Swearing Allegiance: Street Language, US War Propaganda, and the Declining Status of Women in Northeastern Nightlife, 1900–1920

MARA L. KEIRE
University of Oxford

In September 1917, in the midst of the US mobilization for World War I, Baltimore journalist H. L. Mencken wrote an article satirizing the Commission on Training Camp Activities' campaign to keep the new military recruits morally pure. Mencken, the consummate master of the American language, condemned the contradictions in the War Department's campaign by juxtaposing prewar white slavery narratives, which portrayed prostitutes as innocent victims, with wartime discourse, which depicted all sexually active women, prostitutes or not, as diseased harpies. Mencken used the evocative oxymoron "predatory country girls" to emphasize the incompatibility of prewar and wartime representations of prostitutes.[1] In this article, I will, like Mencken, juxtapose the strikingly different prewar and wartime descriptions of sexually active women. Unlike him, I will not focus primarily on the language of reform. Wartime characterizations of prostitutes as vipers, vultures, and disease-spreading votaries in reform literature represented a sharp shift from the evocation of white slaves, innocent country girls, and prodigal daughters during the white slavery scare of 1907 to 1914, but it also corresponded with a marked difference in the way men talked about women when the two sexes met in the very vice resorts that reformers condemned. The influence of wartime programs and propaganda went well beyond the realm of official discourse and had a detrimental effect on working-class women's status through the street vernacular that both men and women used in

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[1] H. L. Mencken, "'Reformers' Oppose Sanitary Measures against Disease," *Evening Mail*, 18 September 1917. Mencken paid close attention to American English and the meanings of its changes. See *The American Language: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1919).

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saloons, dance halls, nightclubs, and other entertainment establishments of ambiguous reputation.

In order to show the decline in women's sexual status during the First World War, this article analyzes the most obscene conversations that undercover investigators heard while patrolling diverse vice-related venues before the war and in commercial dance halls, cabarets, and other establishments where men and women met socially during the war. Drawn from the documents of private New York antivice associations, mainly the Committee of Fourteen, these conversations came from reports written by working-class men hired to fit into the disreputable and quasi-reputable settings they investigated. Before the war, these investigators visited venues in New York City and, later, during the war, in cities throughout the northeastern United States from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to Providence, Rhode Island. Often written using rough street vernacular, antivice reports provide rare insight into the sexual codes central to the commercial recreation of the urban working class.[2] Although the investigators' records are not transparent, they nevertheless expose a striking change in the way men and women used obscene language before and during the war. Like printed pornography, spoken crudities in saloons and dance halls revealed in bold strokes the opinions that people downplayed in polite society, but unlike the often equally obscene verbal epithets recorded in defamation cases, these labels went unchallenged and rarely entered the public record.[3] As an illustrative extreme, sexual swear words and their conversational context provide a key to understanding changes in gender hierarchies. Shifting street vernacular shows that during World War I, men gained power to the detriment of women's self-determination.

While Mencken perceived the shifting discourse of social reformers as a negative development for women, cultural commentators, from popular historians Frederick Lewis Allen and Henry May to more recent scholars

[2] These investigators held their jobs for a long time, and it was often the same investigators who recorded prewar banter in vice-district dives who later reported on the back-and-forth in wartime dance halls. On investigators' records, their usefulness, and the difficulties of interpreting them, see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 130–32; and Jennifer Fronc, *New York Undercover: Private Surveillance in the Progressive Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 6–8.

[3] Lynn Hunt, "Introduction: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800," in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800*, ed. Lynn Hunt (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 36–40; Christopher Waldrep, "The Making of a Border State Society: James McGready, the Great Revival, and the Prosecution of Profanity in Kentucky," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 3 (1994): 767–84; Mary Beth Norton, "Gender and Defamation in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 44, no. 1 (1987): 3–39; and Peter N. Moogk, "'Thieving Buggers' and 'Stupid Sluts': Insults and Popular Culture in New France," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 36, no. 4 (1979): 524–47.

like Kathy Peiss, David Nasaw, and Susan Cahn, have portrayed World War I as a turning point for sexual manners and mores in America—a liberatory loosening up of the sexual restrictions on women.[4] But as Susan Sontag warned in 1973, "Sex as such is not liberating for women. Neither is more sex."[5] Since 2000, more historians, notably Elizabeth Clement, Jennifer Fronc, and Courtney Shah, have recognized World War I's complicated legacy for women in public, arguing that the war encouraged a sense of masculine entitlement among the troops.[6] But these historians have mostly focused on the way the War Department persecuted all sexually active women, overlooking the way official misogyny sanctioned a street-level disregard of women's self-definitions. In this article, I build on Clement's, Fronc's, and Shah's excellent work to discuss how men talked about the women who participated in the new commercial popular culture of movie theaters, amusement parks, and dance halls. For all their determination to participate on their own terms, women operated in settings that stimulated a sense of masculine entitlement that at times exceeded the privilege men experienced in the old red-light districts. More women could participate in the cleaned-up cabarets and dance halls without irrevocably damaging their individual reputations, but the virulence of the wartime campaigns against sexually active women fostered an extreme misogyny that encouraged men to denigrate the women they met in these places.

THE OFFICIAL STORY

During World War I, the dominant discourse of American antivice reform changed. Reformers stopped describing prostitution as an institutional problem founded on the economic exploitation of women and started defining prostitution as a medical problem of diseased individuals, specifically disease-spreading women.[7] A dramatic discursive development, this

[4] Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920's* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931); Henry F. May, "Shifting Perspectives on the 1920's," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43, no. 3 (1956): 405–27; Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); and Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckoning: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[5] Susan Sontag, "The Third World of Women," *Partisan Review* 40, no. 2 (1973): 14–40, 22.

[6] Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 144–55; Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 147–54; and Courtney Q. Shah, "'Against Their Own Weakness': Policing Sexuality and Women in San Antonio, Texas, during World War I," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no. 3 (September 2010): 458–82.

[7] For accounts of these trends, see Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 87; Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Re-*

shift evolved as a consequence of the wartime implementation of prewar plans to reduce commercial vice. Since 1910, antivice reformers of all rhetorical persuasions had argued that if they could abolish the municipally tolerated red-light districts, prostitution would wither away to an "irreducible minimum."[8] Readily recruited into the War Department, many well-connected reformers saw World War I as their opportunity to realize their long-cherished goals. Backed by the power of the federal war machine, the Law Enforcement Division of the Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA) succeeded in closing over a hundred vice districts, including those in Seattle, San Antonio, and New Orleans.[9] But when prostitution did not disappear and soldiers continued to have sex and contract venereal disease, reformers grew disillusioned and changed their rhetorical strategies. During mobilization, the training camp commissioners stopped blaming the pimps and madams and started blaming the prostitutes themselves.[10]

Their anger did not, however, end with prostitutes. With the new emphasis on soldiers' venereal health that mobilization inspired, the training camp officials extended their wrath to include all sexually active young women.[11] By ordering men to "keep away from prostitutes priced and private," the CTCA made money irrelevant to a woman's reputation as a "whore."[12]

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form Tradition (1987; reprint, with new preface, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 165; and John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 212.

