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by

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Welcome to Sodom: The Cultural Work of City-Mysteries

Fiction in Antebellum America

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Welcome to Sodom: The Cultural Work of City-Mysteries
Fiction in Antebellum America

by

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Dissertation

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For my Parents, Theodore and Marilyn Erickson

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Welcome to Sodom: The Cultural Work of City-Mysteries
Fiction in Antebellum America

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This dissertation will examine a genre of popular fiction from antebellum America known as the “city-mysteries” novel. These novels, which enjoyed great popularity from the early 1840s to 1860, appeared in the wake of several European examples, most notably Eugene Sue’s *The Mysteries of Paris* (1840-41) and G. W. M. Reynolds’ *The Mysteries of London*. While written about a wide range of American cities, from the burgeoning metropolitan areas of the Eastern seaboard to small New England towns to rising Western cities, these novels shared a concern with “removing the veil” from the hidden operations of urban life. In their presentation of the process of

urbanization, this body of literature helps reveal the ways that popular writers, as well as elite thinkers, were coming to terms with the sudden increase in the size, density, and diversity of urban areas in antebellum America. The dramatic changes wrought in the lives of many ordinary Americans by the growth of cities raised a number of questions of ethical and religious significance that these novels help address: Is it possible to be a “good” American in a large city? A good neighbor? A good republican? A good Christian? These novels, along with the vast body of tracts, sermons, reform literature, newspapers, children’s books, and other popular print forms, offer a window onto how everyday Americans thought about the urban environment. While these novels were written and purchased in large part for their entertainment value, and their depiction of both how enjoyable and frightening city life could be, they also contained a great deal of information—both accurate and false—about the cities that they described that would have shaped the thoughts and imaginations of their readers. In the process, these texts would have shaped what antebellum Americans expected city life to be like, and would have influenced how they might have prepared themselves to make the shift from a rural to an urban setting in the period of America’s first great wave of urbanization.

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Introduction

*All the Great Cities east and west,
'LONDON' and 'PARIS,' and the rest,
Mentioned in our school histories,
Each one has its own 'mysteries;'
Why can't we have, pray tell us, do,
Our 'MYSTERIES OF CHARLESTON' too?*

—*The Mysteries of Charleston*, by Eugene Sue, Jr.¹

In 1845, a writer for *Bentley's Miscellany* in London, remarking on the success of Eugene Sue's *Mysteries of Paris* and the incipient publication of G. W. M. Reynolds's *Mysteries of London*, announced that, "mystery-mania has crossed the channel." This mania for novels claiming to reveal the "mysteries" of city life was soon poised to cross the Atlantic as well. Beginning in the early 1840s, American authors of popular fiction began to take the growing cities of the United States as both a setting and a subject for their novels. With the huge success of George Lippard's 1844–45 Philadelphia novel, *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk-Hall*, "mystery-mania" can fairly be said to have arrived in America. While one writer of an 1839 travel guide to American cities admitted that, "We have, indeed, no cities, which can compare with several in the eastern hemisphere—no monuments like theirs—no palaces, nor baronial castles," he noted the remarkable progress that urbanization had made in the young republic: "But in the settlements of a wilderness, stretching hundreds and even thousands of miles, on every

¹ *The Mysteries of Charleston*, by Eugene Sue, Jr. (Charleston: Printed at the Typographical Depository Down Town, 1846), 4.

side—in the erection of towns and cities ... we have exceeded all expectations, and are without parallel, considering the infancy of our country, in the history of nations.”²

This dissertation will be a study of that process of urbanization in antebellum America, using as a lens the huge number of “city-mysteries” novels written about American cities in the twenty years before the Civil War. In so doing, I hope to provide a detailed picture of antebellum urban life. Mostly focusing on the metropolitan areas of the East Coast—New York, Philadelphia, Boston—these novels also revealed the hidden aspects of life in more far-flung locales, such as San Francisco, St. Louis, New Orleans, and Cincinnati, as well as in smaller settlements that may not have fully lived up to the title of “city,” like Nashua, NH; Troy, NY; Fitchburg, MA; and Pottsville, PA.³ I will argue that these novels, which are most often dismissed as either simply sensationalistic or as manifestations of a knee-jerk antiurbanism, are actually much more nuanced in their presentation of urban life. City-mysteries narratives, with their detailed descriptions of what to expect from urban life, would have been uniquely useful to Americans in “imagining” the city, both before they moved to the city and after they arrived. The following chapters will show that, in their portrayal of life in the growing antebellum

² Charles A. Goodrich, *The Family Tourist: or, A Visit to the Principal Cities of the Western Continent* (Hartford: Philemon Canfield, 1839), vi-viii.

³ These books reached readers in even more isolated locations. The cover of J. Wimpleton Wilkes’s 1844 *The Mysteries of Springfield* states that it could be bought from dealers not only in Boston, New York, New Haven, and Hartford, but in Northampton and Cabotville as well. Likewise, Ralph Rural’s *The Mountain Village; or, The Mysteries of the Coal Region*, published in Pottsville, PA, could be bought from news stands, post offices, bookstores, and newspaper offices in Minersville, Port Carbon, Tamaqua, Reading, and Harrisburg—cities that did not qualify for their own novels of urban mystery.

It is likely, however, that these novels of smaller cities had primarily local interest, given the advertisements on the back cover of *The Mysteries of Springfield* for local establishments like Bacon and Cleland’s Dry Goods Store. It is unlikely that too many New York or Boston readers would have needed to know what was “the cheapest store in Springfield.”

city, these sensational novels, far from focusing on the “miseries” of urban life, imparted a much clearer sense of the city’s possibilities and wonders.

The sudden profusion of these novels in the early 1840s reflects a response to a unique historical circumstance: during this period, America was becoming urbanized at the most rapid rate in its history. Charles Goodrich, the author of the city travel guide mentioned above, marveled that in Rochester, NY, “had we visited it in 1810—twenty-eight years since—not a single house should we have found standing upon it,” but by 1838, it had become a city of 20,000.⁴ This sudden and drastic rate of urban growth was not confined to new cities on the western fringe of settlement; cities that were already big got bigger at a much faster pace. In 1800, in a nation of over 5 million people, only 183,000 Americans lived in one of the six cities with a population over 10,000. Between 1820 and 1860, the population of the United States tripled (growing six times faster than the world average), from 10 million to 32 million, but the urban population multiplied tenfold, and the proportion of the population living in cities grew from 6 percent to 20 percent of the total, the greatest proportional increase in city dwellers that the U.S. has ever seen.⁵

As a result of this growth, the core areas of American cities were some of the most densely populated areas on the planet, and continued urbanization was seen as inevitable, being governed by natural laws as universal as gravity. With urban growth came urban problems, along with greater attention to those problems. John Griscom’s

⁴ Goodrich, *The Family Tourist*, 211.

⁵ Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 3; Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 227.

1845 report on *The Sanitary Condition of the Laboring Population of New York* was a landmark work in this regard, making urbanization itself a subject of inquiry and suggesting specific solutions to address problems that were specific to cities.⁶

Urban America in the antebellum years was growing not only quantitatively but also qualitatively—the experience of living in a city was changing in important ways. John Denison Vose referred in *Seven Nights in Gotham* to the “great floating population” of New York, and this sense of mobility was one of the most notable new qualities of urban life. European visitors to New York and other cities noted the frequency with which people changed residence; May 1, which was the day in antebellum New York when most residential leases expired, offered a spectacle of the city seemingly turning itself inside out as vast numbers of people moved their belongings from one home to another. The expansion of transportation networks (between 1820 and 1860, railroad mileage in the U.S. went from zero to 30,000) in the nation also made it easier to move between cities. This ease of movement brought waves of immigrants, foreign and domestic, to urban areas, as the 1850 census made clear in the case of New York, showing that nearly 60 percent of the people in the city had been born elsewhere, a significant proportion of them overseas.⁷

The growth of cities, both in flesh and in bricks and mortar, is one of the main preoccupations of American city-mysteries novels, many of which begin by describing a panoramic view of a city stretching to the horizon. But the visual was not the only

⁶ In particular, Griscom’s main argument was for improved street cleaning as a solution to the city’s health problems.

⁷ Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840–1857* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

sensory realm in which the urban experience was changing. When the protagonist of *Ellen Ramsay* first arrived in New York, “his ears were dinned with all sorts of uncouth noises. The streets in the distance seemed filled with one tremendous roar, as if the city carried on as part of its immense trade an extensive business in retail thunder.”⁸ Man-made structures competed with man-made noise and a concentration of smells that today we can only imagine to make the antebellum city an environment almost wholly alien to the experience of rural life.

The increasing size and diversity of the urban environment were accompanied by economic and cultural changes as well. The rise of factory production moved many jobs to new industrial towns such as Lowell, situated near easily-harnessed water power, while what we have come to know as white-collar workers began to grow in numbers as business enterprises grew in size and complexity.⁹ These economic forces generated a great deal of wealth, but it was wealth that was increasingly concentrated among a small group, producing an “Upper Ten” that stood in stark contrast to the “lower million” associated with the egalitarian ethos of Jacksonian politics.¹⁰ Along with these economic changes came cultural changes—an increasing number of women working for wages, the

⁸ Thomas Low Nichols, *Ellen Ramsay; or The Adventures of a Greenhorn in Town and Country* (New York: n.p., 1843), 20. See Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), for a discussion of the aural dimension of antebellum life.

⁹ This shift in work patterns was clearly felt at the time, as the Rev. John Blake lamented in 1854: “Why have so many of our sons forsaken the farm, for the office, the counting-room, the warehouse, and the professions?” For more on this process, see Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹⁰ From 1800 to 1860, the share of Philadelphia’s wealth controlled by the richest tenth of the city’s population rose from 50 percent to 90 percent, and in New York, by 1845 the richest 4 percent of the city’s population possessed 80 percent of the city’s total financial resources. (David Reynolds, introduction to George Lippard, *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk-Hall* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), xxxiii; and Melvin L. Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820–70* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 22.)

rise of mass-culture phenomena such as the daily penny newspaper and Barnum's Museum, steadily increasing literacy rates—that drastically altered what the urban environment looked like and how people were able to amuse themselves in it.

Richard Maxwell has written of the European context that, “Early nineteenth-century literature manifests confusion and unease about what it might mean to know a city,” and this unease was even stronger in the American case, where the process of urbanization was proceeding so much more rapidly than it had in Europe.¹¹ The author of the immodestly-named *Phelps' New York City Guide to all that can be seen and how to see it* echoed this discomfort, saying that New York's “march of improvement has been so rapid that the oldest citizens have but an imperfect knowledge of its extent and splendor.”¹² The antebellum era constitutes the critical period for urbanization in American history, not the decades of the late nineteenth century that, while they saw greater numerical increases in urban population than did the antebellum decades, did not constitute as great a qualitative alteration in urban experience.¹³ The difference between the experience of living in or visiting a city of 50,000 and a city of 500,000 is, I would argue, much greater than that between a city of 500,000 and a city of 2 million. As Thomas Bender notes, “most of the urban ‘problems’ typically associated with a later period had already made their appearance in American cities well before the Civil War,”

¹¹ Richard Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 3.

¹² *The Great Metropolis. Phelps' New York City Guide to all that can be seen and how to see it* (New York: Humphrey Phelps, 1865), vii.

¹³ This view of the late nineteenth century as the most dramatic period of urbanization in American history has been shaped by many historians, but perhaps most notably by Arthur Schlesinger, whose influential 1933 study *The Rise of the City: 1878–1898* contains in its title a claim as to which era was most critical for the process of urbanization.

and an “urban consciousness” was beginning to emerge in the antebellum era.¹⁴ The post-bellum years are usually thought to be the golden age of American urban literature—the age of Crane, Dreiser, Norris, and the other urban realists. These writers were writing, however, about cities that were already huge; they did not live through the experience, as antebellum writers did, of seeing Philadelphia or New York make the transition from walking city to metropolis.¹⁵

Many American cities changed in the antebellum years from “public cities”—relatively easily grasped places where life concentrated on the streets, one was likely to run into people one knew, and specialization and segregation had not yet set in—to “private cities,” to borrow Sam Warner’s phrase, where many activities became less visible, anonymity became the norm, and one had little or no contact with the people who actually ran the city. While it is all too easy to describe the antebellum era as a “liminal” period, since we have the advantage of knowing that the Civil War was right around the corner, in terms of the experience of urbanization this view is appropriate, as the years from 1840–1860, and the texts produced during this period, offer us a glimpse into how people came to terms with the simple fact that cities in America were getting too big to be easily comprehended.¹⁶ Yet comprehending these new cities through

¹⁴ Bender, *Towards an Urban Vision*, 97.

¹⁵ After the Civil War, people were still interested in reading about cities, and there were still many books written about urban corruption. But I would argue that the sorts of books about cities that people wrote and read changed, due to both changes in the ways people thought about cities (cities were not growing as fast, but their problems were seen to be more insoluble; the bureaucratization of reform that came out of the Civil War experience changed the ways that people addressed these problems) and to alterations in the popular fiction marketplace (the rise of the dime novel format and the genres of the Western and the detective story affected the sorts of cheap books that were produced as well as their subject matter).

¹⁶ The tendency to make the antebellum era carry far too much weight, because we know what is coming, is widespread in the field. To people living then, the period was neither an epilogue nor a prologue nor an ephemeral in-between state. In retrospect, every era can be seen as an era of great change or of crucial

narratives that claimed to “remove the veil” from urban life, showing the hidden connections of money and power that tied the high and the low together, is precisely what authors of city-mysteries novels attempted to do.

Outline of Chapters

The first chapter will serve as an introduction to the city-mysteries genre broadly defined, situating it in the context of antebellum urbanization and the attendant rise of mass print culture. In addition, I will offer some of what I feel are the defining characteristics of city-mysteries fiction that distinguish it from other forms of urban literature, and will situate my approach in the wider literature on the subject and offer some theoretical explanations for it. Chapter Two will outline the variety of opinion that existed in the broader culture of antebellum America about what the term “urban” meant, situating it in the context of urban growth and the putative cultural response of anti-urbanism. Chapter Three will discuss the view of urbanism and urbanization that was presented in popular urban narratives. In doing so, I hope to show what ordinary antebellum Americans, rather than only elites, thought the term *urban* meant, which will indicate that our image of antebellum thought as uniformly anti-urban is a distorted one. Chapter Four will address questions of authorship and the literary market as they relate to city-mysteries fiction. It will take a “case study” approach, examining the careers of three prolific authors of popular urban fiction: George Lippard, George Thompson, and

foreground. What I hope to examine here is how, in the antebellum period, change of a certain kind took place that was responded to in certain ways, without assuming that it only makes sense in light of what came later.

Justin Jones. Chapter Five deals with the existence (or not) of a mass audience for print in antebellum America; what such an audience might have looked like; how forms of popular print such as city-mysteries reached a nationwide audience; and how critics, pro and con, responded to the wave of cheap fiction that suddenly overwhelmed the country. Chapter Six will examine the issue of readership, looking at advice from critics and clergymen on how to read (or avoid) cheap fiction. I also examine evidence such as letters, diaries, and marginalia to attempt to shed light on that most elusive of questions—*how* did readers in history read popular fiction?

Chapter Seven will address the wide range of representations of class, labor, and capital in city-mysteries fiction. It will discuss what city-mysteries would have prepared workers from rural areas to find when they arrived in cities, as well as what I call the “mysteries of the market,” examining how these novels explained the emerging market economy in an era that was roiled by financial panics, lacked a standard currency, and saw traditional relationships within the trades being fundamentally altered. Chapter Eight will discuss the class politics of the city-mysteries genre overall. While the novels have frequently been described as embodying a radical class position, a less selective reading reveals that they directed their populist political rhetoric much more to the expectant capitalist than to the incipient socialist. In the process, I hope to sketch an outline of how authors of popular fiction imagined the classes and class relations in America, an outline that differs in some important respects from our present vision of class in antebellum America.

Chapter Nine will examine the presentation of gender in city-mysteries novels. The opportunity to both see and interact with members of the opposite sex on familiar terms was an aspect of urban life that readers longed to read more about, and city-mysteries novels made every effort to meet the need. Both as laborers and as objects for display (or purchase), male and female bodies are highlighted in the genre, which offered antebellum readers clear statements on how being a man or a woman in a city differed from being a man or a woman in the country. Chapter Ten will discuss urban sexuality as portrayed in the novels, which focused insistently on the fungibility of sex in the urban environment. As would befit any medium of exchange in an age rife with counterfeiting, the appearance of gender was also liable to be deceptive, which will be examined through a discussion of cross-dressing.

Chapter Eleven will discuss ways in which authors of popular urban narratives figured the city as a “wilderness,” both in an effort to appeal to readers of other popular genres and to interpret the urban landscape in terms that would have been familiar to most readers. In the process, they revealed the urban frontier to have been the true cultural and racial “borderland” of antebellum America, where citizens could encounter a broader range of ethnic diversity and were confronted with more strange sights and smells than anywhere else on the planet. Chapter Twelve will take as its focus the ethnic and racial diversity of antebellum urban America, which is reflected in almost every novel in the genre. From the invention of various orthographic representations of dialects and accents to depictions of interracial sex, this chapter will examine the ways in which authors of city-mysteries novels attempted not simply to describe, but to re-present the

extreme heterogeneity of the urban scene. The Epilogue will discuss why the genre of city-mysteries disappeared after the Civil War, or, more precisely, why popular urban fiction took on a different form—from the narratives of urban striving of Horatio Alger to the incipient naturalism of Stephen Crane—as the way that Americans thought about urban places and urban problems changed.

Chapter One

Cities, Print Culture, and the City-Mystery Genre

It is a Book, perchance, which tells the story of a poor man's home; of a rich man's luxury; of a City slumbering in crimes....

—George Lippard¹

Among the hordes of people moving to cities in antebellum America were figures who, in retrospect, appear all too familiar—the archetypal young man (or woman) from the provinces, in E. B. White's words, who came to the city with a “manuscript in his suitcase and a pain in his heart....”² But in the 1840s, such an ambition would have been all but unthinkable. Cities had long been the primary proving grounds for most forms of ambition, but until a commercialized, mass-produced print industry appeared, writing for a living would have been an unlikely road to either fame or fortune. Certain writers, of course, such as Cooper and Irving, had both become famous and wealthy by their pens in the preceding decades, but they were from families that were already wealthy, and they had sufficient leisure to write.³

Virtually no model would have existed for anyone aspiring to make a career as a writer. Many of the men (and they were primarily men) who wrote city-mysteries fiction were employed either as journalists or printers, and thus gained entry into an industry that was being entirely transformed during the 1830s and 40s. As cities grew, the print

¹ *Quaker City Weekly* (January 27, 1849).

² E. B. White, *Here is New York* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 18.

³ Irving's fame and fortune was due in large part to his humorous city novel, *Diedrich Knickerbocker's History of New York*.

industry grew along with them, and the amount of print produced in America exploded. Young men from all walks of life stepped in to supply the growing demand for reading matter, in the process both reflecting and shaping the way in which many Americans thought about their cities.

The City as Subject

It comes as no surprise that the cities where most of these texts were produced would themselves become the subjects of an outpouring of popular print material.⁴ David Henkin has written of the increasing presence of text in antebellum New York, noting that shop signs and banners and newspapers and other forms of print “proliferated across the cityscape, directing the daily movements of New York’s burgeoning population, promoting competing visions of the urban community....”⁵ With the appearance of the penny newspaper in the 1830s, which invented the practice of local news reporting, city dwellers of all classes were exposed to printed texts that narrated their urban environment for them.⁶ The impact of the steam press on the world of urban print is hard to

⁴ The literature on the rise of print culture in the nineteenth century is too voluminous to cite here. For two recent examples, see: Andie Tucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); and Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁵ David Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 2.

⁶ Lehuu notes that much of the fascination with cities bred by the new penny press was their focus on local news, especially gossip and crime, which outweighed foreign news. In giving such attention to local crime, she argues, the penny papers brought it into everyday life as a subject of conversation and, “while privatizing the consumption of publications, rendered public what was previously thought to belong to the private realm.” Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page*, 37, 25. This expansion of subject matter was not confined to newspapers, nor to sensational genres of exposé like the city-mystery; it can be seen as a product of urbanization itself. Irving Howe writes, “As the city becomes a major locale in literature, there occur major changes in regard to permissible subjects, setting, and characters. The idea of literary decorum is radically transformed, if not destroyed. Literature gains a new freedom; everything, which may be too much, is now

exaggerate: in 1800, there were five daily newspapers in New York, with a total circulation of only 2,500, whereas in 1850, there were fourteen dailies, with a total circulation of over 150,000.⁷ Their steam presses shook the sidewalks of lower Manhattan, and yesterday's editions were added to the piles of refuse littering the streets. These papers, along with the masses of maps, guidebooks, reform tracts, and city novels that were produced in the period, served to "produce and present social knowledge, to analyze the relationship between that mysterious artifact the modern city and its often disoriented citizens."⁸

City-mysteries novels were part of this outpouring of urban literature. Adrienne Siegel has counted only 38 urban novels published in the U.S. between 1774 and 1839, and 340 published between 1840 and 1860. Her survey also finds that from 1840 to 1870, the era of Manifest Destiny and westward expansion, "more than three times as many books were written about life in the city as about conditions beyond the Appalachians."⁹ So much cheap urban fiction was produced that publishers like Frederic A. Brady were able, before the rise of the dime novel and its "innovation" of series of cheap stories, to market a complete series entitled "Tales of the Metropolis, Etc." Some authors in the period were clearly self-conscious about what might have seemed to be overkill. R. A. Smith, introducing his guidebook *Philadelphia as it is in 1852*, said that,

possible. ... The city thereby offers endless possibilities of symbolic extension." Irving Howe, "The City in Literature," *Commentary* 51 (May 1971), 64–65.

⁷ Dan Schiller, *Objectivity and the News: The Public and the Rise of Commercial Journalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 14; see also Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History, 1690–1960*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

⁸ Richard Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), ix.

⁹ Adrienne Siegel, *The Image of the American City in Popular Literature, 1820–1870* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1981), 6.

while some might think any introduction unnecessary, “when the number of ‘Hand-books,’ ‘Guides,’ &c. already published, is considered, we may surely be justified in giving the ‘wherefore’ which has induced us to add another to the catalogue....”¹⁰

Not only was literature becoming a distinctly urban commodity, produced primarily by urban citizens who in their daily lives encountered the city at first hand, but American cities both accelerated and were transformed by the metamorphosis of information into a product for sale, resulting in what Richard Lehan has called a “symbiosis between literary and urban text,” as the transformed cities in turn influenced the sort of novels that were written about them.¹¹ City-mysteries novels, themselves examples of the blooming body of literature about urban life, often reflected the presence of print in the urban fabric. In George Lippard’s *Quaker City*, the first and most successful American city-mystery, Monk-Hall, the secret nexus of all criminal activity in Philadelphia, is bracketed in its obscure Southwark neighborhood by a “printing office on one side and a stereotype foundry on the other.”¹²

¹⁰ R. A. Smith, *Philadelphia as it is in 1852* (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1852), 2.

¹¹ Terence Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 7; Lehan, *City in Literature*, xv. An examination of this relationship can also be found in Wyn Kelley, *Melville’s City: Literary and Urban Form in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), although Kelley grants texts more power to “impose” urban form than I believe they possess; they can “imagine” urbanization, but if a text’s representation of a city bears no relation to the facts on the ground, then it will be of little use in thinking about that city. Richard Ohmann’s claim--“Urbanization was not a cause; along with mass culture, it was an effect of the way businessmen took over and reorganized production”—highlights the extent to which the form of American cities, especially New York, was influenced by commercial considerations, but I would argue that the relationship between urbanization and capitalism, as between urbanization and urban literature, is more symbiotic than one of simple cause and effect. Ohmann, “Where Did Mass Culture Come From?” in *Politics of Letters* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 150.

¹² George Lippard, *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk-Hall*, ed. David Reynolds (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 48.

City-mysteries novels, both by their very existence and in their content, called attention to the new status of the city itself as a subject for novelists and as an object of textual fascination.¹³ The engrossing quality of new urban texts could be dangerous, as one young man learned in a city-mystery set in Boston; his finger brushed the hand of a fallen but beautiful woman as she traced the course of Tremont Street on a map of the city, sending a thrill through his frame and sealing his doom.¹⁴

This incident, displaying the simultaneous dangers and pleasures of perusing one kind of urban text (a map) within another kind of urban text (a city-mystery novel), underscores the fascination that cities held for antebellum Americans.¹⁵ As more people moved to cities, more people wanted to know about where they (or their brothers, or sisters, or children, or parents) had moved. An 1851 children's book about various types of Philadelphia street vendors entitled *City Cries* presumes that "every stranger from the country, who comes to the city" will be consumed with curiosity about "what all this noise and confusion tends to, what it all means, where these crying, bawling people come

¹³ A British critic, Robert Vaughan, was most explicit in pointing out the connections between urbanization and the rise of popular fiction: "... it is manifest, that men possess nothing deserving of the name of literature until they begin to build cities; that literature, the offspring of society as it obtains in cities, derives its character from the state of that society, varying with it in all the stages of social progress; and that the effect of commerce in augmenting small towns into great cities has been, to give to literature in our own age, a much more popular character than has attached to it in any preceding time." Robert Vaughan, *The Age of Great Cities: or, Modern Civilization Viewed in its Relation to Intelligence, Morals, and Religion* (London: Jackson and Walford, 1843), 145.

¹⁴ *Luke Lovell, the Widow's Son; or, the Adventures of a Young Gentleman from the State of Maine, Who Went to Seek His Fortune in Boston* (Boston: for sale by H. B. Skinner, 1848), 23.

¹⁵ For more on the fascination of the urban in literature, see: Lehan, *The City in Literature*; Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973); Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); William Sharpe, *Unreal Cities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); and Hana Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

from, and how they live.”¹⁶ In the preface to *Hot Corn*, his collection of sensationalistic reform vignettes, Solon Robinson wrote that it was the “growing taste for works of this kind” that led his publishers to offer him “liberal inducements” to “expose to open day the hidden effects produced by Rum, to give narratives of misery....”¹⁷

Fascination with the “romance of real life” in American cities—with tales that bore sufficient similarity to what the penny press had begun to market as “news” so that they might plausibly be true—was at a fever pitch in antebellum America.¹⁸ If readers in the period felt threatened by what newspapers told them was a rising tide of crime and bloodshed, they were also fascinated by it, and wanted to read about it whenever possible.¹⁹ What Wyn Kelley has called the “literature of the labyrinth” fed this

¹⁶ *City Cries: or, A Peep at Scenes in Town*, by an Observer (Philadelphia: George Appleton, 1851), iii–iv. The presumption that even young children would be fascinated not just by the exciting sights of city life, but also by its mundane characteristics (street vendors) and its mysteries (how do these people live?) was widespread, if the proliferation of children’s books on the subject is any indication. *City Characters; or, Familiar Scenes in Town* (Philadelphia: Appleton, 1851) is even broader than *City Cries*, going beyond hucksters to delineate stevedores, beggars, retired gentlemen, sailors, dandies, nurses, and aldermen, among others.

¹⁷ Solon Robinson, *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York Illustrated* (New York: Dewitt and Davenport, 1854), v.

¹⁸ Benjamin Day, in the April 4, 1835 issue of the New York *Sun*, the nation’s first penny paper, gave this definition of news: “News, properly so called, to be interesting to the public, must generally tell of wars and fightings, of deeds of death, and blood, of wounds and heresies, of broken heads, broken hearts and broken bones, of accidents by fire or flood, a field of possessions ravaged, property purloined, wrongs inflicted, rights unavenged, reputations assailed, feelings embittered, and oppressions exercised by nations, communities, or individuals. These are generally the elementary principles of news....” These guidelines set out quite clearly what came to constitute the “horizon of expectations” of readers of city-mysteries novels as well. As David Henkin notes, however, antebellum newspapers, while they “thrived on the widespread perception of the city as a mystery in need of deciphering,” also often perpetrated hoaxes or “humbugs” on their readers. This further influenced what readers of popular literature about cities would have expected from their reading, and resulted in the papers’ being “caught up in the net of suspicion that they cast.” Henkin, *City Reading*, 134.

¹⁹ On the existence of an actual increase in crime, see Roger Lane, *Violent Death in the City: Suicide, Accident, and Murder in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia*, 2nd ed. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999); and “Urbanization and Criminal Violence in the 19th Century,” in *The History of Violence in America*, eds. Hugh Graham and Ted Gurr (New York: Bantam Books, 1969). In his essay, Lane argues that urbanization actually settled populations and decreased crime, but he bases this argument on an analysis of Boston, which had a much higher level of wealth per capita than did either New York or Philadelphia during the antebellum period.

fascination by offering readers experienced (and therefore safe) guidance to the dangerous (and therefore exciting) city. As Richard Maxwell notes, gaining knowledge of this labyrinth offered initiation into a realm of special knowledge, along with expertise in “learning to find a way among places, classes, or genders. The city as labyrinth is a realm of hidden but real connections.”²⁰

The assumption that not only the urban labyrinth, but the facades of individual buildings, or the businessman’s uniform of black coat and vest, concealed material out of which a novel, a “romance of the real,” might be spun, indicates the emerging sense that urban life even in its most minute particulars was potentially fascinating in ways that rural life was not. As the author of a Boston city-mystery wrote, “In this exemplary city many incidents have occurred, which may furnish the novel writer with abundant matter for ‘exciting tales.’ Were our eyes gifted with power to scan the routine events which daily transpire in busy Boston, as we can watch the moving figures upon a chess-board, we should behold that which at one moment would overwhelm us with astonishment, and at the next paralyze us with horror.”²¹ City life had the capacity to both delight and horrify, a duality that authors of city-mysteries exploited to the hilt.

The Anti-Urban Tradition?

It is clear that for those who embraced the excitement of city life as well as for those who feared it, the city as text and context remained fascinating. Our prevailing

²⁰ Kelley, *Melville’s City*, 9; Maxwell, *Mysteries of Paris and London*, 12. As in the classical tradition, then, the labyrinth serves above all as a knot, tying things together.

²¹ John Hovey Robinson, *The Lady’s Dream: or, The Fortune Teller of Copp’s Hill* (Boston: W. W. Page, 1846), 3.

notion of antebellum American thought is that it was profoundly anti-urban, and certainly that strain does exist in the culture of the period.²² While the rejections of city life associated with Jefferson or Thoreau are more extreme for the period than they are generally represented to be, there is little question that a genre of novels such as city-mysteries that so frequently depicted young men and women from the country being ruined by city ways can be read as “anti-urban.” Yet at the same time, if cities seemed opposed to the pastoral ideal, to many Americans they also seemed to be sites of opportunity and excitement; as Michael Cowan notes, America was idealized as both the New Eden *and* the New Jerusalem.²³ Cities offered opportunities for material advancement, for education and polish, and for the most effective exercise of Christian virtue. The title of Morton and Lucia White’s influential 1962 study, *The Intellectual Versus the City*, has become convenient shorthand for nineteenth-century attitudes towards urbanization, but it obscures the diversity of antebellum responses to the city.

While some authors described cities as self-contained units—more village than metropolis—that allowed for a more easily grasped vision of the ties binding city dwellers to each other, on other occasions authors clearly articulated the sense that there were places in cities where the veil of urban anonymity was absolute. As Richard Maxwell notes, the idea of a forbidden section of the city, which he refers to as the

²² Although to argue that, as Andrew Lees does, since Poe wrote stories with sinister portrayals of cities, as did Melville (*Pierre, Redburn*) and Hawthorne (*The Marble Faun*), they must all have been anti-urban is stretching the point too far. None of these writers are especially noted for having written happy, sunny books, and we could just as readily argue that Poe is against country houses (“Fall of the House of Usher”), Melville found the South Seas sinister (*Moby Dick*), and Hawthorne was anti-village (*The Scarlet Letter*). See Lees, *Cities Perceived: Urban Society in European and American Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 94–5.

²³ Michael H. Cowan, *City of the West: Emerson, America, and Urban Metaphor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 30.

“dreadful enclosure,” “a carefully demarcated territory where crime is the norm and human beings are beasts, flourishes throughout nineteenth-century literature.”²⁴ It is impossible, however, to state that this bifurcation follows a clear chronology during the period from 1840–1860, since this is the period when the form that large American cities would take was still in flux, a state of confusion that city-mysteries novels reflect. The way in which a given author depicted urban life—either as coherent or fragmented—had less to do with the precise point in the period at which he was writing than it did with what that author’s experiences of city life had been and, more importantly, how he thought city life worked and how he thought it should work.²⁵ What is notable about many of these novels is the fact that they contain both narratives of urbanization, depicting the city as simultaneously understandable and inscrutable. Authors of city-mysteries often noted how anonymous large cities were, and yet in the same books cities were shown to be remarkably like villages, where everyone was connected in some way, and where the rich met the poor and dispensed charity to them on a face-to-face basis.

Regardless of what one thought of cities, the “mysteries” of the new metropolis were of interest to more and more Americans. As an elderly gentleman remarks in *Seven Nights in Gotham* before an outing of nocturnal urban tourism, “You young bucks who are full of fun and frolic, wandering about town day and night, ... know all about Gotham and its contents ... that’s the reason I want to look in and see for myself, as I’ve never paid much attention to the many reports about certain classes and places.”²⁶ Even an

²⁴ Maxwell, *Mysteries of Paris and London*, 74.

²⁵ Nor is this tendency consistent even within the work of a single author; in some of George Thompson’s novels, the city is quite readily navigated.

²⁶ John Denison Vose, Esq., *Seven Nights in Gotham* (New York: Bunnell & Price, 1852), 11.

older man who had lived his whole life in New York, it is implied, would be fascinated with the growing city; such issues were not of interest only to intellectuals and European tourists. People wondered about the people who lived next door—who were they? how did they live? what are those awful noises?—and the new mass of urban texts helped them form conjectures and construct narratives about them.

In the process, such texts helped foster a form of urban community that, even if it existed largely in the imagination, allowed people to feel some connection to the anonymous people around them.²⁷ The sense that the life of any city-dweller, behind any door, contained sufficient drama “to make up a volume more strange than wildest romance,” virtually demanded the development of a genre of fiction like city-mysteries.²⁸ Kit Hobbs, the eccentric urban habitué in *Seven Nights in Gotham*, could have been speaking for thousands, if not millions, of antebellum Americans when he expressed his dream depiction of the city: “I’ed like to take one good long look at something just about now; and I don’t know but what I’ed give ten dollars if such a sight could be seen. ... I’ed like to have all the roofs of the houses lift up in such a way so that I could take a good view of several hundred thousand people lying flat on their backs! ... Wouldn’t it be one whopping sight, the seeing of ‘the elephant’...?”²⁹

²⁷ As Richard Sennett writes, “The most direct way to knit people’s social lives together is through necessity, by making men need to know about each other in order to survive.” By both creating and feeding a sense of curiosity about what went on behind closed city doors, new forms of urban textuality—newspapers, guidebooks, city-mysteries—made people need to know about each other, and thus connected them. Even crime news, which could be read as making urban residents suspicious of everyone, may also have worked in this way, by constantly propounding the question of who was malign and who was benign, and what was their connection to the reader. Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 138.

²⁸ Robinson, *Hot Corn*, 344.

²⁹ Vose, *Seven Nights in Gotham*, 88.

Popular Fiction and History

As Richard Maxwell has noted in his study of European city-mysteries fiction, urban mysteries constituted a “genre as disreputable as it was, in its time, essential.”³⁰ The waxing popularity of the genre in antebellum America was noted by many critics, who bemoaned the fact that “such works are becoming more and more the literature of the country....”³¹ David Reynolds, in his landmark study of antebellum popular literature, quantifies the rise of this tide of sensational literature. Before 1831, he finds American fiction to have been evenly split between what he calls “adventurous” and more genteel “sentimental-domestic” novels. Between 1831 and 1860, however, when the advent of the steam press greatly expanded the lower end of the print market, the proportion of sensational or “darkly humorous” volumes rose to 60 percent of the total, while genteel fiction diminished to only about 20 percent, undermining the commonly-held assumption that “domestic novels written by women commanded the enthusiasm of the antebellum public.”³²

³⁰ Maxwell, *Mysteries of Paris and London*, 24. Michael Denning’s observation that urban mysteries were “perhaps the first internationally popular genre” of fiction is particularly apposite in light of Maxwell’s work, as well as Kimberly Gladman, “Upper Tens and Lower Millions: City Mysteries Fiction and Class in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” Ph.D. Diss., New York University, Dept. of Comparative Literature, 2001. Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1987), 85.

³¹ “Immoral Works. The Saturday Courier—George Lippard—Thomas Paine, &c.” Philadelphia *Saturday Evening Post*, Sept. 26, 1846.

³² David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 183; Michael Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 7. Reynolds’ monumental work is responsible for bringing the city-mysteries genre, along with much other popular fiction of the antebellum period, to the attention of scholars in the field, who for years were only dimly aware of the existence, much less the importance, of authors such as George Lippard and George Thompson (both of whom have also benefited from Reynolds’ editorial hand in reissues of some of their works). The importance of this book and Michael Denning’s *Mechanic Accents* to research in the field cannot be overstated.

But within this genre of “sensational” literature, where does the subgenre of city-mysteries stand? The fragmentation of the “novel” into different subgenres in the nineteenth century was part of what Nina Baym has identified as a tendency for fiction to “specify and specialize,” allowing readers to classify novels based on subject matter, location, and the class status of characters.³³ These subgenres often coalesced around their shared conventions to produce highly formulaic standard plots that were satisfying to audiences precisely because of their familiarity.³⁴

The development of generic conventions allowed audiences to know what to expect from a novel, thereby heightening their appreciation of variations, but such formulas also allowed authors to write more quickly and permitted publishers to rationalize their businesses based on expected profits from individual titles. But this is not to say that formulas came to be entirely detached from the culture that produced them; as Frederic Jameson has written, the conventions of a genre provide clues to the historical context in which an individual text was produced.³⁵ Viewing a genre such as city-mysteries as a whole offers a way to make inferences about the collective thinking of

³³ Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 200.

³⁴ See especially John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), ch. 1; and David Paul Nord, “An Economic Perspective on Formula in Popular Culture,” *Journal of American Culture* 3 (Spring 1980). Cawelti’s claim that formulaic literature, with its emphasis on escape, is less mimetic than serious literature is one that I think is contradicted by the case of popular antebellum urban fiction. Compared to the “serious” American literature on cities of the period, city-mysteries are far *more* mimetic (although it is unclear why this should be the standard that determines seriousness) and contain far more actual detail about city life.

