, "Muscular Vegetarianism: The Debate Over Diet and Athletic Performance in the Progressive Era," *Journal of Sport History* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 60.

manages to reveal a dynamic comprehension of gender identity in opposition to the time of its taking and relevant to today.

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Illustrations:



Fig. 1: Sherman, Augustus. *Mary Johnson*. Circa 1908, National Parks Service.



Fig. 2: Sherman, Augustus. *Cossack Immigrants*. Circa 1905-1920, National Parks Service.



Fig. 3: Sherman, Augustus. *A German Family of One Daughter and Seven Son*. Circa 1905, National Parks Service.



Fig. 4: Sherman, Augustus. *Scottish Immigrant Family*. Circa 1905-1920, National Parks Service.



Fig. 5: Sherman, Augustus. *Finnish Girl*. Circa 1905-1920, National Parks Service.



Fig. 6: Sherman, Augustus. *Russian Sisters*. Circa 1905-1920, National Parks Service.



Fig. 7: Sherman, Augustus. *Ruthenian Woman*. Circa 1905-1920, National Parks Service.



Fig. 8: Sherman, Augustus. "Arabs," now titled *Moroccan Immigrants*. Circa 1905-1920, National Parks Service.



Fig. 9: Sherman, Augustus. *Russian Giant*. Circa 1905-1920, National Parks Service.



Fig. 10: Sherman, Augustus. *Slovakian Mother and her Children*, circa 1905-1917. Gelatin Silver Print, 12.3x9.6 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York: New York.



Fig. 11: Sherman, Augustus. *Italian Woman*. Circa 1905-1920, National Parks Service.



Fig. 12: Sherman, Augustus. *Enrico Cardi*. Circa 1919, National Parks Service.



Fig. 13: Sherman, Augustus. *Peter Meyer*. Circa 1909, National Parks Service.



Fig. 14: Sherman, Augustus. *Eleazar Kaminetzko*. Circa 1914, National Parks Service.



Fig. 15: Sherman, Augustus. *Emma Goldman*, Circa 1919, National Parks Service.