[8] For examples of this belief as a rationale for reform efforts, see Francis E. Ward to John D. Rockefeller Jr., 21 October 1910, file 59, box 8, series: boards, record group 2-OMR, Rockefeller Family Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, New York (cited hereafter as RAC); Jane Addams, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1912), 9; Hartford Vice Commission, *Report of the Hartford Vice Commission* (Hartford, CT, 1913), 14, 73–74; and [Lancaster Vice Commission], *A Report on Vice Conditions in the City of Lancaster, Pa.* ([Lancaster], 1913), 76.

[9] Joseph Mayer, *The Regulation of Commercialized Vice: An Analysis of the Transition from Segregation to Repression in the United States* (New York, 1922), 9; Raymond B. Fosdick, *Chronicle of a Generation: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper, [1958]), 147; and Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 72–77. For a list of the vice districts closed, see *Standard Statistics of Prostitution, Gonorrhoea, Syphilis* (pamphlet), [1919], p. RL-1, file 1, box 170, American Social Health Association Papers, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis (cited hereafter as ASHA).

[10] *Next Steps: One, Two, Three* (pamphlet), [ca. 1918], file 2, box 131, ASHA. For a general account of these developments, see Nancy K. Bristow, *Making Men Moral: Social Engineering during the Great War* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 112.

[11] [Albert E. Webster], "Conference and Observations at Grant Park," 8 September 1917, file 380, box 24, Ethel Sturges Dummer Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College (cited hereafter as ESDP). For general descriptions, see Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 80–82; and Bristow, *Making Men Moral*, 118, 126.

[12] "Beware!" (poster), [ca. 1918], file 3, box 131, ASHA. For other examples, see Jane Deeter Rippin, "Social Hygiene and the War: Work with Women and Girls," *Social Hygiene* 5, no. 1 (January 1919): 125–36, 126; and Bascom Johnson, "Law Enforcement against Prostitution from the Point of View of the Public Official," *National Municipal Review* 9, no. 7 (1920): 427–34, 428.

Indeed, reformers' abhorrence toward "charity girls" and "patriotic prostitutes," who gave away sex for free to soldiers and sailors, exceeded their disgust for "professional prostitutes." Reformers reluctantly rationalized the indigent prostitute's need for money, but they showed no such sympathy for the "uniform-crazed" girls who traded sex for a night on the town.[13] Despite these distinctions, the CTCA condemned all women who engaged in sex with soldiers. After all, as one wartime pamphlet explained, if a woman was "willing to 'give you a good time,'" she must "have either [the] clap or syphilis or both."[14] Thus, even though statistics showed that more women named soldiers as the source of their infection than the reverse, the CTCA insisted on classifying women as the "carriers of venereal disease" and soldiers as the targets of their contagion.[15] Through mandatory sex education lectures, a dramatic movie entitled *Fit to Fight*, and literally a million printed pamphlets, the commission ensured that troops repeatedly heard this message.[16] Reducing women to disease vectors legitimated an extreme misogyny that allowed government authorities to persecute women with impunity.

Six months into the war, the CTCA closed the Committee on Protective Work for Girls, which aided young women who gave into the "lure of the uniform," and it opened the Section of Women and Girls in the commission's Law Enforcement Division.[17] The new section treated sexually active women with complete disregard for their civil rights. No longer satisfied with women leaving the immediate area around the camps, the section

[13] Rippin, "Social Hygiene and the War," 126; Webster, "Conference and Observations at Grant Park," 8 September 1917, file 380, box 24, ESDP; and Joseph R. Mayer to Raymond B. Fosdick, 29 September 1917, pp. 6–8, file: Arizona 17, box 3, CTCA.

[14] *"Hello, Soldier Sport, Want to Have a Good Time?"* (pamphlet), [ca. 1918], file 6, box 131, ASHA.

[15] Maude E. Miner, "Report of the Committee on Protective Work for Girls: October 1, 1917 to April 1, 1918," 15 April 1918, file 381, box 24, ESDP.

[16] On the lectures, see Walter Clarke, "Social Hygiene and the War," *Social Hygiene* 4, no. 2 (April 1918): 259–306, esp. 269; and "Method of Attack on Venereal Diseases: An Outline of Activities and Co-operating Agencies Planned to Reduce the Prevalence of Venereal Diseases in the United States Army," *American Social Hygiene Association Publication,* no. 111 (New York, 1917), file 7, box 170, ASHA. In November 1917 the American Social Hygiene Association, which coordinated the work for the CTCA, proposed a budget allocating $10,000 for lecturers and $10,000 for producing and reproducing pamphlets. See Raymond B. Fosdick to Edwin R. Embree, 23 November 1917, file 739, box 79, series 100, Record Group 1, Rockefeller Foundation, RAC; and "War Budget for Activities to Be Carried On in Cooperation with the War Department Commission on Training Camp Activities to October 1, 1918," enclosed in a letter from William F. Snow to Raymond B. Fosdick, 22 November 1917, file 739, box 79, series 100, Record Group 1, Rockefeller Foundation, RAC. On the movie *Fit to Fight*, see Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 68–69.

[17] For a discussion of the "lure of the uniform" and its reform implications, see "Miss Miner Discusses Plans of the Committee on Protective Work for Girls, Created by the CTCA," *ASHA Bulletin* 5 (March 1918): 3–4. For descriptions of the committee and the work of the section, see Rippin, "Social Hygiene and the War," 126–27; and Henrietta S. Additon, "Work among Delinquent Women and Girls," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 79 (September 1918): 152–60, 155.

used the power granted it by the War Department to arrest women who approached soldiers or sailors in a flirtatious manner and forcibly tested them for venereal infection.[18] Bascom Johnson, director of the Law Enforcement Division, conflated protection with detention in a blunt endorsement of imprisonment: "How can we protect young girls? . . . By providing detention houses. . . . How can we make prostitutes hard to find? By internment in State reformatories, etc."[19] This statement was more than just rhetoric: the federal government initially allocated $250,000 from the president's war emergency fund to create centers for quarantining women but ended up spending over $400,000 to accommodate the women detained.[20] In the push to acquire sufficient housing, section workers found that the abandoned brothels of the recently closed vice districts served their purposes well. With large reception rooms and many small bedrooms, parlor houses required little renovation to hold the imprisoned women. Builders merely added high walls and topped them with barbed wire to make the conversion from brothel to detention center complete.[21] In a bitter irony barely recognized at the time, wartime reformers confined their "prodigal daughters" in the very houses from which, at the peak of the white slavery scare, they had once sworn to free them.