³⁵ “Genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact. ... So generic affiliations, and the systematic deviation from them, provide clues which lead us back to the concrete historical situation of the individual text itself, and allow us to read its structure as ideology, as a socially symbolic act, as a protopolitical response to a historical dilemma,” in this case that of urbanization. Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 106.

large groups of people about urban life in ways that a study of individual texts would not, with changes in genres indicating larger cultural transformations. In this regard, popular fiction that is produced with the primary goal of wide sale rather than aesthetic distinction is especially worthy of study, since its success and endurance is more closely linked to the broader cultural mood. Although our tendency as scholars is to focus our attention on works that are more obviously “serious,” I believe that a thorough reading of works of ephemeral popular fiction can be more important to forming an understanding of antebellum American culture than can reading works that we think of as “literary.”³⁶

Ellis Oberholtzer wrote that any claims to the status of George Lippard as an artist can be dismissed by “the reading of his works by those who have proper standards of literary taste,” and claims to his efficacy as a social reformer are met by “the realization that no good moral object was ever effected by his tales of seduction and revenge which were read by a multitude only for their libidinous descriptions....”³⁷ This dissertation is not concerned with proper standards of literary taste, or good moral objects, and while it may occasionally dwell on libidinous descriptions, its primary concern is in line with

³⁶ The continued reluctance of some cultural historians to accord “the lower sort” of cultural forms the same sort of respect that social historians have devoted to the lower social strata is perplexing, to say the least. Jane Tompkins, in arguing why she finds it “morally and politically objectionable, and intellectually obtuse, to have contempt for literary works that appeal to millions of people simply because they are popular,” states this contradiction most powerfully: “When Melville calls upon that ‘great democratic God’ and celebrates ‘meanest mariners, renegades, and castaways,’ it is cause for critical acclaim, but when the common man steps out of *Moby-Dick* or *Song of Myself* and walks into a bookstore, his taste in literature, or, as is more likely, hers, is held up to scorn.” Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), xiv.

The methodologies of the history of the book, which attempt to locate books and literature in the world of goods and material practices, offer a valuable way out of this dead end. Wide reading in antebellum “trash” has only served to bolster Roger Chartier’s observation that “‘Popular literature’ ... [was] not radically different from the literature of the elites ...; they were shared by social groups not exclusively popular; they were at the same time acculturated and acculturating.” Roger Chartier, *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, and Audiences from Codex to Computer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 88.

³⁷ Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer, *Literary History of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs, 1906), 261.

Lippard's own assertion that "the manners, spirit of the people, costume of the age, were as much a part of history, as great political or military events."³⁸

The "manners" or "spirit" of an era are those phenomena which sources like popular fiction illuminate so well, and those which are most often left out by the methodologies of social historians who, when they do take literary sources into account, "tend to privilege realism and naturalism as more socially-engaged genres."³⁹ As Edward Spann muses at one point in his study of antebellum New York, "who could be sure what the silent masses of the poor, the 'subterraneans,' were thinking?"⁴⁰ If we are ever to even begin to find out, we must look beyond census records and the works of labor radicals as well as beyond the canonical works of the American Renaissance. As Antonio Gramsci wrote, "the success of a work of commercial literature indicates (and it is often the only indication available) ... the mass of feelings and conceptions of the world predominant among the 'silent' majority."⁴¹ Despite their lack of literary distinction at the levels of plot and polished style—a shortcoming that was as clear to antebellum critics as it is to us—city-mysteries are valuable sources both because they reached the entire mass of readers, not readers of one specific class, and because the material they drew on was "charged with the political content of everyday life."⁴²

³⁸ *Quaker City Weekly*, Jan. 27, 1849.

³⁹ Amal Amireh, *The Factory Girl and the Seamstress: Imagining Gender and Class in Nineteenth Century American Fiction* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), xii.

⁴⁰ Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840–1857* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 234.

⁴¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings, 1929-1935* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 349. Writing in the 1920s, Gramsci was blissfully unaware of the Nixonian overtones his use of the term "silent majority" would acquire.

⁴² Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 66.

Yet they are also valuable because they have had an influence on more canonical literature, as David Reynolds (in the American case) and Richard Maxwell (in the French and British) have shown. Even if city-mysteries are viewed as the “industrially-produced” analogs to the finely crafted works of canonical authors, to be mined for source material, their impact on the work of authors such as Dickens, Melville, Hawthorne, Hugo, and Zola should not be discounted.⁴³ Amory Dwight Mayo, defending the rise of cheap print in the antebellum period, wrote that, “this great outburst of popular writing in journals, magazines, and fugitive books is the *birth of American literature*. ... Some of these boys and girls will catch a glimpse of our American realities and inscribe them in enduring lines. ... [M]any a scribbler will be trained ... for the loftier heights of authorship.”⁴⁴ But such novels were not simply “beneath” the works of the American Renaissance; to a great extent they were in conversation with them. The appearance of writers such as Poe and Dickens and Hawthorne as objects of satire in sensational antebellum urban novels hints that the cultural sphere these books represented may not have been as far removed from the “literary” as we have been led to believe.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, I argue that city-mysteries novels have an importance all their own, regardless of their relationship to the canonical works of antebellum American literature.

⁴³ Michael Newbury observes that constructing popular fiction as industrially-produced in “fiction factories” was a way of “branding and dismissing” certain kinds of fiction as “subliterary,” and thus containing it. Michael Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 33-34.

⁴⁴ Amory Dwight Mayo, *Symbols of the Capital; or, Civilization in New York* (New York: Thatcher and Hutchinson, 1859), 160–61. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, the satire of Poe as “Southey Tyte,” the neglected poet, in I. Anderson Smith’s *Blanche Vernon, the Actress!* (New York: n.p., 1846) and as “Raven A. Pot” in A. J. H. Duganne’s *The Daguerreotype Miniature* (Philadelphia: G. B. Zieber & Co., 1846). Duganne and Lippard were both friends of Poe, and Lippard took up a collection of money to buy Poe a train ticket back to Baltimore shortly before his death, further complicating the view of cultural “separate spheres.” For Hawthorne, also see *Blanche Vernon*; for Dickens, see Vose, *Seven Nights in Gotham*, op. cit.

As George Foster put it in his one foray into sensational urban fiction, “What we hear reiterated on all sides of us becomes at last, to our perceptions, truth,” and the sudden omnipresence of city-mysteries fiction would have surrounded antebellum readers with a unique discourse about urbanization.⁴⁶ What this literature did for its readers, and how it shaped their perceptions, is a question worthy of study aside from its literary connections.

Apart from the attitudes about urbanization that a city-mystery novel conveyed to its readers, the simple fact of a city-mystery being published was an important civic event, an indication that one’s city was sufficiently wicked to have “made it.” As one roué brags to a visitor to Lowell in *Norton: or, The Lights and Shades of a Factory Village*, that supposedly virtuous city could boast as many places to view “low scenes” as anyplace else, including over 400 places to buy liquor; the publication of numerous novels detailing these “mysteries” of Lowell cemented the growing city’s status. A letter dated June 15, 1908 bound in with a copy of *Life in Rochester ... Being Scenes of Misery, Vice, Shame and Oppression* proudly describes the cheap book by John Chumasero, a local Democratic politician, as “Rochester’s First Novel.”⁴⁷ This sense of the importance of such cheap, popular fiction for residents of a particular city was perhaps expressed most clearly by “Eugene Sue, Jr.” in the poem *The Mysteries of Charleston*:

All the Great Cities east and west,
‘LONDON’ and ‘PARIS,’ and the rest,
Mentioned in our school histories,
Each one has its own ‘mysteries;’
Why can’t we have, pray tell us, do,

⁴⁶ George Foster, *Celio; or, New York Above Ground and Under Ground* (New York: Dewitt and Davenport, 1850), 109.

⁴⁷ John Chumasero, *Life in Rochester, or Sketches from Life; Being Scenes of Misery, Vice, Shame and Oppression, In the City of the Genesee*, by a Resident Citizen (Rochester: D. M. Dewey, 1848).

Our 'MYSTERIES OF CHARLESTON' too?⁴⁸

The Roots of the City-Mysteries Genre

As this poem and the pseudonym of its author indicate, American writers of urban mysteries were inspired by the success of two colossal (both in sales and length) European best-sellers—Eugene Sue's 1843 *The Mysteries of Paris* and G. W. M. Reynolds's 1844 *The Mysteries of London*.⁴⁹ Although the "27th American edition" of George Lippard's *Quaker City* (1844-45) claims that, "This work was planned and partly written before the author heard of the existence of Eugene Sue," it is clear that Lippard and those who were hot on his heels were motivated at least in part by the popularity of their European forerunners.⁵⁰ Lippard and some other American authors of city-mysteries followed the examples of Sue and Reynolds in another respect, since both European writers used their popularity to embark on careers in politics (Sue as a Socialist, Reynolds as a Chartist), as Lippard would do through forming a fraternal labor

⁴⁸ Eugene Sue, Jr., *The Mysteries of Charleston* (Charleston: Printed at the Typographical Depository Down Town, 1846), 4.

⁴⁹ Stuart Blumin has argued that American writers imitated these novels in their presentation of the "big city as a shockingly abnormal collection of the very rich and the very poor, and to emphasize the difference between the big city and more traditional communities by exaggerating the polarization of urban society," while Louis James has claimed that the various "Mysteries" "tried to show city life, with all its activities and classes of society, as an organic whole." Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 15; James, *Fiction for the Working Man, 1830–1850* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 165. While both explanations are too simplistic, Sue and Reynolds did create certain conventions—the urban superman; the focus on low life, especially prostitution; the depiction of an underground city unknown to most city dwellers—that would become staples of the genre in America.

⁵⁰ *Quaker City Weekly*, March 17, 1849. The inheritance plot of Lippard's pair of New York novels, *The Empire City* and *New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million*, including a Jesuit plot against the heirs, is taken directly from Sue's *The Wandering Jew*. In a fascinating inversion, Richard Lehan argues, based largely on Sue's own admission, that the greatest influence on Sue was James Fenimore Cooper: "Sue took the sequential plot structure of the Natty Bumppo novels and moved it to the city; the city replaced the forest, the underworld gang replaced the evil Indians...." Lehan, *The City in Literature*, 55.

organization, the Brotherhood of the Union, and as Ned Buntline would through his involvement in the formation of the Know-Nothing Party.

Sue and Reynolds in turn drew on a longer tradition in European literature of fascination with the low life of cities, from the “coney-catching” literature of seventeenth-century England, which offered guides to urban swindles, to the biographies of famous highwaymen such as Dick Turpin, Claude Duval, and Jack Sheppard, to eighteenth-century works like *Tricks of the Town Laid Open* (1747) and *London Unmasked* (1787) to, most prominently, Pierce Egan’s 1821 *Life in London; or the Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorne, Esq.*⁵¹ If the “city” element of “city-mysteries” drew on this European tradition, the “mysteries” portion had an even longer lineage, going back to the medieval “mystery plays” of the Passion and the tradition of referring to the trades practiced by European guilds as “mysteries.”⁵² Precisely foreshadowing what would become the standard title convention by which the genre was known, Thomas Powel entitled his 1623 guide to the perils of usury *The Mystery and Misery of Lending and Borrowing* which, like its descendants, offered a detailed description of urban geography, in this case mapping the safest places in London for debtors to hide from their creditors.⁵³

⁵¹ See James, *Fiction for the Working Man*; Dana Brand, *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 19–20; and Stuart Blumin, “Introduction” to George Foster, *New York by Gas-Light* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

⁵² This linkage to guilds ties in to the radical class aspects of city-mysteries fiction, as, during the Enlightenment, writers such as Franklin and Rousseau discouraged young men from giving away seven years of their lives to learn these “mysteries,” as in the narrative of the self-made man as presented in Franklin’s *Autobiography*. I am grateful to Jay Fliegelman for this insight.

⁵³ Thomas Powel, *The Mystery and Misery of Lending and Borrowing* (London: Printed by Thomas Harper for Benjamin Fisher, 1636 [1623]), 176.

Authors of American city-mysteries novels drew on all these sources, filtered through Sue and Reynolds, along with broader literary conventions such as the Gothic, the flâneur, and the “country and the city” novel, to Americanize the genre just at the moment when both the market and the means of production for cheap fiction were taking off. What they produced was an incredibly flexible discourse about city life, capable of revealing the “mysteries” of both low and high life, of depicting the dangers of rum and starvation wages to the urban poor alongside the perils of the combination of excessive wealth and weak moral fiber to the urban elite. What almost all American examples of the genre shared, and what differentiates them from their European counterparts, is an insistence that their narratives were founded in fact, that the events described were all around the reader, and all they had to do was look to find out for themselves. Ned Buntline summed up this distinction thusly in his *Mysteries and Miseries of New York: A Story of Real Life*: “We have a hard task before us, in following real life, instead of imitating some great predecessors in foreign cities, and giving a clear scope to fancy....”⁵⁴ As a writer in the *Philadelphia Spirit of the Times* put it in 1845, asking that someone “familiar with Philadelphia ... write out its ‘mysteries’,” there must be hundreds of men who had seen enough remarkable things in Philadelphia first-hand to write such a book and “not leave such a rich field of literary enterprise to the starveling pens of boys ... who trust entirely to their imagination for facts and their memory for prurient falsehoods.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Ned Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York: A Story of Real Life* (New York: Berford, 1848), 64. This American insistence on fact was also evident in earlier American examples of popular urban print culture. Thomas Groom’s *Boston Almanac* for 1839 included a list of “General Events” from the past year, largely snippets of sensational urban news, which bore the heading “Truth is Strange, Stranger than Fiction” (40).

⁵⁵ *Philadelphia Spirit of the Times*, Jan. 25, 1845, 2.

George Lippard was very likely the “starveling boy” referred to here, since *The Quaker City* was being issued at just that moment, and Lippard’s former boss at the *Spirit of the Times* was not impressed, describing it at one point as a “disgusting mass of filth.”⁵⁶ Lippard’s pioneering status in the genre was noted almost immediately; he himself reprinted a blurb in his *Quaker City Weekly* newspaper from the *Democratic Messenger* of Mt. Gilead, OH, which noted that Lippard had “succeeded in a field of literature never before trodden....”⁵⁷ George Thompson, in *The Mysteries of Bond-Street; or, The Seraglios of Upper Tendom*, published only three years after Lippard’s death, listed a spate of recent crimes in New York and called upon the spirit-rappers to “call up the shade of George Lippard, to write a new woe unto Sodom.”⁵⁸

Lippard’s fusion of novelistic sensationalism and political radicalism gained him a wide following, making him one of the “stars” of the nascent culture industry, and this success ensured that he would have many imitators.⁵⁹ The rapid appearance of city-

⁵⁶ John DuSolle, quoted in Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 204.

⁵⁷ *Quaker City Weekly*, Jan. 27, 1849.

⁵⁸ George Thompson, *The Mysteries of Bond-Street; or, The Seraglios of Upper Tendom* (New York: n.p., 1857), 79. “Wo unto Sodom” was the fiery inscription that appeared in the sky during Devil-Bug’s famous dream in *The Quaker City*, an incident that was depicted on the cover of several editions of the novel. While Lippard’s spirit did not return to write another city-mystery novel (as far as we know), his spirit is credited with having dictated the introduction to an 1871 book by Olive G. Pettis that was entirely dictated by various spirits through Ms. Pettis, entitled *Historical Life of Jesus of Nazareth and extracts from the Apostolic Age: given by themselves...* (Providence: A. Crawford Greene, 1870-71).

⁵⁹ Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 87. Lippard’s meteoric success included a theatrical version of *Quaker City*, which was scheduled to be staged in Philadelphia before the entire novel had even appeared; the production was canceled when one of the men involved in the local seduction case on which the novel was based threatened to buy all the tickets and trash the theater. A group of theater aficionados, disgruntled at the cancellation, threatened a riot, and were only dispersed (so Lippard claimed) by a dramatic personal appearance by the Author himself, pleading for the preservation of the peace. His popularity was international as well: *Quaker City* was rapidly published in a pirated English edition, and then was “translated” by the German popular novelist Friedrich Gerstäcker, who also saw fit to include his name as the book’s author. Later translations would include an edition in Czech, and a 1900 edition in Swedish that was translated from Gerstäcker’s German edition but that credited Lippard as being the author. For more

mysteries novels set in cities small and large all across the nation can in part simply be credited to the desire to emulate popular metropolitan culture; after all, Bowery B'hoys fashion had spread across the nation (if local papers are to be believed), with small-town toughs wearing red flannel shirts and their hair in soap-locks. But it also constituted an embrace of what had suddenly appeared as a useful rhetorical mode through which to address the process of urbanization, one which did not simply start on the East Coast and gradually spread west, but happened all over the country at roughly the same time, and in San Francisco almost overnight. As Dana Brand notes of American city-mysteries, "this extremely accessible genre would become the main form of literary exploitation of the new sense of the city fostered by the penny press."⁶⁰

These fictional narratives of the underside of city life bore some similarity to the non-fictional urban sketches that also enjoyed tremendous popularity at this time, a genre of which George Foster is the best-known practitioner. In his *New York Naked*, referring to his earlier book *New York in Slices*, Foster claimed that the popularity of the urban sketch was sparked by his books, and "was adopted and imitated in all directions. In a few weeks after the commencement of 'New York in Slices,' we had 'Hudson in Patches,' 'Wisconsin in Chunks,' and 'Mississippi in Gobs'—and all sorts of states, cities, and provinces, in all sorts of aliquot quantities."⁶¹ Foster was aware of the similarity, at least in terms of subject matter, between these collections of journalistic vignettes and novels like *Quaker City*, and was not above trying to ally his work to the

on the stage version and the near-riot, see Francis C. Wemyss, *Twenty-Six Years of the Life of an Actor and Manager*, 2 vols. (New York: Burgess, Stringer, & Co., 1847), 1:394-5.

⁶⁰ Brand, *Spectator and the City*, 89.

⁶¹ George Foster, *New York Naked* (New York: R. M. Dewitt, 185?), 16.

immense popularity enjoyed by Sue and his followers; he claimed that the appearance of *New York by Gas-Light*, his first collection of urban sketches that he had written for the *New York Tribune*, with “its truly painted pictures of New York life ... created a sensation new to our literature, and which met from some quarters the same species of opposition encountered at first by the *Mysteries of Paris*, and some other similar works.”⁶²

Yet Foster also argued that his journalistic sketches—part of what he called the “legitimate business of the Morning and Evening Newspapers”—were qualitatively different from popular fiction on the model of “dirty French Novels,” by which a reformist Whig like Foster would have almost certainly meant the racy European forebears of American urban fiction. Foster encouraged his readers, who he assumed to be young and male, to avoid “filthy Compositions of home manufacture,” books that “would burn up in them every good principle”: “Boys! you had better jump into a furnace at white-heat, than to have any thing more to do with this low and nasty traffic! Stick to the Newspapers!”⁶³

⁶² Foster, *New York Naked*, 1.

⁶³ George Foster, *New York in Slices*, by an Experienced Carver (New York: William H. Graham, 1849), 106–7. While quick to denounce the morals and practices of his competitors in the field of sensational urban reading, Foster was smart enough to know a good thing when he saw it, and he himself wrote his own fictional city-mystery, the 1850 *Celio; or, New York Above Ground & Under Ground*. He was also somewhat immodest, claiming at one point that, “I do not think it too much to claim that the great movement of illuminating the depths of the moral and social degradation of life in a metropolis, owes something of its momentum to me....” *New York Naked*, 17.

City-Mysteries and Urban Nonfiction

While “sticking to the newspapers” in antebellum America was no way to avoid city-mysteries fiction, since many of them were written for and serialized in weekly papers, it is a useful way to understand the important differences between city-mysteries fiction and sketch collections like Foster’s, both in form and in how they may have been read.⁶⁴ Stuart Blumin, who edited the reprint of Foster’s *New York by Gas-Light*, points out that one formal difference between city-mysteries novels and works like *Gas-Light* is that the novels expose the life of a city through “elaborate and improbable Dickensian plots rather than the simple sequence of initiatory visits characteristic of the urban sketch.”⁶⁵

Beyond formal distinctions, however, Blumin bases his argument in favor of the “nonfiction” sketch on the relative utility of the two forms, claiming that the journalistic sketch represented a “new and much more satisfying method for addressing the concerns that made the sensationalist city romances popular,” stating that they contained all the themes of city-mysteries novels but also the “tangible city, in much of its particular and realistic detail. ... It is a city one can enter, understand, and, making certain allowances,

⁶⁴ Foster’s pointed mention above of the “Morning and Evening Newspapers” was a way of drawing a cultural distinction between the *daily* papers, for which Foster wrote, and the weekly “story papers” that most often ran serialized city fiction. This distinction could also cut the other way. George Lippard, in a letter to the editor of the Philadelphia *American Courier* complaining of having been characterized as a “contributor to the periodical literature of Philadelphia,” attested that the claim “is not true. I have been, and am, a writer of books, but I never in my life, wrote an article for one of the Philadelphia periodicals....” (George Lippard to Andrew McMakin, Nov. 7, 1853. Dreer Collection of American Prose Writers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.)

⁶⁵ Blumin, Introduction to *New York by Gas-Light*, 22. This observation is somewhat ironic, given that, in the American context, it was the section on Five Points in Dickens’s *American Notes*, in which Dickens described visiting various portions of the slum in company with a policeman, that created the model for Foster’s style of investigatory sketch.

even believe.”⁶⁶ While this may simply be an example of the denigration of literary sources by a modern social historian, who instead fetishizes the “journalistic,” however unreliable, Blumin argues (incredibly) that Foster’s books “proved as popular as the sensationalist city novels,” which “did not constitute the ‘meaningful representation’ that the first metropolitan generation sought.”⁶⁷

Blumin does note that Foster’s chosen genre differed from city-mysteries in important ways. The most obvious is that there is no narrative strand connecting the sketches; they were written for a daily newspaper, often about particular events that were in the news. As Solon Robinson wrote of the sketches that were assembled to form his collection *Hot Corn*, they “were written amid the daily scenes and avocations of a city editor’s office ... without any thought or design on the part of the author of making a book....”⁶⁸

In contrast, writers of fictional narratives of city life, whether they were serialized in papers or not, most often thought that they were writing *books*, even if those books were short, cheap, paper-covered pamphlets. In the preface to *Life in Rochester*, John

⁶⁶ Blumin, Introduction to *New York by Gas-Light*, 27.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 26–7. How Blumin is able to divine what sort of “meaningful representations” antebellum city dwellers sought, beyond the aid of spirit-rappers, is beyond me; it seems one potential method might be to compare how many sensational urban novels were produced in the period with how many collections of journalistic sketches were produced, and how many copies were likely to have been sold of each. Using this approach, however, it would appear that *fictional* representations of city life seemed to have been far more “meaningful” to antebellum readers, although that is something modern historians have no way of knowing.

Blumin’s defense of Foster as being somehow more clear-eyed and impartial than novelists of the period is especially interesting, given that Foster’s own life bears more resemblance to that of a character in a “sensational romance such as the *Quaker City*” than is the case for most authors of those romances (Blumin, “Introduction,” 26). Among other elements: Foster at one point worked as the editor of a nativist newspaper, *The Sacher*; according to his obituary in the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* (April 16, 1856), he “formed one of the band of a traveling menagerie”; and, most tellingly, late in his life he was convicted of the crime—forgery of financial drafts—that was most often the focus of city-mystery narratives.

⁶⁸ Robinson, *Hot Corn*, vii.

Chumasero wrote that he had lived in Rochester for ten years, during which time he had been writing down disconnected sketches of incidents: “At the end of that time, a large number of sketches had accumulated in [my] port-folio, each having no connection with the other, but being wholly detached, and each possessing rather the character of a local memorandum than a piece ... written with a view of publication.” Chumasero goes on to explain that a publisher heard about the sketches, and “urgently requested that a selection should be made from them, thrown into a connected form, and prepared for publication. ... a thin semblance of a plot [was] contrived, on which those sketches have been strung....”⁶⁹

It is this “connected form” that could have made city-mysteries *more* useful, not less, than disconnected urban sketches like Foster’s, for making sense of the city. As Wyn Kelley notes, these novels differ from the urban sketch by making the “urban labyrinth” an image not just of decay in certain parts of town, like Five Points, but of a network that ties the entire city together, high and low, center and suburb; in the process, they also escape, if ever so slightly, from the ephemeral and highly time-specific nature of the daily newspaper.⁷⁰ John Denison Vose clearly stated the choice facing authors: they could translate their familiarity with urban life into “a long and elaborate story, half real and half fictitious, for the sake of introducing ‘blood and thunder’ characters,” or

⁶⁹ Chumasero, *Life in Rochester*, 3-4.

⁷⁰ Kelley, *Melville’s City*, 110. Kelley perceptively notes that “this expanded labyrinthine scheme dominates the structure of the fiction as well, and we begin to have the labyrinthine plots of Judson and Lippard.”

they could “give an impartial account of what is to be seen nightly in Gotham” and suggest specific reforms.⁷¹

The benefit of a unified narrative that fused fact and fiction, apart from the opportunities it provided for the inclusion of racy scenes—a benefit not to be overlooked—was that it allowed the author to offer the reader an explanation for *all* of urban life, not just for a part of it. Instead of giving the predominantly middle-class readers of the *Tribune* a glimpse at Five Points venality, as Foster did, an author like Lippard could spin a narrative thread that connected conditions in the Five Points to those on Fifth Avenue, and to all points in between, explaining to readers what the people who rode by on Broadway in their magnificent carriages had to do with those readers’ lives. If today we find the plots implausible (and, admittedly, a great many of them are), our assumption should not be that these novels simply have nothing to tell us, but instead that they may have told antebellum readers something different.⁷²

Characteristics of the Genre

For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to interpret the classification “city-mysteries” broadly. Through an examination of Lyle Wright’s bibliography of American fiction, along with searches of catalogs in rare book libraries and advertisements from the period, I compiled a (by no means comprehensive) list of between 250–300 novels that I

⁷¹ Vose, *Seven Nights in Gotham*, 127.

⁷² Despite their frequently clumsy plots, novels of metropolitan life were, according to Nina Baym, viewed as constituting a distinct genre from the “book of sketches,” which she describes as “a collection connected by various possible threads but without the unifying, complex plot of a novel.” Based on her study of antebellum reviews, she argues that these collections of sketches were considered to be easier to write, and thus were viewed as “minor forms.” Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers*, 202.

felt fit in the category of popular antebellum fiction about city life. Proceeding from the assumption that what connected these novels was their urban subject matter (although “urban fiction” was certainly not the only subgenre they would have fit into), I have examined, along with the usual “Mysteries of...” books, any novels that contained the name of a city, or the words “mystery” or “mysteries,” “city” or “metropolis,” “secrets” or “revealed,” or other similar catchwords in their titles.

In addition, I have included works by authors who were well-known for writing city mysteries but whose titles do not fit the criteria outlined above; so, in the example of George Thompson, in addition to obvious candidates like *City Crimes* or *The Mysteries of Bond Street*, I have also included *The Demon of Gold* and *Grace Willard; or The High and the Low*. The question raised by this approach, then, is did these novels constitute what antebellum readers would have seen as a distinct genre, or is the genre something modern scholars (namely this one) have invented? Scholars of nineteenth-century popular culture are likely familiar with such generic classifications of literature as “blood and thunder” stories or “dime novels.”⁷³ A term that may be less familiar, but that was nevertheless in common use during the 1840s and 1850s, was “yellow-covered” or “yellow-jacket literature,” which assumed that books that looked alike, having the colored paper covers characteristic of cheap short fiction, would be similar in content.

⁷³ The term “dime novels” is frequently misused to describe any cheap popular fiction from the nineteenth century, similar to the way in which scholars of British fiction use the term “penny dreadfuls.” As I and other scholars have argued elsewhere, however, the dime novel did *not* constitute a separate genre of fiction, since dime novel publishers frequently recycled stories that had been published previously. What was unique about dime novels was the method of their production, packaging, and distribution—they were more a marketing phenomenon than a genre of literature, distinguished in their early incarnations by the fact that their *cost* was incorporated into their name. Since dime novels did not appear until 1861, it is anachronistic to refer to writers like George Lippard, as Michael Denning consistently does, as “dime novelists.”

Literary classifications such as these, most often used derisively by critics who found cheap fiction distasteful, were frequently used to include books of sensational urban fiction, but the genre of “city-mysteries” was not coterminous with any of them. Most novels that deployed fictional discourses of urban exposure were indeed cheap, fairly short novels with colored paper covers that would have fit the description of “yellow-covered literature,” yet others were of greater length and were issued by genteel publishers in respectable-looking cloth bindings with gilt lettering, and Lippard’s *The Quaker City*, at nearly 500 pages in length, could resemble the most serious of volumes.

What defined the genre was its combination of urban subject matter and the invocation of the trope of “mysteries,” the idea that beneath the surface of city life lay fascinating and extensive networks of money and power, a notion that was entirely in keeping with an era that has been called the “age of conspiracy.”⁷⁴ The convention of “Mysteries” or “Mysteries and Miseries” was familiar enough to have become an object of satire; sketches and books appeared with such titles as “The Mysteries of Odd-Fellowship,” the “Mysteries and Miseries of Housekeeping,” the “Mysteries of Government,” the “Miseries of Bachelorhood,” the “Mysteries and Miseries of the Life of a City Editor,” and “The Mysteries of the Backwoods.” When in 1866 Rev. Peter Stryker visited slums in lower Manhattan, which had become a standard element of the reformist

⁷⁴ Richard Maxwell has observed that the rise in the amount of information circulating in society—a crucial characteristic of America in the age of the print revolution—lends itself to a proliferation of conspiracy thinking. In such conditions, “a good way to achieve power is to discover methods for reversing this trend, for shrouding, once again, public affairs in secrecy. ... If one can act secretly in a society that is presumed to operate publicly, all kinds of illicit opportunities open up. Money (for example) has an ‘abstractness and qualitylessness, through which transactions, acquisitions, and changes in ownership can be rendered hidden and unrecognizable in a way impossible where values are owned only in the form of extensive, unambiguously tangible objects.’ Even more important, secrecy within an expected context of public action creates a special aura of prestige. What the ordinary man cannot understand, cannot even gain access to, he respects.” Maxwell, *Mysteries of Paris and London*, 168; quoting Georg Simmel.

tourist itinerary, he was jeered by a group of “depraved” children in one dark room with the cry, “The miseries of New York!”⁷⁵

That this title convention was seen as representing some form of generic classification is indicated by George Lippard’s indignant response to an ad run by the Philadelphia publisher T. B. Peterson for an edition of *Quaker City* under the title “The Mysteries and Miseries of Philadelphia.” On at least three occasions during 1849, Lippard protested against this ad in his newspaper, the *Quaker City Weekly*, showing his sensitivity at being associated with a generic convention—“mysteries and miseries”—that was seen as a marker for immoral fiction: “We never were guilty of anything of the kind, and certainly have never been so ‘far left’ as to affix such a thoroughly contemptible title to any one of our books.”⁷⁶ Nevertheless, whether a novel had the word “mysteries” in its title or simply the name of a city or a catch word such as “metropolis,” readers would have expected that it would be part of a genre one writer called the “muddy Bethesda of city literature,” and that it would concern itself with “drag[ing] ... from obscurity” aspects of city life that had hitherto remained “hidden and local.”⁷⁷

Caleb Atwater, in his *Mysteries of Washington City*, stated that his book was the first of a planned trilogy, the later volumes of which would describe the “Humbugs” and “Crimes” of Washington. While to a certain extent the assumption existed that

⁷⁵ Eric Humberger, *Scenes from the Life of a City: Corruption and Conscience in Old New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 2.

⁷⁶ *Quaker City Weekly*, Jan. 20, 1849.

⁷⁷ Donald Grant Mitchell (Ik Marvel), *The Lorgnette: or, Studies of the Town. By an Opera-Goer*. 2 vols. (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 2nd ed., 1850), 1: 44; Thomas V. Paterson, *The Private Life, Public Career, and Real Character of That Odious Rascal Ned Buntline...* (New York: Thomas V. Paterson, Printer and Publisher, 1849), 17.

“mysteries” equaled “crimes”—a Philadelphia drama critic in 1849 blamed “Works, entitled *Mysteries of Great Cities*” for “making of vice a feature in our literature”—such books did not solely concern themselves with low life. Such narratives would, as a reviewer of *The Forged Will* put it, take “the reader alike to the splendid palatial residence of the wealthy aristocrat and the abode of poverty....”⁷⁸ Many city-mysteries were, in part, “melancholy pictures of the sin, shame, and misery of city life,” yet titles such as *Flirtations in America; or High Life in New York* and *Aristocracy, or Life Among the “Upper Ten,”* both of which participated in the discourse of urban exposure that defines the genre, appeared in publishers’ ads next to titles like *Mysteries of Three Cities*.⁷⁹ The seduction case involving the Episcopalian Bishop of New York, William Onderdonk—hardly a scene of “low life,” even if it did involve sexual scandal—was described in one newspaper as one of the “Mysteries of New York.”⁸⁰

The vision of the genre that emerges from an examination of antebellum sources including novels, advertisements, reviews, plays, and publishers’ catalogs is that it was defined not simply by an urban setting, but by an attempt to reveal some concealed aspect

⁷⁸ Colley Cibber, “The Drama, No. 58,” *The Pennsylvanian*, Oct. 13, 1849; Review of Emerson Bennett’s *The Forged Will*, from the *Philadelphia Daily News*, Sept. 28, 1853; reprinted in Emma Wellmont, *Substance and Shadows* (Boston: John P. Jewett), 1854. Cibber wrote that gangs of young men, inspired by books and plays in the “city-mysteries” genre, were wreaking havoc in America’s cities.

Nina Baym has labeled popular antebellum urban fiction the “‘metropolitan novel’ or the ‘novel of low life,’” in which “characters ... were drawn from the bottom of the social heap, and the novels took place mostly on city streets or in public places.” Baym argues that these novels were the literature of “ordinary life among the lower classes,” and cites Dickens as the main example of the genre. (Baym, 209; see pp. 209-213). While city-mysteries almost always did include characters “from the bottom of the social heap,” they also almost always included characters from the top; the conceit of the genre was not just to show low life, as journalists like Foster did, but also to make the novel of low life and the novel of high life the same novel.

⁷⁹ See ads in the back of Jonathan F. Kelley, *Humors of Falconbridge* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1856).

⁸⁰ *Philadelphia Spirit of the Times*, Jan. 13, 1845. Interestingly, the article states that the case would qualify as one of the “Mysteries of New York” only if a court passed an injunction preventing the trial proceedings from being published; that is, if the facts were not made available, then fiction-writers would be forced to make conjectures about what had gone on.

of that urban setting. Perhaps the best indication of what the genre was thought to include comes in an ad for the New York publisher P. F. Harris, who for a period worked with the prolific author of city-mysteries George Thompson. Harris, “having secured the services of one of the best writers of the day,” was set to embark on “the publication of BOOKS FOR THE PEOPLE! consisting of Romances of the most exciting nature, particularly illustrating City Life in *all* its aspect.”⁸¹

The Veils of the City

Among the many mysteries that novels in this genre sought to explain, those that are seen as being somehow related to the phenomenon of rapid urban expansion are the primary focus of this dissertation. That expansion itself could be a mystery in the case of some cities; the growth of San Francisco from a settlement of fewer than 1000 people to a city of over 50,000 in only six years was a constant source of astonishment. But the phenomena that were less obvious were of more interest to both the writers and readers of the genre. These mysteries were understood to exist in any place that had some claim to be a city; the cover of *The Mysteries of Troy* bears the quote, “Every place, large or small, has its mysteries,” and the author of *The Mysteries of Fitchburg*, in justifying his writing a novel that would place his home town on the same literary footing as Paris, New York, or Boston, informed his “dear reader” that “there are more things done here in Fitchburg, than is dreamt of in your philosophy.”⁸² In general, however, the lack of any real action

⁸¹ Ad inside back cover of George Thompson, *The Locket: A Romance of New York* (New York: P. F. Harris, 1855). Italics mine.

⁸² Philip Penchant, *The Mysteries of Fitchburg* (Fitchburg, MA: Charles Shepley, 1844), 5.

in the city-mysteries set in smaller towns, or the tendency of what action does take place to occur in larger cities, underscores the fascination in the period with *large* cities; as so many of these novels of small-town mysteries indicate, New York or Philadelphia or Boston was thought to be where things *happened*.

Yet the definition of what constituted an “urban mystery” was extremely flexible. For the hero of *Wilfred Montessor*, mystery was anything that had the ability to fascinate; to the author of *The Mysteries of Papermill Village*, the life of the town was “full of mysteries, inasmuch as the inhabitants are opposed in political and religious faith”; for Osgood Bradbury, in *The Mysteries of Lowell*, the “greatest mystery is the female heart”; Salem is characterized as “mysterious” due to its character as “a quiet city, a money-getting and a money-keeping city”; as the subtitle of George Lippard’s novel *New York* indicated, for him the real mysteries of the city were the product of the divide between the “upper ten” and the “lower million.”⁸³ Despite this “great diversity of opinion ... as to what constitutes the mysteries of any city or town in our country,” a general assumption was that these mysteries would “doubtless [envelope] in their intricacies scenes of vice, scenes of cruelty”; whether these crimes of vice and cruelty were figured as the products of capitalism or Jesuitical conspiracies or gangs of river

⁸³ *Wilfred Montessor: or, The Secret Order of the Seven* (New York: Charles G. Graham & Co., 1844), 22; Theodore Bang, *The Mysteries of Papermill Village* (Papermill Village, NH: Walter Tufts, Jr., 1845), 3; Osgood Bradbury, *Mysteries of Lowell* (Boston: E. P. Williams, 1844), 10; *Caroline Hargrave, the Merchant’s Daughter: Being the First Series of the Mysteries of Salem!* (Salem: Varney, Parsons & Co., 1845), 3. Theodore Bang was especially specific about what constituted a mystery in Papermill Village: “Another mystery resolves itself into the abundance of foolish speaking, jesting, and lewd talk in our stores and shops” (26).

pirates or lust or poverty or class envy was up to the individual author.⁸⁴ Regardless of the orientation of the author, however, the basic conceit underlying the genre was twofold: in city life, things and people are not what they appear to be; and one's life, especially in its material conditions, can change in an instant.

Whatever the mystery in question, however, all novels in the genre presumed that some mechanism of concealment was at work in the urban environment that rendered the city unknowable. This presumption that things were going on that could not be seen fed what Thomas Baker has described as a voyeuristic "public appetite for inside information."⁸⁵ City-mysteries presumed that, since there were more people in cities, there were more secrets; that the urban environment determined the sort of secrets it contained; and that, in the process of "describing life, and men, and manners, not only as they appear, but as they are," what would be uncovered would almost always be illicit.⁸⁶ The focus in the antebellum urban press on crime news was not simply sensationalistic; it

⁸⁴ Bradbury, *Mysteries of Lowell*, 9; Chandler Eastman Potter, *Mysteries of Manchester* (Manchester, NH: J. P. Emery, 1844), 7.

⁸⁵ Thomas Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9. The fascination with the "unseen" is especially crucial given the centrality of visual perception in this era, which saw tremendous improvements in the ability to render likenesses, in print technology, and in theatrical reproduction, as well as in urban signage and textuality. See Henkin, *City Reading*, and Donald Lowe, *The History of Bourgeois Perception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). The linkage between city-mysteries novels and new technologies of visual perception is made clear in a passage near the end of the first part of Ned Buntline's *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*: "We intend to give a perfect **daguerreotype** of this great city, offending none save those who deserve it, and neither shrinking from, nor fearing to expose them fully. Our next number will follow in a very few days, and some rich **illustrations** for it are in course of preparation. In the mean time the following **engraving** will show that we keep a bright LOOK-OUT ABROAD" (112).