Historians do not know how many women suffered from these policies, but they numbered in the tens of thousands. The War Department claimed to have "helped care for 30,000 delinquent women and girls," an act that Elizabeth Clement has characterized as incarceration.[22] In contrast, Alan Brandt argued that only 18,000 women were committed to federally funded institutions between 1918 and 1920.[23] Government investigators Mary Dietzler and Thomas Storey concluded in their 1922 report on detention houses for quarantined women that the CTCA interned 15,520 women.[24] Even allowing for statistical differences, these numbers are hardly

[18] Ethel Sturges Dummer to Paul Kellogg, 23 May 1919, p. 13, file 235, box 16, ESDP. For more on these policies, see Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900–1918* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 35; and Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 165–68, 175–76.

[19] Bascom Johnson, "Next Steps: A Program of Activities against Prostitution and Venereal Disease for Communities Which Have Closed Their 'Red Light' Districts," *American Social Hygiene Association Publication,* no. 126 (Washington, DC, 1918), 10–11, file 2, box 131, ASHA.

[20] Miner, "Report on the Committee," 13–14; Martha P. Falconer, "The Part of the Reformatory Institution in the Elimination of Prostitution," *Social Hygiene* 5, no. 1 (1919): 1–9, 2–3; and Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 88–89.

[21] After the war, government investigators hid these measures in bureaucratic documents. See Mary Macey Dietzler, *Detention Houses and Reformatories as Protective Social Agencies in the Campaign of the United States Government against Venereal Diseases* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1922), 48, 89, 109–10, 113, 132–34, 149–50. For a similar, less complicated report, see Falconer, "The Part of the Reformatory Institution," 4.

[22] Clement, *Love for Sale*, 125, 160.

[23] Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 89.

[24] Dietzler, *Detention Houses and Reformatories*, 5–6.

comprehensive, as they fail to quantify the full impact of the CTCA's repressive turn. Since federal officials only counted federal detainees, they ignored women held in local jails and hospitals as a direct result of wartime policies.[25] In Bedford Hills, one of New York State's reformatories for women, authorities capped the total numbers admitted to the institution, but they also noted that the number of inmates incarcerated for sexually related offenses rose dramatically in 1917 and 1918. These women now made up 75 percent of the reformatory's population.[26] The internment of "promiscuous" women represented the most extreme impact of the CTCA's misogyny, directly altering the lives of uncounted women. The commission's policies also incited lasting cultural changes that affected the way men treated women.

During the war, men who frequented the cafés, cabarets, and commercial dance halls of the northeastern United States began to talk about women differently. By closing the vice districts and targeting women who approached men, the CTCA and its agents encouraged a new social distance between men and women. Men started talking to other men first, and, when doing so, they labeled the women around them in the most reductive ways imaginable. Men's categories overrode women's self-definitions. By contrast, in the entertainment venues of the prewar vice district, women not only initiated sexual solicitations more often than men but also set the place and price. To show how women's autonomy changed over this period, the next section circles back to the prewar years to examine the obscenities men and women used during their leisure hours in commercial resorts.

Swearing in Saloons

Often overlooked by historians of popular culture, the back rooms of saloons were central to the story of mixed-sex leisure in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the national stereotype of the pre-Prohibition saloon involves a row of white working-class men with their bellies up to the bar, this image represents an ideal and a regulatory construction rather

[25] The only source that quantifies both local and federal internment is from Puerto Rico. From July 1918 to January 1919, military and local police arrested over a thousand women on vice-related charges. Local judges convicted and ordered confined 809 women in local jails. The US District Court found 58 women guilty of sex offenses and also had them imprisoned in the local jails. Both sets of arrests and convictions resulted directly from war department policies. In contrast, the year previous, the Puerto Rican jails housed an average of 790 prisoners, of which only 25 to 30 were women. See [Howard L. Kern], *Special Report of the Attorney General of Porto Rico Concerning the Suppression of Vice and Prostitution in Connection with the Mobilization of the National Army at Camp Las Casas* (San Juan, 1919), 8–9, 14.

[26] *Eighteenth Annual Report of the New York State Reformatory at Bedford Hills, N.Y. for the Year Ending June 30, 1918* (Albany, 1919), 13.

than the reality of bar life in American cities.[27] Banned from the front barroom, women drank in the less discussed but still significant back room of saloons. Indeed, these "family rooms" featured in most downtown saloons. There women reveled as patrons, bartenders, proprietors, and prostitutes, circulating among the tables as they socialized. Also known as "wine rooms," back rooms catered to both men and women and frequently had music for dancing.[28] These "concert saloons" differed from dance halls only by their size and layout rather than by the entertainment offered. The simplest offerings involved a piano and a "professor" to play it, but concert saloons and black-and-tans, their mixed-race counterparts, commonly hired multipiece bands.[29] Far from being single-sex sites dedicated solely to drinking, saloons set important precedents for later mixed-sex cafés, cabarets, and dance halls.

Although proprietors catered to both sexes, the back rooms were heterosocial in a specific way: men and women did not go out as couples to saloons on dates, but they did hang out together. Most people assumed that if a woman frequented a saloon wine room, she was part of the "sporting world," as Americans called their demimonde. Women regulars often drank at a discount, received a commission on the drinks men bought, and split with the proprietor their earnings from prostitution in the upstairs rooms of the saloon. Indeed, male saloon patrons were arguably the only customers in these settings.[30] The wine rooms of turn-of-the-century saloons served both sexes, but women usually comprised part of the services offered, while men acted as the privileged patrons and proprietors. Men spent the money, but women set the price—anywhere from one to five dollars—and dictated the place to which they would adjourn—usually an upstairs room in the saloon

[27] For an alternative, contemporary view, see Frederic H. Wines and John Koren, *The Liquor Problem in Its Legislative Aspects* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1897), 12, 317, 330; [Newark Vice Commission], *Report on the Social Evil Conditions of Newark, New Jersey to the People of Newark* ([Newark], [1914]), 21–22.

[28] Norman H. Clark, *Deliver Us from Evil: An Interpretation of American Prohibition* (New York: Norton, 1976), 57; and Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 84.

[29] For descriptions of concert saloons and the variety of entertainment offered in them, see Louise de Koven Bowen, "Dance Halls," *Survey*, 3 June 1911, 383–87; Burton W. Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 22–38; Kathy Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 57–59; Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (New York: Norton, 1992), 224–25, 231–32.

[30] George J. Kneeland, *Commercialized Prostitution in New York City*, rev. ed. (New York: Century Company, 1917), 53–56; Mara L. Keire, *For Business and Pleasure: Red-Light Districts and the Regulation of Vice in the United Sates, 1890–1933* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 31. This situation differs from the direct employment of female servers in Parisian cafés. See Andrew Israel Ross, "Serving Sex: Playing with Prostitution in the *Brasseries à femmes* in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 24, no. 3 (May 2015): 288–313, 288.

or at a nearby hotel.[31] As the providers of commercial nightlife, sporting women were bold and aggressive figures with great determinative power.

Both men and women used "vile language" in these saloon back rooms, and the crudeness of their conversations reflected the disreputability of the setting. In 1901 Mr. Arthur Wilson reported that in a Seventh Avenue black-and-tan a "colored woman had her dress to her knees. A Negro who was also sitting there said to her, 'Lizzie, put down your clothes or we will see your fire cracker [*sic*].' She says, 'That's all right, Jones, you don't get any of my firecracker.'"[32] As part of the vice districts' "vocabulary of abuse," men and women tossed around terms like "cocksucker," "son of a bitch," and "god damn bitches" with casual abandon.[33] For example, eleven years later in another Seventh Avenue venue, a woman declared, "There's nothing but a lot of C—— suckers in this place," to which Mike, a male patron, replied, "Oh no, I am the only 'C sucker' in the place." This prompted the woman to exclaim, "Why you S of [a] B, I'm going to leave."[34] Although these particular exchanges were more obscene than most of the conversations that antivice investigators recorded, men and women typically conversed, and cursed, together in the back room of saloons.

The overt heterosociability in downtown saloons and the free exchange of insults challenge the canonical characterization of turn-of-the-century commercial nightlife.[35] Inspired by Jon Kingsdale's seminal 1973 article, "The 'Poor Man's Club,'" even sophisticated scholars of popular culture such as Howard Chudacoff and Richard Stott have interpreted the presence of prostitution in working-class saloons as a confirmation that saloons were a male domain.[36] Yet if prostitution was present, so were women. Often drunk, frequently profane, and almost always disreputable, the sporting women who socialized and solicited in saloons were visible, vocal players

[31] Kneeland, *Commercialized Prostitution*, 39–40; Clement, *Love for Sale*, 89–91.

[32] "Arthur E. Wilson States," 2 March 1901, 305 7th Avenue, New York Committee of Fifteen Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library (cited hereafter as NYC15). For a similar example, see Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 63. Investigators did not always observe rules of grammar, writing in a descriptive but often inconsistent fashion. I have maintained these idiosyncrasies when quoting directly from their reports.

[33] For examples of swearing, see "Statement of Arthur E. Wilson," 9 February 1901, Investigation Report, 128th Street and 2nd Avenue, 21 January 1912, file: 1912, box 1, Committee of Fourteen Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library (cited hereafter as C14); Investigative Report, 300 Seventh Avenue, 21 January 1912, file: 1912, box 1, C14. Peter Moogk coined the phrase "vocabulary of abuse" ("'Thieving Buggers,'" 528).

[34] Investigative Report, 300 Seventh Avenue, 21 January 1912, file: 1912, box 1, C14.

[35] On the significance of interchangeable insults, see Moogk, "'Thieving Buggers,'" 534, 546.

[36] Jon M. Kingsdale, "'The Poor Man's Club': Social Functions of the Urban Working Class Saloon," *American Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (1973): 472–89; Howard Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 107–15; and Richard Stott, *Jolly Fellows: Male Milieus in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 101, 228–30.

integral to urban nightlife. Women in saloons commodified their sex, but they hardly deferred to men's whims. The language that they used and that others used to describe them confirmed their relative power. Both men and women indiscriminately embroidered their conversations with epithets, applying them with equal derision to both sexes. In a 1979 article comparing insults in New France to those of "Old" France, historian Peter Moogk argued that "sexual and social roles were more loosely defined" in communities that used "sexually interchangeable insults" than in those where the "pattern of abuse" followed disproportionately gendered lines.[37] This observation also holds true for prewar New York, where sporting women regularly defied conventions that deemed modesty more feminine than assertiveness.

An analysis of sporting women's obscenities underscores these women's agency. Unlike later obscene exchanges during the First World War, sporting women were "bitches" and "bums," and only on rare occasion were they fetishized body parts. "Cocksucker," a common epithet, was obscene, but it was also active: it defined people, who were as often female as male, by what they did. As an insult it reviled agents, not objects. In this setting, the metonymized individual, the "cock," was the patron, not the prostitute. Moreover, men suffered insults as frequently as women. Saloon prostitutes sometimes ridiculed their customers' penises, giving a running commentary about the size and hardness of a man's penis for the amusement of the room.[38] This commentary could even turn into a sale's pitch. In 1912, when a man was slow to accept a prostitute's terms in a hotel barroom on Myrtle Street in Brooklyn, the woman groped him, saying, "I don't believe you have a prick." The man, perhaps feeling the need to prove his masculinity, acquiesced to her sexual advances.[39] If, as feminists argue, women fear rape and men fear laughter, then saloon wine rooms were not for the faint of heart of either sex. Little respect existed between prostitutes and their customers, but the sexual dynamics in the low-down dives indicate that women played a leading role in this heterosocial arena.

Just as saloons were not exclusively male domains, neither was "saloon" necessarily a straightforward designation. The line dividing cafés, dives, dance halls, and concert saloons was often ambiguous. All of these entertainment venues, generically called "resorts" in underworld parlance, let in most anyone who chose to enter, and as the twentieth century progressed, they appealed to an increasingly varied group of consumers. Changing licensing laws and the desire to serve liquor to a mixed-sex clientele meant that proprietors turned "saloons" into "cafés" and "dance halls" into "clubs" according to whichever type of business license gave them maximum

[37] Moogk, "'Thieving Buggers,'" 534.

[38] Deposition of Lawrence J. Beine, [July] 1912, p. 3, *People of the State of New York vs. Jim Proprietor*, box 29, C14.

[39] Ibid., 2. For a similar example, see Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 70.

latitude.[40] Vice venues clustered together in commercial neighborhoods, but under liberal municipal administrations, district proprietors established shooting galleries, pool parlors, vaudeville theaters, and cheap restaurants alongside the more traditional brothels and saloons. Thus, during the Progressive Era, through the diversity of entertainment offered, red-light districts gained an implicit institutional legitimacy that blurred the line between respectable and disreputable nightlife.[41] As the new commercial popular culture—especially movies, music, and dancing—attracted young men and women of increasingly heterogeneous social backgrounds, this problem compounded. On the eve of World War I, the institutional overlap between the sporting culture of the old vice districts and the youth culture of the new popular recreation confused previously predictable sexual conventions.[42] The entertainment districts in northeastern cities, with their ambiguous moral geography, provided the setting for the conversations in the next section.