⁸⁶ "Extract from a Review of the Works of George Lippard," Philadelphia *Saturday Courier*, May 31, 1845. In general, the assumption was that if something was a secret, it must be criminal. In the 1846 play "The Mysteries of Odd-Fellowship," the wife of Mr. Mugblossom, an Odd Fellow, enlists her friend, Mr. Busyman, to find out the secrets of the order. Mr. Busyman assumes, simply because the Odd Fellows have secret rites, that "it's rascality in disguise ... who says roguery's not at the bottom of all this?" *The Mysteries of Odd-Fellowship, a Farce, in one act*, by A Member of the Order (Philadelphia: Turner & Fisher, 1846), 10.

reflected a desire to *expose* dark corners and private vices, to peer into the lives that were lived in such “close proximity to oneself, without being noticed by those one watches, safe from any interaction with them.”⁸⁷

The first method of concealment that city-mysteries novels presumed to be at work was that of urban anonymity—as cities got to be so large that one could not realistically be familiar with every nook and cranny, the ease with which one could disappear into its fabric increased.⁸⁸ As E. B. White wrote of New York, large cities “bestow the gift of loneliness and the gift of privacy,” and their density serves to insulate individuals against “all enormous and violent and wonderful events that are taking place every minute.”⁸⁹ Although White was writing a century after the heyday of city-mysteries, that sense of the city was already emerging in the 1840s. Over and over again, novels in the genre stress the fact that even people who have lived in a city for years do not know what goes on there, cannot tell who is a criminal and who is not, and are under the impression that crime is something that goes on in bad neighborhoods, not in the house right next door. Osgood Bradbury wrote of the implications this growing anonymity had for authors of fiction:

⁸⁷ Brand, *Spectator and the City*, 117. As the flip side of this cultural desire, or perhaps as its by-product, Richard Sennett argues in *The Fall of Public Man* that much of the urban culture of the 1830s-40s is an attempt to escape surveillance. At the same time, as David Stewart has written, stories of crime overflowed the pages of the penny papers and “eroticized urban experience that was, for the vast majority of city dwellers, constraining, confining, and mind-numbingly dull.” David M. Stewart, “Cultural Work, City Crime, Reading, Pleasure,” *American Literary History* 94 (Winter 1997), 684.

⁸⁸ The overwhelming scale of the new megalopolises of the nineteenth century required the use of literary techniques other than realism. As Richard Maxwell writes, “Allegory was originally a technique for using enigmatic figures to reveal an invisible world. By the middle of the nineteenth century, London or Paris was that world: visible enough in its particulars, perhaps, but as a whole unimaginable ... unless it could be apprehended through figures that suggested its full significance.” Maxwell, *Mysteries of Paris and London*, x.

⁸⁹ White, *Here is New York*, 9, 13.

We live in an age of the world, the tendency of which is to run into masses. The people have, in some good degree, lost their individuality, and become gregarious.... Men and women once moved about in society with peculiar, distinctive characteristics, and with individuality as plainly as the nose upon the face. To write a story then, and describe the characters as they passed before us ... were comparatively an easy task; but now we are compelled to search with great scrutiny among the masses before we can find suitable material wherewith to weave a tale which shall be recognized by the reader as a veritable history.⁹⁰

The second level of concealment that was part of the “veil” of urban life was the increasingly enclosed and isolated nature of urban spaces, along with the increasingly segregated social and residential patterns of city dwellers. Combined with the anonymity of the mass of citizens, this physical isolation made cities especially “mysterious,” and especially good candidates for a cultural form rooted in the desire for exposure and transparency, whether in politics or finance or cheap reading.⁹¹ Virtually every novel in the genre features an outwardly respectable house in a quiet neighborhood that contains either a brothel or a gambling den. In George Thompson’s *Harry Glendon*, just such a building turns out to contain the den of a secret organization of thieves, the “Brotherhood of the Jimmey,” which is broken up by a police raid: “The place was kept open by the authorities for a length of time to enable the public to examine with wonder the great den

⁹⁰ Osgood Bradbury, *Helen Clarence* (Boston: H. L. Williams, n.d.), 1. David Henkin observes that, despite the tendency in the period to depict the city as a mystery to be unveiled, phenomena such as personal ads placed in newspapers and posted around the city called attention to the mysterious dramas of city life: “The chaotic and often anonymous promiscuity of urban life was not a matter of dark secrets lurking underground; it was a prominent feature of the city in which strangers presented and interpreted public selves for a variety of purposes and effects.” Henkin, *City Reading*, 177.

⁹¹ The tendency toward transparency could be taken too far, especially for the poor. As a street urchin says in *The Mysterious Marriage* as he gazes into a restaurant window, “Wish I had them biskits in that winder—wouldn’t I eat ‘em though ... gittin hungrier every minit; ef them fellers as puts sich big beef-steaks and shoulders of mutton and bulging stavin piles of sassages in their eatin-house winders only knowd how bad it made fellers feel as hadn’t the mopusses for to buy ‘em, guess they’d take em out...” The combination of extreme urban congestion and new technologies of display such as plate glass windows rendered the city all too legible for some citizens. Eliza Ann Dupuy, *The Mysterious Marriage. A True Romance of New York Life* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson & Brothers, 1858), 59.

existing in their midst. Crowds of course took advantage of the opportunity, and great was the surprise of everyone who saw it.”⁹²

The urban veil concealing the life of the city was not only architectural but social and moral as well. Instead of claiming to uncover the physical hiddenness of poverty and misery, as did journalists such as Foster, authors of fictional city-mysteries were just as interested in puncturing the veneer of respectability of the urban elites, a practice that made the genre at times a useful blackmail tool.⁹³ Regardless of class, however, one of the assumptions underlying the genre was that everybody in the city had something they wanted to hide. As a pamphlet published after the Helen Jewett murder allegedly quoted Richard Robinson, her acquitted killer: “I can unmask one half of New York and uncloak the other. I know that city, web and woof, male and female, from the East river to the North, from Castle Garden to Washington Place.”⁹⁴

If the veil of urban mystery proved sufficiently fascinating above ground, a third region of hidden urban life—the subterranean city—held even more fascination. As one 1857 travel guide to the city pointed out, “it is not only the pavement, and the sidewalks, and the houses that make up the streets—there is also a street below the street.”⁹⁵ The introduction of water and sewage systems into American cities in the period, along with the rapid pace of demolition and construction had created underground networks of

⁹² George Thompson, *Harry Glindon; or, The Man of Many Crimes* (New York: n.p., 1854), 60.

⁹³ The claim in *The Mysteries of Philadelphia* that, “of the entire number of gentlemen who ... have the entrée and keep a woman, there are nine married men, whose names we shall give, before our last volume closes, without fear favor, or affection,” was very likely an effort to extort money from Philadelphia husbands (17-18).

⁹⁴ *Robinson Down Stream*, quoted in Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 382.

⁹⁵ Philip Wallys, *About New York: An Account of What a Boy Saw in his Visit to the City* (New York: Dix, Edwards & Co., 1857), 63.

which most residents were only dimly aware.⁹⁶ City-mysteries novels often featured subterranean passages between buildings, and described slum areas such as New York's Five Points as being honeycombed with tunnels between building cellars and storerooms that only the gangs of criminals who used them could navigate. George Thompson, in *City Crimes*, and Charles Averill, in *The Secrets of the Twin Cities*, went even farther, taking their readers on tours of entire underground cities, complete with streets, stores, and distinct neighborhoods.⁹⁷ This conceit was of a piece with antebellum street culture, which produced at least one newspaper called "The Subterranean," published by the radical Democratic politician Mike Walsh, the title of which became slang for any sort of left political radical. The assumption that another city existed beneath the visible one was not confined to fiction; a letter to the editor in a Nativist newspaper in New York in 1854 from a "Philadelphia correspondent" confirms the claim of a previous letter that there existed in Philadelphia underground passages connecting "three Romish strongholds in 18th street," which the correspondent assumes are being used to move cannon back and forth in anticipation of a riot.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ In Newton Curtis' *The Matricide's Daughter*, a gang of counterfeiters has taken over a store cellar that extends out under the street, as was common in the period, and uses it as their workshop; the workers wear soft leather moccasins so that they will not be heard aboveground (13). In addition to descriptions of these tunnels and cellars, the novels feature frequent scenes set in dives such as the underground bar described by Dickens in his *American Notes*, the Diving Bell, which came to be known as "Dickens' Hole."

⁹⁷ Averill, who was especially focused on issues of urban geography, describes his underground city as being the haunt of criminals and the destitute, stating that some people lived their entire lives there without ever going above ground, living on offal from the sewers and the corpses of their dead comrades. Charles Averill, *The Secrets of the Twin Cities* (Boston: George Williams, 1849); see Ch. 21, "The Subterranean Streets of New York." In Joseph Ingraham's *The Miseries of New York* (Boston: "Yankee" Office, 1844), Jake, an elderly fence who has escaped from prison, lives underground in an old cistern near Chatham Square, and says that he has not been aboveground for seven years.

⁹⁸ "Letter from a Philadelphia Correspondent," *The Mystery* (New York), Dec. 9, 1859.

This letter points out the fourth and most sinister model of urban concealment used in city-mysteries novels, that of the conspiratorial organization. The mania for conspiracy theories in the antebellum period—anti-Catholic, anti-Masonic, anti-Bank—is well known, but city-mysteries fiction transformed this anxiety into a uniquely urban form.⁹⁹ City-mysteries novels depicted conspiracies as touching almost every aspect of urban life. George Thompson’s Jack Harold has branded on his chest “A Criminal Brother of the Unholy Alliance,” proof of his membership in a secret New York crime ring that boasted members in high positions in government. In the *Mysteries of Catskill*, a Catholic group called the “Grand Canton” has plans to divert an inheritance via kidnapping and murder. The “G.F.K Club” in *Ellen Merton, the Belle of Lowell* is a group of Lowell rakes who alert each other to the arrival of new pretty girls in town and aid each other in seducing them. *John O’Brien; or, The Orphan of Boston*, a city-mystery written by a Catholic priest, claimed to reveal a Protestant conspiracy called the “Friends and Fathers” that was devoted to turning Catholic children Protestant. Meanwhile, George Lippard and others postulated a Jesuit conspiracy to take over the United States and create a new Popish empire. Harrison Gray Buchanan even claimed that a vast nationwide network of gamblers, through the use of a “complete and efficient

⁹⁹ On secret societies and their initiation rites, see Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); on nineteenth-century conspiracies, with a focus on politics, see Frank L. Klement, *Dark Lanterns: Secret Political Societies, Conspiracies, and Treason Trials in the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1984) and Orville J. Victor, *History of American Conspiracies; A Record of Treason, Insurrection, Rebellion, &c. in the United States of America from 1760 to 1860* (Rutland, VT: C. E. Tuttle, 1973 [1863]); on the purposes served by conspiracy thinking, with a focus on contemporary theories, see Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). On the value of “openness,” as opposed to secrecy, in antebellum politics, and the consequent importance of the “public meeting,” see Mary Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 108–114.

organization extending to every State,” were able to obtain information on how the electorate was leaning so as to place bets on the outcome of elections.

Such conspiratorial visions were not entirely imaginary. *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* features a criminal conspiracy headed by a man named Belcher Kay, who was the real-life warden of the port and was identified by James Stuart, a criminal arrested by the Committee of Vigilance in 1851, as having been involved with many of his gang’s burglaries. When Stuart and his accomplice were arrested, their confessions were explosive, since they seemingly verified all the rumors that had been circulating about a hidden conspiracy of crime and immorality in San Francisco.¹⁰⁰

It is likely no coincidence, given the fascination business life held for authors of city-mysteries, that these conspiracies closely followed the models of the emerging American corporation.¹⁰¹ The “League” of counterfeiters in Harry Hazel’s *The Burglars* produces fake Bank of the United States banknotes in order to buy a ship and enter the China trade; they have branch offices in cities around the country (their headquarters are in New Orleans), and have annual meetings in “A-----, Ohio.”¹⁰² Whether working for evil or for good (as do the Secret Order of the Seven in *Wilfred Montessor*), these secret groups are all characterized by their fearsome initiation rites, a promise of death to traitors, and their ability to function unseen by the rest of society. In addition, despite

¹⁰⁰ Philip Ethington, *The Public City: The Political Construction of Urban Life in San Francisco, 1850-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 109. Stuart and Whitaker later revealed that if two of their accomplices had been hanged, they had plans to burn down the entire city, which was precisely the centerpiece of many of the antebellum conspiracy theories in San Francisco.

¹⁰¹ Alan Trachtenberg has attributed the “mysteries” of the city in this period primarily to the process of incorporation and its attendant concealment of power. Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 112–121.

¹⁰² Harry Hazel [Justin Jones], *The Burglars, or the Mysteries of the League of Honor, an American Tale* (Boston: Hatch and Co., 1844), 18, 20.

their anti-social ends, these groups are depicted as knitting all levels of society together, a task of which few other institutions in antebellum cities seemed capable. As Frederic Raynor, the head counterfeiter in *The Brazen Star*, explained: "... our extensive connection with officers of justice, with merchants, with tradesmen, with mechanics, and throughout all the ramifications of society—this formidable array of circumstances in our favor ... will effectually protect us from discovery."¹⁰³

The Romance of the Real

If conspiracies in these novels linked high and low together through hidden networks of power, they also connected the seemingly unrelated stories from the news that were often incorporated into the narratives. Perhaps no other genre of fiction in America has been more insistent that it is *not* fiction, that its narratives are "founded in fact," "romances of real life."¹⁰⁴ While some authors, such as George Lippard, having touched some prominent figures too closely, included disclaimers that "the author [has] painted no living character in the pages of his work, or satirized any particular individual," a much more common claim was Justin Jones's for his "GREAT LOCAL NOVELETTE, Illustrative of LIFE IN BOSTON,--in which none but Conspicuous

¹⁰³ George Thompson, *The Brazen Star; or, The Adventures of a New-York M. P.* (New York: George W. Hill, 1853), 19.

¹⁰⁴ As Richard Maxwell writes, "The novelist of urban mysteries turns his attention to moments when the articulation of facts, the words in which they are stated, becomes a central issue. ... he finds a way to combine the aspirations of realism with a venerable allegorical rhetoric. Out of this union emerges a means for imagining the city and deciding what lives it might allow its inhabitants." Maxwell, *Mysteries of Paris and London*, 4.

Living Characters!! Will be introduced.”¹⁰⁵ The constant insistence on the factual basis for these narratives of urban exposure prompted many authors to blur generic categories, claiming that, “though this book bears the title of a novel, it is written with the ink of truth and deserves the name of a history more than that of a romance.”¹⁰⁶ The author of *Mysteries of Philadelphia* went so far as to claim that he had done seven months of what can only be called fieldwork in “the haunts of High Life in Philadelphia,” laying aside his paying job to work on “research and development” full time, compiling a notebook of “many hundred pages.”¹⁰⁷

Hand in hand with the claim that the novels were based on fact was that of contemporaneity, allying the novels more closely with the news in the columns of the papers in which they were often serialized than with the historical novels, like those of Sir Walter Scott, that enjoyed great popularity at the time. Ned Buntline articulated this effect especially clearly: “Not in olden time when the people differed as much from us in character as in costume, do we commence this story—but now, in modern days, when every man, woman, and child, who reads it, can recognize its characters and descriptions.”¹⁰⁸ Buntline situated these new urban characters so close in time to the

¹⁰⁵ Ad on back cover of part 5 of Lippard’s *Quaker City* (Philadelphia: G. B. Zieber, 1845); Prospectus for Vol. 3 of the *Star Spangled Banner*, Jones’s story paper, in the Oct. 7, 1845 issue. Lippard’s stance in this regard was quite complicated, no doubt because his novel genuinely seems to have angered some prominent Philadelphians. In an ad published with the 1844 edition of *Quaker City*, Lippard danced around the issue, saying that the novel “relates especially to the two past years of the history of Philadelphia,” but does not refer to any incident “TO WHICH PUBLICITY HAS BEEN GIVEN”; yet he insists that “the work is founded on facts, however, which occurred since January, 1842,” claiming that the novel is based on facts, just not facts that are publicly known. Lippard’s 1845 disclaimer was probably due to the near riot that accompanied the attempted staging of a theatrical version of the novel, since, in at least one edition, Lippard included a twelve-page “Key,” which gave real names for some of the characters in the book.

¹⁰⁶ Buntline, *Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, 5.

¹⁰⁷ *Mysteries of Philadelphia*, v; the phrase “research and development” actually appears on p. vii.

¹⁰⁸ Buntline, *Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, 9.

setting of his novels that he claimed to have seen one of the B'hoys he described in an earlier novel "not an half hour since, strutting down Broadway...."¹⁰⁹ Instead of including a disclaimer about not revealing the actual names of his characters, Charles Averill in *The Secrets of the Twin Cities* seems more interested in protecting the date itself, saying that the story starts on "September 25, 184-": "The exact year, in full, we may not mention. It is too recent, and its leading events by far too fresh in the public mind, to render it either prudent or advisable...."¹¹⁰

This situating of events in a time almost simultaneous with the moment in which they are read connects events and people, enabling them, to use Benedict Anderson's phrase, to think of themselves as an "imagined community."¹¹¹ The location of items on the same page of the newspaper—or, I would argue, in the same fictional narrative of city life, or on the same block in the actual city itself—tended to diminish the differences between otherwise disparate events. The tremendous appeal of local news for readers was not lost on authors of city-mysteries, many of whom also wrote for and edited newspapers, which further highlighted the link between current events and city-mysteries narratives. Joseph Scoville, in *The Adventures of Clarence Bolton*, remarked that "the

¹⁰⁹ Buntline, *Three Years After*, 10.

¹¹⁰ Averill, *Secrets of the Twin Cities*, 7.

¹¹¹ Benedict Anderson describes "calendrical coincidence" as being the "essential literary convention of the newspaper." Other than having happened on the same day, many in the same city, the events described in a newspaper have no connection to each other, save in the shared, communal experience of reading them. "In this perspective," Anderson writes, "the newspaper is merely an 'extreme form' of the book, a book sold on a colossal scale, but of ephemeral popularity. Might we say: one-day best-sellers?" Inverting this analogy, then, city-mysteries can be read as "extreme forms" of newspapers, of colossal scale (and sold on such a scale as well), but of enduring popularity. Newspapers provide the consistency and range of referents of allegory, and the specificity and informational nature of historical detail. As Denning observes, "reading Lippard is like reading a newspaper with a plot." Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), 33–35; Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 91.

editorials of the Picayune and a page of the story are written at the same hour and on the same sheet of paper....”¹¹² As Louis James has noted of the racy urban press that appeared in British cities in the 1830s, the inclusion of the suffix “in London” (or “in Boston”) in a title calls attention to the fact that the existence of such papers, and of city novels as well, relied on interest in events in a particular urban place at a particular time.¹¹³ The frequency with which city-mysteries incorporated real figures from the news—Helen Jewett, Madame Restell, Daniel Webster, Edwin Forrest—cemented their link to current events. As did many authors in the genre, Isaac Baldwin referred readers who might be unclear as to the actual events that constituted his *Wonderful Adventures and Horrible Disclosures of a Louisville Policeman* to “the statements published in the daily and weekly prints a few months since.”¹¹⁴

Sensational Reform

Another characteristic of novels in the genre, which is unsurprising given the frequency with which they were attacked for immorality, is a consistent claim to be working for reform. Regardless of the political stance of a given novel—radical Democratic or pro-business Whig—some recipe for solving the increasingly apparent problems of urban poverty, prostitution, and crime was almost always offered. In the process, of course, the vices that needed correcting were depicted in the most graphic terms possible, and it is remarkable that the exposure of such a vast range of urban woes,

¹¹² Joseph Scoville, *Clarence Bolton; or, Life in New York* (New York: Garrett & Co., 1853), 63.

¹¹³ Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man*, 18.

¹¹⁴ Isaac Baldwin, *The Wonderful Adventures and Horrible Disclosures of a Louisville Policeman*, Written by Himself (Cincinnati: H. M. Rulison, 1852), 32.

from counterfeiting to intemperance, so often involved the detailed description of beautiful women in various stages of undress.¹¹⁵ George Lippard claimed in a letter to Theodore Parker that, “I have written upon the Crimes of a large city—that focus of civilized demoralization—not because I am a sensualist, but because I wished to picture stern facts...,” but his biographer noted that Lippard went beyond simple, “stern facts,” making it his business “to drag away purple garments and expose to our shivering gaze the rottenness of vice—to take tyranny by the throat and strangle it to death.”¹¹⁶ This fusion of sensationalism and avowed reformist intent has led David Reynolds to label the sub-genre “Dark Reform,” which he views as being distinct from more openly sensational literature, which he labels “Subversive.”¹¹⁷ Even the raciest writers, however, such as Henri Foster and George Thompson, would often observe that the only way to shield young minds from the power of vice is to show it to them thoroughly, somewhat akin to making a child caught smoking a cigarette smoke the entire pack. While this may have been simply a facetious ploy, many city mysteries advocated for specific ends, including laws against seduction, changes in the code governing eviction of tenants by

¹¹⁵ This is not unique to city-mysteries fiction, however, as any reading of Henry Ward Beecher’s advice books will indicate, particularly *Lectures to Young Men*, which Beecher claimed to have consciously written in the style of the cultural forms he was attacking (iv). In *Seven Nights in Gotham*, John Vose slyly highlighted the hypocrisy of much of the “legitimate” reform literature. Two clergymen of the judge’s acquaintance have asked to join the group on their nocturnal tours of New York’s low life, as they are “very anxious to disguise themselves and to look in upon the vice and immorality carried on in such dens....” (107). It is no coincidence that the night the ministers wish to join the group is the night when they plan to visit the city’s brothels; in Vose’s description, the ministers are clearly horny old hypocrites.

¹¹⁶ Copy of letter from Lippard to Theodore Parker, Oct. 16, 1847, Theodore Parker Papers, vol. 8, pp. 342-46, Massachusetts Historical Society; John Bell Bouton, *Life and Choice Writings of George Lippard* (New York: H. H. Randall, 1855), 96.

¹¹⁷ See Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*. David Paul Nord has written that, “Perhaps more than anything else, the missionary impulse ... lay at the foundation of the popularization of print in the nineteenth century.” The breathlessness with which authors of city-mysteries described the female body in their “reformist” works indicates that the missionary position may have been just as important. Nord, *The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815–1835* (Columbia, SC: Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Culture, 1984), 2.

landlords, and increased wages for sewing girls, reflecting the emerging sense that, as one reviewer put it, “The novel is now almost recognized with the newspaper and the pamphlet as a legitimate mode of influencing public opinion....”¹¹⁸

Understandably, depicting vice in order to cure it frequently resulted in quite graphic delineations of sex and violence, which some writers engaged in with more relish than others. Women’s “snowy globes” and “rose-tipped hillocks” are repeatedly exposed and described, as are men’s “powerful weapon[s], whose onslaught no ardent female could parry or thrust aside” (although in less detail).¹¹⁹ In addition to describing conventional sexuality, homosexuality and bestiality are hinted at in the novels. Fusing sex and violence, necrophilia makes frequent appearances; one character in *The Lady’s Dream* is locked in a tomb and spends the night clutching a half-decayed corpse to himself, pressing “his lips to the gumless teeth,” thinking that it is his fiancée.¹²⁰ Bodies, sexualized and otherwise, litter the pages of many city-mysteries. Characters have their throats cut with razors, Bowie knives, and broken glass; they are tortured with water and fire; they are eaten by rats, dogs, and each other; their skulls are crushed by crowbars, shovels, gravestones, doors, and collapsing buildings. Critics noticed this tendency toward Gothic rhetorical excess, the overheated mixture of “glowing and sinful colors,” and began to define the genre based on its prose style, calling it the “raw head and bloody bones school.”¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Review from the *Literary World*, Nov. 30, 1850; quoted in Baym, 214-15. It should be noted that this quote appeared *before* the publication of the great “issue” novel of the century, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

¹¹⁹ J. Henry Smith, *The Green Family; or, The Veil Removed* (Springfield, MA: Smith & Jones, 1849), 59.

¹²⁰ John Hovey Robinson, *The Lady’s Dream*, 34.

¹²¹ “Immoral Works,” *Saturday Evening Post*, op. cit.

Writers such as Lippard embraced these accusations of stylistic defect, claiming that “Literature merely considered as an Art is a despicable thing. ... Grace of style, elegance of language ... are not the ultimates of literature. The great object of literature, is the social, mental and spiritual elevation of Man.”¹²² Thomas Low Nichols was perhaps more honest in his admission that the great object of literature was to sell: “As the most wicked things in this world, both in history and fiction, have always been found the most interesting--and as good books are generally very dull ones, an author, whether he consult the public taste or his own reputation, or his publisher's interests, should be as accommodating as his conscience will allow.”¹²³ In some cases, the bizarre pacing of plots of some city-mysteries is attributable to serialization, and their rough and brief style was blamed on what George Wilkes called “the curse of cheap publishing,” or the fact that the shorter a book was the more profitable it would be.¹²⁴ The stylistic excesses of the genre can also be understood within the larger cultural frame of melodrama, which dominated the stage at the time and was linked by some critics to the style of popular authors.¹²⁵ John Ross Dix, in the introduction to *Local Loiterings*, an 1845 book about Boston, cautioned his readers that they “must not expect to be entertained by startling

¹²² *Quaker City Weekly*, June 2, 1849.

¹²³ Thomas Low Nichols, *Ellen Ramsay; or The Adventures of a Greenhorn in Town and Country* (New York: n.p., 1843), 54.

¹²⁴ George Wilkes, *The Mysteries of the Tombs* (New York: Sold at all the bookstores, 1844), 64.

¹²⁵ See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). As one later critic of Lippard wrote, “The striding and screeching of which Forrest was accused on the stage, were transferred to the printed page by a number of writers of a school which was founded by George Lippard....” Oberholtzer, *Literary History of Philadelphia*, 251

As Peter Buckley has written of the style of city mysteries, “Perhaps all fiction can be said to have its roots in the task of making the unseen narratable, but in urban melodrama this task is given a particular social urgency. The hallmark of the novel is therefore an excess of signification growing out of the concern that something will be left unsaid.” Peter G. Buckley, “The Case Against Ned Buntline: The ‘Words, Signs, and Gestures’ of Popular Authorship,” *Prospects* 13 (1988), 259.

tales or novel incidents. I have no ‘MYSTERIES’ of Boston to relate, no melodramatic doings to chronicle.”¹²⁶

Urban Mystery and Narrative Structure

On some level, the project that these authors had embarked upon, that of showing all walks of city life and tying them together, forced upon them both stylistic irregularities and confusing, labyrinthine plots. Whether trying to accurately reflect the different dialects and accents one heard on a city street, or to depict scenes of sex and violence, authors of city-mysteries would often produce sentences that were less than Addisonian. As for their plots, if some deficiencies were due to simple lack of skill or to serialization, in other cases, “where many characters are necessarily introduced, and of different grades in their social positions, and where so many incidents, some of them occurring almost simultaneously, are detailed, it is impossible for us to develop the plot in a straight-forward course, but must often go out of the way, and sometimes into devious paths, in order to preserve a perfect connection.”¹²⁷ While some plots were lifted wholesale from European Gothic fiction, others operated much the same way that the fictional Monk-Hall did in George Lippard’s *Quaker City*, with hidden trap doors and secret passages suddenly appearing to connect the reader unexpectedly with another narrative strand.

¹²⁶ John Ross Dix, *Local Loiterings, and Visits in the Vicinity of Boston*, Boston: Redding & Co., 1845, 9.

¹²⁷ Harry Hazel [Justin Jones], *Hasserac, the Thief-Taker...* (Boston: Jones’s Publishing House, 1849), 39. The amount of simply bad writing that also appeared in city-mysteries is not to be discounted. Some passages were so “telegraphic” as to be totally incoherent, as with this sample from *Ellen Grafton*: “What would the world say? Her husband a minister of the gospel! To-morrow. How much hung upon its light. To-morrow! Night? Mystery!” Henri Foster, *Ellen Grafton. or The Den of Crime: A Romance of Secret Life in the Empire City* (Boston: Star Spangled Banner Office, 1850), 23.

In constructing such complicated plots, authors of city-mysteries tended to rely on several plot devices, which, if not unique to the genre, were given a special valence. The first of these is the urban superman, based on Prince Rodolphe of Gerolstein in Sue's *Mysteries of Paris*, who in addition to being a fabulously wealthy master of disguise and individual combat, knows all the hidden passages of the city as well as all of the subcultural slang, enabling him to pass undetected in any milieu. American city-mysteries offered many variations on the theme—the supervillain, the superwoman, burglars, doctors, lawyers, detectives—but most novels in the genre relied on some character who had special knowledge of the city, who saw more deeply into its mysteries and could act as a guide for more naïve characters. An additional device was pioneered by Lippard in *The Quaker City*: his “Monk-Hall,” a Gothic mansion through which all the various plot lines (in the form of all the classes of the city) flowed, unknown to the outside world and often used as a den for whatever criminal conspiracy was at work, all watched over by “Devil-Bug,” its monstrous warden. The Monk-Hall analog could be a cave, an underground hideout, a palatial mansion, a yacht club, a brothel, or even the White House, but many novels relied on some physical nexus for the webs of connection that they wove through the metropolis.

Uses of the City-Mysteries Genre

The influence of *The Quaker City* is crucial to consider, because in some ways it is responsible for obscuring what I take to be one of the most salient characteristics of the genre: its flexibility. Lippard's first novel was so tremendously popular, and was

reprinted so many times, that it has come to be the book most modern scholars think of when (or if) we think of “city-mysteries.” The fact that for many years it has been the only example of the genre easily accessible in a reprint edition has compounded its odd stature as a towering achievement of trash.¹²⁸ But in many ways Lippard’s novel is not at all characteristic of the genre as a whole. It is much longer (500 pages) and was more expensive than most city-mysteries (most editions cost a dollar); it is more sensationalistic and violent than a great many examples. Lippard also articulated his politics much more clearly in the novel than did most other authors, and his politics were far more radical than most; at the same time, it is more stridently moralistic than many novels in the genre, especially about the crime of seduction; and, lastly, it is simply better than almost all other antebellum city-mysteries. It is more comprehensive, it is funnier, it contains a broader range of characters, its use of vernacular is superior, it is weirder, and it is better written. My stance toward *Quaker City* is somewhat ironic, since my reading of that novel served as the germ for this entire dissertation. In spite of how remarkable I feel that novel to be, what I am ultimately trying to argue is that the genre is far broader and more flexible than the example of *The Quaker City* has led us to believe, and that to properly understand the ways in which the genre may have done its work, we need to pay less attention to Lippard’s masterpiece, which tends to make us not notice other, less-exciting examples.

¹²⁸ One of Lippard’s New York novels has been sporadically in print, but is difficult to find. The University of Massachusetts Press’s recent reprint edition of three of George Thompson’s sensational urban novellas is a welcome addition to the field; see George Thompson, *Venus in Boston and Other Tales of Nineteenth-Century City Life*, ed. David S. Reynolds and Kimberly R. Gladman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

Specifically, I find the genre to be far more flexible in class terms than critics like Michael Denning have led us to believe. Given Lippard's political radicalism, Denning and others have constructed an image of popular urban fiction in general as being read primarily by working-class readers and characterized by sensational prose, advocacy of radical politics, antagonism toward the middle and upper classes, an obsession with seduction as a class crime, and a focus on the virtue of the working classes.¹²⁹ But while Lippard's *Quaker City* may have praised the poor and called for the redistribution of wealth, George Thompson praised the poor and called for things to stay exactly as they are. In *New York Life*, the demon, Asmodeus, gives the narrator a "Social Kaleidoscope," through which he can look at people and see them as they really are. He discovers that the rich in New York are miserable because they have so many things to worry about, and that the poor laborers living in hovels are genuinely happy.¹³⁰ While both novels valorize the downtrodden, one does so in the context of democratic radicalism and one does so through the conservative message that the poor are happy as they are, and would only be made miserable if they had more material comforts.

A salient characteristic of the genre is the obsession with the *contrast* between rich and poor to which the compactness of urban space called attention, but the awareness of this contrast does not necessarily imply a progressive or radical outlook. While city-mysteries *may* have been read in large part by working-class readers, we should not

¹²⁹ Denning does admit that "not all of the 'mysteries of the city' told the same story," and that the genre "encompassed a number of different formulas." Yet he returns to the claim that city-mysteries were a genre characterized by their "ability to figure the world of the capitalist city to its artisan readers," and that "the dreams of the utopian socialists haunt the pages" of these novels. Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 86.

¹³⁰ Thompson, *New-York Life: or, The Mysteries of Upper-Tendom Revealed* (New York: Charles S. Attwood, n.d.), 89.

assume that that fact implies that novels in the genre only featured “working-class” politics. Given the complex political landscape of antebellum America, it is a mistake to assume that any coherent body of thought that could be described as “working-class politics” existed, if by that one means the actual politics of actual people who labored for a living. It is more likely, given the frequency with which many city-mysteries incorporated depictions both of the depraved poor and the immoral rich, that the intended audience for the genre was the broad, virtuous middle—in short, the fiction-buying public.¹³¹

Through my reading of popular antebellum urban novels, I have found city-mysteries that are pro- and anti-business, pro-Whig, pro-Democrat, pro- and anti-expansion, pro- and anti-Catholic, pro- and anti-Quaker, pro- and anti-slavery, novels that were published in garish yellow paper covers and others that were published in genteel cloth bindings. Some novels, like Lippard’s, concern themselves with the oppression suffered by the urban poor at the hands of wealthy merchants and manufacturers, while others are more concerned with the infiltration of New York Knickerbocker society by *nouveau riche* families who made their money in trade and with the threat to high society from adventurers posing as European aristocrats in order to marry American heiresses. Some books fitting the conventions of the genre were published by accused pornographers, and others were published by progressive religious firms. City-mysteries set in New York and Boston often mingled with the genre of the sea story, and those set

¹³¹ It is striking how many novels in what was certainly a disreputable genre hewed to the recommendation given in a review of Emerson Bennett’s *The Forged Will* for “what should be the prime object of all story-writers, whose works reach directly the million, the complete triumph of virtue over duplicity and crime....” Printed on title page of Emma Wellmont, *Substance and Shadow*.

in St. Louis and San Francisco partook of some stock elements of the frontier novel.¹³²

The tropes of southwestern tall-tale humor mingled well with the extravagant style of the city-mystery genre; in *Ten Years on the Town*, Dick Billings tells two incredulous young women that Broadway is “over seven hundred miles long; houses four hundred and five stories high; streets paved Jerusalem style, all gold; the city boarded over in winter with three-inch plank, so as to keep the cold nor’-west chilling blasts off the millions of pretty maidens’ faces....”¹³³

But the discourse of urban exposure could also be mixed with the conventions of sentimental and domestic fiction, such as mysterious foundlings and disinherited aristocrats. E. D. E. N. Southworth’s *The Hidden Hand* incorporates a standard urban inheritance plot, while the conclusion of *The Three Widows: or, Various Aspects of Gotham Life*, a typical city-mystery, concludes with a flurry of seven weddings that pair off all of the characters who are left alive, following the model of antebellum sentimental fiction.

Thus, the rhetorical stance of city-mysteries was not solely one of working-class radicalism or anti-urbanism, as it has so often been portrayed. There were as many variations on the theme of urban exposure as there were responses to the process of urbanization, and the genre’s appeal was not confined to poor or uneducated readers.

¹³² These popular genres would have been quite closely associated for readers, especially since many authors of city mysteries wrote either frontier stories (Ned Buntline, Charles Averill) or sea adventure stories (Joseph Holt Ingraham, Justin Jones). In addition, city-mysteries stories were printed alongside other popular story genres in the weekly story papers. Part of this is of course due to the eternal flexibility of hack writers, who are willing and able to write whatever will pay, but it also denotes some generic similarity, since readers would have had expectations of an “Ingraham story,” and would have seen the connection between genres as being more natural than it appears today.

¹³³ John Denison Vose, Esq., *Ten Years on the Town; or, The Adventures of the Played-Out Club* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1863), 94.

Hogg's Weekly Instructor, a high-brow Scottish periodical, in 1849 featured a series of tales of "Mysteries of City Life" that focused on American cities. The first article in the series appeared between an article on the history of the Royal Mint and an article on Wordsworth.¹³⁴ Some of Ned Buntline's early fiction, including his "Life-Yarn," appeared in the *Knickerbocker*, the premier literary organ of antebellum New York. In at least one instance, the same text—Mrs. Ann Stephens's *High Life in New York*—appeared in classic city-mystery guise (a two-column octavo pamphlet with a yellow paper cover, in 1843) and then later in a typical genteel middle-class edition (a 12mo volume bound in red cloth with the title in gilt on the spine and a floral wreath blind-stamped on the covers, in 1854). This flexibility of the genre, its ability to focus either on the "social, fashionable, financial business life ... here in this city of New York" or the "unimaginable filthiness of the Old Brewery," to both dress up and dress down, seemingly contradicts Michael Denning's claim that the "boundary between the genteel and the sensational" was clearly drawn and strongly policed in this period.¹³⁵

City-Mysteries and Cultural Work

If the rhetoric of "city mysteries" was capable of being adapted to show both aristocratic and radical democratic views of the urban experience, this presumes that these images of urban life served some purpose for antebellum readers, that they did "cultural work." As Jane Tompkins has described the concept, it involves

¹³⁴ *Hogg's Weekly Instructor* (Edinburgh), vol. 3, new series, 1849.

¹³⁵ *Fortunes of a Young Widow*, 33; George Thompson, *New York Life*, 7; Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 59.

a redefinition of literature and literary study, for it sees literary texts not as works of art embodying enduring themes in complex forms, but as attempts to redefine the social order. In this view, novels and stories should be studied not because they manage to escape the limitations of their particular time and place, but because they offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment.¹³⁶

This notion, that reading literature can serve functions other than (or in addition to) aesthetic pleasure or escapism, is not a modern invention. It is quite clear that antebellum readers *expected* to be “worked on” by what they read. Writing of the power of fiction to work toward reform, William Elder claimed that “there are books abroad in the community, which pretend only to the entertainment of a vacant hour, richer in their wisdom and more loyal to the duty which authorship owes to humanity than the average of the sober treatises on society ... which ... demand the assent of the more serious world.”¹³⁷ Elder went farther, saying that fiction was actually better than history, since novels are “false only in names and dates, but true in every thing else,” and that reading skillfully-written fiction was “the best prospective training for future duty and achievement.”¹³⁸ If critics who were in favor of fiction reading expected readers to be worked on by fiction, those who viewed fiction reading as dangerous and immoral were even more aware of literature’s ability to do “cultural work.” Henry Ward Beecher’s alarm that, “This black-lettered literature circulates in this town, floats in our stores, nestles in the shops, is fingered and read nightly, and hatches in the young mind broods of salacious thoughts” makes obvious the assumption that most antebellum readers

¹³⁶ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, xi.

¹³⁷ William Elder, “Fiction,” part 2, in *Quaker City Weekly*, August 18, 1849.

¹³⁸ Elder, “Fiction,” part 1, in *Quaker City Weekly*, August 11, 1849.

shared, whether they were for or against fiction: if you read novels, they would do things to you.¹³⁹

My understanding of what this cultural work was, however, differentiates this dissertation from other literature on the subject. Much criticism of popular antebellum urban fiction has focused on whether or not it is “realistic,” on the extent to which what it says about the city reflects the lived reality of antebellum citizens. My premise here is that the inherent significance of these novels lies less in their mimetic relation to urban life than in their power to shape what people expected city life to be like, to form a “city of the imagination” in the minds of readers, both those who were thinking about moving to cities and those who already lived in cities but were not able to fully “know” the metropolis.¹⁴⁰ Even if the events described in such novels were not “real,” they were nevertheless real in the sense that they formed a part of the way readers imagined and experienced their material reality. In this regard, I am not as dismissive as is Stuart Blumin in his work on George Foster of the potential utility of fictional narratives of city life.

But my reading of city-mysteries fiction is not solely concerned with their use-value. As David Stewart writes, aside from the question of what everyday antebellum urban life was actually like, “Blumin’s argument is based on its fulfilling productive

¹³⁹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Lectures to Young Men, on Various Important Subjects* (Salem: John P. Jewett & Co., 1846), 211

¹⁴⁰ See the Introduction to William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination* (New York: Norton, 1986). On the question of realism, see George Rogers Taylor, “Gaslight Foster: A New York ‘Journeyman Journalist’ at Mid-Century,” *New York History* 58:3 (July 1977), 297-312; Stuart Blumin, Introduction to George Foster, *New York by Gas-Light*.

expectations: urban reading solved urban problems.”¹⁴¹ Stewart’s analysis calls for greater attention to the “thrilled urban body,” the extent to which reading popular narratives of urban crime gave physical pleasure to readers, providing exhilaration as they depicted scenes of violence and danger while keeping the reader safe.¹⁴² While I hope to always remain aware of the fact that these books were produced, sold, and read primarily as entertainment, and thus to keep this element of pleasure in mind, I do not think that reading popular fiction is an either/or proposition, that it either does “productive” cultural work or it is simply escapist and pleasurable. I think that the same reading of a work of popular fiction can offer both; as Ned Buntline wrote, “My aim is first to thrill and interest the reader, and then when each word will tell with its effect, to pitch in a moral which ... cannot fail to be felt.”¹⁴³ In addition, I am less interested in the level of explicitly productive cultural work—of specific urban knowledge transferred and assimilated (although no doubt some city-mysteries do a great deal of this)—than I am in the less accessible level of assumptions shaped and expectations molded.

I have already alluded to the way in which my approach differs from David Reynolds’s landmark *Beneath the American Renaissance*. In short, I do not assume here that these novels are “beneath” anything; this dissertation will examine them on their own terms, as an important cultural phenomenon, without subordinating them to more

¹⁴¹ David Stewart, “Cultural Work, City Crime, Reading, Pleasure,” 681.

¹⁴² Stewart, op. cit., 697.

¹⁴³ Buntline, *Three Years After*, 5. There can be little question that city-mystery novels did offer some form of instruction, or that they did cultural work of a certain type. In a scene in Joseph Holt Ingraham’s *Harry Harefoot*, young Harry, freshly arrived in Boston, betrays his ignorance of urban table manners by, among other things, drinking from the finger bowl, much to his father’s mortification: ““They will think we are all ignoramuses down in Kennebec....”” *Harry Harefoot; or, The Three Temptations. A Story of City Scenes* (Boston: H. L. Williams, 1845), 6. If these narratives did not always offer journalistic precision, they nevertheless did give their readers some hints as to how to act when they came to town.

canonical works of greater aesthetic subtlety. I also do not assume, as Reynolds implies when he labels such novels “Subversive,” that these novels are, in aggregate, in any substantive way oppositional to mainstream culture.¹⁴⁴ While city-mysteries unquestionably featured “carnavalesque” language and wild prose styles, and some were without question beyond the pale of “polite” society, most novels in the genre have more in common with the dominant ideological and cultural stance of the time than Reynolds implies. My focus differs from that of Michael Denning’s *Mechanic Accents* in several respects: it confines itself to antebellum urban literature; it is not solely concerned with representations of labor and manifestations of working-class culture; and it constructs the genre more broadly, offering a fuller and more accurate picture of who read city-mysteries novels and what messages they might have received.

While Wyn Kelley’s *Melville’s City* also is primarily focused on more canonical figures, her account of Lippard and other popular writers is deserving of mention. I agree with much of her analysis of the antebellum city as labyrinth, but hope to show that writers of city-mysteries did not register the degree of hopelessness in the face of urbanization that she indicates. With respect to Janis Stout’s *Sodom in Eden: The City in American Fiction Before 1860*, I share with her the project of “discovering how minor writers express widespread popular attitudes toward urbanization,” but we part company in her primary interest, which she shares with Reynolds, in more canonical figures; in her somewhat facile assumption that city-mysteries novels are representative of a monolithic strain of anti-urbanism in American culture; and, most of all, in her view that the

¹⁴⁴ See Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 200–210.

aesthetic deficiencies and commercial nature of city-mysteries fiction result in the “impossibility of taking these novels at all seriously.”¹⁴⁵ Perhaps the study with which this dissertation shares the most ground is Adrienne Siegel’s 1981 *The Image of the American City in Popular Literature, 1820–1870*, which was heavily influenced by the “myth and symbol” school of American Studies scholarship. While we share the assumption that antebellum Americans may not have been as anti-urban as scholars such as the Whites have led us to believe, I hope to expand on Siegel’s study in important ways, incorporating the methodologies of the history of the book in examining questions of authorship and audience, adding an emphasis on gender, and offering both a clearer delineation of the genre of city-mysteries fiction and examining a broader range of texts. While Siegel is more concerned than I am with the level of realism in novels about antebellum urban life, in large part we agree in important ways on the antebellum stance toward urbanization and the role popular fiction played in shaping it.

Beyond the realm of literary studies, the book that this dissertation addresses most directly is perhaps Thomas Bender’s *Toward an Urban Vision*. I hope in part to do for ordinary readers what he did for a more elite audience in that book: illuminate how the mass of antebellum Americans thought about the process of urbanization—what it was and what it meant to live in a city—and, whenever possible, to obtain a glimpse of what that life might have been like for the generation of Americans who experienced the greatest boom in urban growth in this country’s history. In some respects, then, it will be an *histoire de mentalités*, offering an intellectual history of ordinary people, but without

¹⁴⁵ Janis Stout, *Sodoms in Eden: The City in American Fiction Before 1860* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), ix, 42.

much of the theoretical baggage the term implies. In addition, the vision of urbanization articulated in popular urban fiction does not stress a fusion of the urban and the rural in the same way that the “urban vision” Bender outlines does; in many respects, my reading of city-mysteries fiction indicates that the urban and the rural were seen as being mutually exclusive. Mary Ryan’s *Civic Wars* also offers a picture of antebellum urban life, but her focus, as is that of so many scholars of the period, is more on politics than on culture. My reading of the popular fiction of urbanization departs from her analysis of the antebellum era as one of sanguine contentment with urban diversity and easily-grasped city forms.¹⁴⁶

The following two chapters will address this issue of antebellum “contentment” with urbanism. Chapter Two will examine the variety of opinion in antebellum America surrounding what the “urban” meant, and on whether large cities were a benefit or a detriment to the young Republic. Chapter Three will look at the view of urbanization as a phenomenon offered in popular urban novels themselves.

¹⁴⁶ See Ryan, Chapter 1.

Chapter Two

Ideas of the Urban in Antebellum America

*When the stranger says: "What is the meaning of this city?
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?"
What will you answer? "We all dwell together
To make money from each other?"*

—T. S. Eliot

One of the most enduring assumptions about early nineteenth-century American life and thought is that the era was characterized by a strong strain of anti-urbanism, despite the fact that the antebellum era saw a greater percentage the U.S. population move to cities than in any other period in American history. From Thomas Jefferson's famous prescription for the health of the body politic—"The mobs of great cities, add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body"—to Thoreau's decision to lead a life of contemplation by the shores of Walden Pond, our image has long been that *thoughtful* nineteenth-century Americans preferred the glories of New World nature, while the mendacious and superficial (think Boss Tweed and P. T. Barnum) chose life in the crowded, dirty, money-grubbing city.¹

But what did actual Americans, especially those who chose to move to cities in antebellum America, think of cities? More to the point, what did these people think

¹ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query 19, edited by William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, VA, 1954), 165. This association of anti-urbanism with intellectualism was clear in the antebellum period, and likely led to a good deal of emulation. As Frederick Law Olmsted noted, "Men of literary taste are always apt to overlook the working-classes, and to confine the records they make of their own times, in a great degree, to the habits and fortunes of their own associates, or to those of people of superior rank to themselves, of whose sayings and doings their vanity, as well as their curiosity, leads them most carefully to inform themselves." Quoted in Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 60.

words like “city” and “urban” meant? Had they fully internalized the warnings of various influential cultural commentators against the cheap and easy charms of city life that would lead them down the paths of intemperance, sexual license, dishonesty in business, and irreligion? Or were they more persuaded by the substantial body of pro-urban sentiment that a different group of social and cultural critics of the day were producing? Their books and sermons and lectures strove to convince people that, no matter how filthy their streets or boring their jobs or hardhearted their landlords, the cities where they had chosen to live were the crowning achievements of man and, therefore, of God. This chapter will attempt to answer some of these questions through an examination less of “elite” sources (although, unavoidably, these more familiar sources will play a role) than of more popular texts dealing with urbanization. In particular, I hope to use city-mysteries novels themselves, along with elements of the popular discourse of which they were a part, to uncover a more widespread understanding of what the “urban” meant, one that took into account both urban freedom and its inverse, urban isolation, and displayed an awareness of the perceived urban dangers that could so often also be experienced as urban delights.

The Negative Impact of Urbanization

The impact of the growing cities of antebellum America on those who experienced that growth most directly was a subject of popular, medical, political, and clerical concern from an early stage. This concern was bolstered by a highly environmentalist understanding of human nature—the assumption that people are

profoundly affected by their surroundings. As Asa Greene explained this environmental theory in a popular guide to New York, “The citizens live too close together, too crowded, to allow room for hospitality. The scattered condition of people living on farms and plantations renders them hospitable. Bring the southerner to New York—make him a citizen of this great metropolis—and he would no more entertain strangers than Mr. John Smith....”² The fear was not simply that behaviors would change, but that fundamental qualities of a person’s nature, such as hospitality, which has its basis in generosity and trust, could be altered by city life.

These changes, it was feared, would be wrought by the many dangers that cities posed; giving neighbors reasons to distrust each other, cities would drive them ever farther apart. The popular antebellum press fed on and inflated many qualities of city life that were in fact unpleasant in the extreme. Fires, riots, murders, prostitution, filthy streets, crushing poverty, epidemic disease—all were characteristics of antebellum cities that newspaper editors, ministers, lecturers, and other cultural entrepreneurs capitalized on, in the process leaving a body of work that has been understandably interpreted as “anti-urban.” And there can be little doubt that antebellum city life was no paradise. Streets were filled with a mixture of garbage, human and animal waste, dust, and the bodies of dead horses and dogs, creating a smell that we can only imagine and leading to frequent outbreaks of such diseases as typhus and cholera.³ Along with the difficulty of

² Asa Greene, *A Glance at New York: Embracing the City Government, Theatres, Hotels, Churches, Mobs, Monopolies, Learned Professions, Newspapers, Rogues, Dandies, Fires and Firemen, Water and Other Liquids, &c. &c* (New York: A. Greene, 1837), 25.

³ For the most thorough examination of the effort to manage these conditions of urban filth, see Martin V. Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure from Colonial Times to the Present* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 12. One particularly shocking statistic given by Melosi is that, in 1856,

procuring fresh and healthy food, these conditions made nineteenth-century cities unhealthy places to live—the *New York Mirror* noted in 1833 that, “a healthy man in New York would be a curiosity.”⁴

Along with unhealthy conditions, uncomfortable and unsafe elements of city life contributed to a negative view of urbanization. As cities grew larger, and especially as foreign immigration increased, urban poverty became a problem that was more and more difficult to ignore, forcing city dwellers to choose between rejecting the appeals of the needy and feeling as if they were encouraging pauperism. Poverty, and the attendant “wear and tear of conscience and heart strings,” was assumed to be a part of what city life meant, being “so evident to all who are familiar with city and country life” as to be hardly worth mentioning.⁵ If the discomfort produced by frequent encounters with the poor and sick was part of the urban experience, so was the threat of crime, which was thought to be encouraged both by the wealth on display in the city and by the anonymous nature of “a dense population [that] affords facilities for its commission.”⁶ Of particular concern were crime waves, or “epidemics,” that, like contagious diseases, were thought to afflict some cities more than others (New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco were especially prone to these epidemics, while Philadelphia was thought to be more prone to rioting).

New York City had only 10,000 water closets to serve a population of 630,000. As more people got water closets after the arrival of Croton water in the city, the increase in wastewater caused cesspools to flood, accentuating the problem they were intended to solve (91).

⁴ *New York Mirror*, April 6, 1833; quoted in Melvin L. Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820–70* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 270.

⁵ Joel Ross, M.D., *What I Saw in New-York; or, A Bird's Eye View of City Life* (Auburn, NY: Derby & Miller, 1852), 109–10.

⁶ “Cheap Literature: Its Character and Tendencies,” by a Southron, *Southern Literary Messenger* 10:1 (1844), 39.

Accentuating this fear of crime was a perception (not entirely unfounded) that the criminal justice system was, due to both corruption and structural flaws, incapable of administering justice.⁷ Dr. Joel Ross noted that there was not only more gambling in cities than in the country, but “more dissipation, more daring outrage, more crimes of almost every hue. ... Hence we keep our locks and keys, and bolts and bars, watching for thieves and robbers, day and night.” Ross articulated a perception that crime was a pervasive element of urban life, a view that novels of vast criminal conspiracies like those detailed in city-mysteries only served to feed, augmenting the doctor’s sense that, “with all these on the alert, and Policemen to whistle, and dogs to bark, and prisons to hold the rogues, nothing is safe.”⁸ Novels of urban crime would have served to simultaneously heighten these fears of crime and render the subject of urban crime as an object of fascination in its own right.⁹

The prevalence of urban crime was seen as being intrinsically tied to another characteristic of city life, its mobility and rootlessness, especially as embodied in

⁷ For more on the development of urban police forces in America, following the development of the Metropolitan Police in London, see: Roger Lane, *Violent Death in the City: Suicide, Accident, and Murder in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia*, 2nd ed. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999); Lane, *Policing the City: Boston, 1822–1885* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967) Lane, “Urbanization and Criminal Violence in the Nineteenth Century: Massachusetts as a Test Case,” *Journal of Social History* 2:2 (Winter 1968): 159–63; Eric Monkkonen, *Police in Urban America, 1860–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); David R. Johnson, *Policing the Urban Underground: The Impact of Crime on the Development of the American Police, 1800–1887* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979); Wilbur Miller, *Cops and Bobbies: Police Authority in New York and London, 1830–1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); James F. Richardson, *New York Police: Colonial Times to 1901* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970); and Richardson, *Urban Police in the United States* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1974).

⁸ Ross, *What I Saw in New-York*, 76–7.

⁹ As David Stewart has written, urban exposés “helped create city crime. ... [such books] not only reflected real dangers in urban life, they multiplied them, magnified them, and dwelt upon them in such detail as to generate fears that by the late 1840s reached levels of near hysteria—all to the delight of the reading public.” “Cultural Work, City Crime, Reading, Pleasure,” *American Literary History* 9:4 (Winter 1997), 683.

immigration.¹⁰ Aside from the Nativist ideas popular in the 1850s, which alleged that Rome was determined to subvert the American republic via imported Catholic institutions, the simple presence of immigrants—people who looked and sounded and acted different, and who had a different investment in the community than did long-time residents—served to make antebellum cities threatening environments for many Americans.

The sudden presence in New York of, as Catherine Maria Sedgwick put it, “swarms of Irish, and Irish priests and German radicals,” along with the vast numbers of native-born Americans moving into and out of the city, led to a perception of urban areas as “gigantic caravansaries, so fluctuating in their population and tendencies” that they were unpredictable and menacing.¹¹ The presence of large groups of people speaking a foreign language and living in the same neighborhood contributed to a larger sense of urban disorder, the idea that certain parts of the city were “forbidden” and unknowable.

If some “disorderly” parts of the city were a mystery to many citizens, other elements of urban disorder, particularly sexual disorder, were all too apparent. The openness with which prostitutes plied their trade on the streets of America’s cities and the prominence of advertisements for abortionists and birth-control doctors in the cheap urban press contributed to the sense of “an emerging urban world where sinners walked

¹⁰ The level of population turnover in antebellum cities is astonishing. *Adams’s New Directory of Boston* for 1858 noted that “the migratory tendency of a portion of our population and the never failing hand of death” were responsible for the removal of over 14,000 names from the previous year’s directory, “while a little more than 15,000 new ones have come to fill their places” (2).

¹¹ Letter from C. M. Sedgwick to Mrs. K. S. Minot, 11 January 1852, in *The Life and Letters of Catherine Maria Sedgwick*, edited by Mary E. Dewey (New York: Harper, 1871), 335; Amory Dwight Mayo, *Symbols of the Capital; or, Civilization in New York* (New York: Thatcher & Hutchinson, 1859), 13.

through the streets apparently unscathed by their sinfulness....”¹² The threat cities posed to the sexual virtue of young women, especially young women from the country, was highlighted by novels such as city-mysteries that so often were constructed around seduction plots; George Lippard would condemn the “peculiar sensualism which is engendered in midnight revels of the large City” while outlining that sensualism in minute detail.

Cities posed a threat to male morality as well, although men were often depicted as being responsible for the depraved sexual state of urban America. William English described a sort of farm-team structure, where libertines learned their craft in smaller manufacturing villages, until they were ready to prowl the streets of Boston or New York, while George Thompson portrayed a more sudden immersion into urban sexual vice, where an honorable young man from the country, after only a “few months in the wicked cities,” would become “the merriest libertine and the most ultra-‘fast one’ ever bred within the vicious atmosphere of the metropolis.”¹³ For those antebellum writers who wrote of the “wicked city,” the easy availability of sex was one of the primary negative connotations of urbanism.

Aside from these more obviously threatening (and more easily sensationalized) aspects of city life, other characteristics associated with urbanization were also singled out for criticism. The emphasis placed on fashion in cities, combined with the level of mobility that prevented deep local attachments from forming, resulted in what many

¹² Eric Humberger, *Scenes from the Life of a City: Corruption and Conscience in Old New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 103.

¹³ William B. English, *Rosina Meadows, the Village Maid: or, Temptations Unveiled. A story of city scenes and every day life.* (Boston: Redding & Co., 1843), 10; George Thompson, *Adventures of a Pickpocket; or, Life at a Fashionable Watering Place* (Boston: Berry & Co., 1849), 81.

critics felt was an insincere cast to much of urban life. A. J. H. Duganne, in *The Knights of the Seal*, attacked Boston for a lack of sincerity, claiming that the city had become devoted to “a false religion—a church of Fashion!”¹⁴ The ideal of rustic authenticity and the frank yeoman stood in stark contrast to “that heartless ceremonious intercourse, which characterizes the fashionable society of cities.”¹⁵ In addition, the love for display which “fashion” was thought to involve was made possible through another urban culture that fostered insincerity through the constant pursuit of the newest and best—economic competition.

The Competitive City

As Dana Brand has noted, much of the tradition of what is called anti-urbanism in America is actually the product of “intellectuals formulating their objections to a society built on commerce and industry.”¹⁶ As will be discussed below, cities were overwhelmingly associated with money; they were the best places to pursue wealth, as well as the primary sites of its accumulation and display. As a result, writers who were opposed to capitalism, or to the ways in which antebellum capitalists were making their money (especially those involving industrialization) included cities in their critiques, even though most true factory labor in antebellum America was not located in large cities, but in smaller towns like Lowell that were situated near rivers offering water power. Rather, it was commerce, or “trade,” which implied wealth divorced from

¹⁴ A. J. H. Duganne, *The Knights of the Seal, or the Mysteries of the Three Cities* (Philadelphia: G. B. Zieber and Co., 1848), 108.

¹⁵ Mrs. N. P. Lasselle, *Annie Grayson; or, Life in Washington* (New York: Bunce & Brother, 1853), 254.

¹⁶ Dana Brand, *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 65.

productive activity, that was especially associated with cities, particularly as embodied by banks and abstract economic instruments. As Cornelius Mathews indicated in an 1845 New York novel, this type of capitalist activity was perhaps more psychologically threatening than productive industry, even of the factory kind: “The Town is all one shop! ... Wild with trade; inflamed to scarlet, yellow, every direful hue, with feverous trade.”¹⁷ In a satirical poem entitled “The Golden Calf,” one antebellum author scoured history for an explanation for the fall of all previous empires: “’Tis love of gold, the parent vice of all/Those other vices which weak man enthrall...”¹⁸

The competition, selfishness, and materialism fostered by business life were crucial elements of some of the more powerful but less obvious elements of the anti-urban critique. Many writers stressed the difficulty of living a Christian life in a large city, since cities offered so many distractions that could compete with religious obligations such as church attendance. In *Reuben Kent’s First Winter in the City*, a Sunday-school book about the dangers of city life, the eponymous hero mentioned the obstacles to Christian conduct posed by the distractions of the city, noting that, “Bustle and activity, show and excitement occupy the mind, and leave it little time for self-inspection.”¹⁹ A preoccupation with “show” was not only a threat to good Christian morals, but also to the sense of urban community. As city dwellers became more mobile, they were brought into contact with a broader cross-section of the city, including the

¹⁷ Cornelius Mathews, *Big Abel and the Little Manhattan* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845), 76. While the pressures associated with commercial activity were frequently depicted as driving businessmen insane, factory labor was thought to lead to more frequent suicides. See “Editorial,” *Lowell Offering*, 2nd ser., 4 (1844), 214.

¹⁸ John Hunt Strother, *The Golden Calf; or, The Almighty Dollar* (New York: Geo. E. Leefe, 1854), 6.

¹⁹ Helen C. Knight, *Reuben Kent’s First Winter in the City* (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1845), 30.

wealthy, which gave rise to class envy or “imitation” which, one writer claimed, “especially in the city, is the source of more misery and wrong, than almost anything else that can be named.”²⁰

Along with moving every year and competing with one’s neighbors and emulating one’s betters, however, came one of the signal questions posed by the process of urbanization—that of how to live an ethical life when pushed together in close proximity to people one didn’t know and had no connection to, and, in fact, with whom one was likely in direct competition. As John Todd wrote, the “angel of woe” did not come to modern cities with fire and brimstone as he came to Sodom and Babylon, but “he now comes unseen, and cuts the cords which bind men to conscience...”²¹ The constant flux of urban life taught men that it made little difference whether they stayed in a city or not, and “this very slight hold upon men, which we obtain in the great city, is a constant source of anxiety and jealousy, lest we lose all the hold we have.”²²

The diminished power of conscience to tie men together in the urban environment raised crucial questions about one’s responsibility to one’s neighbors. Perhaps the most famous literary illustration of this dilemma is in Herman Melville’s story “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” in which the lawyer narrator, finally having been forced to move his office in order to escape the presence of his enigmatic copyist, is confronted by the new occupant of his old office, who tells him that “... you are responsible for the man you left there.” The lawyer, with “assumed tranquillity, but an inward tremor,” tells the new tenant that

²⁰ Edwin H. Chapin, *Moral Aspects of City Life: A Series of Lectures* (New York: Henry Lyon, 1854), 64.

²¹ John Todd, *The Moral Influence, Dangers and Duties, Connected with Great Cities* (Northampton, MA: J. H. Butler, 1841), 46.

²² Todd, *Moral Influence*, 80.

“the man you allude to is nothing to me—he is no relation or apprentice of mine, that you should hold me responsible for him.”²³ At length, the narrator’s conscience gets the better of him, and he attempts to help the mysterious scrivener after he has been taken to the Tombs, but his efforts are to no avail, and Bartleby starves.

With the rise in urban mobility and subsequent lack of local attachments came the loss of the sense of neighborliness that was idealized in the period as being characteristic of the New England village. Yet this ethical dilemma of how to treat one’s neighbors in a city where little sense of community existed was heightened by the great contrasts between rich and poor that existed in cities and by how much closer those neighbors could be in a city—often only inches away through flimsy tenement walls—than in more rural areas. Indeed, the 1865 report on the “Sanitary Condition of New York,” remarking on the “mixed” nature of many neighborhoods, observed that in many parts of the city “the child of wealthy parents may hear from his comfortable bed the cries of his unfortunate brother, in the dampness and darkness of the tenant-house,” highlighting both the epidemiological dangers and the ethical problems posed by the close juxtaposition of the rich and poor.²⁴ Edwin H. Chapin began one of his sermons on the “Moral Aspects of City Life” with a text from Luke 10:29: “... and who is my neighbor?” Chapin concluded that there was “no place where it has so much significance as in the great city,” for, were

²³ Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” in *The Complete Shorter Fiction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Everyman’s Library, 1997), 45.

²⁴ *Report of the Council of Hygiene and Public Health of the Citizens’ Association of New York upon the Sanitary Condition of the City* (New York: D. Appleton, 1865), 131.

the truth to be known, “the most apathetic would be startled to discover who, literally, their neighbors are....”²⁵

Overcoming this apathy was a primary concern of many who wrote about the problems of antebellum cities, yet many antebellum Americans assumed that part of what living in a city implied was a higher level of self-interest than existed in the country. As George Thompson wrote in his *Mysteries and Miseries of Philadelphia*, “All was cold selfishness. Each individual seemed wrapped up in contemplation of his own actual or possible wants. ... The struggle to live—the fight for existence amidst the dense throngs of such a city as this, had smothered all gentle sensibilities. To each, each seemed a foe, and even the common courtesies of life were submerged in the conflict to exist.”²⁶ This intense competition, heightened by the visibility of the extremes of success and failure on the streets of the city, was felt to be characteristic of city life. One unidentified young New York resident, evidently from a more rural area, wrote in his diary in December of 1843 that, “Thanksgiving in my mind is associated with the meeting of friends and receiving and extending congratulations ... but in this city it is not so it is here every one for himself number one is the main object.”²⁷ This sentiment was echoed in many city-mysteries novels, which depicted cities as places “where the business of each man is to save himself, amid the crushing competition of wealth and labor ... where each man’s hand is at his neighbor’s throat.”²⁸ Formulating a set of natural laws that applied to the

²⁵ Chapin, *Moral Aspects of City Life*, 143.

²⁶ George Thompson, *Mysteries and Miseries of Philadelphia*, By a Member of the Philadelphia Bar (New York: Williams & Co., 185?), 8.

²⁷ Diary of an unidentified young man, New York City, Jan. 1, 1843–Aug. 17, 1844; entry for Dec. 14, 1843. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

²⁸ *Caroline Tracy, the Spring Street Milliner’s Apprentice* (New York: Stearns & Co., 1849), 19.

urbanite, the author of an 1847 article on the “Physiognomy of Cities” described the contradictory nature of the city-dweller, who, “though gregarious considered at large, in the individual there is no thing more solitary and more disposed to prey on its own kind.”²⁹

This contradiction—that in cities one was surrounded by one’s fellows, yet urban life was solitary in the extreme—was presented in city-mysteries fiction as being another characteristic of city living. In *Easy Nat*, the narrator describes the negative effect on the character of Thomas Braxton caused by his move to the city and his residence in a boarding house with twenty to thirty other boys, “like himself, from the country, with no parents to look after them, and no ties to attract them to their new fireside”—their mutual companionship is seemingly not even an option.³⁰ This tendency of young people to move to the city alone, and to live in boarding-houses that offered none of the connections of home, combined with high levels of urban mobility to create a sense of isolation that many antebellum writers were beginning to see as part and parcel of what “urban” meant—a feeling that would later come to be called *anomie*.³¹ As Chapin noted, “So, among all the thousands in the great city, there is a very deep and solemn sense, in which every man is alone.”³² This observation echoed Horace Greeley’s question:

²⁹ G. W. P., “The Physiognomy of Cities,” *American Whig Review* 6 (Sept. 1847): 234.

³⁰ A. L. Stinson, *Easy Nat; or, The Three Apprentices. A Tale of Life in New York and Boston, but Adapted to Any Meridian* (New York: J. C. Derby, 1854), 25.

³¹ This term was first used in this context by Emile Durkheim in his 1897 work *Suicide* to describe a state of social instability and alienation brought about by a breakdown of standards and values.

³² Chapin, *Moral Aspects of City Life*, 188.

“Who, if he has any choice, prefers to grow old and die at No. 239, unknown to, and uncared for by, the denizens of Nos. 237 and 241?”³³

This sense of individual isolation was further reinforced by the increasing tendency toward economic segregation in America’s largest cities, which served to disconnect entire groups from the collective life of the city. While some of this was due to individual choice—German and Irish immigrants were drawn to neighborhoods where their language and religious practice were more welcome—some of it was imposed by the economic and physical structure of cities themselves. While this trend had long been evident—Edward Pessen notes that by the 1820s more than half of the richest New Yorkers lived on only 8 of the city’s 250 streets—the 1840s and 50s saw it accelerate. The notion of “two nations” existing in a given city was constantly put forth in city-mysteries novels, contributing to a view of America’s cities as fragmented, isolated places composed of multiple communities “understanding as little of one another, having as little intercourse, as if they lived in different lands.”³⁴ Following a common conceit borrowed from the press, Robert Greeley, in *Violet, the Child of the City* described the Five Points slum as “a city within itself; its inhabitants a community speaking the same language, but having very few traits of character in common with those around them. Nothing can be more complete than their isolation from the rest of society.”³⁵

³³ Greeley quoted in Edward Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840–1857* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 190. Walter Benjamin argued that urban numbering systems, like addresses, can be seen as ways to compensate for the fact that, when people disappear in cities, they leave no traces.

³⁴ William Ellery Channing, *The Obligation of a City to Care for and Watch Over the Moral Health of its Members* (Glasgow: James Hedderwick & Son, 1841), 4.

³⁵ Robert Greeley, *Violet, the Child of the City: A Story of New York Life* (New York: Bunce and Brother, 1854), 35. Michael Denning’s claim that city-mysteries “posited the city as an autonomous and self-

The Fragmentation of the Urban Body Politic

With the fragmentation of cities came a more visible manifestation of interest-group politics and culture, in contrast to the (largely imagined) era of commonweal that had previously existed, leading to concerns about the “excesses” of urban democracy. Abuse of the ballot box in antebellum urban politics comes as no surprise.³⁶ The particular manner, however, in which the perceived phenomenon of democracy gone awry was presented in city-mysteries fiction is an important element of their construction of the urban. The perceived withdrawal of traditional elites from the public life of American cities (especially New York) in the face of advances from machine politicians contributed to the sense that democratic institutions, instead of protecting city-dwellers

contained social whole” is half right, for this conceit was necessary in some respects to the effort to construct a comprehensive narrative of urban life. Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1987), 91. Richard Lehan notes, correctly, I think, that as capitalism becomes more entrenched and economic structures (e.g., corporations) get bigger, “urban activity becomes more abstract and ‘unreal’ as power operates from hidden sources. Such a city is at once a physical reality and a state of mind.” Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 287. It was not simply capitalism, however, but the physical changes it brought to cities—increased segregation between business and residential districts, more distinct separation of neighborhoods based on class and ethnicity, which in turn leads to the rise of commuting and its attendant technologies—along with reforms in municipal government during the antebellum years, that reinforced this sense of individual separation from power. As Lee Benson has shown, the political affiliations of voters in New York State between 1815–1844 were determined by a complex set of variables, of which class was not predominant. While his emphasis on the importance of religio-cultural factors in determining voting behavior is a valuable corrective to a more reductive, materialist view, I would argue that it was impossible in the antebellum period to separate religious, cultural, and (to a lesser extent) ethnic elements from the complex equation of “class.” Furthermore, Benson analyzes counties from all over New York State, which—then as now—differ dramatically from the political climate in New York City. Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

³⁶ The membership certificates for the 1856 San Francisco Committee of Vigilance, which was organized primarily to combat political corruption, features an image of a ballot box, with the goddess Justice fallen down before it with her scales thrown down, making clear the connections many made between threats to political and sexual purity in America’s cities

from despotism, might be imposing despotism on them.³⁷ It also underscores the extent to which, for many antebellum observers, conditions in America's cities, whether presented as being the result of excessive democracy or of an overwhelmingly powerful and selfish aristocracy, represented a betrayal of the promise of the American Revolution.

This tendency is especially clear in the case of novelists such as Lippard, who in his day was just as famous for his heroic legends of Revolutionary War figures as he was for his city-mysteries, and who viewed the city as the field of battle for those contending over America's republican legacy. Virtually all city-mysteries, in their discussions of how cities had changed over the years, compared contemporary urban conditions to those of an earlier "golden age" of simplicity and virtue, when merchants lived in modest houses near their stores instead of in uptown mansions, when artisans lived above their shops instead of in factory towns, and when cities were of a scale that enabled people to recognize and know each other.

³⁷ See Homberger, *Scenes from the Life of a City*, Ch. 3 for a fuller discussion of this phenomenon. Homberger notes that between 1825 and 1837, merchants and lawyers made up about 50 percent of the membership of the city council in New York; over the next twelve years, that proportion would be cut in half, as elites and other "respectable" men withdrew from willing contact with more rough-and-tumble politicians (152). James Vance has argued that this suspicion of urban democracy has deeper roots, going back to the immediate post-Revolutionary era, when Americans saw the Terror in France as an example of urban democracy run amok, having been hijacked by the "mob." (James E. Vance, Jr., "The Classical Revival and Urban-Rural Conflict in Nineteenth-Century North America," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 4:2 [Fall 1973]: 166.) This connection is borne out by the images on the front and back covers of one paperback city-mystery, E. E. Barclay's *St. George de Lisle: or, The Serpent's Sting: ... A True and Thrilling Narrative of Crime in High Life, in the City of New York* (Philadelphia: Barclay, 1857). The front cover features a section from a painting in Madame Tussaud's of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, including figures who appear to be Franklin, Jefferson, and Washington. The back cover features a "Frightful scene in the 'Chamber of Horrors,'" which depicts a man being held down on the floor with his head in a guillotine. The associations of the latter image with the excesses of the Terror would have been all too clear to antebellum readers.

In moral terms, the posited golden age of the American city is the Revolutionary era, as a Yankee farmer visiting New York muses in Osgood Bradbury's *The Modern Othello*:

The Vermonter sighed as he cast his memory back to the simple manners of George Washington; to his bravery, glory, and unsullied virtue; and to the purity and devotion of Martha Washington, who should be a pattern for succeeding generations of the daughters of America. The Vermonter sighed to think that vice and immorality reigned in seaboard cities to an alarming extent; that the women's heads were turned by a hundred isms they did not comprehend, and their hearts poisoned by impurities of thought and action, injurious and inimical to the best interests of the sex and the happiness of families. He walked along hoping that his country and people would get on the right track again.³⁸ (21-22)

The contrast of Revolutionary simplicity with urban ostentation was a common one; the author of *Life in Town* claimed that it "is worth the pension of a revolutionary soldier twice-told, to see a fashionable beauty, all neck and pocket handkerchief, trifling with her cake..." and George Lippard wrote that a proposition had been received to rent Independence Hall out to a confectioner, who was confident that he would find "ample custom" from the "hordes of ignorant foreigners who come to see the place under the delusion that Liberty was once proclaimed there."³⁹ These comparisons are used constantly, both in more conservative novels such as Bradbury's and in the radical democratic writings of George Lippard. The comparisons are often so direct as to elide completely the intervening period, implying that the change in the city was not so much a gradual process of evolution as it was an instantaneous alteration, a method that simultaneously exaggerates the strangeness of the antebellum city when compared to the colonial era while obscuring the causes for the change.

³⁸ Osgood Bradbury, *The Modern Othello; or, the Guilty Wife, a Thrilling Romance of New York Fashionable Life* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 1855), 21-22.

³⁹ *Life in Town, or The Boston Spy. Being a series of sketches illustrative of whims and women in the 'Athens of America,'* by an Athenian (Boston: Redding and Co., 1844), 19; Lippard, *Quaker City Weekly*, Jan. 27, 1849, 3.

On a deeper level, however, the city-mysteries genre as a whole can be seen as trying to explain contemporary urban conditions in the 1840s in the light of the promises contained in the republican rhetoric of the Founders. Almost every novel in the genre revolves around a plot of lost, stolen, or mistaken inheritance; the city literally swallows up the rightful heirs of land, wealth, and good names. Such narratives imply, and often explicitly state, that the changing conditions of urban life—including monopolistic business practices, industrialization, early machine politics, and partisan demagoguery—were separating Americans from their republican birthright.⁴⁰ In most cases, the rightful heirs are unaware of their entitlements, having been deliberately kept in ignorance of their rights by powerful individuals who derive the benefits of the stolen inheritances. In many texts, such as Lippard's New York novels and in Eliza Dupuy's *The Mysterious Marriage*, it is the Catholic church, especially Jesuit priests, that is attempting to claim control over the inheritance of the republic. The sense of the betrayal of the nation's republican promise is often explicit, as a young man in Cambridge laments in Emma Rosewood's *The Virtuous Wife, or the Libertine Detected* (1845):

'The sword that you see, was worn seven years by my father, in the service of his country, at the battle of Bunker Hill, and I myself used it in my early years, but being wounded at the battle of New Orleans, in 1812 [sic], I obtained my discharge. The papers contained in the sack, are all that remains of a decent patrimony, which has been unjustly taken from us by *wicked* and *powerful* men. I preserve these papers, madam, as a striking proof of the wickedness of mankind, and to remind me that I have nothing left but honest industry to support my family.'⁴¹

⁴⁰ For fuller discussions of ideas about inheritance in the period, see: Toby L. Ditz, *Property and Kinship: Inheritance in Early Connecticut, 1750–1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); and Stanley L. Katz, "Republicanism and the Law of Inheritance in the American Revolutionary Era," *Michigan Law Review* 76 (1977): 1–29.

⁴¹ Miss Emma Rosewood, *The Virtuous Wife, or the Libertine Detected. A Tale of Boston and Vicinity. Containing a Warning to Girls from the Country, and an Example for City Ladies. A Narrative of Facts*. (Boston: Dow and Jackson, 1845), 7.

In many city-mysteries set in New York, the legacy of the Battery as a Revolutionary fort involved in the defense of the city from the British is invoked to decry both plans for the park's commercialization or its popularity as a site for the sex trade. The linkage of the idea of political inheritance to the process of urbanization, which produced many of America's greatest fortunes through real estate speculation, was frequently suggested by popular and elite writers alike in their analyses of the meaning of the urban.⁴² James Fenimore Cooper, in *Home as Found*, has a land auctioneer discuss the history of a parcel of Manhattan land, from its beginning as the dairy farm of "old Volkert Van Brunt," whose family had occupied it for more than a century, to its escalation over the course of four sales in the previous two years from a value of \$5,000 to \$112,000, once it had been surveyed and split into lots.⁴³ In this description, the city itself was the inheritance of the Revolutionary era, but instead of remaining unified, the urban community—like urban real estate—was growing increasingly fragmented.