DISHING IN DANCE HALLS

During World War I, men and women participating in urban nightlife adopted new social scripts that shifted the power to initiate sexual negotiations from women to men. This shift occurred across the class spectrum. As Beth Bailey argued in her 1988 book about courtship in twentieth-century America, within the white middle class, the First World War irrevocably solidified the move from a female-supervised system of suitors calling on women in their homes to a male-initiated practice of dating in public

[40] For examples of rebranding, see Wisconsin Vice Committee, *Report and Recommendations of the Wisconsin Legislative Committee to Investigate the White Slave Traffic and Kindred Subjects* ([Madison], 1914), 59; [Hartford Vice Commission], *Report of the Hartford Vice Commission: Hartford, Conn.* (Hartford, CT, [1913]), 27; Vice Commission of Chicago, *Social Evil in Chicago: A Study of Existing Conditions, with Recommendations* (Chicago, 1911), 83; and H. Gordon Frost, *The Gentlemen's Club: The Story of Prostitution in El Paso* (El Paso: Mangan Books, 1983), 148, 154–55.

[41] Popular entertainment developed in this fashion in multiple cities. For examples, see Herbert Asbury, *The Barbary Coast: An Informal History of the San Francisco Underworld* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1933), 270–71; Kenneth L. Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 48; Robert F. Selcer, "Fort Worth and the Fraternity of Strange Women," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 96, no. 1 (1992): 55–86, 63; James R. McGovern, "'Sporting Life on the Line': Prostitution in Progressive Era Pensacola," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (1975): 131–44, 134; Perry R. Duis, *The Saloon: Public Drinking in Chicago and Boston, 1880–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 237–38; and Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 204–8.

[42] For accounts discussing this overlap, see Bowen, "Dance Halls," 383–87; *Report on the Social Evil Conditions of Newark, New Jersey*, 47; Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 43–44; Paul S. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 207; and Mark Thomas Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 95–96.

places.[43] Bailey ascribed men's new control over courtship to male privilege within commercial leisure, yet a similar weakening of women's agency occurred in urban nightlife. Prior to World War I, in the differentially reputable venues of commercial entertainment, women approached men as frequently as men approached women. Furthermore, if the couple agreed to have sex, the woman, not the man, set the price and dictated the place to which they would adjourn. Unlike the shift in respectable society from courting to dating, the loss of women's power in the sporting world did not coincide with a change from a domestic to a commercial locale but rather resulted from a new set of regulatory circumstances. During the war, when women risked internment if they approached unknown men, male "go-betweens," namely, waiters, bartenders, doormen, and bell boys, became integral to the sexual negotiations in black-and-tans, cabarets, nightclubs, dance halls, and other ambiguously reputable venues that survived the CTCA's assault on urban nightlife.[44] The closure of the red-light districts and the suppression of saloons across the country reinforced a larger trend in twentieth-century sexual conventions that privileged men and disempowered women.

By 1918 five years of saloon reform and almost a year of wartime measures had dramatically changed the pattern of heterosocial interaction. For most of the first two decades of the twentieth century, antivice reformers had attempted, with only limited success, to quash direct sexual solicitation. In New York the Committee of Fourteen pressured proprietors of saloons, dance halls, and cabarets not only to suppress direct sexual solicitation but also to discourage any sort of social interaction between strangers of the opposite sex.[45] Yet before the war, women still retained an important power in these settings: the power to set the price and place of sexual interactions. Proprietors, waiters, and bartenders supervised the socializing in their resorts, insuring that neither the patrons nor the prostitutes grew too rowdy, but they did not participate in the actual negotiations between women and men.[46] During the war, however, antivice investigators stopped relaying women's voices with any regularity. The previously rote invocation, "she solicited me to prostitution," disappeared from their reports and turned into an anachronism. Instead, investigators started writing down their

[43] Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 13–24.

[44] American Social Hygiene Association, "Atlanta Social Hygiene Survey" (typescript), 1926, file 10, box 98, ASHA; "Detroit, Michigan: General Summary, Under-Cover Investigation of Prostitution, January 4 to February 4, 1926 and March 4 to June 4, 1926" (typescript), file 9, box 99, ASHA; American Social Hygiene Association, "Saint Louis Social Hygiene Survey" (typescript), March 1923, file 2, box 100, ASHA.

[45] Mara L. Keire, "The Committee of Fourteen and Saloon Reform in New York City, 1905–1920," *Business and Economic History* 26, no. 2 (1998): 573–83, 573.

[46] For examples of back-room dynamics and the role of saloon managers, see "N.E. Cor. 132 St and 5th Ave.," p. 2, file 1913, box 28, C14; "Special Report Club Inspection," file 1914, box 28, C14; and Deposition of Lawrence J. Beine, [July] 1912, *People of the State of New York vs. Jim Proprietor*, box 29, C14.

discussions with other men about the sexual availability of the women in the vicinity. Men now brokered the meetings between men looking for sex and the women willing to provide it. The social distance between men and women increased in wartime entertainment venues at the same time that the social distance between men decreased. Where once women interacted directly with men, under recreation's new regulatory constraints, men no longer talked first with women, but they did talk about them, categorizing them by their sexual availability, before they ever even approached them.

Men's uncontested right to label women served as the most important index of men's new power to initiate sexual negotiations. Before the war, through sartorial signifiers and conversational cues, sporting women clearly broadcasted who they were and what they offered. Wartime repression, however, caused many prostitutes to mute their professional signifiers, making it more difficult for men to judge whether a woman, in their words, was "out for the sugar" or just wanted a "good time."[47] As a result, men unfamiliar with the sexual codes of a particular dance hall turned to insiders—waiters, bartenders, and managers—to decipher the dance hall's sexual signifiers and to categorize the women around them. Since dance hall rules, which followed the dictates of the CTCA, forbade men from approaching women they did not know, men relied on the male management to inform them which women were sexually willing and at what price.[48] Waiters quickly told their customers which women were "charity girls" and which ones were "money girls," and if the man seemed like a "good fellow" and a heavy tipper, the waiters would "stake" (introduce) him to a woman.[49] Although not pimps per se, waiters, bartenders, doormen, and managers facilitated other men's search for sex by labeling the women around them.

Dance hall employees also offered their customers tips on the social scripts that men needed to follow to obtain women's sexual favors. Besides telling their customers which women were sexually willing, waiters also coached their customers on how quickly they could push a woman for sex. For instance, Sam Kaplan, a doorman in New Haven, Connecticut,

[47] Before the war, vice investigators found it much easier to read the sexual signifiers and determine whether a woman was a prostitute, promiscuous, or prim. See Investigation Report, 30 January 1914, Gilligan's Cafe, file: 1913–1914, box 28, C14. For typical categorizing phrases, see Investigation Report, 19 January 1917, 216 West 46th Street, box 31, C14; "Investigation Report, D.O.," 4 June 1918, Paterson, NJ, p. 14, file "Paterson, NJ," box 24, C14; and "Grand Central Palace," 4 May 1918, file: 1918, box 4, C14.