In place of several different literary and textual forms that reflected this splintering, the city-mysteries narrative is itself a polyvocal narrative of disunity, as the diversity of the changing urban scene continually intruded on the best efforts of novelists to produce orderly stories. In fact, these novels, both as narratives and as artifacts of print culture, reflect what I would call an "irrational public sphere," where the multiplication of voices in the novels, often through the use of dialect, mirrored the

⁴² Two families that are more commonly associated with other businesses—the Astors with the fur trade and the Lorillards with tobacco—gained their initial wealth through the sale of real estate in New York that appreciated as the city grew northward.

⁴³ James Fenimore Cooper, *Home as Found* (New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1849), 115. The invocation of the Dutch period in New York is a measure of the lasting influence of Washington Irving and his tales of New York's Knickerbockers.

increasing fragmentation and segregation of urban life. In contrast to Michael Warner's interpretation of sentimental fiction as instigating the shift in American fiction away from a culture of disclosure in the public sphere to a culture of the private emotional sphere of readers, city-mysteries and other sensational fiction can be seen as perpetuating the culture of disclosure, but towards the ends of the urban irrational. In *The Letters of the Republic*, Warner claims that the role of disclosure in Charles Brockden Brown's city novel *Arthur Mervyn* validates the public sphere by satisfying the republican imperative for knowledge, which can then be used in rational debate.⁴⁴ In the city-mysteries genre, however, disclosure, the "removing the veil" from urban life, reveals the fact that the "rational" public sphere no longer exists, since the knowledge that is being disclosed is already possessed by some ("wicked and powerful men"), and used by them to the detriment of others. If the creation of print culture led to a reconfiguration of political and public life in the West, then the proliferation of print cultures in the 1830s and 40s reflects the ways in which the twin forces of market capitalism and urbanization complicated the political and public world, if not undermining the notion that such a unified and rational world ever in fact existed. Print culture may once have been a mark of republican ideology, but the writers of city-mysteries novels employed republican rhetoric in their print sub-culture to reveal the ways in which republican ideology had been betrayed.

⁴⁴ Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); see ch. 6, esp. pp. 165–169.

The City and Nature

The process of urban growth was not only seen as betraying the legacy of the Founders, but also as destroying the natural legacy bequeathed to America by God. “God made the country, man made the town,” was a commonplace in the antebellum era, yet the proliferation of towns and cities could not be ignored, and represented for some a physical blot on God’s nature. Between 1830 and 1860, the number of “cities” in America as defined by the census—settlements of over 2500 people—went from 90 to 362, and these cities were growing physically larger, encroaching further into the countryside. Unlike European cities, American cities were characterized by simultaneous rapid growth both in the core and the suburbs, so their impact on the landscape expanded dramatically.⁴⁵ It was not only the process of urban growth but the speed with which it took place that was so disorienting. As a resident of San Francisco remarked of his city in 1849, “It’s an odd place, unlike any other in creation, and so it should be; for it is not created in the ordinary way, but hatched like chickens from artificial heat.”⁴⁶ Straddling the period when American cities were growing so explosively, the genre of city-mysteries fiction reflects the tension created by an awareness of the emergence of new modes of urban interaction conditioned by the increasing size of cities existing side by side with a nostalgia for the more manageable scale of the “walking city.” Despite this physical growth, however, cities, much like the telegraph and the railroad, “annihilated time and

⁴⁵ During the 1840s, New York’s core grew at a rate of roughly 65 percent, but suburban growth exceeded 130 percent; the comparable rates in Boston were 61 percent and nearly 85 percent, and in Philadelphia roughly 30 percent versus 75 percent. Despite this physical expansion, antebellum cities remained quite dense at their core, as almost no buildings were taller than five floors. Melosi, *The Sanitary City*, 58–9.

⁴⁶ San Francisco’s population went from 1,000 to 50,000 in eight years, an increase in growth that had taken Philadelphia 120 years to accomplish, New York 190, and Boston 200. Quoted in Roger Lotchin, *San Francisco, 1846–1856: From Hamlet to City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), vii.

distance,” as the stock phrase of the period had it, bringing more and more people into closer and closer proximity, and the same challenges presented by these new technologies were also posed by the new “technology” of the city.

As Thomas Bender has argued, in the antebellum period “cityscape and landscape were treated as counterpoints.”⁴⁷ Instead of offering an “urban vision” that incorporated values of both country and city, however, most city-mysteries novels highlighted the opposition of the urban and the natural. Instead of the garden suburbs that combined the charms of rural life with the benefits of proximity to the city that were discussed by reformers such as Andrew Jackson Downing and Frederick Law Olmsted, the suburbs in city-mysteries novels are most often the forward positions of urban depravity, the site for assignation houses that are perfect locations for seduction or rape because of their seclusion. In George Foster’s *Celio*, the villain chooses as the site for an attempted rape a suburban cottage “surrounded by open lots ... and the other offal with which a large city surrounds itself as with a rampart, thrown up out of its own grave.”⁴⁸ This role of the suburbs as an even more convenient location for urban crime rather than as a “middle ground” between civilization and nature held whether the city in question was a metropolis like New York or Boston, or a smaller city, such as Lowell or Manchester, underscoring the physical expansion of the city (and its questionable morality) into the countryside. Nathaniel Hawthorne, in a notebook where he recorded ideas for stories, jotted a note in the 1850s for “A sketch—the devouring of the old country residences by the overgrown monster of a city,” fusing the visions of the city as encroaching on nature

⁴⁷ Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision*, 74.

⁴⁸ George Foster, *Celio* (New York: Dewitt & Davenport, 1850), 115.

and as destroying the legacy of the colonial and Revolutionary eras, as “Mr. Beekman’s ancestral residence” has been destroyed and “a street runs directly through what was once its hall.”⁴⁹

The “Mystery” of Urban Growth in an “Anti-Urban” Nation

Given the range of this anti-urban sentiment—the city as the source of disease, of isolation and alienation, of the destruction of the Revolutionary legacy, and of nature itself—from both elite and popular sources such as city-mysteries novels, why didn’t more people leave? Why were people flocking to cities in antebellum America, and why didn’t authors, both popular and elite, “go West,” as Horace Greeley commanded the young men of the city to do from the comfort of his office at the *New York Tribune*?⁵⁰ Rejecting Greeley’s advice, people moved to cities in droves; in 1840, the urban population of the United States had increased by 63.7 percent over that in 1830; in the 1850 census, the decennial increase was 92.1 percent; and in 1860, it was 75.4 percent. As George Lippard’s biographer wrote of Lippard’s relationship to Philadelphia in the wake of the death of his wife and children, “The very sight of the city sickened him, and still for him it had a strange fascination. He used often to speak of leaving it, and yet was loth to take the step.”⁵¹ In the face of so much anti-urbanism, why didn’t Lippard move away, and why did so many others come to join him? The answer lies at least in part in what Amory Dwight Mayo called “the rage of the people of New York for city life,”

⁴⁹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The American Notebooks*, edited by Claude M. Simpson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1972), 239.

⁵⁰ Greeley himself eventually went slightly North, retiring to Westchester.

⁵¹ John Bell Bouton, *The Life and Choice Writings of George Lippard* (New York: H. H. Randall, 1855), 92.

saying that “country girls push for the city as by a natural instinct....” Mayo observed that only half of the land in New York state was cultivated, yet one-third of the state’s population lived in cities, “exposed to the influences of American city life,” well aware of the risks.⁵²

How does this fit with the longstanding legacy of anti-urbanism in American history, which is often really a debate about whether or not urban life at a certain time was good or bad? What Mayo realized was that many antebellum Americans were in important ways substantially pro-urban. This does not mean that they thought that the disease and the filth and the crime and the poverty of America’s cities were good things, but that people knew about these things and wanted what urban life had to offer anyway. Both popular and elite sources had made them aware of the perils of the city, yet they still found something desirable. However enthusiastically writers held up the country as the standard of virtue against which urban vice was measured, those writers themselves remained fascinated by the city, and most of them would not have been able to live anywhere else, even those who had originally come from smaller towns. Contrary to the view of city-mysteries novels as resolutely anti-urban, presenting “the provincial in the labyrinth, the reader of the novel,” with only one choice—“to avoid the plague spots of the city, to refuse to enter the labyrinth at all”—city-mysteries novels did even more to lure people to cities than they did to warn them away.⁵³ The presumption of many

⁵² Mayo, *Symbols of the Capital*, 45.

⁵³ Wyn Kelley, *Melville’s City: Literary and Urban Form in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 113. This was equally true of later popular texts that have been interpreted as anti-urban, such as the Horatio Alger novels, which, despite their depictions of urban success, also showed grinding urban poverty and frequently had their heroes move to the country once they had made their fortunes. In 1928, the manager of the Newsboys’ Lodging House in New York admitted that

historians, especially historians of labor, has been that people were primarily *driven* to the city by negative reasons, namely rural poverty, rarely entertaining the notion that they might have been *drawn* to the city by positive motivations—the desire for fun, diversion, and sex—much less that some of these attractive elements might have been outlined in novels that purported to show the “mysteries and miseries” of city life.

Despite the romanticizing of the New England countryside that filled so many journals of the day, publications such as the Lowell *Offering* were full of explanations of the positive aspects of city life that drew young women from the countryside to Lowell. George William Curtis, in an 1855 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*, pointed out that most of the “agreeable picture[s] of rural life” in print had been

written by men who have chosen the city, and have not the slightest intention of taking their own advice. And naturally enough. For the countryman who comes to the city ... is not a man to whom the village church, and sequestered school-house, and purple hills have ever been romantic or agreeable. The brindle cow always kicked over his pail.... In the church he heard long and dry sermons.... the fields were the arena of his daily toil.... A few uncertain weeks’ schooling at a miserable school in winter, do not satisfy his thirst for knowledge, if he has any; and the rough, coarse life of the farmer’s home, although he does have as much fried pork as he wants, is neither amusing nor satisfactory....⁵⁴

Curtis grasped what many city-mysteries authors understood, that the things that made cities frightening also made them attractive; as one novelist put it, “Everybody likes to be in a crowd; perceives [its] electric influence, ... thinks better and brighter and faster, talks quicker and shrewder, feels more acutely, enjoys more keenly.”⁵⁵ In addition,

“more boys were running away from home to try their luck in New York because of Alger’s stories than for any other reason” (Eugene Arden, “The Evil City in American Fiction,” *New York History* 35 (1954), 264.

⁵⁴ George William Curtis, “Editor’s Easy Chair,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 11 (July 1855): 271–72.

⁵⁵ Adam Badeau, *The Vagabond* (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1859), 31–32.

Curtis expressed what the authors of sensational urban fiction were already practicing, that, if a young man had “talent and ambition, he will surely burst away from the relentless tedium of potatoes and corn, and earn more money in an hour by writing a paragraph exhorting people to go and hoe corn and potatoes, than he would by hoeing them for a day.”⁵⁶ Even Horace Greeley, who most famously encouraged people to leave the city, chose to stay, and he seems to have been held in New York by something more than the emoluments of authorship. In the early 1840s, Greeley rented an old farmhouse on a site overlooking the East River at Turtle Bay on 49th Street. Annoyed by the difficulties of commuting to his office downtown, Greeley betrayed something of the fascination that the crowded metropolis held for him when he complained that he found the silence at his rural retreat “so sepulchral, unearthly, that I found difficulty in sleeping.”⁵⁷

City on a Hill

However anti-urban some members of the antebellum cultural elite may have been, clinging to their myth of America as a Jeffersonian rural paradise and seeing large cities as a recent blemish on America’s agrarian face, others saw the young nation as having its roots in urbanism.⁵⁸ In fact, some writers of the period argued not only that America had always been an urban nation, but that Christianity and democracy—the two

⁵⁶ Curtis, “Editor’s Easy Chair,” 272.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Homberger, *Scenes from the Life of a City*, 214.

⁵⁸ The best-known historical treatment of this view of America as having been an urban nation from the beginning is Carl Bridenbaugh’s *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625–1742* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971 [1938]).

pillars of antebellum American identity—were themselves the products of urban environments.⁵⁹

Many antebellum writers admitted in particular the urban origins of the colony that would become New York, giving that colony's roots in "commerce" as an explanation for its contemporary "go-ahead" character. Roger Lotchin has correctly noted that the burst of urban growth in nineteenth-century America, which is often interpreted as a "response to industrialism," is unsatisfactory, given that America's cities were in place long before industrial manufacturing took hold, and that both can be seen as responses to developments in commerce.⁶⁰ It is more accurate to say that the American countryside grew up around and in response to the commerce centered in port cities, that "the frontier was urban at the beginning ... the wilderness was hacked into forts and towns and cities before it was transformed into a network of family farms."⁶¹ Whatever their view of America's origins, however, in response to the growing economic and

⁵⁹ Henry P. Tappan, the future president of the University of Michigan, argued in a lecture on "The Growth of Cities," that, "The first churches were established in cities, and when it became the prevailing religion, it was in cities that it received its fullest development...." W. A. Scott traced the development of democracy and self-government back to the granting of city charters in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which he saw as having broken down the feudal system. Tappan, *The Growth of Cities: A Discourse* (New York: R. Craighead, 1855), 25; W. A. Scott, *Trade and Letters: Their Journeyings Round the World* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1856), 30. James Vance has pointed out that, since the Dissenters in England were primarily urban, the earliest white settlers of America were city people, "bringing to the wilderness an understanding of the role of cities in economic development." See Vance, "The Classical Revival and Urban-Rural Conflict," 162; and Vance, *The Merchant's World: The Geography of Wholesaling* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

⁶⁰ Lotchin, *San Francisco, 1846–1856*, 67.

⁶¹ Robert M. Senkewicz, *Vigilantes in Gold Rush San Francisco* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 11. This view stands in sharp contrast to the "central place" theory articulated by the urban historian Walter Christaller, which holds that cities grow out of the countryside.

cultural power exerted by cities in American life many antebellum writers saw urban growth as inevitable, governed by laws of nature.⁶²

The natural laws that were presumed to govern the growth of cities were in line with biological theories of progressivism that held sway during much of the nineteenth century. John Todd wrote that a large city *must* have a great deal of wealth, and that “It must also be accumulating, and the business and population must continue to increase, for the moment the waters begin to slacken, the tide begins to ebb, and the prosperity of that city is usually on the wane.”⁶³ Cities like San Francisco that emerged from the continent seemingly fully-formed violated these natural laws of urban growth, prompting frequent attributions of San Francisco’s emergence to either “hothouse” conditions or simply “magic.”

The vision of a city as a natural system, often modeled on the human body, was a dominant paradigm of urban reformers, but the metaphor was applied more broadly in antebellum thinking about cities. Osgood Bradbury in *The Gambler’s League* employed a digestive simile when he wrote of Third Avenue as “that great throat of the city which swallows up weekly so many beeves, sheep, swine, and vegetables, which entering the bowels of the metropolis through this gullet, pass no more out forever!” As a corrective to this image of urban constipation, Bishop, the wise thief in *The Matricide’s Daughter*,

⁶² The irresistible tendency of urbanization in the period, along with the city’s growing cultural power, is captured in Michel de Certeau’s description of the modern city as “a circumscribed space in which the will to collect and store up an external population and the will to make the countryside conform to urban models are realized.” (Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985], 135.)

⁶³ Todd, *Moral Influence ... Connected with Great Cities*, 28.

justified the existence of slums in cities as being “the sewer through which the mass of humanity about us are cleansed.”⁶⁴

Along with biological metaphors for the city, however, emerged views that altered the interpretation of the city and nature as antagonistic counterpoints. Emerson argued that cities ought to be considered, in fact, as part of nature: “If we consider how much we are nature’s, we need not be superstitious about towns, as if that terrific or benefic force did not find us there also, and fashion cities. Nature, who made the mason, made the house.”⁶⁵ This view of the city as “natural” complicated the questions posed by such urban problems as poverty and riots, for if cities were part of nature, instead of human artifacts, then were these urban phenomena that gave some thinkers pause also natural? Ideologies of progressive natural law seemed to suggest that not only were such phenomena natural, they were ultimately beneficial. As W. A. Scott argued, “The restlessness of our times, and the fierceness of party strife ... is evidence of healthful activity. Where there is no life, there will be no movement. The strugglings and overactings of some portions of modern society, is evidence of the depth of its breathings. ... Where there is great vigor, there will be action, and thinking, and diversity of

⁶⁴ Osgood Bradbury, *The Gambler’s League; or, The Trials of a Country Maid* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 1857), 52; Newton Mallory Curtis, *The Matricide’s Daughter: A Tale of Life in the Great Metropolis* (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1850), 72–3.

⁶⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *Essays*, vol. 3 in *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1883), 175. For more on Emerson’s often contradictory attitudes toward urbanism, see Michael H. Cowan, *City of the West: Emerson, America, and Urban Metaphor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

opinion....”⁶⁶ By this view, cities lived by the same laws as Emerson’s nature, where the “direction is forever onward.”⁶⁷

If sexual license, capitalist rapacity, and degraded poverty were not “urban” phenomena, then what were they? Many popular antebellum writers indicated that such conditions may well have existed in cities, but that they existed everywhere else too, so it was unjust to blame cities for their existence. E. Porter Belden, the builder and exhibitor of a popular scale model of New York City, told his customers that the “only safeguard in a populous city is a moral principle too elevated to be swayed by ridicule, and too deeply seated to allow the first dereliction,” implying that, whatever evils they encountered in the city, it was up to individuals and their often flimsy moral principles (more often than not learned in a country village) to resist.⁶⁸ From this, it was a short step to saying that the problems of America’s cities had all been brought there from someplace else—whether from the American countryside or from Ireland and Germany—and were not inherent to the cities themselves. Caleb Atwater, in *The Mysteries of Washington City*, admitted that it was the desire for unearned government largesse, and not the city of Washington, that produced most of the “dissipation and vice” to be found there: “Move the capitol where we will, the turkey-buzzards ... will follow it, and build their nests under the eaves of the treasury building.”⁶⁹ What many scholars have interpreted as anti-urbanism on the part of antebellum writers was in fact an opposition to something else entirely, most often capitalism or, more broadly, the transformation of society and culture

⁶⁶ W. A. Scott, *Trade and Letters*, 22.

⁶⁷ Emerson, “Nature,” 174.

⁶⁸ E. Porter Belden, *New York: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Prall, Lewis and Co., 1851), 101.

⁶⁹ Caleb Atwater, *Mysteries of Washington City, During Several Months of the Session of the 28th Congress*, by a Citizen of Ohio (Washington, DC: D. A. Sage, 1844), 118.

implied under the rubric of the “market revolution.”⁷⁰ But capitalism was by no means the only explanation for urban problems; Amory Dwight Mayo attributed them to the “dietetic abuse” practiced by rural residents who moved to cities, while W. A. Scott chalked them up to simple “human depravity.”⁷¹

The Anti-Rural Tradition

In fact, many writers pointed out that the same things critics of urban life decried as the dangers of the city were also the dangers of the country. In many city-mysteries narratives, young women move to the city and fall into prostitution only after first having been ruined in their country villages. Mike Walsh, the radical Democratic politician, wrote a story for his newspaper, the *Subterranean*, in which Mary, a beautiful trusting girl from a small Hudson Valley village, winds up as a New York streetwalker because she was seduced by an exhorter at a Methodist camp meeting, and Ellen, a character in George Lippard’s *Mysteries of the Pulpit* is described as having been seduced by a minister in “the quiet village of Prairie Home, out yonder in the west.”⁷² Most of these young women are depicted as having to flee the oppressive atmosphere of their small towns, where everyone knows of their sexual transgression and shuns them. In the many

⁷⁰ See Leo Marx, “The Puzzle of Anti-Urbanism in Classic American Literature,” in *Literature and the Urban Experience*, edited by Michael Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1981), 63–80; Gregory L. Crider, “William Dean Howells and the Antiurban Tradition: A Reconsideration,” *American Studies* 19:1 (Spring 1978), 55–64; Frank Freidel, “Boosters, Intellectuals, and the American City,” in *The Historian and the City*, edited by Oscar Handlin and John Burchard (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1963), 115–120; Charles N. Glaab, “The Historian and the American Urban Tradition,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 47 (Autumn 1963), 12–25.

⁷¹ Mayo, *Symbols of the Capital*, 32; Scott, *Trade and Letters*, 112.

⁷² Michael Walsh, “The Victim of Hypocrisy,” in *Sketches of the Speeches and Writings of Michael Walsh* (New York: Thomas McSpedon, 1843), 66–7; George Lippard, *Mysteries of the Pulpit: A Revelation of the Church and the Home* (Philadelphia: E. E. Barclay, 1851), 89.

city-mysteries set in small towns that appeared during the genre's heyday, "urban" problems are seen as afflicting even the smallest villages. In *The Mountain Village; or Mysteries of the Coal Region*, set in a small Pennsylvania mining town, "Ralph Rural" describes not only filthy alleys and streets that would rival New York, but even its own secret criminal conspiracy, called the "Black Spots."⁷³

Both elite and popular writers made clear that the same fundamental forces behind the woes of the city were at work in the country as well. Amory Dwight Mayo told his readers that, "Selfishness as withering, meanness and craft as belittling, sensuality as brutalizing as any that dwells in city courts, often curses the farmer's house," and traced all corruption in the nation's economic system to the dishonesty of farmers in paying their laborers and evaluating their crops.⁷⁴ Avarice, love of display, and especially sexual license are often presented as being products of the soil instead of the pavement. In *Emily, The Beautiful Seamstress*, Osgood Bradbury noted that most of the "patronage" of New York's brothels and theaters "comes from the country."⁷⁵ But rubes did not have to come to the city for their sexual adventures, at least according to many popular writers. Solon Robinson warned the readers of *Hot Corn* that, "Sly walks in town are bad—in the country, dangerous," a fact that is highlighted graphically by George Brigham, a

⁷³ Ralph Rural, *The Mountain Village; or Mysteries of the Coal Region. A Romance Founded on Fact, Illustrating Life, Mystery and Crime, in the Coal Region* (Pottsville, PA: G. L. Vliet, Printer, 1849), 23, 6.

⁷⁴ Mayo, *Symbols of the Capital*, 19, 88. This critique of urban dishonesty was also presented in the Lowell *Offering*, where "Susan" wrote that she found that "Country people are very suspicious. ... A poet will look at a wood-cutter, and say 'there is an honest man'; and as likely as not the middle of his load is rotten punk ... while all looks well without. A rustic butcher slays an animal that is dying of disease, and carries his meat to the market. The butcher and the woodman meet, and say all manner of harsh things against the 'grandeeds' of the city...." This view of country life, from someone who had left the country for life in a thriving city, is indicative of a view shared but rarely voiced so explicitly by a wide range of authors. "Letters from Susan," Lowell *Offering*, 2nd Ser., 4 (August 1844): 240.

⁷⁵ Osgood Bradbury, *Emily, the Beautiful Seamstress; or, The Danger of the First Step. A Story of Life in New York* (New York: Samuel French, 1853), 58.

character in *Ellen Merton, the Belle of Lowell*. Brigham tells a friend of having gone walking in the woods, where he saw a couple walking along a sylvan stream who then had sex on the bank. Immediately thereafter, George met a young woman walking along the path, allegedly looking for her handkerchief, and to thank George for his assistance in finding it she cheerfully succumbed to his advances. George brags that he was a “frequent participator” in such “little rural rambles” until the city of Lowell began enforcing sexual order in the countryside by appointing officers to patrol the woods.⁷⁶ As one of the most virulent attacks against city-mysteries fiction admitted, vice, “though it congregates mostly in the cities, comes from the country,—where the causes of demoralization ... work powerfully, though insidiously.”⁷⁷

In many novels, the seclusion of the country is presented as offering encouragement to crime, from the forgers in *The Mysteries of Manchester* who built their mint at the foot of Amoskeag Falls so that the water would drown out the noise of their press, to the seducer in Osgood Bradbury’s *The Mutineer*, who told Nancy, his prey, that “the loneliness of this place is my best security against danger....”⁷⁸ The pastoral calm that was idealized in the poetry and painting of the Romantic movement becomes both a sexual and financial menace.⁷⁹ In Bradbury’s *The Mysterious Foundling*, a 14-year-old

⁷⁶ Solon Robinson, *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York Illustrated* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1854), 163; *The Belle of Lowell: or, the Confessions of the “G.F.K.” Club* (Boston: Brainard & Co., 1844), 17.

⁷⁷ “Satanic Literature,” *National Magazine* 2:1 (January 1853): 26.

⁷⁸ Chandler Eastman Potter, *Mysteries of Manchester* (Manchester, NH: J. P. Emery, 1844), 12; Osgood Bradbury, *The Mutineer; or, Heaven’s Vengeance* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 1857), 17.

⁷⁹ So was the isolation of Southern agrarianism. For two valuable rebuttals to Eugene Genovese’s claim that the antebellum South was unremittingly hostile to urbanization, see: W. K. Wood, “A Note on Pro-Urbanism and Urbanization in the Antebellum South: Augusta, Georgia, 1820-1860,” *Richmond County History* 6:1 (1974), 23-31; and Lyle W. Dorsett and Arthur H. Shaffer, “Was the Antebellum South Antiurban? A Suggestion,” *Journal of Southern History* 38:1 (Feb. 1972), 93-100.

girl in a Vermont village is bombarded with stories of how “Boston is a terrible place, and full of both old and young deceivers,” all while an older gentleman is attempting to seduce her during innocent trips to the local fishing hole. He proposes marriage, then takes her to Boston and places her in a brothel, where she is able to preserve her sexual purity for several months. It is only upon returning to a rural setting that he is able to complete his seduction, prompting Alice to lament, “O, my God! what a journey to the country that proved to me! ... Let those scenes about that country village be forever shrouded in darkness and gloom!”⁸⁰ The frequency with which super-villains in the novels resorted to the country in order to perpetrate their crimes seems to indicate that simple criminal opportunists, who work quietly, can commit their crimes in the city, but *real* criminals, men who are dyed to the core with evil, require rural solitude to give full vent to their impulses.

This points toward an even more pronounced tendency in city-mysteries fiction, to not simply defend the city against the charge of being a source of evil, but to attack rural life itself. As the narrator of the humorous middle-class city-mystery *Doesticks: What He Says* described his decision to leave his small town in Michigan for Gotham, he “wearied of the eternal sameness of a country village ... and bade a long farewell to the aspiring village (which had long since assumed the name of city, but had never grown large enough to fit the appellation, and for this reason always reminded me of a boy with

⁸⁰ Osgood Bradbury, *The Mysterious Foundling; or, The Gamester's Fate* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 1857), 89. In this novel, in addition to an extended set-piece of sexual double entendres about fishing, Bradbury essentially offers step-by-step instructions on how to seduce a girl in a country village.

his father's boots on,) where I had vegetated for several years...."⁸¹ The comparison between rural boredom and urban excitement, small-town ignorance and city sophistication, was a common one for antebellum authors, from the Lowell *Offering* to Emerson.⁸² This view of the countryside as the site of stagnation, when seen in the light of theories of biological progressivism, renders the country, not the city, as the locus of corruption and death. The constant description of cities and towns in popular antebellum fiction as "flourishing," "bustling," and "thriving" indicates the difficulty of holding truly anti-urban ideas in a "progressive" age. The imagery of physical decay that has often been associated with cities in the period was applied by some urban authors to the countryside. Emma Wellmont observed that, after a year in the country, "a kind of decay will come over your outward appearance," but W. A. Scott was more explicit, inverting Jefferson's metaphor to describe the "perverseness" of mind that he found in rural populations that did not have the benefit of vigorous stimulation as "the excrescences that grow upon a body naturally cold and dark...."⁸³

⁸¹ [Mortimer Thompson], *Doesticks: What He Says*, by Q. K. Philander Doesticks P. B. (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1859), 34–5.

⁸² Emerson wrote that, "The City delights the understanding ... it is full of varieties, of successions, of contrivances" while the "Country, on the contrary, offers ... the monotony of an of an endless road ... the melancholy of uniform and infinite vegetation; the objects on the road are few and worthless...." Quoted in Cowan, *City of the West*, 186.

⁸³ Emma Wellmont, *Substance and Shadows; or, Phases of Every-day Life* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1854), 81. W. A. Scott, *Trade and Letters*, 33. Scott, whose essays were originally given as lectures in San Francisco in 1854, was stunningly harsh in his rebuke to Jefferson's view of urbanization, referring to the view "that would remove [cities] from the body politic as 'unsightly wens'" as belonging to "the little, one-sided, one-eyed, narrow, contracted, mean, and pusillanimous spirit of the semi-barbarous ages..." (25). The rise of the Cult of Jefferson perhaps makes it difficult for modern scholars to comprehend the substantially lower level of adoration with which Jefferson was regarded in antebellum America. The recent "news" that Jefferson had fathered children with one of his slaves would have come as no surprise to George Lippard, who incorporated the daughter and son of that very union into his New York novels, much less to William Wells Brown, whose 1853 novel *Clotel* assumed as its premise that most readers knew the story of Jefferson and Sally Hemings.

These descriptions of the physical decay resulting from country life were accompanied by frequent allusions to the mental stagnation that resulted from living away from cities. Harriet Dannel, the wife of a Forty-niner, having been forced to move from Manhattan to a farm near Athens, NY, in order to save money, wrote in her diary that “the country looks very dull and dreary to me who is accustomed to City life,” echoing claims that a quiet life in the country “often stupefies rather than deepens the character.”⁸⁴ The frequent mention of the stagnation and boredom of rural life—its “dull, lifeless silence”—indicates why, however unpleasant city life may have been, so many antebellum Americans were making the choice to live in cities.⁸⁵ “Doesticks” described his friend Damphool, who chose to leave New York for their rural Michigan home, as “entombed, but ... still alive,” having exiled himself to “a stagnant village in the Western wilderness ... a very baby of a city ... without energy to cry when it is hurt, or go-aheadism sufficient to keep its nose clean. ... A distant and remote extreme of the hurrying world, which is so separated from the ‘heart of business’ that no single drop of its vital life ever reaches this defunct and amputated member.”⁸⁶ Such imagery of rural infantilism and feeble-mindedness stand in stark contrast to the widespread view of antebellum thought as holding the countryside to be the moral and economic engine of the nation. Indeed, George Curtis in *Harper’s* claimed that the statistics of insane asylums showed that a disproportionate number of the insane came from the country,

⁸⁴ Quoted in Brian Roberts, *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle Class Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 169; Mayo, *Symbols of the Capital*, 18.

⁸⁵ See Amireh, *The Factory Girl and the Seamstress*, for a thorough discussion of the theme of city polish vs. rural stagnation as presented in the pages of the Lowell *Offering*.

⁸⁶ *Doesticks: What He Says*, 293–94, 296.

driven mad by “the silence, the seclusion, the drudging toil, the long monotony of the year, the mental idleness....”⁸⁷

The City Inevitable

Just as the progress of history was assumed by many in the antebellum era to be inevitable, so was the process of urbanization, and associations of the rural with backwardness only fed this view. The anonymous author of an 1865 essay on “The Growth of New York” noted that “the concentration of population in great cities, during the present century, is so clearly shown in the census returns, appears to be so constant and to be due to such general and permanent causes, that it may be regarded as a fixed tendency and law of growth.”⁸⁸ Whether urban growth was seen in Darwinian terms as the city “eating” the country or in more positive terms as part of the march of progress, most antebellum thinkers seemed to agree that “populous cities ... are the result to which all countries, that are at once fertile, free and intelligent, inevitably tend,” and admitted that the “intellectual growth” of cities, along with their material growth, seemed “to be determined by a law of political economy....”⁸⁹ In contrast to arguments put forth by modern scholars that the city “served to disguise” the transformation being wrought on American society by the market revolution by giving it “an apparent physical implacability and inevitability which placed it beyond criticism and control,” many

⁸⁷ Curtis, “Editor’s Easy Chair,” 272. Emerson, in his essay “Farming,” described the farm itself as an “asylum” designed to shelter the “slow, narrow man” unable to cope with the pace of urban life. Quoted in Cowan, *City of the West*, 221.

⁸⁸ *The Growth of New York* (New York: George Wood, 1865), 5.

⁸⁹ George Tucker, professor of moral philosophy at the University of Virginia, 1843; quoted in Andrew Lees, *Cities Perceived: Urban Society in European and American Thought, 1820–1940* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 91; Tappan, *The Growth of Cities*, 17.

nineteenth-century writers both understood the role played by capitalism in urban growth and embraced it:

The tendencies of trade and industry are all in that direction... The common schools, the periodical literature, the pulpits, the free libraries, the diffusion of artistic taste, the railroads, the telegraphs, every invention which, by relieving people from the smaller and coarser cares, gives free play to their intellectual faculties, help to make the solitude of the country or the monotony of village life more and more repulsive.⁹⁰

By this view, cities not only generated knowledge and capital (along with vice and poverty), but also a new way of life and a new language that were reflected in the carnivalesque pages of sensational urban fiction. City-mysteries novels, by their very appearance, along with the profusion of city guides and almanacs and directories, indicated the rise of the city itself as an object of fascination and of the “urban” as a new category of life. While the authors of city-mysteries were well aware of the difficulty of shedding patterns of social relations that had been learned in smaller towns, they also depicted the need for new ways of thinking to accommodate the new “urban” way of life;

⁹⁰ John D. Fairfield, *The Mysteries of the Great City: The Politics of Urban Design, 1877–1937* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 2; “Our Great Cities,” *The Nation* 9: 228 (Nov. 11, 1869): 404–5. One indication of the depth of the belief in urban progressivism was the prevalence of urban utopianism in the period. Since Augustine and Bunyan, cities have been invested with allegorical significance. Scholars have written of the city as Hell or the city as labyrinth in city-mysteries fiction, but have neglected the extent to which (as in Bunyan) the city is figured as paradise. In Charles Barrington’s *Emily; or, The Orphan Sisters*, it is only on seeing the steeples of New York that Emily “felt that she had, indeed, escaped the fangs of her persecutors, and that, at last, a home and a place of rest was found for her. As they came in sight of the Battery ... it appeared to her like a Paradise....” Charles Barrington, *Emily; or, The Orphan Sisters* (New York: Samuel French, 1853), 78. George Lippard’s policy of not granting charters for chapters in his Brotherhood of the Union to city dwellers, “fearful of the corrupting influence of Large Cities,” has been seen as a measure of the absolute nature of Lippard’s anti-urbanism (*Quaker City Weekly*, Dec. 29, 1849). Yet the rubric for his secret society was entitled the “B. G. C.,” which stood for “Brotherhood of the Golden City”; this organization, which shunned urban members, was structured around a vision of utopian urbanism.

as Thomas Bender notes, “For mid-century city dwellers, there was an urban ‘inside’ and a rural ‘outside.’”⁹¹

Horace Bushnell described San Francisco and Sacramento as possessing “so much of city life and character” that they were hard to recognize as new settlements; clearly, “city life” as a discrete category had some meaning.⁹² A New York publisher in 1848 announced the commencement of a series entitled “Tracts for Cities,” indicating that the pamphlets would discuss “general questions in their relations to the peculiar circumstances of cities....”⁹³ This not only indicates that urban life was thought to be a distinct category, but that its “peculiar circumstances” would have been familiar to a broad range of readers, even those who lived in the country but were continually exposed to a torrent of print media written and published in cities. In particular, these peculiar circumstances were thought to include a dense, diverse, and large population; a regular and compact physical fabric; and an accelerated and exhilarating pace of life.

The Urban American

Nineteenth-century writers posited the emergence of a new kind of person who lived in the new environment of the city, the “urbanite.” Apart from having unique ways of dressing and talking, and possessing the skills of urban navigation, urbanites were distinguished by a different outlook on life, and were able to sort the people they

⁹¹ Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision*, 86. Emerson wrote in his journal that he wished “to have rural strength and religion for my children, and I wish city facility and polish. I find with chagrin that I cannot have both,” supporting Bender’s notion of a mutually exclusive urban “inside” and rural “outside.” Quoted in Cowan, *City of the West*, 215.

⁹² Quoted in Lotchin, *San Francisco*, xx.

⁹³ “Tracts for the Times,” Boston, July 20, 1848. In Horace Mann Broad­sides Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society.

encountered into manageable categories and to fathom the “thin crust of fashionable cupidity and hypocrisy” that characterized urban interactions—in short, cities were their “natural” habitat.⁹⁴ In *The Mysteries of St. Louis* (one of several American city-mysteries written by German immigrants and published in German), Tom, a fireman, is hurt in an explosion and is taken to a farm; a great deal is made of the fact that it is the first time he has ever left the city.⁹⁵ The existence of a sizable generation that had been born and raised in cities was a new possibility in the antebellum period, and it added a fresh element to the “heterogeneous American character” that increasingly tied individual identity to specific regions.⁹⁶ As Dana Brand has described it, the type of the city dweller emerged as the “representative of modern subjectivity ..., the passive yet compulsive consumer of a rapidly and perpetually changing spectacle.”⁹⁷

Yet popular antebellum literature did not depict the urbanite as passive, but rather as a participant in the novel forms of urban life. As George Lippard described this new urban figure in a sketch included in *The Midnight Queen*, “He had lived by turns in all the large cities of the Union. Now, he was (or seemed to be) a cotton broker in New-Orleans; now, a fancy stock man in Wall-street; now, a planter in Charleston; now, a commission merchant in Cincinnati; now, a gentleman of leisure in Washington.... He had seen every phase of the savage life, which is but poorly hidden by the glittering tinsel-cloak of large city civilization, and that life had taken possession of him, and

⁹⁴ *The Double Suicide. The True History of the Lives of the Twin Sisters Sarah and Maria Williams* (New York: H. H. Randall, 1855), 7.

⁹⁵ Henry Boernstein, *The Mysteries of St. Louis, a Novel*, translated by Friedrich Munch (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Co., 1990 [1851]), 73.

⁹⁶ Ditz, *Property and Kinship*, 8; see also Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970) and *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Knopf, 1976).

⁹⁷ Brand, *The Spectator and the City*, 4.

moulded him in every fibre.”⁹⁸ Stanley, Lippard’s urbanite, is exemplary of Fitz-Hugh Ludlow’s observation that, in a large city, one’s “specialty must be only the axis around which are grouped encyclopedic learning, faultless skill, and catholic intuition.”⁹⁹ Once possessed of “that peculiar knowledge which is the product of city life,” as a city-mystery set in Hartford described it, the urbanite became a connoisseur of urban life; although uniquely able to appreciate a “rustic walk,” the urbanite felt most at home in “the avenues of bricks and mortar....”¹⁰⁰

The urbanite was so distinct a character that he or she was thought to be physically different from a rural denizen. Apart from longstanding notions that cities bred disease and poor health through their bad air and confined living quarters, cities were thought to produce actual physical changes in citizens. Henry Tappan thought that people from the country possessed “expressionless eyes” because they were not used to having other people to look at, while several city-mysteries writers wrote of the existence of a different “urban face,” conditioned by the searching eyes of huge crowds.¹⁰¹ While some argued that, as commerce and urbanization increased, so did life expectancy, others claimed that the stress and competition of a mercantile life would lead to “shattered

⁹⁸ George Lippard, “The Man of the World,” in *The Midnight Queen; or, Leaves from New-York Life* (New York: Garrett & Co., 1853), 102–3.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Spann, *The New Metropolis*, 424.

¹⁰⁰ J. Henry Smith, *The Green Family; or, The Veil Removed* (Springfield, MA: Smith & Jones, 1849), 103–4; E. H. Docwra, *The Devil’s Race Course, a Legend of Baltimore* (Baltimore: Henry Taylor, 1854), 5. The notion that only city dwellers could truly appreciate the countryside, and that, in fact, the pastoral ideal was an entirely urban creation, was commonplace in city-mysteries fiction.

¹⁰¹ Tappan, *The Growth of Cities*, 17–18; see, e.g., Curtis, *The Victim’s Revenge*, 44. For the best-known theorization of the mental impact of urban life, see Georg Simmel, “Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. by Kurt H. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950); see also Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” *American Journal of Sociology* 44:1 (July 1938): 1–24.

nerves—attenuated frames—paralysis....”¹⁰² What most writers agreed on, though, was that cities accelerated everything, even biological processes. The author of *Life in Town* wrote of antebellum Boston that “precocity is the peculiar characteristic of infants” in the city, while the author of *A Moral Picture of Philadelphia* wrote that, “Boyhood and girlhood seem to be extinct in our city. The Philadelphians are all either babies or men and women. The boy resigns the nipple of his mother’s breast, that he may put a cigar in his mouth.”¹⁰³ Joan Brumberg has written that city life was associated in the nineteenth century with early menarche in girls.¹⁰⁴ In the era when childhood was beginning to be idealized and seen as a separate stage of life, it was the one part of life that urbanites were not thought to know, because cities made them grow up too fast.

Within the phylum of the urbanite, certain orders were assumed to have special knowledge of the city and its ways, and a special ability to see “behind the veil” of urban life. For some, such as Charles Loring Brace and Horatio Alger, this ultimate urban type was the newsboy, the “street gamin” who, as the author of *The Homeless Heir; or, Life in Bedford Street*, put it, “was most decidedly a fixture of the locality in which we have found him. He belonged to it, most emphatically, and was of it.”¹⁰⁵ George Lippard and others suggested that clergymen were the true urban experts, since “there is no place, no

¹⁰² Scott, *Trade and Letters*, 43; “Editor’s Table,” *Russell’s Magazine* 1:5 (August 1857).

¹⁰³ *Life in Town, or the Boston Spy*, 26; *A Moral Picture of Philadelphia. The Virtues and Frauds and Follies of the City Delineated*. By Lord B---, formerly of England, now a naturalized citizen and resident of Philadelphia (Philadelphia: Printed for the author, 1845), 12.

¹⁰⁴ Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 9–10; see also Fred E. Schroeder, “Feminine Hygiene, Fashion, and the Emancipation of American Women,” *American Studies* 17:2 (Fall 1976): 101–109. I am indebted to Jessie Randall for these citations.

¹⁰⁵ *The Homeless Heir; or, Life in Bedford Street. A Mystery of Philadelphia*. By John, the Outcast. (Philadelphia: J. H. C. Whiting, 1856), 16. The fascination with street vendors in general as a distinctly urban type is borne out by the large number of children’s books from the period that detailed the different kinds of vendors one would find in the streets of a particular city.

court, no avenue, no den of poverty nor haunt of shame forbidden to your feet.”¹⁰⁶ Other authors suggested that policemen, journalists, prostitutes, lawyers, doctors, tract distributors, and burglars were the figures that had almost magical access to all the secrets of a city. Osgood Bradbury in *The Empress of Beauty* suggested that Jack Hasty, a cab-driver, was the best repository of arcane urban knowledge: “His head was a sort of intelligence office which gentlemen of all classes consulted....”¹⁰⁷ Such comprehensive urban knowledge could be valuable, and urban expertise was therefore something that a smart person might set out to achieve. In *Minnie Lawson ... A Romance of Gotham*, Mary learns how to be a fortune-teller in Java specifically because “she fancied by pursuing such profession in New York, she would be able to learn much of the hidden secrets of the city.”¹⁰⁸

Special Cities

The knowledge these “urban experts” possessed was highly specialized, since many city-mysteries novels, based as they were on local color and an odd brand of boosterism, claimed a unique character for specific cities. If authors of city-mysteries constantly reminded their readers that city life was of a wholly different order than life in the country, they also made those claims for the particular cities where they set their narratives. Part of the ideal of each city having its own character was the practice in the antebellum period of giving each city a nickname “expressive of some familiar and

¹⁰⁶ Lippard, *Mysteries of the Pulpit*, 17.

¹⁰⁷ Osgood Bradbury, *The Empress of Beauty; Second Series of the Mysteries of Boston* (Boston: J. N. Bradley & Co., 1844), 19.

¹⁰⁸ Charles Red Swan, *Minnie Lawson: or, The Outlaws League. A Romance of Gotham* (New York: n.p., 185?), 104.

apparent peculiarity”: thus New York was the “Empire City” or “Gotham,” Philadelphia the “Quaker City” or the “City of Brotherly Love,” Boston the “City of Notions” or the “Athens of America,” Baltimore the “City of Monuments,” New Haven the “City of Elms,” Salem the “City of Peace,” Cincinnati the “Queen City” or “Porkopolis,” Pittsburgh the “Smoky City,” New Orleans the “Crescent City,” and Fitchburg, somewhat incredibly, was called “Eden amid the hills.”¹⁰⁹

Authors of travel narratives and city-mysteries alike, however, were most fascinated by the clear differences between the nation’s three largest cities: Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. Boston was a pious, conservative city of narrow twisting alleys; Philadelphia was a sober, affluent city noted for clean, regular streets; New York was aggressive, fast, open, crowded, and dirty, split between the tangle of lower Manhattan and the spaciousness of the grid above Canal Street. Boston was intellectual, Philadelphia genteel, and New York commercial. Vice in Boston was thought to be more concealed, while in New York gamblers, prostitutes, and saloon-keepers operated in the open light of day (Philadelphia was more noted for riots and other crimes of bloodshed than for vice *per se*).¹¹⁰ The different character of specific cities was often employed to comic effect in city-mysteries, as characters from one city are totally lost in another (special confusion was generated by the different value of a shilling in different cities—in New York it was twelve cents, in Boston nine).

¹⁰⁹ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *Jemmy Daily; or the Little News Vender* (Boston: Brainard & Co., 1843), 5; for Salem, see *Caroline Hargrave, the Merchant’s Daughter: Being the First Series of The Mysteries of Salem! or Modern Witchcraft* (Salem: Varney, Parsons & Co., 1845), 17; for Pittsburgh, see Samuel Young, *The Smoky City: A Tale of Crime* (Pittsburgh: A. A. Anderson, 1845); for Fitchburg, see Philip Penchant, *The Mysteries of Fitchburg* (Fitchburg, MA: Charles Shepley, 1844), 5.

¹¹⁰ In terms of the open acceptance of urban vice, however, no Northern city was thought to measure up to New Orleans.

These differences were articulated, however, against a background of opinion that saw urban culture becoming more homogeneous as the nation came to be viewed as a network of cities. The explosion of railroads connecting America's cities led to the first articulation of the concept now known as "flyoverland"—vast parts of the country were simply spaces one went through on the way between cities.¹¹¹ City-mysteries and other narratives of the urban demimonde depicted the skills necessary for surviving in one city as applicable to any city; in a crime novel about Henry Madison and his "wife" Ellen Stevens, the couple traveled from Philadelphia to San Francisco to St. Louis to New York to Boston to Camden to Detroit to Toledo to Cincinnati to St. Louis to San Francisco (where, the novel claims, they were finally executed by the Vigilance Committee), and in every city they encounter people they know from previous urban locales.¹¹² In George Thompson's *The Criminal*, Jack Harold is recognized while trying to pick President Van Buren's pocket by a policeman who has never seen him—the New York police have started sending descriptions of "their most noted thieves and rascals" to other cities, so that "an eye can constantly be kept upon their movements."¹¹³ To Jack, as to Melville's Redburn, cities have all come to resemble each other: "There were the same sort of

¹¹¹ According to George Rogers Taylor, in the 1840s railroad mileage in the U.S. tripled to 9,000 miles, and increased fivefold in the 1850s. See Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815–1860* (New York: Rinehart, 1951).

¹¹² Rev. Sheldon P. Drury, *Startling Confessions of the Terrible Deeds of Henry Madison, and his Associate and Accomplice Miss Ellen Stevens, Who was Executed by the Vigilance Committee of San Francisco, on the 29th September last* (Cincinnati: Barclay & Co., 1857).

¹¹³ George Thompson, *The Criminal; or, The Adventures of Jack Harold*, by Greenhorn (Boston: William Berry, 1850), 32.

streets pretty much; the same rows of houses with stone steps; the same kind of sidewalks and curbs; and the same elbowing, heartless-looking crowd as ever.”¹¹⁴

Increasingly in antebellum America, New York was becoming the standard for what the undifferentiated term “urban” implied. George Foster, in *New York in Slices*, explained that, “Every thing is done differently in New York from anywhere else,” but these highly unique local conditions, in their extremity, were coming to define what an American city was (or aspired to be).¹¹⁵ A villain in a George Thompson novel opines that, “I would rather be hung in New York than die a natural death in Philadelphia,” and elsewhere Thompson rejected the notion that “Philadelphia and Boston are ahead of New York in the race of profligacy.”¹¹⁶ New York was not simply the biggest city in the country, it was the most *urban*; all the rest of the country flowed through this one city. As David Henkin notes, New York, with only two percent of the nation’s population in the 1850s, accounted for 18 percent of the country’s newspaper circulation, processed 22 percent of the country’s mail, and received over 37 percent of its publishing revenue, coming to function “as a metonym for the big city within a predominantly nonurban American society, especially in the pages of a print discourse about city life that was disproportionately produced in Manhattan.”¹¹⁷ In an 1853 children’s book about a trip to Boston, the main character, Marco Paul, tells his cousin that, not only is everything in

¹¹⁴ Herman Melville, *Redburn* (New York: Doubleday, 1957 [1849]), 195. This similarity of cities was especially true as urbanization spread westward, and cities from Cincinnati to San Francisco modeled themselves on adaptations of Philadelphia’s grid plan, including the frequent use of the Philadelphia practice of naming one set of streets after trees and numbering the cross streets.

¹¹⁵ George Foster, *New York in Slices*, by an Experienced Carver (New York: William H. Graham, 1849), 67.

¹¹⁶ Thompson, *Mysteries of Bond-Street; or, The Seraglios of Upper Ten-Dom* (New York: n.p., 1857), 71; *New-York Life, or the Mysteries of Upper-Tendom Revealed* (New York: Charles S. Attwood, n.d.), 33.

¹¹⁷ David Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 23.

New York larger, it is “superior in every respect. There is nothing in New York that is not bigger and better than the corresponding thing in Boston.”¹¹⁸ New York was coming to be seen as dominant not only in size or quantity, but in categorical terms as well. Showing a keen grasp of what made a city a city, Charles Loring Brace wrote to a friend in 1851 that, “New York is the *materialist* place in our country.”¹¹⁹

Like reformers, ministers, and others concerned with the growing trend of urbanization, authors of popular urban narratives offered their own definition of what “urban” meant. While the image of urbanism that emerges from these novels overlaps in some ways with the broader discourse about city life, their emphasis on the pleasures of the urban—both licit and illicit—distinguishes them from the broader stream of the antebellum debate over the rise of the city.

¹¹⁸ Jacob Abbott, *Marco Paul's Voyages & Travels: City of Boston* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853), 51.

¹¹⁹ Letter from Brace to John Hull Olmsted (brother of Frederick Law Olmsted), Feb. 6, 1851; quoted in Homberger, *Scenes from the Life of a City*, 9.

Chapter Three

Defining the “Urban” in City-Mysteries Fiction

Here, more than anywhere else, the human heart is turned inside out, and its secret avenues are re-cast in the streets and bye-places.

—Edwin Chapin¹

Given the many reasons for not moving to cities that were in circulation in antebellum America, how can the continued growth of cities be explained? The growth of cities can be attributed to economic or geographic factors: cities were concentration points for trade, commerce, media, and transportation that helped rationalize the nation’s economy. As such, they would have served to draw people from the countryside who were hungry for opportunity. City-mysteries novels, which many have interpreted as participating in the discourse of anti-urbanism, offer a more complicated answer to the question, adding the attractive power of cities’ *cultural* appeal to the economic opportunities they offered. While authors working in the genre were aware of the lurid appeal of depicting the city’s “misereries,” in so doing they simultaneously represented cities as the centers of excitement and opportunity in the young republic.

In their depictions of life in America’s fast-growing antebellum cities, many city-mysteries offered a strangely ambivalent view of urbanization—discouraging rural readers from moving to the city while depicting the motivations (however questionable) of those who rejected such advice—while other novels in the genre were more positive,

¹ Edwin H. Chapin, *Moral Aspects of City Life: A Series of Lectures* (New York: Henry Lyon, 1854), 17

depicting the immediate charms of urban living. As Roger Lane has written, “Cities throughout the nineteenth century were powerfully attractive in the root sense of that word, but their attractions were elemental and immediate, never clothed in ideology. . . . Few came persuaded by anything but individual experience that city life was inherently superior.”² Since popular reading forms such as city-mysteries would have helped to inform people’s “individual experience,” it is important to understand the ways in which such novels might have helped convince readers that city life was either worse than or “inherently superior” to life in the country.

First and foremost, popular fiction about city life represented cities as places of opportunity. While the aspect of cities that was most likely attractive to a majority of urban migrants was economic opportunity, writers who took a more positive view of city life defended urbanization on the very same grounds that anti-urban writers attacked it, invoking moral and religious arguments *in favor* of cities. One of the most consistent depictions of cities, by both popular writers and more elite reformers, was as a field offering tremendous opportunities for Christian evangelism and charity, particularly given the central role that cities played in the nation’s media. In Osgood Bradbury’s *Ellen Grant*, a young man who has moved to New York writes back to the country to convince his sister to join him, telling her, “This is a great city and affords a fine field for charitable doings.”³ The concentrated intellectual and financial resources of cities resulted in them being powerful tools for good as well as stages for the display of true

² Roger Lane, *Violent Death in the City: Suicide, Accident, and Murder in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia*, 2nd ed. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 5.

³ Osgood Bradbury, *Ellen Grant; or, Fashionable Life in New-York*, by a Member of the New York Bar (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 185?), 54.

Christian ethics. The frequency with which authors of city-mysteries decried the tendency of the wealthy to bestow “pious largesses ... upon the so-called heathen ten thousand miles off” instead of on the “hordes of little heathens who infest this Christian metropolis” reflects this sense of cities as a potential mission field as well as the feeling that urban elites were not meeting the moral challenge these cities posed.⁴

The City of a Thousand Advantages

If cities were represented as sites for the productive use of wealth for charitable ends, however, they were even more frequently represented as sites for the accumulation of that wealth. John Todd cautioned his readers that “very few men come into the great city for ease, or quiet—to get rid of care and anxiety. All these are increased, by coming here, a thousand-fold.”⁵ Todd, along with many authors of city-mysteries, made clear that the best reason to move to a city was the economic opportunity urban life presented; particularly in the pre-Gold Rush era, city life offered the best chance at not simply security but great wealth. Cities offered bright young men (and women) from rural regions new jobs, a broader scope of economic vision, and a variety of opportunity—in a vast range of fields—that small towns simply could not match. In I. Anderson Smith’s city-mystery *Blanche Vernon, the Actress!*, Charles, a young man from the country, having long “thought of leaving his village home, and endeavor, by long and patient industry, to amass wealth in the great city of New York,” finally resolves to move when

⁴ *The Orphan Seamstress, a Narrative of Innocence, Guilt, Mystery and Crime*, by the Author of the “Milliner’s Apprentice” (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1850), 30.

⁵ John Todd, *The Moral Influence, Dangers and Duties, Connected with Great Cities* (Northampton, MA: J. H. Butler, 1841), 146.

he is offered a “fine situation” by Mr. Graves, “a rich merchant of the city....”⁶ New York is not only the place to “amass wealth,” it offers the widest variety of “fine situations” for doing so.

If city-mysteries presented cities as places where young men went to make their fortunes, they just as often depicted them as sites of economic opportunity for young women. The panoramic description of the crowds in city streets was a constant motif in the genre, and almost every crowd scene mentioned the fact that “female operatives formed quite a large portion of the multitude.” At the beginning of *Rosina Meadows*, the title character is preparing to leave her family for Boston the very next day, “to seek what the girls call her fortune....”⁷

It is true that, in many of these novels, the young men and women who head to the city in order to make their fortunes are ultimately disappointed, the men often descending into intemperance, poverty, and crime, and the women into prostitution. Nevertheless, the constant presentation of economic opportunity as a reason for moving to cities, regardless of whether or not it is fulfilled, underscores the predominant role that this motivation played for novelists, and likely for their readers as well. Besides, for every narrative that showed young people ruined in their pursuit of urban wealth, another one, like the brief biography of O. A. Bullard, assured readers that hard work would pay off. Bullard, an artist who painted a popular panorama of New York City, is described in a pamphlet biography that was used to publicize his show as a native of upstate New

⁶ I. Anderson Smith, *Blanche Vernon, the Actress! A Romance of the Metropolis* (New York: n.p., 1846), 7.

⁷ *Mary Beach: or, The Fulton Street Cap-Maker* (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1849), 8; William B. English, *Rosina Meadows, the Village Maid: or, Temptations Unveiled. A story of city scenes and every day life.* (Boston: Redding & Co., 1843), 7.

York whose father said he was too lazy to ever make a farmer and sent him off to be a sign painter. “What a lesson here is for every young man!” the biography exclaimed, assuring its young, urban, male reader that, if he “has felt the tears of poverty rolling down his cheeks ... and said to himself, It is no use to try,” he should be “encouraged by reading this, and glory in the success of Mr. Bullard,” secure in the knowledge that not only is the city the best place to become wealthy, but that the city itself—in this case, as panorama—could be the source of that wealth.⁸

City-mysteries not only depicted cities as sites of rewarding labor, whether moral or economic; they drew a sharp distinction between the boredom of rural life and the opportunities for entertainment offered by cities.⁹ In *The Mysteries of New York*, Ellen longs to leave her upstate boarding school, because she “should like to be where there is something going on,” and cities, however they were depicted, were shown to be places where things *happened*.¹⁰ Whatever else they expected from city life, it seems, antebellum city dwellers expected to be entertained. City-mysteries novels were filled with so many descriptions of the theater, dance-halls, horse races, shopping, lectures, cock and rat and dog fights, “model-artist” shows, and concerts that it would have been almost impossible to read these novels without getting the impression that cities offered more fun than any place else in the nation. Even less orthodox pleasures, such as sexual adventure and drinking, were not always strictly condemned. For an alleged temperance

⁸ “Excursion to New York City, Through in Two Hours,” New York, 1856. In Broadsides Collection, New-York Historical Society.

⁹ See Adrienne Siegel, “When Cities Were Fun: The Image of the American City in Popular Books, 1840-1870,” in *Journal of Popular Culture* 9:3 (Winter 1975): 573-582, for a thorough discussion of this phenomenon.

¹⁰ Tom Shortfellow, pseud., *The Mysteries of New York* (London: William Walker, 1847), 11.

story, the scene presented in *Rosina Meadows* of a sumptuous hotel bar filled with convivial men drinking “Tip and Ty’s, Fiscal Agents, Eye Openers, Wormwood Floaters, Sherry Cobblers, Moral Suasion, Stone Wall, Split Ticket, Sundown, Smashers, I.O.U.,” and other antebellum cocktails is far too lively to have been an effective deterrent.¹¹

What is more, many city-mysteries showed the physical city itself to be a source of pleasure and entertainment. In *Emily: or, the Orphan Sisters*, the title character is distracted from her woes by the “novelty and variety which her eyes encountered” on her approach to Philadelphia.¹² First-hand accounts of urban life support this idea of the city itself as entertainment. Brewster Maverick, a New York adolescent, recorded in his pocket diary in 1847 that he “Seen Booth in Hamlet,” and that he purchased numerous cheap copies of plays, but he also records such moments of less structured urban enjoyment as “Walk around town with Alex & Dodger” or “Seen a Chinaman.”¹³ Another diary, this from an “unidentified young man” from Maine, records the variety of urban diversions, both explicit and incidental, that New York City offered in only one night in 1843:

This evening Isaac and myself took a stroll round the city, in the first place we went down to Dickens’ Place and there we saw vice in its worst form and misery in its most refined shape. After leaving there went west to a free concert and heard one song which was enough. We left and went to Ripleys and saw quite a number of curiosities. We left there and went to Engine House No. 31 and examined the machine. There are gold numbers in her sides which cost \$164. We left them and went home.¹⁴

¹¹ William B. English, *Rosina Meadows*, 25–6, 28.

¹² Charles F. Barrington, *Emily: or, The Orphan Sisters*, (New York: Samuel French, 1853), 77.

¹³ Brewster Maverick, pocket diary, 1847; “Booth” and “Chinaman,” May 24, 1847; “walk around town,” May 26, 1847. In collection of New-York Historical Society.

¹⁴ Diary of an unidentified young man, New York City, Jan. 1, 1843-Aug. 17, 1844, entry for Dec. 4, 1843. In collection of New-York Historical Society. “Dickens’ Place” is the subterranean bar/dance-hall in Five

However much this writer may have disapproved of the “vice” and “misery” he witnessed, the fact remains that the city presented both phenomena to him in venues where he could view them as entertainment.

The Freedom of the Crowd

In order to enjoy the pleasures of the city, and especially its more questionable ones, city dwellers required another aspect of urbanism that city-mysteries stressed—freedom. Large cities were shown in these novels to provide hiding places for criminals of all varieties, but they were also shown to provide a measure of anonymity and freedom from small-town scrutiny that was on some level appealing. In contrast to a view of nature that held the natural world to be the home of spontaneity and freedom, in opposition to the organization and rigor of the city, city-mysteries depicted urbanites as possessing “that careless freedom, and moving about with that unrestrained ease that proclaims a large city the nursery of genuine and unaffected simplicity.”¹⁵ The density of antebellum American cities, combined with their high levels of residential mobility, resulted in highly unstable communities where it was difficult for any form of coercive social authority to exert control over an individual.¹⁶

Points run by Pete Williams, an African-American entrepreneur, made famous in Charles Dickens’s *American Notes*; it was also frequently known as Dickens’ Hole.

¹⁵ For an interpretation of nature as the site of spontaneity, see Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 17; Tom Shortfellow, *The Mysteries of New York*, 135.

¹⁶ See Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 151–53.

Novelists depicted cities as representing freedom from the often-stifling strictures of the small town, where everybody knew everybody else's business, where church attendance was monitored, and where one's social standing in the community was fixed by one's family's circumstances. "The right to do 'as you d—n please'—to quote the democratic phraseology of the aborigines," was, according to Thomas Butler Gunn, "nowhere so universally recognized, or less curbed by authority," than in New York, which he described as "the most free and easy place conceivable."¹⁷ This freedom of city life was held up in stark contrast to the country, "where the people stare at every stranger who alights, and where curiosity is excited to know your whereabouts and your business," where "you can do nothing ... but it is made the subject of conversation."¹⁸

The anonymity afforded by city life was often likened to a forest, where those wishing to avoid contact (for whatever reason) could do so, but it was also often presented as a positive, both in popular fiction and in more elite sources.¹⁹ David Clapp, a printer from Boston who visited New York in the 1830s, wrote that a large city "possess[es] a thousand advantages over a thinly-settled town or village," the foremost among which was

... the comparative retirement in which one may live, without, at the same time, secluding himself in such a manner from the healthy excitement of passing events and social intercourse, as to injure either his physical or moral faculties. In the city, if a man is disposed he can ... separate himself from the thousand disagreeable and useless customs and practices

¹⁷ Thomas Butler Gunn, *The Physiology of New York Boarding-Houses* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1857), 12.

¹⁸ Emma Wellmont, *Substance and Shadows; or, Phases of Every-day Life* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1854), 113, 223.

¹⁹ According to Thomas Bender, Charles Loring Brace felt that large cities were better than small villages for the poor, because the anonymous nature of urban life made it less shameful for the poor to accept help (Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision*, 141–42).

of every community ... to a degree which, in the country, would shut him out of civilized society....²⁰

This withdrawal was often dependent upon idiosyncrasies of urban development. One of the main criticisms of tenement buildings articulated by popular novelists was that one lived inches away from people one knew nothing about. Apart from the anonymity enforced by physical walls, however, the sheer profusion of activity in cities was thought to offer the individual a high level of independence. The ease with which one could become lost in the urban crowd is borne out in these novels, not only by criminals on the run but by characters who wish to forget themselves.²¹

In depicting cities as places that isolated the individual from others by subsuming them all in the urban crowd, city-mysteries novels also presented cities as the best venue for individual achievement, where one could strive without interference from others.²² Sam Bass Warner's formulation of the antebellum city as a "private city," a site whose purpose was private moneymaking and whose government's role was to encourage

²⁰ Travel Journals of David Clapp, Boston Printer, 1831–43, v. 3, 52–54. In the Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Archives, Winterthur Museum and Library.

²¹ David Henkin astutely notes that "anonymous access to urban life" was greatly facilitated by the proliferation of what he calls the "verbal cityscape." As more and more of the city came to be legible in print—store and street signs, newspapers, broadsides, paper money—less and less human interaction was required to navigate it. See Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 175. Isabelle Lehuu finds a contradiction in the discourse of "exposure" that was such a common feature of the popular antebellum press, arguing that the demand for detailed information about the lives of the rich or the criminal resulted from the growing anonymity of urban life; thus, the papers exposed private life just as they worked to make reading more private. Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 49–52.

²² This depiction is ironic given that the antebellum era was a period of increasing outside interference in individual lives in America's cities through the mechanisms of new urban institutions such as police forces and sanitary commissions. This description of the city sounds very similar to the idealization of the western frontier in the same period as a place where a man could make a living without anyone looking into his business; the representation of the city as a "frontier" space will be discussed in a later chapter.

business, is borne out in popular urban fiction from the period.²³ While city-mysteries novels expressed admiration for individuals like Mary Beach, the titular heroine of an 1849 novel who moved to New York and made a life for herself through gumption and hard work at cap-making, urban individualism was also shown to have a dark side, such as ineffective government and a refusal to take responsibility for community needs.

George Foster, in *New York Naked*, complained that, “The community takes it for granted that it has done its duty when it lights the lamps, gathers up the mud in little heaps, and sets policemen to watch the doors of our store-houses and dwellings,” but to judge by many city-mysteries, those minimal duties were rarely performed. While the Vigilance Committees in San Francisco in 1851 and 1856 are the best-known examples of the antebellum urban response to governmental ineffectiveness, authors of popular urban fiction encouraged similar solutions.²⁴

²³ Warner’s book is a touchstone in a debate about the role of the “public” in nineteenth-century American society, and over the changing location of the boundary between public and private in this period. For more on this subject, see Philip Ethington, *The Public City: The Political Construction of Urban Life in San Francisco, 1850-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Mary Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

²⁴ In these two uprisings, a rigorously organized group of over 5,000 men took on the functions of law enforcement in San Francisco, essentially declaring a state of emergency on their own. A study of the records of both Vigilance Committees makes clear that the 1851 Committee was concerned not so much with a crime wave as with a wave of ineffective crime prosecution, and that the 1856 Committee was primarily concerned with preventing electoral corruption. As Roger Lotchin has argued, a large cause of the level of disorder that existed in San Francisco was the unwillingness of the populace to pay for any governmental services, services which they then took upon themselves. Roger Lotchin, *San Francisco, 1846-1856: From Hamlet to City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 168. Lotchin quotes a newspaper report from 1856 that claimed that in the previous year, 57 people had died in the city due to the bad condition of the streets, most having drowned by falling through holes in streets built over the water. While such a number is difficult to believe, it indicates the hesitation of San Franciscans to pay for public services like street maintenance.

While the ability of antebellum cities to provide services was often limited by fiscal constraints placed on them by rural-dominated state legislatures, the line between what tasks were “public” and what were “private” was often blurry in the period.²⁵ Emerson wrote in his journals, “Let every man shovel out his own snow, and the whole city will be passable,” but other city tasks, especially law enforcement, could not be undertaken independently.²⁶ Ned Buntline—understandably, given his political ambitions—was especially strident in his condemnations of the state of municipal services in New York, especially in the prosecution of gambling. Charles Meadows, a clerk in a Buntline novel who is drawn into gambling with his bosses’ money and ultimately commits a murder to conceal his guilt, blames himself, but Buntline wishes to “go to the root of the evil.” If he had not been duped into the gambling house in the first place by the gambler’s assistant, Buntline observes, he would never have gambled, but if the police had shut the house down, he never would have been led astray: “therefore, we will charge, as the principal and first cause of the murder, and all of this wretchedness and ruin, the neglect of the city authorities in doing their duty!”²⁷

Buntline was not alone in calling for citizens to act in the face of such neglect; Harry Hazel’s *Big Dick, the King of the Negroes* depicts a riot that results from an

²⁵ The clearest example of this is the new city charter for New York City that was drawn up in 1856 by the Republican-dominated state legislature in response to the Democratic sweep of the city elections, led by the new mayor, Fernando Wood. The biggest change wrought by the new charter was that it merged the police forces of the whole metropolitan area into one force, aptly called the Metropolitans, removing them from mayoral control. In 1857, the Metropolitans fought a pitched battle against the Municipals, the city policemen still loyal to the mayor, when they tried to arrest Wood. For a full discussion of this event, see Edward Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840–1857* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), Ch. 3.

²⁶ Emerson, *Journals*, v. 5, 437; quoted in Cowan, *City of the West*, 230. Emerson also neglects the fact that every man was likely to shovel the snow from his sidewalk into the public street, where it would remain to block traffic.

²⁷ Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York: A Story of Real Life* (New York: Berford, 1848), 73.

attempt by Boston vigilantes led by “Big Dick” to clean up the “riotous and outrageous scenes” that took place in the brothels of “Nigger Hill.”²⁸ Thus, if cities were sites of freedom and anonymity, they were also places where traditional forms of authority were no longer effective, and where individuals would be forced to take on the tasks of governing the city themselves.

Pursuing Urban Polish

If cities offered people a chance for individual achievement, they also offered them opportunities to obtain the education and refinement necessary for such tasks. In contrast to the idealization of country gentility, popular urban texts made clear that cities were the primary homes of learning and the arts. Sidney George Fisher, the famed Philadelphia lawyer and diarist, wrote in 1847 that, “A man of any education cannot live among farmers in this country. The moment you leave the neighborhood of a city you are in the midst of barbarism...”²⁹ Fisher’s view was not confined to his class, but was shared by authors of popular narratives. In Harry Hazel’s *The Burglars*, Arthur Remington leaves western Massachusetts for Boston, forsaking any ideal of Jeffersonian rural polish, in order to “improve myself in those accomplishments which make the

²⁸ Harry Hazel [Justin Jones], *Big Dick, the King of the Negroes; or, Virtue and Vice Contrasted. A Romance of High and Low Life in Boston* (Boston: Star Spangled Banner Office, 1846), 59. The novel does not make clear whether the “Nigger Hill” in question is Copp’s Hill in the North End or Mount Vernon, the present-day western side of Beacon Hill, both of which had large African-American populations, although it is more likely the latter.

²⁹ Sidney George Fisher, *A Philadelphia Perspective: The Diary of Sidney George Fisher Covering the Years 1834–1872* (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1967), 202; entry for November 1, 1847.

gentleman,” and, in *The Lady in Black*, Sarah Thornton’s “every faculty had been improved by all the facilities of education, which a metropolis affords.”³⁰

The opportunities offered by cities for education were an especially frequent element in narratives about Lowell, both those in the Lowell *Offering* and in other promotional venues as well as in sensational fiction set in the city.³¹ Harry Harford, an established rake, tells his young housemate William Walton in *Ellen Merton, The Belle of Lowell* that, “... if you remain in Lowell you will learn more in those nine years, than you have ever yet dreamed of.”³² This education was likely of a very different sort than that which Lowell was seen as offering to the young female factory workers who came there from small New England towns, often in large part because of the educational opportunities it afforded. Another Lowell city-mystery offers a detailed description of how the library works and of what books Miss Elliston, the virtuous heroine, chooses to read. She stresses, in words seemingly taken directly from the *Offering*, “I certainly have more advantages here in regard to the obtaining of books than I should get elsewhere,” and puts her education to good use as an author.³³

More than libraries and lyceums, however, the best education that cities offered was that of frequent contact with a diverse group of people, a condition enforced by the density of antebellum cities whose streets, as Mary Ryan writes, “were spaces where

³⁰ Harry Hazel [Justin Jones], *The Burglars, or the Mysteries of the League of Honor* (Boston: Hatch and Co., 1844), 6; Thomas Low Nichols, *The Lady in Black: A Story of New York Life, Morals, and Manners* (New York: n.p., 1844), 16.

³¹ In relation to its size, Lowell was the subject of a disproportionate number of city-mysteries narratives, in large part because of the fascinating nature (to male novelists) of a city with a population largely composed of young women.

³² *Ellen Merton, The Belle of Lowell: or, the Confessions of the “G.F.K.” Club* (Boston: Brainard & Co., 1844), 6.

³³ *A Tale of Lowell. Norton: or, The Lights and Shades of a Factory Village, Wherein are developed some of the Secret Incidents in the History of Lowell*, by “Argus” (Lowell: “Vox Populi Office,” 1849), 25.

citizens could learn the cosmopolitan skills of discerning and accepting differences.”³⁴ This enforced proximity was depicted in city-mysteries novels as being one of the crucial aspects of the urban experience. The conflict between public and private in antebellum cities has been mentioned previously, but it took on new urgency as American cities grew in population, pushing more and more people into substantially the same amount of space. Under such conditions, as Georg Simmel has written, “what is public becomes ever more public, and what is private becomes ever more private,” a tension that was fed by phenomena such as the penny press and city-mysteries fiction, which flourished on the presumption that they were exposing secrets of “private” life.³⁵

These secrets were increasingly visible, even to passers-by—Bradley Cumings, a young man living in Boston, wrote in his journal in 1831 that, “It is not at all difficult, by walking in the middle of the street, to see what is going on in the chambers of folks’ houses, and in some places, it would be easy to look a story higher.”³⁶ The proximity of urban life heightened the presumed relationship of “seeming” to “being”; as Mr. Harefoot cautioned his son Harry upon leaving him in Boston in *Harry Harefoot*, “As every thing in a city depends upon outside appearances, for people haven’t time to study the inside, you must *appear* every thing you find you cannot *be*.”³⁷ The lack of privacy in the city

³⁴ Ryan, *Civic Wars*, 14.

³⁵ Quoted in Richard Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 168.

³⁶ Bradley N. Cumings, Journal, 1828–1847; entry for February 5, 1831. In collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

³⁷ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *Harry Harefoot; or, The Three Temptations* (Boston: H. L. Williams, 1845), 12; emphasis mine. As Thomas Baker has noted, much of the etiquette of polite society was dedicated to enforcing the correlation between appearance and reality. The restrictions around calling at people’s homes aimed to regulate contact with the outside world in a way that would render it visible and, therefore, respectable. Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 142.

and the power of appearances are borne out in the papers of the 1856 San Francisco Committee of Vigilance, which contain lists of people “Denounced” or put on “Black Lists” based on testimony of what a witness overheard in a saloon, or saw out his back window.³⁸

The density of urban settlement continually confronted citizens with things they could not possess—George Thompson and George Foster both wrote of the torture felt by impoverished pedestrians as they walked by the offices of brokers in the financial districts of New York and Boston, whose windows were filled with specie and bank-notes.³⁹ In Joseph Ingraham’s *The Miseries of New York*, the narrator meets a poor poet in the street who has made a “system” of starvation, “letting my eyes take my tongue’s place” by going around the city looking in shop windows at food until he can “eat” no more.⁴⁰ If the streets offered a pleasurable, diverse spectacle, they also offered pain. Nevertheless, the close proximity of the high and the low was thought to be part of what “urban” meant in the antebellum period. As Hawthorne phrased it, the “stifled element of cities, the entangled life of many men together” exerted a powerful hold on the nineteenth-century American mind.⁴¹ Dr. Joel Ross wrote of a New York omnibus that,

³⁸ See San Francisco Committee of Vigilance Papers, Unclassified Papers, 1853–56, Boxes 1 and 2, Henry E. Huntington Library.

³⁹ See Thompson, *Jack Harold; or, The Criminal’s Career* (Boston: Wm. Berry & Co., 1850), 176; Foster, *Celio*, 53.

⁴⁰ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *The Miseries of New York. Or the Burglar and Counsellor* (Boston: “Yankee” office, 1844), 33.

⁴¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 145.

“the rich and poor must mingle and commingle together, and thus distinction, rank, and caste are necessarily moulded into a healthy equilibrium.”⁴²

The Effects of Urban Proximity

That positive view of the omnibus experience was one interpretation of one of the most signal characteristics of urban life as presented in city-mysteries fiction—proximity—that directly addressed the changing boundaries between public and private in antebellum society. The authors of the *Annals of San Francisco* claimed that “association” was the “sand-paper which rubs down nature’s asperities, the burnisher which polishes the rough surface of society,” and it is clear that association—across the lines of class, race, gender, ethnicity, and religion—was enforced by the compact nature of antebellum cities.⁴³ Cities were thought of as places where extremes were placed close together, as George Thompson put it, where “wealth and poverty jostle each other, while piety and vice are next door neighbors. The millionaire lives in the next street to the mendicant; and the sanctuary of prayer adjoins a brothel.”⁴⁴ In many respects, city-mysteries novels can be regarded as expressions of varying degrees of optimism or pessimism about the ability of the encounters generated by this proximity of social extremes to smooth the “rough surface of society.”

But if the compact urban fabric made it possible for people to spy on their neighbors with opera glasses, as in *The Three Widows*, it also brought people into close

⁴² Joel Ross, M.D., *What I Saw in New-York; or, A Bird’s Eye View of City Life* (Auburn, NY: Derby & Miller, 1852), 64.

⁴³ Frank Soulé, John H. Gihon, and James Nisbet, *The Annals of San Francisco* (New York: D. Appleton, 1855), 673–74.