[48] Investigation Report, 19 January 1917, 216 West 46th Street, box 31, C14; Investigation Report, 8 March 1917, 153/155 West 47th Street, box 31, C14. For an example of dance hall regulations, see Municipal Dance Hall Committee, "Rules for Dancing," [ca. 1918], file 381, box 24, ESDP.

[49] For examples of this kind of slang, see "General Conditions and Conversations," 31 August 1917, Trenton, NJ, p. 2, file: Trenton, NJ, box 24, C14; 12 February 1917, 2137/2139 Boston Road, box 32, C14; "Investigation Report, D.O.," 16 November–20 November 1918, Providence, RI, p. 8, file: "Special New Eng. towns," box 24, C14; "Investigation Report," 16 April 1918, Philadelphia, PA, p. 12, file: Philadelphia, box 24, C14.

told an investigator that Helen Davis "is a regular guy, is not out for the money but likes to go out for a good time and if you treat her right will go the limit."[50] The investigator noted that Kaplan "told me he had been out with her and she is good."[51] Not rushing a woman or asking her directly how much she wanted was particularly important, because, as one New Haven woman explained about herself, "she likes her Jazz but is not a streetwalker."[52] These status differences mattered to women, but the economic distinctions held greater significance for men.[53] An evening with a charity girl was generally cheaper than a night out with a prostitute, especially since waiters made sure to warn their customers if the women who interested them were "bleeders," a label that suggested sexual unavailability due to menstruation even as it implied women's economic exploitation of men.[54] To reassure their customers that a charity girl was a "regular fellow" who would "go the limit," waiters would tell the investigator, as Sam Kaplan had with Helen Davis, that he or someone else he knew "had made her."[55] Even when male waiters and their male customers colluded to preserve charity girls' pretenses that they were more respectable than prostitutes, men nevertheless saw women from a sexually reductive perspective.[56]

After the crackdown on prostitution during the war, men on the town used slang words for vulva, usually "cunt" or "gash," to label all sexually willing women. For example, in March 1917 one waiter observed in an Eighth Avenue venue that "there aint [*sic*] one girl that remains here at

[50] It was not uncommon to refer to women as "guys" and "fellows" in the slang of the day.

[51] "Report of D.O.," 28 November–5 December 1919, New Haven, CT, p. 33, file: "Special New Eng. towns," box 24, C14. For similar examples, see Investigation Report, 19 January 1917, 216 West 46th Street, box 31, C14; and "Disorderly Houses, Manhattan, Bronx and Bklyn.," 26 February 1918, file: 1916, box 30, C14.

[52] "Report of D.O.," 28 November–5 December 1919, New Haven, CT, p. 34, file: "Special New Eng. towns," box 24, C14.

[53] "Report of D.O.," 28 November–5 December 1919, New Haven, CT, pp. 6, 10, file: "Special New Eng. towns," box 24, C14; "Investigation Report, D.O.," 11 May 1918, Paterson, NJ, p. 4, file: Paterson, NJ, box 24, C14. The venereal health of a woman was also both a consideration and a point of conversation, although it was secondary to the economic distinctions. See "Report of D.O.," 28 November–5 December 1919, New Haven, CT, p. 35, file: "Special New Eng. towns," box 24, C14.

[54] In addition to being called "bleeders," these women were also known as "cockteasers" and "leg pullers." See "Central Casino," 8 July 1916, file: 1916, box 31, C14; "Investigation Report, D.O.," 21 November–23 November [1918], Fall River, MA, p. 16, file: "Special New Eng. towns," box 24, C14.

[55] "Investigation Report, D.O.," 21 November–23 November [1918], Fall River, MA, p. 9, file: "Special New Eng. towns," box 24, C14. See also Investigation Report, 4 June 1917, Old Homestead, box 32, C14.

[56] "Investigation Report, D.O.," 21 November–23 November [1918], Fall River, MA, p. 16, file: "Special New Eng. towns," box 24, C14; "Report of D.O.," 28 November–5 December 1919, New Haven, CT, file: "Special New Eng. towns," box 24, C14.

this hour that aint 'C——t' [cunt]."[57] Another declared, "There is so much gash around that he is sick of it."[58] Indeed, by 1919 waiters and their male patrons employed a shorthand where "gash" and "cunt" acted as the initial umbrella terms to describe all sexually willing women who they only subsequently distinguished as either prostitutes ("hustlers," "whores," or "gold diggers") or as those simply out for a "good time" ("charity," "charity bums," or "charity gash").[59] In these conversations, male waiters and their male customers verbally reduced women to their sex organs, only qualifying this overarching category to indicate whether a man could get away with just paying for drinks, or whether he would have to pay the woman directly for her time and sexual attention.

The changing use of obscenities from insults to labels raises important issues for evaluating the relative power of women in the new popular culture. In the second decade of the twentieth century, more women from the respectable working and lower-middle classes could participate as consumers in commercial recreation; however, for all these women's self-defined respectability, men saw them as they saw all women in public: as sexual objects available for their exploitation. Men humored charity girls' belief that they were better than sporting women, but the conversations between men showed the hypocrisy behind this pretense. Among men, all women were gash. The conflict between women's self-perceived status and men's reductive objectification might not have mattered, but by gaining greater power to initiate sexual encounters, men also acquired the power to make the key determinative categorization, and they did so by diminishing all women. Men's umbrella definition of all women as cunts overrode individual women's prerogative to define themselves.

The Conversational Context: A Theoretical Evaluation

The vernacular vocabulary and the conversational context of prewar and wartime profanity reveal the fraught gender dynamics of commercial recreation in the early twentieth-century northeastern United States. At the beginning of this period, in the mixed-sex back rooms of saloons, women and men spoke to each other directly. Whether their conversations entailed solicitations or crude sexual put-downs, neither women nor men relied on

[57] Investigation Report, 19 March 1917, 2926 Eighth Ave., box 32, C14. See also "Investigation Report, D.O.," 21 November–23 November 1918, Fall River MA, p. 5, file: "Special New Eng. towns," box 24, C14.

[58] Investigation Report, 17 February 1917, 2926 Eighth Ave., box 32, C14. See also Investigation Report, 19 January 1917, 216 West 46th Street, box 31, C14.

[59] For examples of the way men used this slang, see Investigation Report, 29 March 1919, 57/67 Smith St., Brooklyn, file: "Bklyn.—Investig. Reports," box 32; "Report of D.O.," 28 November–5 December 1919, New Haven, CT, pp. 7, 9, file: "Special New Eng. towns," box 24; 16 December 1916, 2137/2139 Boston Road, SW, box 32; "H.K. June 28th 1919," file: "Bklyn.—Investig. Reports," box 32; "Grand Central Palace," 4 May 1918, file: 1918, box 4; all C14.

intermediaries to negotiate the social terrain of vice-district venues. The narrative strategies that antivice investigators adopted in their reports reflected the directness of sexual interactions in saloons. Because solicitations, not sexual representations, interested male investigators, they rarely went into a saloon's main barroom to ask other men about the sexual availability of women. Instead, the investigators, like regular johns, headed right to the back room, where the conversations between men and women quickly exposed the sexual codes at work. The investigators' prewar reports indicate that they either acted as observers or interacted with women directly to assess a resort's relative reputability. This situation changed during the war. Investigators now questioned male patrons to determine which women were sexually available. The conversational requisites of social mediation meant that any man wanting to have sex with a woman became complicit in the verbal objectification of women. Where once women interacted directly with men, one subject to another, in the venues of the new popular culture the enforced distance between men and women meant that men as subjects talked together about objects—women.[60] In saloons, women had commodified their sex, but in dance halls, men objectified women.

The lexical differences between prewar and wartime profanity show how the CTCA's misogynistic anti-VD propaganda and campaign to increase the social distance between working-class men and women had a significant, negative impact on women's status. In her 1982 essay, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State," Catharine MacKinnon observed: "Man fucks woman. Subject verb object."[61] MacKinnon wrote this statement as an axiomatic truth, but the sharp shift in the way men and women employed profanity in the early twentieth-century Northeast demonstrates how objectification changes due to historical circumstances: MacKinnon's observation best fits wartime developments. Conversations between saloon prostitutes and their clients before the war show that women objectified men as often as men objectified women. A prostitute impatient with her customer could tell him to "hurry up and get fucked," while another could ask a john if he thought she was going to "fuck around here with you all night."[62] In neither example did women defer to men. Women actively

[60] Eve Sedgwick described this type of social mediation as sexual displacement that reinforced the patriarchy. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 26. For other relevant theoretical discussions, see Jane M. Ussher, *Fantasies of Femininity: Reforming the Boundaries of Sex* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 103; and Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, "Truth and the Obscene Word in Eighteenth-Century French Pornography," in Hunt, *The Invention of Pornography*, 206.

[61] Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, no. 3 (1982): 515–44, 541.

[62] "Report of A. Whitehouse and J. W. Brewster," 2 May 1905, file: "Inv. Rep. 1905," box 28, C14; Deposition of Lawrence J. Beine, [July] 1912, p. 5, *People of the State of New York vs. Jim Proprietor*, box 29, C14.

set the tone and the terms of the sexual exchange. In contrast, during the war, women would tell men, usually through an intermediary, if they would not "step the limit" (go all the way) or "had their flowers" (were menstruating) so men would not spend their money under false pretenses and then "get sore at them."[63] Investigators stopped reporting conversations with women because they had already learned from other men which women were "gash." The male grapevine knew if a man had "hosed" (had sex with) a woman and whether she was out for the money or not. In wartime conversations between men, a woman was no longer the active agent—a "cockteaser"—but rather a metonymic object—a "cunt."[64] Prewar obscenities acted as insults, not descriptions. Where "cocksucker" was an epithet that simply embroidered back-room banter, "cunt" served as a defining term in the wartime conversations between men. Even the exchange about Lizzie's firecracker, the closest comparison to wartime conversations, did not entail pure objectification. Lizzie was not reduced to her genitalia, nor had she lost control over her sexuality.[65] Men's discursive diminishment of women during the First World War did not mark the first time men called women "gash," but in the new sexual scripts, after women lost their prerogative to initiate sexual negotiations, men labeled women (subject, verb, object). In the commercial dance halls and other heterosocial venues of the new popular culture, charity girls were cunts because soldiers, sailors, and male civilians described all sexually willing women as such.

World War I served as the crucial lexical context for men's reduction of women in public to their privates. In wartime dance halls, amusement parks, and training camps, venereal distinctions superseded social distinctions. When men on the town aggregated the women around them into the category of "cunt," they followed the lead of the Commission on Training Camp Activities, which in its propaganda reduced all sexually active women to a "dirty dose."[66] With a million widely distributed pamphlets, the commission reinforced this symbolic diminishment of women using metaphors that

[63] Investigators noted the use of these terms in the following reports: "Vicinity of 63rd + Halsted Sts.," 1 April 1918, p. 344, vol. 10, Chicago Committee of Fifteen, Ms. 1028, Department of Special Collections, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL; and "Report of D.O.," 28 November–5 December 1919, New Haven, CT, p. 10, file: "Special New Eng. towns," box 24, C14. The dance hall manager relayed the women's concerns about men getting "sore at them" to the investigator.

[64] "Investigation Report, D.O.," 16 November–20 November 1918, Providence, RI, p. 5, file: "Special New Eng. towns," box 24, C14; "Central Casino," 8 July 1916, file: 1916, box 31, C14. On metonymy and the way men reduce women (subjects) to cunts (objects), see Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1979; repr., New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989), 204.

[65] "Arthur E. Wilson states," 2 March 1901, 305 7th Avenue, NYC15.

[66] *V.D.: Putting It Up to the Men* (pamphlet), p. 8, file 5, box 131, ASHA. See also *Standard Statistics of Prostitution, Gonorrhea, Syphilis* (pamphlet), p. 3, file 1, box 170, ASHA.

compared sexually willing, therefore venereal-diseased women, to any other object or animal that spread death and disease: German bullets, malarial mosquitoes, venomous vipers, and, in the most extreme version of women as disposable objects, other men's toothbrushes.[67] By so thoroughly vilifying women, wartime propaganda legitimated men's objectification of the women they met in dance halls and other commercial entertainment venues. The War Department's campaign against women lasted only a few years, but it took place at a critical time in the development of popular culture. Its extreme misogyny formalized men's reduction of women, whatever their social status, to objects of exchange, barely capable of self-determination, valued only for their vaginas.