⁴⁴ Thompson, *Jack Harold*, 7.

proximity to things they would rather ignore.⁴⁵ One children's travel guide to New York wrote that, if one were to "go just behind the front wall" of the buildings in Broadway, the "rich and glorious" thoroughfare of the city, one would "find it filled with workshops, where steam-engines are whizzing, and where, from morning to night, men and women, and little children, too, are driving their work...."⁴⁶ It was not only industry that was encroaching ever closer to the heart of city life, but more sinister elements that were also crowded cheek by jowl with the wealthy and respectable. One author described Chambers Street in New York as being filled with such houses "as good families down town live in. But from this street you can throw a stone to the vilest part of the great city of New York—to the region where the most squalid vice and the most abject poverty unite to hold their orgies...."⁴⁷ Frank Forester described the West End of Boston as being home to prostitutes "living side by side, as it were, with the wealth and aristocracy of the city," but shrugged off this violation of Bostonian propriety by observing that, "The same may be said of all large cities."⁴⁸ If cities were thought to place extremes of wealth and poverty, virtue and vice, right next to each other, then narratives that outlined this proximity and its potential consequences worked to create a sense in their readers that every day of urban life was lived on a razor's edge between safety and violation, rendering the city simultaneously terrifying and exciting.

⁴⁵ *The Three Widows: or, The Various Aspects of Gotham Life*, By a Member of the New York Bar (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1849). In this novel, a Mr. Mansfield uses his lorgnette to look through the windows of an attractive Quaker woman who has just moved in across the street from his house in East Broadway, largely because it was a heavily Quaker neighborhood.

⁴⁶ Philip Wallys, *About New York: An Account of What a Boy Saw in his Visit to the City* (New York: Dix, Edwards & Co., 1857), 61–3.

⁴⁷ *Life in New York*, 2nd ed. (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), 91.

⁴⁸ Frank Forester, *Albert Simmons; or, The Midshipman's Revenge* (Boston: F. Gleason, 1845), 42.

This extreme proximity of city life helped to create an atmosphere of constant competition that was a frequent theme of sensational urban fiction. The compact nature of cities meant that everyone was easily visible, which spurred competition even more. The ability to succeed in this urban free-for-all was the mark of triumph in the ultimate struggle, since those against whom one competed were the best the country had to offer. As George Foster wrote of New York, the city was constantly being replenished “by accessions of the most brilliant individuals ... who, inspired by the only real ambition, rush to the great intellectual focus of the age, to compete where victory is honor and to shine where all is bright.”⁴⁹ The “whirlpool of life in a great city” was presented in city-mysteries as a site of unrelenting competition to shine in society, where there were assembled “countless other souls, each emulating, impelling, stimulating, rivaling, and outdoing the others.”⁵⁰ City-mysteries novelists were fascinated with urban competition, especially in high society, between wealthy families striving to outdo their neighbors, but also among the poor, as is shown in their frequent depictions of the merciless antebellum urban market for unskilled labor, where someone was always willing to work for less.

⁴⁹ George Foster, *New York in Slices*, by an Experienced Carver (New York: William H. Graham, 1849), 124.

⁵⁰ George Thompson, *The Mysteries of Bond Street; or, The Seraglios of Upper-Tendom* (New York: n.p., 1857), 84; Thompson, *The Countess; or, Memoirs of Women of Leisure, Being a Series of Intrigues with the Bloods* (Boston: Berry & Co., 1849), 18. The second quoted passage, from *The Countess*, is a direct reference to a work by a “certain author,” namely Edwin Chapin’s *Moral Aspects of City Life*. Later in the novel Thompson implies that Chapin, a “handsome minister of one of the orthodox churches,” was one of the admirers of the title character, a famous prostitute, frequently writing her poems and visiting her to talk of “Religion and Love” (29-30). Why Thompson would have read Chapin’s lectures on urbanism is impossible to know, but the way the reference is used indicates that the ways in which sensational novelists and Unitarian ministers thought about the city may not have been all that different. Lecture Three in Chapin’s book is titled “The Strife for Precedence,” and is solely about the unceasing competition of urban life.

The upside of this status of cities as “battle-ground[s] of annihilating competition” was that, because cities attracted the best and the brightest and because competition was so intense, they were the best places for people of talent to get noticed. The image of the city as extracting the utmost from its citizens, and offering them the chance to display their skills to the widest possible audience, stands in stark contrast to Doesticks’s only partly-humorous depiction of the “Western town where, like the rest who dwell therein, thy abilities will be underdeveloped, thy talents will be veiled, thy energies rust out...”⁵¹ The eponymous hero in *Luke Lovell, the Widow’s Son*, fancies himself just such a “powerful mind,” and, possessed of “an impression that his genius was too extensive to be confined to a forty-acre farm in the poor County of York” in southern Maine, decides to move to Boston.⁵²

While the high level of visibility that the dense city offered could prove dangerous to unsophisticated, beautiful girls, whose charms attracted the unscrupulous and licentious, for men it was an important inducement in an era where being “noticed” by the right person could prove to be the basis for a successful career, as was the precipitating incident in so many of Horatio Alger’s narratives of urban success after the Civil War. The dense urban city also offered the best stage on which to demonstrate one’s success. John Beauchamp Jones, in *The Spanglers and the Tingles*, remarked that, in Philadelphia, as in other large cities

are the circumstances and projects of conspicuous characters, even in spite of their efforts to the contrary, known to the community. But then, what were fine

⁵¹ [Mortimer Thompson], *Doesticks: What He Says*, by Q. K. Philander Doesticks P. B. (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1859), 300.

⁵² *Luke Lovell, the Widow’s Son; or, the Adventures of a Young Gentleman from the State of Maine, Who Went to Seek His Fortune in Boston* (Boston: for sale by H. B. Skinner, 1848), 2.

equipages, rich dresses, and magnificent mansions, if it were not known to whom they belonged? With out this, one might as well be poor as rich, so far as enjoyment is concerned. ... Notoriety, distinction, is the great aim in all countries ... and happiness seems to be measured by comparison, and enjoyed by contrast.⁵³

This “enjoyment by contrast” operated, however, through invidious comparison between those who had succeeded and those who had failed, which was the downside of urban proximity. The author of *Will He Find Her?*, in order to help “the southern reader” better understand New York’s geography, gives an absurdly precise description of the Five Points slum, describing it as being “only one hundred yards distant” from Chatham Street, the “second thoroughfare of the Empire City,” only “six hundred yards” from the Bowery, the city’s “third thoroughfare,” and a mere three hundred yards from Broadway, the city’s heart.⁵⁴ The proximity generated by cities such as New York forced comparisons between the squalor of Five Points and the glamour of Broadway. The contrasts between extremes were more apparent in cities both because the extremes were so close together and because a much wider gap separated the poles of society in urban areas than in rural ones.

While some writers held that the visible presence of the good life in cities would be a spur to industry in those less well off, a more common refrain concerned the misery that such comparisons produced. Henry Ward Beecher, no stranger to social climbing, wrote that, “Covetousness breeds misery. The sight of houses better than our own, of

⁵³ John Beauchamp Jones, *The Spanglers and the Tingles; or, The Rival Belles* (Philadelphia: A. Hart, 1852), 16. Jones’s fiction frequently bears out Georg Simmel’s observation that, “For many individuals, property does not gain its significance with mere ownership, but only with the consciousness that others must do without it.” *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. by Kurt H. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950), 332.

⁵⁴ Winter Summerton, *Will He Find Her? A Romance of New York and New Orleans* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1860), 1847.

dress beyond our means, of jewels costlier than we may wear, ... and rare curiosities beyond our reach, these hatch the viper brood of covetous thoughts; vexing the poor—who would be rich; tormenting the rich—who would be richer.”⁵⁵ Edward Chapin joined the chorus, identifying “Imitation, especially in the city,” as the “source of more misery and wrong, than almost anything else that can be named.” The “fear of losing caste, and of what the people will say” identified by Chapin was a constant theme in a genre like city-mysteries that was obsessed with class mobility and the superficiality of urban elites.⁵⁶ Mrs. Gordon, a snobby New York socialite in Osgood Bradbury’s *Ellen Grant*, is astonished when two of her friends say they have no wish to be envied: “Did you ever! not wish to be envied? Why, dear Catharine, life would be dull and insipid if people didn’t envy us. ... To live and not be talked about, nor make the vulgar stare, would be a dull life for me.”⁵⁷

The familiarity with the luxuries of urban life that proximity forced upon the urban poor, according to a character in *The Mysteries of Rochester*, creates “a kind of desire ... for having them constantly,” adding that, since “this they cannot honestly do, therefore temptation steps in, aided by desire,” resulting in crime born from the seed of urban emulation.⁵⁸ In an 1847 entry in his diary, Philip Hone wrote that New York had come to rival the large cities of Europe: “the two extremes of costly luxury in living, expensive establishments, and improvident waste are presented in daily and hourly

⁵⁵ Henry Ward Beecher, *Lectures to Young Men, on Various Important Subjects* (Salem: John P. Jewett & Co., 1846), 89. Beecher was also no stranger to covetousness, especially when it applied to his “neighbor’s wife.”

⁵⁶ Edwin H. Chapin, *Moral Aspects of City Life: A Series of Lectures* (New York: Henry Lyon, 1854), 64.

⁵⁷ Bradbury, *Ellen Grant*, 42.

⁵⁸ John Chumasero, *The Mysteries of Rochester* (Rochester: W. H. Beach, 1845), 52.

contrast with squalid misery and hopeless destitution.”⁵⁹ A firsthand witness to the growing ostentation of New York life that was fed by the creation of new business fortunes in the antebellum era, Hone expressed remorse after one lavish dinner upon reflecting how much good for the poor could have been done with the money spent on one bottle of wine or piece of foie gras, and he was undoubtedly aware that at least some of the city’s poor could see just how extravagant these entertainments were. The author of *The Factory Girl* wrote that, “No one can enjoy the full amount of happiness which is attainable by mortals, until they believe themselves as well off as others,” a happiness that was presented as almost impossible to achieve in cities where the poor could see not only their rich neighbors as they promenaded down Broadway or Chestnut Street or Washington Street, but also the outpouring of consumer goods arrayed in the show windows of the shops in these main streets that attracted the promenaders in the first place.⁶⁰

City of Extremes

Social structure was not the only area in which antebellum cities were presented as being “extreme.” The speed and intensity of city life were crucial aspects of the urban experience, and were keys to the view of the city as the ultimate test of character and endurance; as John Todd wrote, “Every thing, in the great city, from the tire on the carriage-wheel, to the strongest moral and mental attainments, is tasked to its utmost

⁵⁹ Philip Hone, *The Diary of Philip Hone, 1828–1851*, 2 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1927), 2: 785–6; entry for Jan. 29, 1847.

⁶⁰ Ariel Ivers Cummings, M.D., *The Factory Girl: or, Gardez la Coeur* (Lowell: J. E. Short and Co., 1847), 24.

limits. Nowhere else, does every thing human wear out so fast.”⁶¹ As was mentioned above, New York was felt to be the most extreme, and therefore most urban, place in the country. The radical Democrat Mike Walsh, publisher of the *Subterranean* newspaper, wrote that Philadelphia bore the same resemblance to New York that a baby did to a man, saying, “It is big enough—plenty; but then it lacks the life, spirit and soul, which are indispensable to a city....”⁶² These qualities—life, spirit, constant movement, variation—taken in extreme quantities were seen as crucial elements of the urban.

The vastness and diversity of the urban experience, in all its extremity, was celebrated in city-mysteries as being exhilarating almost to the point of surfeit. George Lippard compared a Philadelphian in New York for the first time to a “parrot attempting to walk on a tea table”:

... in New York all is mud, flash, and uproar. ... Down Broadway! Churches like jails; houses like hospitals; women dressed in rainbows; men hurrying along as though running for their lives, or for the Doctor; lean supernumeraries, dressed in Turkish attire, and holding forth tempting inducements of an ‘Exhibition of Model Artists’ up stairs; a sea of omnibuses and umbrellas, rolling from gutter to gutter, down the street, as far as the eye can see; beggars at every step, and of all sizes, and all shades of rags; a noise like Babel, the moment after the confusion of tongues....⁶³

This combined profusion of visual and aural stimuli contributed to what may be described as an “urban sublime” in many city-mysteries, peopled not by yeoman farmers and noble savages but by people whose “predilections were all in favor of city life with

⁶¹ John Todd, *Moral Influence*, 71.

⁶² Michael Walsh, *Sketches of the Speeches and Writings of Michael Walsh* (New York: Thomas McSpedon, 1843), 83. Likewise the Philadelphia lawyer Sidney George Fisher wrote in 1841 that New York “is the only place like a great city in its characteristics that we have and I am always interested for a time by the aspect of movement, life and constant improvement which it presents.” Fisher, *A Philadelphia Perspective*, 122.

⁶³ *Quaker City Weekly*, March 3, 1849.

its noisy hum of industry and crowded thoroughfares....”⁶⁴ Joseph Ingraham, in *Harry Harefoot*, captures the almost visceral thrill of arriving in Boston from a small Maine village, a contrast that “could scarce be greater if they had landed in the moon”:

the confused noises of a great sea-port struck them with awe ... and the next moment [Harry] was at his father’s side, his head perfectly bewildered and overrun with the novelty of all he saw; and the idea that he was to make Boston his residence filled his bosom with a sort of wild ecstasy, under the impulse of which he went almost leaping and bounding up the broken plank sidewalk that was then placed in front of the stores on Long Wharf.⁶⁵

The near fantastic variety, noise, and excitement of urban life, the product of the promiscuous mixture of high and low, rich and poor, sacred and profane, light and shadow, offered to citizens (especially those from the country) an endless source of diversion, and provided authors with a bottomless well of source material. While Emma Wellmont wrote that urban transiency had so infected the countryside that “everywhere has become a city, everybody has assumed city habits,” most writers felt that city life, characterized primarily by speed and variability, was different in both quality and kind from the life lived in smaller towns. As the title character of George Thompson’s *The Countess* recounted her arrival in Boston from Maine at the age of 14, “... I could but feel that I was about entering upon a more extensive area of life, ... where there was more action—more commotion, a vastity more of what the world call ‘real life.’”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ George Thompson, *The G'hals of Boston; or, Pen and Pencil Sketches of Celebrated Courtezans, by One of 'Em* (Boston: William Berry, 1850), 29.

⁶⁵ Ingraham, *Harry Harefoot*, 4–5.

⁶⁶ Thompson, *The Countess*, 21.

“Money is the Key”

The motive power behind all this urban commotion and excitement, according to popular narratives of city life, was money. Money and its pursuit were held to be why cities existed, and cities were often discussed as if they were not physical accretions of brick and masonry but concentrations of capital, or, in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s indelible phrase, “white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish out of non-olfactory money.”⁶⁷ “You must expect to find that on no spot, in the world, can wealth give such immediate power, and consequently on no spot is it so eagerly sought, as in the great city,” John Todd wrote, adding that “the next and certain consequence of this is, that you see the young, the ardent, the keen, and the gifted, rushing into these great marts of nations, to court the smiles of Mammon.”⁶⁸ All of the other qualities that made cities “urban”—the opportunities for fun, freedom, and education, their density, speed, noise, and contrasts—all were seen as being the product of American cities’ fundamentally *economic* (rather than military, religious, administrative, or ceremonial) nature. As one novelist observed, “What a place is this New York of ours! What a boundless and inexhaustible variety of scenes, sights, sorts of life, degrees of ignorance and refinement, grades of virtue and evil, are here comprised! What a whirl of feverish passions—all centering in the wide and rolling tide of money making—or what is designated by the favorite American word, business!”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54–5.

⁶⁸ Todd, *Moral Influence*, 18–19.

⁶⁹ *The Fortunes of a Young Widow, A Veritable Revelation of New York Life in the Nineteenth Century*, by an Old Inhabitant (Boston: Stearns & Co., 1851), iii.

Money was seen as the one common bond that tied everyone in cities together, regardless of all their other differences. Charles Goodrich wrote of New Orleans that the entire population of the city, from “brown and yellow to jet black,” people from “every state, from Maine to Georgia,” all agree “in one point—the pursuit of money. Americans, English, French, Germans, Spaniards, all come hither to make money, and to stay only as long as money is to be made.”⁷⁰ Cities were suffused not only with the spirit of making money but also with spending it, and as antebellum cities increasingly became places of mass consumption, writers noted that, “The impression one gets of cities ... is, that everything in them is for sale.”⁷¹

Sam Bass Warner’s description of the antebellum city’s aspiration to be a community of private money makers is reinforced by a reading of city-mysteries novels, which were very up-front about the power of money and its relationship to urbanism; as George Thompson wrote in *Jack Harold*, “everybody knows that money is the key that unlocks the casket of pleasure, and procures for its fortunate possessor almost every earthly delight.”⁷² One visitor to New York wrote that, “Here people worship that Trinity known as the golden eagle, the silver dollar, and the copper cent, with an idolatry equaled only by a faithful follower of Mahomet,” but many writers, popular and elite, were not so censorious of this mania for money-making.⁷³ Mary Beach and her friend Jane in *Mary Beach: or, The Fulton Street Cap-Maker*, state very clearly that they have moved to the

⁷⁰ Charles Goodrich, *The Family Tourist; or A Visit to the Principal Cities of the Western Continent* (Hartford: Philemon Canfield, 1839), 359.

⁷¹ Junius Henry Browne, *The Great Metropolis: A Mirror of New York* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1869), 92.

⁷² Thompson, *Jack Harold*, 143.

⁷³ *Glimpses of New-York City*, by a South Carolinian (who had nothing else to do) (Charleston: J.J. McCarter, 1852), 11.

city because they want to get rich, and the anonymous author does not criticize that motivation at all. Emma Wellmont stated the premise quite baldly, writing, “Now, I contend, much of our happiness, reason as we will about it, depends on money.”⁷⁴

Defining the Sensational City

What the work of authors like Wellmont or Thompson show is that there was relatively little disagreement in antebellum America about what urbanization represented. Most people agreed that cities stood for the accumulation of capital through commerce, for a certain diversity and intensity of experience, for freedom from scrutiny, and for unsupervised leisure enjoyment, and that what we perceive as disagreements about the value and meaning of cities are in fact disagreements about other changes in American society in the nineteenth century. If, as Thomas Bender writes, “The fundamental defect of the American city, in Olmsted’s view, was its failure to encourage the happiness of urban populations,” that may say less about the existence of a widespread attitude of anti-urbanism than it does about the fact that many thousands of antebellum Americans may have had different definitions of “happiness” than did Frederick Law Olmsted.⁷⁵

Henry Patterson, a New York City hardware store clerk, listed in his diary in 1842 after a visit to Philadelphia “everything which belongs to a great city”: “size, population, wealth, business, noise, bustle, confusion....”⁷⁶ These were “urban” qualities that everyone, pro- and anti-urban alike, seemed to agree on. What many Americans, and

⁷⁴ *Mary Beach*, 40; Wellmont, *Substance and Shadows*, 54.

⁷⁵ Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision*, 171.

⁷⁶ Henry A. Patterson Diary, 5 volumes; 3: 110-11 (July 1842). In collection of the New-York Historical Society. Patterson was not born and raised in New York, but grew up on a farm in New Jersey.

many authors of city-mysteries, differed on was the moral and social potential of such qualities—what would size, and wealth, and noise, and confusion *do* to people? Edwin Roberts, in *The Road to Ruin*, described the pleasure gardens that were popular antebellum urban attractions—and that were frequently depicted as one of the first steps on the road to intemperance—with startling equanimity for a novel whose subtitle is “The Dangers of the Town”: “... there were amusements of all kinds going on,—rational to those who go in a rational manner to enjoy themselves,—vicious to those who seek for vice....”⁷⁷ This indicates the beginnings of a reconciliation with urbanization that city-mysteries novels helped to work out. Instead of the idealized self-contained New England village, where each person’s actions can be watched and guided by a homogeneous society governed by an orthodox Protestant clergy, Americans were forced to come to terms with cities that were simply too big to allow everyone to know everyone, and where individuals would have to make choices about what to do and how to act in full knowledge that, in all likelihood, nobody was watching—or, rather, that everybody was watching, but nobody much cared.

The same novels that contained minute delineations of urban vice and poverty, that railed against the arrogance and avarice of the upper classes of New York or Boston, captured the excitement of urban life and even verged on the sublime. The protagonist of *The Homeless Heir*, Joe Wilson, wanders the streets of Philadelphia sunk in grief over his descent from material comfort to poverty, seemingly another antebellum victim of urban

⁷⁷ Edwin Roberts, *The Road to Ruin; or, The Dangers of the Town. A Career of Crime* (Cincinnati: U. P. James, 1854), 14.

extremity. Instead of depressing him, however, the “rush of active life beside him changed the current of his feelings,” and he is inspired to work to improve his fortunes.⁷⁸

While the juxtaposition of urban sublimity and horror may simply be skillful scene-setting, it captures the ambivalence at the heart of much city-mysteries fiction; these novels strove to show the sensational, seamy underside of cities that many of their authors nevertheless genuinely enjoyed. For those who saw factories as infernos of fire and exploited labor, there were also those who wrote of the sight of the Lowell mills illuminated at night as “one of the most beautiful sights we have ever witnessed ... a spectacle, which might almost lead an observer to believe that our hard-working, matter-of-fact city had been transformed to fairy land.”⁷⁹ For those who saw the parade of belles and dandies on Broadway as a stream of vice and superficiality, there were those who saw “this inexhaustible procession, in the misty perspective ever lost, ever renewed, sweeping onward between its architectural banks to the music of innumerable wheels; the rainbow colors, the silks, the velvets, the jewels, the tatters, the plumes, the faces—no two alike....”⁸⁰ The shared assumptions about what constituted the “urban,” and the variety of responses to them, make city-mysteries novels an exceptionally productive vehicle for studying antebellum attitudes about urbanization.

⁷⁸ *The Homeless Heir; or, Life in Bedford Street; A Mystery of Philadelphia*. By John, the Outcast (Philadelphia: J. H. C. Whiting, 1856), 8.

⁷⁹ “Lowell,” *Lowell Offering*, 2nd ser., 3 (April 1843):149.

⁸⁰ Rev. Edwin H. Chapin, *Humanity in the City* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1854), 16.

The Material City

In *The Master-Builder; or, Life at a Trade*, a man comes to the big city from his small town for the first time, and says: "I shall never get used to the roar of these streets, nor see an end of all the city wonders. But do not imagine from this, that I am home-sick. ... I like the excitement of all this roar, and this sight-seeing, and I hope I may not get so used to it as ever to meet it with indifference."⁸¹ David Stewart has argued that, instead of giving readers command of urban space, popular narratives of city life worked to "construct urban space so that it would command readers."⁸² But readers seem to have found descriptions of urban space equally "commanding" whether they delineated its "mysteries and miseries" or descanted on the "city wonders" (or, as was often the case, paradoxically they did both at once). Authors of these narratives could take for granted that the growing city was an object of fascination for readers; the authors of the *Annals of San Francisco* wrote that "to read and to know something of the history" of the instant metropolis of the West "is so natural and inevitable a desire, that it may be taken for granted, and dismissed as a foregone conclusion."⁸³ Without question, some authors of city-mysteries fiction felt a keen nostalgia for the small country town, and some thought that cities were sinks of iniquity and wickedness, but what captivated all of them was the *novelty* of the form that America's largest cities were taking.

For an era that cherished newness, progress, economic expansion, and trade, America's cities were viewed as prime examples of these phenomena, despite their

⁸¹ Day Kellogg Lee, *The Master Builder; or, Life at a Trade* (Redfield: Clinton Hall, 1852), 31.

⁸² Stewart, "Cultural Work, City Crime, Reading, Pleasure," *American Literary History* 9:4 (Winter 1997), 687.

⁸³ Soulé, Gihon, and Nisbet, *Annals of San Francisco*, 5.

problems.⁸⁴ Other than Boston, whose crooked streets were described in one travel guide as “the result of casualty, not contrivance—just like a European city,” American cities, with their grid layouts, were seen as modern correctives to the squalid urbanism of the Old World.⁸⁵ This “progress” was almost a mania with some, such as E. Porter Belden, whose scale model of New York has already been mentioned. Belden referred to the crooked leftover streets of Dutch New York as a “scandal,” but called readers’ attention away from downtown to the new streets that were laid out following the Commissioners’ Plan of 1811, “without a deviation to the right hand or to the left,” and to the portion of upper Manhattan “which scarce includes an angle more or less than 90 degrees....”⁸⁶ Belden looked forward to a day in the near future when all of Manhattan would be laid out on the grid, and proclaimed that, “Probably no other city would have evinced the public spirit of New York in widening and straightening its ancient streets. Large piles of valuable buildings have opposed no barrier to the accomplishment of this object. The work of improvement is not yet completed. While we write, the crash of buildings, under the hand of innovation, can be heard, making way for an outlet to one of the principal business streets of the city [William Street].”⁸⁷

⁸⁴ As Dana Brand notes, the urban flaneur, with his embrace of commerce and competitive trade, was more in tune with the “ideological mainstream” of America than of Europe. Brand, *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 77–8.

⁸⁵ Goodrich, *The Family Tourist*, 41.

⁸⁶ E. Porter Belden, *New York: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Prall, Lewis and Co., 1851), 28. The Commissioners’ Plan, put forth in 1811, determined the pattern of future development on Manhattan by laying out the familiar street grid above Chambers Street that (with the exception of Greenwich Village) exists today, with twelve broad avenues running north-south. While many urban planners, particularly those of a more utopian stripe, have built careers on finding fault with this plan, it is undeniable that the City Commissioners succeeded in their primary goal: to make New York City the most commerce-friendly city in the U.S. Wide, straight streets made New York an easy city in which to build buildings, deliver and ship goods, and conduct business at street level.

⁸⁷ Belden, *New York*, 29.

Belden's version of urbanization-as-Manifest Destiny was neither unique nor confined to the physical layout of cities, and this progressive spirit was not attributed to Manhattan alone. In *The Mysteries of St. Louis*, a man arrives in St. Louis shortly after a devastating fire has burned most of the city, but amidst the devastation, "no wailing or despondency was heard! No faintheartedness or despair! The manly and vigorous elasticity of the American character, the unremitting, indefatigable go-ahead actions of our fellow-citizens, here show forth in their true splendor and brilliancy."⁸⁸ If St. Louis demonstrated after this one fire American pluck and drive in "their true splendor and brilliancy," then San Francisco—which was seemingly on fire almost constantly during the Gold Rush era—must have seemed the apogee of antebellum initiative. Its fusion of excitement, gold, Westering, and an overwhelmingly young and male populace contributed to "the San Franciscan 'go-ahead' disposition" that served to make an immigrant from anywhere to that city "a shrewder and more energetic man, who works harder, lives faster, and enjoys more of both intellectual and sensuous existence than he would be able to do in any other land."⁸⁹

In the *Quaker City Weekly* of 26 May 1849, George Lippard announced the arrival of summer in Philadelphia, exhorting, "Come to the Quaker City, Stranger! This place of clean streets, brick walls, and Eden-like squares, is worth a visit. The Gold Dollar has just been issued from the Mint, and you can obtain as many of them as you want. They are absolutely given away." While this parody of "Go West" puffery was

⁸⁸ Henry Boernstein, *The Mysteries of St. Louis, a Novel*, translated by Friedrich Munch (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Co., 1990 [1851]), 84.

⁸⁹ Soulé, et al., *Annals of San Francisco*, 505–6.

meant as a joke, it captures some of the sense of novelty surrounding antebellum cities that made comparing them to the American West not entirely ridiculous. The urge in all branches of antebellum American culture to demonstrate superiority to Europe was nowhere more evident than in discussions of the American city, which Amory Dwight Mayo claimed “is essentially a different thing from a European capital,” which “represent quite another phase in the history of human progress than our own”⁹⁰

Urban Authorship

Authors of city-mysteries were no different from the “Knickerbocker Set” described by Perry Miller, who “did not want to range the wilderness with Natty Bumppo.... What they wanted was that Nassau Street and Gramercy Park be rated equivalents of Fleet Street and Grosvenor Square.”⁹¹ In fact, city-mystery authors often engaged in outright urban boosterism in these novels that are so often described as anti-urban. Jabe Johnson, a Yankee from New Hampshire, applies for work at the home of a Quakeress in New York in *The Three Widows*, saying that he had first gone to Boston, but then was told that a larger city lay farther south, so he thought he would go there, explaining, “Small places don’t satisfy a man that was born near the White

⁹⁰ Amory Dwight Mayo, *Symbols of the Capital; or, Civilization in New York* (New York: Thatcher & Hutchinson, 1859), 40–41. Mayo reflects on the unique character of American cities as seats of commercial rather than imperial or spiritual power. Richard Lehan has argued that the reconception of the city as constituting primarily a site of commerce is reflected in Christopher Wren’s plan for London following the Great Fire of 1666; Wren’s plan was centered on the Royal Exchange and East India House, not a cathedral or palace. Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 26.

⁹¹ Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973 [1956]), 29.

Mountains.”⁹² John Chumasero, whose three novels of Rochester life lie toward the more politically radical end of the city-mysteries spectrum, nevertheless was unable to keep from crowing, in *The Mysteries of Rochester*, that, “We are the denizens of a large and goodly city, noted for its wealth and beauty; in resources, boundless, and in influence, mighty!” Chumasero admitted that the citizens of Rochester “have our oddities, our whims, and our peculiarities,” but dismisses what elsewhere he would decry as the evils of the Rochester elite by summing up that, “take us all in all, and verily, in the language of a worthy counsellor in our midst, ‘We are a tall people!’”⁹³

Authors of city-mysteries novels combined this general embrace of all that was new and American in the nation’s cities with a more specific professional attachment to urban America. George Lippard, so famous for condemning Philadelphia with the decree “Wo Unto Sodom,” wrote to a colleague in the Brotherhood of the Union while visiting Cleveland that, “Indeed, Greene, the farther I get from Philadelphia, the more my heart hangs there. I hate travelling. I hate the dissipation of thought which it causes. And I am anxious to get back home again.”⁹⁴ Andrew Lees has noted that, among “writers of the second and third rank, one encounters a widespread belief during most of the period that the cities were places of promise and opportunity.”⁹⁵ Authors of popular antebellum fiction were no exception, realizing that American cities were both crucial veins of source material and essential to the construction of any sort of sustainable career in the print

⁹² *The Three Widows*, 17.

⁹³ Chumasero, *The Mysteries of Rochester*, 192.

⁹⁴ Letter from George Lippard to E. W. C. Greene, S. R., July 14, 1852. Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Gratz Manuscript Collection, case 6, box 23.

⁹⁵ Andrew Lees, *Cities Perceived: Urban Society in European and American Thought, 1820–1940* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 312.

industry. These authors constantly called attention to the rich and entertaining spectacle offered by city life, whose daily occurrences were “infinitely more amusing, interesting, and instructive, than the mimic representations of the stage,” and pointed out that, in order to write entertaining stories, an author could simply write what he saw happening in the street or investigate the life of a single tenement house.⁹⁶

However ambivalent they were about city life, writers across the literary spectrum in antebellum America were confronted with the reality that making a living as an author in this period essentially required one to live in a city, and however much they decried the money-mad atmosphere of urban life, it was impossible for them to ignore the fact that they either moved to or stayed in cities for largely financial reasons. These writers were well aware of the problems that plagued America’s cities in the 1840s and 1850s. They could see that the primacy of commercial considerations was resulting in cities marred by unsanitary housing and a lack of public spaces. They were all too familiar with urban poverty, crime, filth, intemperance, prostitution, and class resentment. Yet pointing out the ills of a city does not necessarily imply a longing for the country; as Andrew Lees has noted, most writers who “spoke harshly of the urban present drew their readers’ attention to urban ills for the purpose of encouraging them to seek urban remedies.”⁹⁷ It was accepted as a given that the web of city life was “woven of many colors, as well as of different textures, and patterns,” that, as Emerson wrote, if great cities were “disgusting, like the population of a cheese, like hills of ants ... the more the

⁹⁶ *Nick Bigelow: and the Female Burglar; and Other Leaves from a Lawyer’s Diary*, By a Member of the New York Bar (New York: Burgess, Stringer & Co., 1846), 5.

⁹⁷ Lees, *Cities Perceived*, 39.

worse,” they were also the home to “Merlins and Corneliuses, Friar Bacons and Crichtons ... the more the merrier.”⁹⁸ George Foster, who proclaimed New York to be a “vast abyss of crime and suffering,” a “horrid recess of filth,” also admitted that, “A great city is the highest result of human civilization,” a quality he saw embodied in the selflessness of New York’s volunteer firemen.⁹⁹ George Thompson expressed this ambivalence with equanimity, noting that, if “Broadway is far from being wholly pure, so the ‘Points’ are not entirely corrupt....”¹⁰⁰

Thus most writers of city-mysteries would fall into the realistic or “pragmatic” tradition of urban thought, accepting urban difficulties as unavoidable annoyances rather than discrete problems to be solved.¹⁰¹ The author of *The Fortunes of a Young Widow* was unsparing in his presentation of the ills of New York, because, he claimed, he thought it would be valuable to rural readers. “And yet with all this,” he went on, “do not suppose that we condemn our city. No. It is one of the best of cities. We don’t think we could live happily, if forced to stay a year from New York.” He even went so far as to praise the city’s facilities for theater-going and (moderate) drinking, along with the “inexhaustible entertainment” of walking the city’s streets.¹⁰² For him, experience turned the “dangers” of city life into simple pleasures. While rarely shying away from the

⁹⁸ Ross, *What I Saw in New-York*, 182; Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1883), 7: 514–5.

⁹⁹ Foster, *New York in Slices*, 5, 3; on firemen, see George Foster, *New York Naked* (New York: R. M. DeWitt, 185?), 123.

¹⁰⁰ George Thompson, *Grace Willard; or, The High and the Low*, by Greenhorn (New York: Frederic A. Brady, n.d.), 12.

¹⁰¹ John Fairfield, *The Mysteries of the Great City: The Politics of Urban Design, 1877-1937* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993). Fairfield contrasts this “pragmatic” tradition, which reached its peak in the 1920s with the work of Robert Park, with the “utopian,” virtuous-republican view, represented by Frederic Law Olmsted and Henry George, who wanted to infuse the virtues of the country into the city.

¹⁰² *The Fortunes of a Young Widow*, v.

myriad negative aspects of antebellum urbanization, authors of city-mystery fiction for the most part did not turn their backs on cities, but rather looked to the cities themselves rather than to the country for positive change.

The City Legible

Whatever their authors' perspective on the city, however, city-mysteries narratives are informed by two seemingly contradictory assumptions about cities—that they are unknowable, and that they can somehow be explained or made sense of. The increase in size of antebellum cities, combined with an alleged increase in their danger, produced a perception of cities as “illegible” that city-mysteries both tapped into and helped to feed. City-mysteries novels constantly reminded their urban readers that there were parts of their own cities, just outside their doors, about which they knew nothing; Frank Forester wrote that “it is well known to most of our readers” that the Reservoir district in Boston was an “unexplored region. Perhaps not one in a thousand of the inhabitants of Boston ever threaded its narrow and filthy labyrinths....”¹⁰³

The primary conceit of the city-mysteries genre was that urban appearances were deceiving, that one could not believe what one saw, that behind the walls of opulent homes and the facades of urban fashions, the rich could be just as miserable and immoral as anybody else, and the converse applied to the poor as well. Even men who have lived their entire lives in New York, according to Robert Greeley, who have never been as far away as Coney Island, “know nothing of what is transpiring ‘behind the scenes’ in the

¹⁰³ Forester, *Albert Simmons*, 9.

great theatre of metropolitan life.”¹⁰⁴ Philip Hone wrote in his diary in 1846 of a walk he took from Pike Street along the New York waterfront up to Twelfth Street, and he “discovered that I knew no more about New York as it now is than the hermit of Saba. ... I sometimes wonder where they get 45,000 votes at an election, but here is the great overwhelming, animated material.”¹⁰⁵ If a former mayor of the city found New York overwhelming, it is not surprising that the assumption underlying city-mysteries novels—that cities were unknowable and “mysterious,” even to lifelong residents—was an easy sell. As Bill, a body-snatcher in *The Iron Tomb, or the Mock Count of New York* explains of the cauldron room for boiling skeletons that is hidden underneath a plain saloon, “thus it is with all our secrets—they exist where least suspected.”¹⁰⁶

Yet while they repeatedly presented cities as illegible, city-mysteries novels simultaneously offered to “remove the veil” from city life, to allow their readers to puncture the aura of unknowability that surrounded America’s growing cities and see what secrets they held. Popular urban novels depicted cities as a series of images that could be assimilated, much as shop windows along Broadway or Chestnut Street grouped consumer goods together in coherent patterns. Joseph Nunes, Jr., in *Aristocracy*, described a Philadelphia boarding house’s location as “not in a thoroughfare, nor in a fashionable location; nor was it quite out of the world, where the visits of respectable-looking persons would be likely to be remarked; but was just in such a neighborhood where one would expect to see ‘Furnished Lodgings for Single Gentlemen,’ stuck up at

¹⁰⁴ Robert Greeley, *Violet, the Child of the City: A Story of New York Life* (New York: Bunce and Brother, 1854), 270.

¹⁰⁵ Hone, *Diary*, 2: 761 (entry for April 27, 1846).

¹⁰⁶ Charley Bowline, *The Iron Tomb, or the Mock Count of New York. A Local Tale*. (Boston: Geo. H. Williams, Uncle Sam office, 1852), 40.

the windows on written tickets.”¹⁰⁷ This description of a Philadelphia that can be so minutely anatomized stands in sharp contrast to the description of the city as a sprawling, unmanageable metropolis. If many of the readers of Ned Buntline’s *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* had never seen the Five Points, they learned not only that the right guide (such as Frank) could translate the local argot, they learned how to get there from the Carlton House hotel in Broadway—“... down Leonard street toward Centre ... across Centre, and down Orange street to the Five Points.”¹⁰⁸

Given the appropriate experience, these novels told their readers, anybody could become an urban expert and could make sense of the mysteries of city life. For every incident in a city mystery of the crowd swallowing up a fugitive, there is another of a fortuitously overheard conversation or glimpsed face that reveals the desire on the part of many of these writers to render antebellum cities both as teeming hives of activity and as legible small towns. While on some level these are simply the implausible plot devices of any brand of sensational fiction, the constant encounters in these novels between people who know each other in the streets of New York or Boston served to reinforce the idea that the mysteries of a given city *could be known*.

Whether through the device of an Asmodeus figure, able to lift roofs and see through walls, or through rigorous urban anthropology, authors of city-mysteries were deeply invested in the notion that the mysteries of a given city could be comprehended. Part of the ability to comprehend an antebellum city was to expect everything and not be

¹⁰⁷ Joseph Nunes, Jr., *Aristocracy; or, Life in a City*, by a Member of the Philadelphia Bar (Philadelphia: S. G. Sherman, 1848), 99.