Conclusion

One of the few extended conversations that an antivice investigator recorded with any woman during World War I occurred in Newark, New Jersey, between David Oppenheim and two prostitutes, Kitty and Katz. Oppenheim had already met Kitty and Katz on an earlier trip to Newark two months before, so they felt comfortable talking with him. When he told them he was "out for charity," Katz laughed, saying that the dance hall known as Patsy Kline's was "a poor place to come for charity. Katz said she used to give it away but she found out she could sell it and is not giving it away any more." Oppenheim then turned to Kitty and asked "if she wasn't going to give it away." She said, "Not me, I'm strictly business." Oppenheim pushed her: "You told me last time you would," but Kitty replied, "That was different, if you would have phoned me . . . you might have got a little charity but I am wiser now, I aint [*sic*] going to give any of it away any more, I was stung too often."[68] Historians of prostitution, including Ruth Rosen, have interpreted prostitutes' disdain for charity girls as a defensive rationalization of their own disreputable status, but Kitty and Katz offered a different explanation. They were tired of men treating them like "gash" without getting any payback.[69]

The reforms implemented by the Commission on Training Camp Activities disrupted the long-term balance between men and women in urban recreation. Women like Kitty and Katz saw only too well how the new order

[67] For the context in which the CTCA used these terms, see *"Hello, Soldier Sport, Want to Have a Good Time?"* (pamphlet), [ca. 1918], file 6, box 131, ASHA; John H. Stokes, *Today's World Problem in Disease Prevention* (Washington, DC, 1919), 105, cited in Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 72; *V.D.: Putting It Up to the Men* (pamphlet), [ca. 1918], p. 8, file 5, box 131, ASHA.

[68] "Investigation Report, D.O.," 30 October 1918, Newark, NJ, pp. 9–10, file: New Jersey, box 24, C14. For the report on Oppenheim's earlier visit, see "Investigation Report, D.O.," 29 August 1918, Newark, NJ, file: New Jersey, box 24, C14.

[69] Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 102.

hurt them. They realized that men had no more respect for women who gave sex away than for those who charged men for it. In contrast, the charity girls who ventured into dance halls retained their illusions of respectability, but their self-definitions mattered little to men. Despite or perhaps because of their liminal status and poor reputations, prostitutes, unlike the more naive charity girls, recognized men's disdain for women. At the very least, they understood that their status depended on how others perceived them. No matter how women self-identified, the dialogic mandates of the new regulatory circumstances meant that women operated in an environment that favored men.

This argument challenges some commonly accepted premises within the existing historiography. Historians of this era have generally considered World War I as a watershed for women's positive participation in the new popular culture. In 1986 Kathy Peiss, the preeminent historian of working women's recreation, warned that "women's embrace of mixed-sex fun could be a source of autonomy and pleasure, as well as a cause of their continuing oppression."[70] But Peiss and other scholars such as David Nasaw, Mary Odem, and Elizabeth Clement tend to emphasize the positive aspects of the social dynamics of dance halls, amusement parks, and movie theaters for women. According to this narrative, women entered into the new popular culture on their own terms, expressing their agency in creative ways as they tested the boundaries defining respectability and sexual freedom.[71] These historians have based their conclusions on two fallacies. First, they presume that prostitutes had little influence in the old "homosocial" culture of the sporting world. Some scholars, like Howard Chudacoff and Richard Stott, simply dismiss women's participation in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commercial leisure.[72] Other historians make a much more insidious choice. In describing the switch from "homosocial" to "heterosocial" leisure, Peiss and Clement compared the new sexual exchange between charity girls and the men who "dated them up" to the old mutuality of treating someone to a drink in the main barroom.[73] But treating in the front barroom involved men buying other men rounds of drinks—an equal exchange—while treating on dates entailed men buying commercial amusements for women

[70] Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 6.

[71] Kathy Peiss, "'Charity Girls' and City Pleasures: Historical Notes on Working-Class Sexuality, 1880–1920," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 84; Nasaw, *Going Out*, 111–14; Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 1–3; and Clement, *Love for Sale*, 145.

[72] Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor*, 109–14; and Stott, *Jolly Fellows*, 228–30.

[73] Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 108–9; and Clement, *Love for Sale*, 48.

with an expectation of receiving sex in return.[74] By comparing dating to barroom treating instead of to prostitution, historians have simplified the unequal distribution of power in mixed-sex amusement and instead described a respectable woman's entrance into commercial recreation as if she were just another "jolly good fellow." Yet "jolly good fellow" was a euphemism for prostitute, not just a description for a well-liked man, and the accepted quid pro quo in dance halls was sex, not just sociability. The gender dynamics of the saloon's mixed-sex back room, not the single-sex front room, prefigured the sexual scripts in dance halls, amusement parks, and other new sites of commercial recreation.

A second historical fallacy of past accounts has been the assumption that charity girls operated independently rather than dialogically. Interpreting women's participation in the new popular culture without taking into account the expectations of their male peers has kept scholars like Odem, Ruth Alexander, and Clement from accurately analyzing how far women succeeded in redefining social scripts.[75] As Stephen Robertson has warned, these types of accounts have an "analytical blind spot regarding sexual violence."[76] Yes, women rebelled against their families and state-enforced middle-class morality, but men exploited that rebellion. Although most everyone at the time placed the onus on women to determine the degree of their sexual involvement, more than a few men forced women to keep up their presumed end of the bargain and deliver sex in exchange for a night out.[77] Men coerced women sexually not because they were psychopathic outliers with deviant desires but because the norms of urban entertainment led them to expect intercourse at the close of an evening. Men believed that they deserved to get off whether they paid for sex directly or through the purchase of treats. Whether charity girls knew it or not, when women entered the venues of the new popular culture, they operated in an environment that still owed much to the precepts of commercial vice.

[74] For a discussion of barroom "treating," see Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 57–64; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 17, 20–21. For treating on dates, see Clement, *Love for Sale*, 1–9, 45–75.

[75] Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, 58; Ruth M. Alexander, *The "Girl Problem": Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900–1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 29, 48; and Clement, *Love for Sale*, 153–54.

[76] Stephen Robertson, "Prostitutes, Runaway Wives, Working Women, Charity Girls, Courting Couples, Spitting Women, Boastful Husbands, Pimps, and Johns," *Journal of Women's History* 20, no. 1 (2008): 247–57, 248. See also Jennifer Fronc, "Narratives of Sexual Conquest: A Historical Perspective on Date Rape," in *Why We Write: The Politics and Practice of Writing for Social Change*, ed. Jim Downs (New York: Routledge, 2006), 63–64.

[77] For examples, see Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 85–87, 203n53; and Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 156.

World War I encouraged a veneration of troops that translated into a diminishment of women's status. This decline engendered far-reaching consequences for the development of popular entertainment in the new century. Although expectations shifted over the course of the twentieth century, men and women who dated continually revised a foundational script based on men's presumed entitlement to women's sexual services. If scholars wish to contextualize today's "rape culture," they need to examine its origins in the conventions set during the early days of men and women dating in the commercial venues of the new popular culture.

About the Author

MARA L. KEIRE teaches US history at the University of Oxford. She is the author of *For Business and Pleasure: Red-Light Districts and the Regulation of Vice in the United States, 1890–1933.*