¹⁰⁸ Buntline, *Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, 74.

surprised at anything, to affect having already “seen the Elephant,” as well as to be able to read the “system of urban hieroglyphics” such as signs and newspapers, along with non-textual signifiers such as dress and place of residence.¹⁰⁹ But the ability to read the city presumed a knowledge of what was actually mysterious about it, of what resisted comprehension. City-mysteries authors, along with ministers like Edwin Chapin, urged their readers to “Wake up from this indifference, that grows out of familiarity,” and view the cities they knew and lived in as sites of mystery and wonder.¹¹⁰

The usual suspects of poverty and vice were not the actual “mysteries” that these novels purported to unveil, since they were all too familiar. The real “mystery” that city-mysteries strove to address was, How are all these people living so near each other connected? What do they have to do with each other? What are their obligations to one another? It is the connection between the rich merchant and the poor street thief, between the glamorous belle and the poor Irish girl who sewed her dresses, between the moral and the immoral, that antebellum city-mysteries novels sought to illuminate, whether the connections took place in Monk-Hall or through commerce, prostitution, inheritance plots, or race riots. City-mysteries authors shied away from depictions of anomie and alienation like that offered by Melville in “Bartleby,” working instead to attempt to defuse anxiety by offering either instruction or titillation. But instead of following a standard discourse of working-class republicanism, city-mysteries investigated odd disconnections that revealed a mystery, or at least a strange anomaly, beneath the hustle

¹⁰⁹ Henkin, *City Reading*, 146.

¹¹⁰ Chapin, *Moral Aspects*, 16.

and bustle of the city. The next chapter offers a more detailed look at three of the most prolific authors in the genre, and situates them in the urban context in which they worked.

Chapter Four

New Books, New Men: City-Mysteries Fiction, Authorship, and the Literary Market

No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money.

—Samuel Johnson

In an 1821 letter home to his mother from Bowdoin College, the young Nathaniel Hawthorne contemplated his career options:

I have not yet concluded what profession I shall have. The being a Minister is of course out of the Question. I should not think that even you could desire me to choose so dull a way of life.... As to Lawyers, there are so many of them already that one half of them (upon a moderate calculation) are in a state of actual starvation. A Physician, then, seems to be “Hobson’s Choice,” but yet I should not like to live by the diseases and Infirmities of fellow-Creatures.... Oh that I was rich enough to live without a profession. What do you think of my becoming an Author, and relying for support upon my pen?¹

While Mrs. Hawthorne may well have responded to the prospect of having an author son with somewhat guarded enthusiasm, Hawthorne’s family did think enough of this career plan to fund a twelve-year “literary apprenticeship” for Nathaniel after his graduation from Bowdoin.² Hawthorne’s letter, however, along with his use of the word “apprenticeship” to describe his early (and notably unprofitable) years as a writer, highlight a critical point: in antebellum America, authorship was not considered to be a “profession.”

¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Letters of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Centenary ed., vol. 15, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1962), 138–39.

² Hawthorne would later display his awareness of his family’s view of the writer’s life in “The Custom-House,” where he imagines his ancestors mocking his choice.

The only three careers that were consistently described as “professions,” and to which a college education was seen as likely to lead, were medicine, law, and the ministry.³ In fact, one antebellum career advice manual precisely outlined this linkage of formal study and “the professions,” comparing it to the less formal preparation for a “trade,” noting that “some *learn* a trade, who should have *studied* a profession; others *study* a profession, who should have *learned* a trade.”⁴ In its entry on authorship, this manual includes an engraving of a clearly wealthy man, in morning gown and ruffled shirt in a richly-furnished library, replete with busts and leather-bound tomes, yet offers no description at all of the work that an author does or the training that would prepare one for it. Much to the contrary, the entry observes that, “Very few persons are educated with the view to their becoming authors. They generally write on subjects pertaining to the profession or business in which they have been practically engaged...”⁵

It is telling that Hawthorne proposed authorship as a career immediately after expressing his wish to live “without a profession.” Mary Kelley has written that our understanding of female writers during the period has been limited by a tendency to view them as “leisured ladies” whose “effusions poured on to page after page, rather than that of the woman who worked, produced a product, negotiated in the literary marketplace,

³ The requirement of a college education was not absolute for the practice of law, which could be entered into after several years of study and reading under the supervision of a lawyer.

⁴ Edward Hazen, *The Panorama of Professions and Trades; Or, Every Man's Book* (Philadelphia: Uriah Hunt, 1839), vii. Emphasis mine.

⁵ Hazen, *Panorama*, 177. The entire entry on authors is 18 paragraphs long, seven of which are on the history of writing and the alphabet, and eight of which offer a comparative history of copyright protection, covering England, France, Russia, the U.S., Italy, and the German States.

and received money for her labor.”⁶ The same can be said, however, for male writers of popular fiction during the period. We tend to view male authors through the lens of the more privileged, alienated-artist-figures of the American Renaissance, instead of as employees in the industry of print, as one contemporary described them: “literature with them is, as with the publishers for whom they work, but a mercantile business.”⁷

Authorship: A Profession or a Trade?

Why, then, the profusion of scholarship on the emergence of the “profession of authorship” in America? The most obvious explanation is that the book that charted the course for almost all research on American authorship is William Charvat’s *The*

⁶ Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 139-40.

⁷ *Asmodeus in New York* (New York: Longchamp & Co., 1868), 249. The lack of formal schooling is a signal difference between the three authors examined in this chapter and both the canonical figures of the American Renaissance and many other popular writers of the day. Herman Melville attended Albany Academy, and most certainly would have attended college had his father not bankrupted their family. Edgar Allan Poe attended two colleges—the University of Virginia and West Point—but, predictably, was kicked out of both. As has already been mentioned, Nathaniel Hawthorne graduated from Bowdoin, and Ralph Waldo Emerson received the best education available in nineteenth-century America, attending the Boston Latin school and then Harvard. As for more popular writers from the period, the tremendously popular Down East humorist Seba Smith graduated from Bowdoin; N. P. Willis, the most popular magazinist of the day, graduated from Yale; R. H. Dana, author of adventure stories, graduated from Harvard; and Joseph Holt Ingraham attended Hallowell Academy in Maine and spent one year at Yale before being kicked out.

Even the female authors of the day, both popular and “canonical,” were vastly better prepared, at least by virtue of their education, to “turn author.” Emily Dickinson attended a private girls’ academy in Amherst and spent a year at Mount Holyoke; Margaret Fuller was rigorously educated in the classics by her father, who decided to educate her as if she had been the son he wanted; and Harriet Beecher Stowe spent five years at a girls’ academy in Litchfield, Connecticut before attending her sister’s Female Seminary in Hartford. Susan Warner, Maria Cummins, and E.D.E.N. Southworth, all authors of sentimental best-sellers, and all from affluent families, were either educated at home by tutors or graduated from private girls’ academies.

In contrast, of the three authors under consideration here, only George Lippard attended any high school at all, and that not for long, staying only about a year. The *sui generis* Walt Whitman is the only canonical literary figure of this period whose background resembles those of most authors of city-mysteries novels, and his career followed a similar trajectory: starting work as a printer’s apprentice in Brooklyn at age twelve, Whitman went on to work for a printing office in Manhattan, which led him to begin writing for local newspapers.

Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870, originally published in 1968. Charvat and many of his followers, however, all too frequently limited themselves to the study of well-known writers who, by virtue of their class and educational backgrounds, could reasonably have been expected to become “professionals” in the antebellum sense. So much of what we know about antebellum authorship is derived from the study of figures who were from a class for whom authorship was, in some respects, a step down--a form of “downward mobility,” as Lawrence Buell has described it.⁸ I am more interested, however, in whether authorship looks different when looked at from a different perspective, that of people for whom being an author was a *good* career outcome, in particular, writers of popular fiction from working-class backgrounds. If we have tended to view antebellum authorship as a “genteel” activity, it may be in part due to the fact that the antebellum figures to whom most attention is paid—Melville, Hawthorne, Cooper—were relatively genteel *before* they became authors.⁹

But what form did authorship take for authors who were from less elevated circumstances? Because writers are “embedded in a culture and surrounded by other workers (be they iron-puddlers or lawyers, mill girls or doctors),” their work as writers “will be to some extent shaped by the norms that define all these kinds of work at that

⁸ Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture From Revolution to Renaissance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 42. In writing of the popular periodical literature of antebellum New England, Buell describes it as being “supplied largely by people with college educations,” with some coming from “nongentry scribblers,” a view of who wrote and why that I hope this chapter will complicate.

⁹ While Melville’s immediate family fell on hard times when his father went bankrupt when Herman was twelve, up to that point he had been raised in patrician surroundings in New York City. Even after his father’s bankruptcy and death (in 1832), while Melville was withdrawn from school and put to work, he was aided by various uncles on both sides of the family. While Melville’s public self-presentation, especially early in his career, was that of a rugged common sailor, he was sufficiently genteel to marry Elizabeth Shaw, the daughter of the chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court. The crucial consideration is that, at least until the age of twelve, Melville would have been raised with more elevated career aspirations than authorship.

time.”¹⁰ Since in antebellum America there were far more laborers than lawyers, it is reasonable to assume that some portion of the writing population might have come from this milieu; as one British critic noted, “In proportion as the multitude acquire the habit of reading books, many from that class will become employed in producing them.”¹¹ And these writers from the “multitude” would have defined their work experience according to the norms of the artisanal rather than the professional world, even while feeling keenly their lack of academic credentials.¹²

There is no question that the antebellum era marked the critical transitional period for authorship in America from a genteel avocation to a career organized by market mediations or, as Michael Newbury has written, that “the pitfalls and promises of professionalization are at the heart of the antebellum authorial experience.”¹³ To assume that these pitfalls and promises were experienced in the same way by all writers, regardless of their background, their class position, their gender, or what kind of writing they did, is to grossly oversimplify an incredibly vibrant and diverse print culture.

¹⁰ Nicholas Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 12.

¹¹ Robert Vaughan, *The Age of Great Cities: or, Modern Civilization Viewed in its Relation to Intelligence, Morals, and Religion* (London: Jackson and Walford, 1843), 142.

¹² Samuel Young, in his city-mystery of Pittsburgh, *The Smoky City*, pleaded his readers’ indulgence for his unpolished prose, specifically pointing to his lack of educational opportunity and his working-class status as extenuating circumstances: “Know us—of humble origin, of limited education, and now, and for years past, compelled to toil from morn till night, beneath the rays of a burning sun, or amid the blasts of winter; thus we have been deprived of those exalted privileges which pour into the mind a stream of intelligence—an attribute of genius, producing the ripe fruits of knowledge, spontaneously springing in the breast, around the heart, burthening the mind with loftiest thought, proudest ambition and holiest desires. We are now, and presume ever will be, a laborer, and therefore we solicit a pardon if we have trespassed the laws which govern the ripe scholar and man of correct taste.” Samuel Young, *The Smoky City: A Tale of Crime* (Pittsburgh: A. A. Anderson, 1845), v.

¹³ Michael Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 120. For another stimulating examination of antebellum authorial labor, especially as it related to issues of race and masculinity, see Paul Gilmore, *The Genuine Article: Race, Mass Culture, and American Literary Manhood* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

“Professional” authorship, as with all trades, was a very different proposition depending on the class of goods one hoped to sell.

Charvat wrote that the “terms of professional writing are these: that it provides a living for the author, like any other job; that it is a main and prolonged, rather than intermittent or sporadic, resource for the writer; that it is produced with the hope of extended sale in the open market, like any article of commerce; and that it is written with reference to buyers’ tastes and reading habits.”¹⁴ Charvat modified this focus in a significant way, however, when he wrote elsewhere that he was interested in writers “for whom both art and income were matters of concern.”¹⁵ According to these terms, there were few writers of “art” prose who succeeded in making a living in this period. As a critic of “cheap literature” writing in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1844 asked, “Where are our authors, and how employed? Washington Irving, taking lessons in diplomacy at the grave Spanish court! Bryant, the editor of a party print, the most prosaic of all human occupations; Halleck, turning his attention from book-making to book-keeping, of the two, we doubt not, far the more profitable employment,” saying that only Cooper remained as an author trying to make a living by his art.¹⁶ Tellingly, this writer concurred with Charvat, excluding from consideration as “authors” anyone who wrote for magazines or newspapers, because of the ephemerality of their work, despite his

¹⁴ William Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 3.

¹⁵ William Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), 7.

¹⁶ "Cheap Literature: Its Character and Tendencies," by a Southron, *Southern Literary Messenger*, vol. 10, no. 1 (January 1844): 35-6.

admission that most of the literary talent of his day was finding an outlet in just such ephemeral forms instead of in morocco bindings.¹⁷

I do not wish to diminish the profound significance of Charvat's work, but rather to complicate this view of authorship in antebellum America. Introducing the element of concern with "art" as well as income excludes many antebellum Americans who lived by their pens and who did not think of their authorial work as being on the same level as the practice of law or medicine. Samuel Young, the author of *The Smoky City*, a city-mystery set in Pittsburgh, figured his authorship in more mundane terms: "In our literary, as well as in our more physical employment, we have delivered many a load of mental packages. The most valuable, (in our estimation,) of them all will be found securely arranged in a box marked the 'Smoky City;' and we sincerely hope that when the owner shall have opened the case and examined the silks and calicoes contained therein, he will find them worthy of a customer...."¹⁸

This chapter will address this issue of authorship through three "case-studies" of men who wrote city-mysteries novels. Because of both their backgrounds and what they wrote, none of the three would have been considered either an artist or a professional. For all three, writing was first and foremost a *job*. These writers—George Lippard, George Thompson, and Justin Jones—all earned a living and supported their families on what they wrote, without the benefit of consular appointments or custom-house posts or

¹⁷ For a very useful examination of the impact of expanding magazine outlets for written work on nineteenth-century American authors, see Ellery Sedgwick, "Magazines and the Profession of Authorship in the United States, 1840-1900," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 94:3 (September 2000), 399–425. While Sedgwick focuses on genteel magazines and more conventionally "literary" writers, the presence of more (and more lucrative) venues for writing would have affected attitudes toward the career more generally.

¹⁸ Young, *The Smoky City*, v.

free cabins on Emerson's woodlot. Finding a term to describe them that is neither historically inaccurate ("professional authors") nor derogatory ("hack writers") is difficult. While it is far from ideal, the term "culture workers" seems to capture the essence of their situation, for it reflects that their life of words was *work*, as well as the fact that, as for many of their more canonical brethren, being a "writer" often meant working in many roles within print culture besides that of author of bound volumes of prose fiction—as editors, publishers, journalists, printers, advertising copywriters, booksellers, playwrights, etc., with all of the different status implications that these various positions carried. In fact, for all three men, writing was a logical step on the ladder of their careers in the culture industry.¹⁹

The Industry of Print

The production of printed material was transformed more dramatically than perhaps any other field of business in antebellum America. The rapid expansion of transportation networks across America, the growth of large urban centers, increases in literacy in the United States, and technological advances in printing technology all led to an explosion of printed material in the period, along with a drastic decrease in its cost. Beginning in the 1820s, with the financial success of James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving, American writers of fiction entered an era that offered an increasing

¹⁹ I do not wish to argue that these authors somehow constitute some sort of link to an earlier model of folk culture in which people produced their own entertainment; as Lawrence Levine notes, "Modernity dealt a blow to artisanship in culture as well as in material commodities." These men were working in an *industry*, one that was still taking shape, but one that also had great economic significance and required substantial amounts of capital. Lawrence Levine, "The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences," *American Historical Review* 97:5 (Dec. 1992): 1269-1399; 1373.

number of outlets for their work, and offered as well the possibility of making a living. Along with the rise of daily penny papers following the appearance of the *New York Sun* in 1833, a flood of other periodical literature—magazines, literary reviews, quarterlies, weekly newspapers, huge ‘story papers’—offered virtually anyone who wanted it a chance to see their work in print, and even hinted at paying some of them.²⁰

The production of this torrent of printed material left its imprint on America’s cities. The technological advances in printing in the 1830s led to a consolidation, and an urbanization, of the industry, as small-town presses could no longer compete with the larger publishers that were congregating in New York and Philadelphia and, to a lesser extent, Boston (these three cities would account for 90% of the fiction published in the United States by 1840). This nascent culture industry was populated not just by authors, but by all manner of associated literary entrepreneurs and tradesmen: publishers, booksellers, papermakers, amanuenses, and critics, as well as the more obvious workers—printers, engravers, stereotypers, bookbinders, stationers, editors, illustrators, library keepers, newspaper staff, newsboys, type founders, etc. Edward Hazen’s *Panorama of Professions and Trades*, first published in 1836, lists 68 different trades, or jobs, nine of which are in some way related to the print industry, more than are listed for any other industry.²¹ Based on a comparison of the relative magnitude of different

²⁰ Magazines alone, on the more prestigious end of the periodical spectrum, illustrate the scope of these changes. In 1800, there were about a dozen magazines published in the United States. This had increased to about 100 by 1825, and to almost 600 by 1850. See Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, 5 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1930).

²¹ Hazen, *Panorama*, 1839. The nine trades listed are: Engraver; Copperplate Printer; Lithographer; Author; Printer; Type-Founder; Stereotyper; Paper-maker and Bookbinder (listed as one trade); Bookseller. Agriculture/food production has eight related trades listed, as does metalworking, but that category extends from blacksmiths and gunsmiths to goldworkers and jewelers.

sectors of the economy, one scholar has noted that during the single decade of the 1830s, “employment in information-related trades and industries grew at a more rapid pace than employment in any other sector between 1800 and the present,” despite the impact of the Panic of 1837.²² The 1840 Census showed that New York had nearly 2000 workers employed in printing and publishing (not counting many of the associated trades listed above), making it the city’s “single most important industry,” a fact which is often borne out in antebellum urban fiction by frequent references to the masses of workers, especially young women, going to work in the print shops and binderies of Nassau, Fulton, and Ann Streets.²³

The dramatic increase in the scale of the publishing business opened up new career options for bright young men who could not afford college. Writing of William Lloyd Garrison’s decision to apprentice himself to a printer in 1818, R. Jackson Wilson states that, “Being a printer was the trade that was most likely to lead out of the ranks of artisans and into the life of a gentleman,” although it is important to note that printers were still considered “mechanics,” or working-class.²⁴ A young man in Joseph Holt Ingraham’s novella *Charles Blackford, or the Adventures of a Student in Search of a Profession* is forced by his snobbish parents to attend college, “destined for a liberal profession,” when he would have much preferred being a printer (the end result being

²² Terence Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 77.

²³ Allan Pred, *The Spatial Dynamics of U.S. Urban-Industrial Growth, 1800–1914: Interpretive and Theoretical Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966), 174–75.

²⁴ R. Jackson Wilson, *Figures of Speech: American Writers and the Literary Marketplace, from Benjamin Franklin to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 120. For more on the class status of printers, see Stephen Botein, “‘Meer Mechanics’ and an Open Press: The Business and Political Strategies of Colonial American Printers,” *Perspectives in American History* 9 (1975), 157–60, and Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760–1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 169.

that he is forced to accept charity while in college, is jailed for a debt of three dollars, and dies of shame).²⁵ While the possibilities offered by a life in the printing industry would have been significantly less rosy by the 1830s, due to the increased barriers to entry to the trade that technological innovations like the steam press had imposed, it was still viewed as one of the more desirable (and certainly one of the safer) artisanal trades. Dr. Joel Ross, writing in 1852, claimed that young men with “a fund of knowledge to communicate” were all too apt to get “out of the machine shop into the printing office....”²⁶

For whatever reason, gentlemanly ambition or a pent up “fund of knowledge,” Justin Jones apprenticed himself to a printer in Brunswick, Maine in 1814, and at the age of 17 moved to Boston. Likewise, George Thompson (about whom very little is known other than that he was quite fat and had a drinking problem), born in New York in 1822 or -23, was (he claimed) apprenticed to a printer after having been left an orphan.²⁷

George Lippard’s road to authorship did not start at the compositor’s desk, but in the copy room of a Philadelphia newspaper. Born in 1822 in Chester County, Pennsylvania,

²⁵ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *Charles Blackford, or the Adventures of a Student in Search of a Profession* (Boston: G.W. Redding, 1845), 8.

²⁶ Dr. Joel Ross, *What I Saw in New-York; or a Bird’s Eye View of City Life* (Auburn, NY: Derby & Miller, 1852), 214-5.

²⁷ Much of what we “know” about Thompson comes from his 1854 “Autobiography,” all of which should be viewed with appropriate suspicion (especially his claim to have lost an eye in a knife fight). It is unfortunate that so little is known about all three of these authors, and that we are forced to rely on statements from the authors themselves that are of dubious value. This lack of concrete information about who wrote city-mysteries has, I would argue, contributed to their continued neglect. As Peter Buckley has written of Ned Buntline, “Judson as ‘Buntline’ is only a product of existing genres and enthusiasms, and one cannot recreate the kind of life that we are willing to give the Melville that stalks behind Redburn and Ishmael.” Peter G. Buckley, “The Case Against Ned Buntline: The ‘Words, Signs, and Gestures’ of Popular Authorship,” in *Prospects* 13 (1988), 256. The best extant biography of Thompson is in the introduction to *“Venus in Boston” and Other Tales of Nineteenth-Century City Life*, ed. David S. Reynolds and Kimberly Gladman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

into a downwardly-mobile farm family of German extraction, Lippard was orphaned at 15 and, after a brief stint as a law clerk, found his way to the rewrite desk of *The Spirit of the Times*, a Democratic penny daily.

The three men would all become authors of cheap, popular fiction, including city-mysteries novels. Yet their experiences would diverge widely, as would their material success. Lippard, a radical Democrat-cum-utopian socialist, became the most famous, and sold the most books. Yet he also made the most enemies, and died youngest, at only 32, following close on the heels of his wife and two young children. Jones started his own job printing business in Boston before appearing in print as an author, most often under the pseudonym “Harry Hazel.” He served as a Whig in the lower house of the Massachusetts legislature, as well as on the Boston Common Council, and died at the age of 75, leaving a large family in comfortable circumstances.²⁸ Thompson spent most of his career in New York and Boston, writing novels as well as working for numerous newspapers, including at least one, *Venus’ Miscellany*, that was blatantly pornographic; he also served several stints in jail, including one for public drunkenness. He endorsed George Law, the Know-Nothing candidate for President in 1856, and died a widower at the age of 47, not absolutely penniless, but by no means a wealthy man.

²⁸ Jones was clearly the most entrepreneurial of the three writers, yet was also the most didactic and traditionally moralistic, and the least inventive in his prose. While only one example, this case runs against the romantic idealization of the pre-corporate era in American letters, as articulated by T. J. Jackson Lears: “The shift from entrepreneurial to corporate control of commercial entertainment involved a change in form, from a carnivalesque exploration of performative language and playful imagery to a literalist, didactic narrative realism.” In general, despite the extreme examples in the genre such as Lippard’s *Quaker City*, city-mysteries novels tend to be much more frequently didactic and literalist than they are “carnivalesque”; perhaps the carnival is a quality of individual writers rather than a particular economic structure. T. J. Jackson Lears, “Making Fun of Popular Culture,” *American Historical Review* 97:5 (Dec. 1992): 1417-26; 1423.

Despite their varying politics and levels of professional success, all three men had several important things in common. All three began their road to authorship with entry-level jobs (in the cases of Jones and Thompson, jobs involving manual labor) in the print industry, just as it was starting to undergo massive changes, and they would all continue to identify themselves, on some level, with their artisanal roots.²⁹ As such, they were sons of the new era in the production and sale of cultural products. They were participants in the growing world of print, but that world was not as unitary as some interpretations of the period would make it appear, and these writers clearly existed in a specific *demimonde* within the industry. In a “Letter from the Empire City” published in George Lippard’s *Quaker City Weekly* newspaper, the correspondent gave the news that, “In the literary world, matters are about as usual. Burgess, the ‘Autocrat of Cheap Publishers,’ as he is called, is doing a lively business at his place in Ann street, and Long & Brother, Wm. Graham, Berford & Co., Dewitt & Davenport, are all looking up after the dull season.”³⁰

²⁹ Throughout, when I use the term “working-class,” I do so with some ambivalence. Apart from the most menial forms of manual labor, I would argue, most ways of earning a living in antebellum America had the potential to offer either working- or middle-class status. It is reductive, however, to view this status solely as a product of income; elements such as ethnicity, religion, place of residence, family background, regional accent, and religion all had bearing on class status as well. Clearly, both Lippard and Jones were from families that, while unable to afford to send their sons to college or to place them in more remunerative jobs, had some pretensions to gentility. In addition, Lippard’s childhood, which was spent on a farm (whether farmed by his own family or rented out is unclear), raises the issue of the nebulous class status of farm families. For most antebellum Americans, and for these three men in particular, the highly vexed notion of “class” was more an issue of identification rather than clearly defined membership, given the state of flux of the American class structure during the period. According to Lippard’s theories of labor, however, only those people who lived off of interest or rents, or off the labor of others without doing any work themselves, could truly be said to not be “working-class.” While this construction of class may be idiosyncratic, even if one accepts Stuart Blumin’s delineation of the emerging middle class in the period as being made up of those who performed salaried, nonmanual work with reasonable expectations for increases in future earnings, none of the three would qualify, at least not early in their careers. See Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, Chapter 3.

³⁰ *Quaker City Weekly*, Sept. 29, 1849.

The World of Cheap Print

This account of the “literary world” in New York indicates that Lippard (and Thompson and Jones) were part of a very specific literary world, that of *cheap* publishing. The correspondent makes no mention of the Harper Brothers or other New York publishers of genteel books, but instead lists the main players in the specific sub-field of cheap, popular ephemera. Critics of sensational fiction were well aware of this differentiation among publishers, and did not hesitate to single out specific houses for criticism. In an 1853 article entitled “Satanic Literature,” one critic says that the publishers of sensational fiction bear more guilt than the “prostituted minds” that produce such books, since the publishers are responsible for “*perpetuating* a corrupt book.”³¹

The author of an 1860 article on the influence of French fiction on American writing and morals accused a “certain house then in Nassau street” for re-issuing sensational novels with different title pages as entirely new books. The author made clear that he did “not allude to any of those old established houses, whether of New York, Boston, or Philadelphia, whose names are honorably associated at home and abroad with the growth and progress of our literature,” going on to explain that, “Of about fifty American publishers, there are scarcely more than three or four who trample on every principle of honor, honesty, and manliness ...; nor shall we say one word, on the present occasion, calculated to show any one, not already in the secret, who these three or four are....” Nevertheless, one page later, the author lets his readers at least partly in on the

³¹ “Satanic Literature,” *The National Magazine* 2:1 (January 1853), 27.

secret, as he singles out the firm of Rudd & Carleton for condemnation for having published translations of Balzac.³² Thus a clear sense existed of the fact that certain publishers were more “down-market” than others, and these three authors knew where they fit in the hierarchy of cultural production.³³ This is not to say that “down-market” necessarily implied immoral content, but simply that readers would have had different expectations from cheaply produced books that looked it; as the preface to *St. Jean’s Evening; or, Crime and Mystery*, states, “The Author is aware that it is no recommendation to a work to be published in the *shilling* form, yet several circumstances have induced him to select it on the present occasion: he hopes a discerning public will decide upon the merits of what is here offered them, without reference to” its form or cost.”³⁴

In addition, all three writers were aware of the difference between their livelihood and the college-educated, “professional” model of authorship. Lippard explicitly drew a contrast between the “profession” that his parents had envisioned for him and his choice to make his living as an author,³⁵ and George Thompson sarcastically dedicated his novel *The Countess; or, Memoirs of Women of Leisure* to the “lawyers, merchants, and divines of the day.” Thompson compared his fact-based “romance of the real” to the rest of the fiction of the day, which he described as a “mess of trashy nonsense, written by the freshmen and ‘sophs’ of such places as Cambridge or Amherst, who have no better way

³² “French Romances and American Morals,” *National Quarterly Review* 2:3 (December 1860), 145, 146.

³³ This goes against the claim that some scholars, such as Lawrence Levine and Peter Buckley, have made that, in Buckley’s words, “in the literary culture of the 1840s, such a distinction between the cultivated and the popular traditions had not been fixed....” Buckley, “The Case Against Ned Buntline,” 255.

³⁴ George Payn Quackenbos, *St. Jean’s Evening; or, Crime and Mystery* (New York: New World Press, 1846), [5].

³⁵ George Lippard, *The Empire City* (New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1850), 201.

to spend their hours.”³⁶ One telling indicator of the awareness on the part of authors of city-mysteries that they were *not* professionals was the frequency with which they presented their books as if they had been, in fact, written by professionals, often including the claims “by a Physician” or “by a Member of the Suffolk [or New York, or Philadelphia] Bar” after a novel’s title.

Thompson was also aware of the older genteel, leisured model of authorship, which held that writing could be “most pleasant pursuit of the world, when it is cultivated . . . as a source of enjoyment alone”; in opposition to this ideal, Thompson asserted that writing was a “terribly irksome and laborious occupation when it is followed for daily bread.”³⁷ The most important similarity between these three men is that all of them would rely wholly on various “laborious occupations” in the world of print for their daily bread, without any support from wealthy relatives or government sinecures, like those enjoyed by Washington Irving or Nathaniel Hawthorne.

All three authors were exceedingly prolific, producing volume upon volume of short (usually around 100 pages) paper-covered novels, along with vast quantities of newspaper writing. Justin Jones wrote at least 43 novels between 1843 and 1867, many

³⁶ George Thompson, *The Countess; or, Memoirs of Women of Leisure, Being a Series of Intrigues with the Bloods*, by the Author (Boston: Berry & Co., 1849), 7. In what is perhaps Thompson’s *magnum opus*, the 1849 novel *City Crimes*, Thompson has the villain of the novel, a deformed criminal mastermind known only as the Dead Man, tell his life’s story. After escaping from prison, the Dead Man set himself up in Boston as a doctor (where he cured nobody), then became a minister (during which period he slept with all the young women in his congregation), and then a temperance lecturer; all the while, he is committing a grisly series of rapes and murders. This satire on the learned professions indicates Thompson’s dim view of their claims to special status. (Thompson, *City Crimes; or, Life in New York and Boston. A Volume for Everybody: Being a Mirror of Fashion, a Picture of Poverty, and a Startling Revelation of the Secret Crimes of Great Cities*, in *Venus in Boston*, ed. David S. Reynolds and Kimberly R. Gladman [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002], 228.)

³⁷ George Thompson, *The Ladies’ Garter; or, the Platonic Marriage*, by Greenhorn. (New York: Howland & Co., 185?), 7.

of which were published by one of his own publishing firms. He wrote both urban sensation fiction and frontier and sea adventure stories, with such titles as *Sylvia Seabury; or, Yankees in Japan. The Romantic Adventures of a Sailor Boy* (1850); *Tom, Dick & Harry; or, The Boys and Girls of Boston. A Tale Founded on Metropolitan Adventures by Moonlight! Starlight!! Gaslight!!! Lamplight!!!! Electric Light!!!! Northern Lights!!!! and Total Darkness* (1849); *The Nun of St. Ursula; or, The Burning of the Convent* (1845); and, most memorably, *Big Dick, the King of the Negroes... A Romance of High and Low Life in Boston* (1846).

George Thompson was, if possible, even more prolific; evidence exists of at least 60 fiction titles under his name or one of his pseudonyms (of which “Greenhorn” was the most common) between the late 1840s and the late 1860s. Thompson confined himself almost exclusively to racy stories of urban corruption and crime, penning such titles as *The Mysteries of Bond Street; or, The Seraglios of Upper Tendom* (1857); *The G'hals of Boston; or, Pen and Pencil Sketches of Celebrated Courtesans* (n.d.); *The Bridal Chamber and its Mysteries; or, Life at Our Fashionable Hotels* (1856); and *Venus in Boston: A Romance of City Life* (1849), along with two accounts of his respective stints in jail in Boston and New York and a parody of P.T. Barnum’s autobiography.³⁸

George Lippard published fewer titles than either Jones or Thompson, but he more than made up for it in length. His two most famous works were *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk-Hall*, an 1844 expose of Philadelphia corruption based on a local

³⁸ These are, respectively, “Mysteries of Leverett Street Jail,” in *Life in Boston and New York Police Gazette*, April 6, 1850; *Ten Days in the Tombs, or a Key to the Modern Bastile*. (1855), under the pseudonym “John McGinn”; and *The Autobiography of Petite Bunkum, the Showman*, 1855.

seduction-and-murder case that sold well over 100,000 copies, and *Washington and His Generals; or, Legends of the Revolution* (1847), an extremely popular collection of sketches of Revolutionary hagiography. In addition to these longer works, however, Lippard produced reams of shorter fiction, including several city-mysteries about New York, a pair of Mexican War novels, a Gothic romance, a sentimental Revolutionary novel, and a novel of Pennsylvania German mysticism based on the Ephrata colony. In his spare time, Lippard ran several newspapers and started a utopian socialist secret society called “The Brotherhood of the Union,” which may or may not still be in existence.³⁹ In many respects, Lippard wrote himself to death.

Whether these short fictional works are characterized as subliterature, sensationalist tracts, or simply as trash, there is no question that they sold. The practice of blanketing the market with many works by a single author was likely a response to (as well as a cause of) the condition of market oversaturation during the period, and, as a result, few of such novels individually achieved enormous sales figures. However, as noted above, Lippard’s *Quaker City* was the biggest fiction best-seller in America before *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and at least one of Justin Jones’s urban novellas, *The Belle of Boston*, was reported by a contemporary Bostonian to have sold at least 20,000 copies.⁴⁰

While these two novels’ sales were exceptional, and few individual titles likely

³⁹ The Brotherhood was thought to have died out in the early 1980s, as most of the surviving members of what had evolved into a fraternal benevolent association were passing away. One Pennsylvania-based website--<http://www.rosecross.org/Legend.html>--however, implies that Lippard’s popularity has not entirely waned, and that the Brotherhood may still have some adherents within the Rosicrucian community. I am indebted to Brett Mizelle for bringing this website to my attention.

⁴⁰ Review of *The Belle of Boston* in *The Symbol*, an Odd-Fellows periodical from Boston (Vol. III, no. 11, Dec. 1, 1844, 522). This same review revealed Jones as the man behind the “Harry Hazel” pseudonym. Thus, despite his continuing use of the pen name, his real identity was widely known for most of his writing career.

challenged the sales figures of novels like *The Lamplighter* or *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*, these writers produced such large numbers of novels that their total sales over the course of their careers would have been immense. As David Reynolds has noted, fiction such as that written by these three men was much more prevalent than the view of antebellum fiction informed by Hawthorne's infamous "d----d mob of scribbling women" comment would indicate.⁴¹

The popularity of such short forms of fiction was driven by supply imperatives as well as by demand, since they were cheaper to produce than longer hard-bound volumes, and could be plausibly disguised as periodicals, thus qualifying for much lower postal rates than those that applied to books. Publishers' desire for shorter pieces often led to direct pressure on authors; the incredibly prolific popular novelist Joseph Holt Ingraham had intended his 1844 novel *Rodolphe in Boston* to be "double or thrice the usual length of the novelettes recently written by the Author," but was compelled by pressure from his publisher to limit the book to 48 pages.⁴² (This tendency, whether due to pressure from publishers or not, did not go unnoticed by Ingraham's competitors. Ned Buntline, in an 1844 review of Ingraham's works, noted that: "Mr. Ingraham has a habit of condensing all his late stories into ten chapters, without regard to 'incident' or history, and the worst of it is, that he permits the *nine* chapters to run dully on, as if twenty instead of one were

⁴¹ "Before 1831, American fiction was pretty evenly divided between adventurous fiction and the more genteel sentimental-domestic genre. Between 1831 and 1860, ... the proportion of adventurous or darkly humorous volumes rose to almost 60 percent, while the proportion of genteel volumes sunk to about 20 percent." David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 183. While Reynolds' generic divisions—Conventional, Moral Adventure, Dark Adventure, Subversive—are questionable, his general point holds.

⁴² Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, "The Mysteries of New England: Eugène Sue's American 'Imitators,' 1844," in *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 23 (Dec. 2000), 12.

to follow; thus forcing himself not only to fill the last chapter with confused and crowded explanations of incidents that either have happened or are about to occur; but with all his tact and ingenuity to break his yarn off very abruptly....”⁴³) George Wilkes referred to this tendency as the “curse of cheap publishing” in his *Mysteries of the Tombs*, stating that his printer forced him to keep his work short enough to be profitable.⁴⁴

As Edgar Allan Poe noted, shorter, more sensational pieces were well suited to the fast pace of the times: “We now demand the light artillery of the intellect; we need the curt, the condensed, the pointed, the readily diffused—in place of the verbose, the detailed, the voluminous, the inaccessible....”⁴⁵ The overwhelming popularity of such fiction did not go unnoticed by the cultural elite; Longfellow wrote somewhat incredulously in his journal of a visit by Joseph Holt Ingraham that Ingraham had written twenty novels in the past year, “till it has grown to be mechanical with him. These novels are published in newspapers. They pay him something more than three thousand dollars a year.”⁴⁶

Because of its popularity, its sensational content, and the type of reader (more than anything else, young) with which it was most closely associated, such fiction came

⁴³ “Ingraham’s Works,” *Western Literary Journal and Monthly Review* 1:2 (Dec. 1844), 112.

⁴⁴ George Wilkes, *The Mysteries of the Tombs* (New York: n.p., 1844), 64.

⁴⁵ From *Graham’s Magazine* in 1846, cited in Ronald Weber, *Hired Pens: Professional Writers in America’s Golden Age of Print* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1997), 37.

⁴⁶ Journal entry dated April 6, 1846, in Samuel Longfellow, ed., *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, With Extracts from His Journals and Correspondences*, 2 vols., (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1886), 2: 35. The elite were not the only writers to take notice of Ingraham’s stunning output; Ned Buntline (no slouch himself at speed-writing) was willing to forgive Ingraham’s “occasional *murder* of the Queen’s English” due to “the haste and rapidity with which he must write, to issue novels at intervals of only two weeks.”

in for more than its share of condemnation, both on stylistic and moral grounds.⁴⁷ John DuSolle, George Lippard's former boss at *The Spirit of the Times*, described his protégé's best-selling novel as "a disgusting mass of filth." James Trumbull, himself a printer and aspiring author, railed that, "The novels so eagerly sought after by all classes . . . stand before the public naked representations of the most degraded states of human society, with no plea for their recommendation except that the public taste requires them."⁴⁸ These pamphlet novels, with their brightly-colored covers proclaiming the author's name in large print, indicated the scope of the shift away from the earlier ideal of genteel, anonymous authorship to an increasingly public and commercialized sphere of cultural production. In this new environment, an author's name and, often, image functioned as "brand names" for overwhelmed consumers.⁴⁹ One especially enthusiastic critic, known only as "A Physician," keenly grasped in his attack on the genre the two elements of the experience of the authors of such fiction—that they wrote for money and that they had to market themselves as personalities—that distinguished their life as writers from the model lived by Hawthorne, one of retirement from the public eye and an avoidance of mercenary considerations:

... lest some of my readers may be in the dark as to what is embraced more particularly in the modern, if not very euphonious nomenclature, "Yellow Jacket Literature," I reply, that in the true exposition of the term,

⁴⁷ While many critics, especially Michael Denning, have assumed a largely male, working-class readership for city-mysteries fiction, evidence from antebellum critics of the genre's popularity and from the novels themselves indicates that the audience was much broader in terms of class and gender. What all parties seem to agree on, however, is the relative youth of the audience. The question of readership will be the subject of the following two chapters.

⁴⁸ James Trumbull, "The Press," in *Voices from the Press: A Collection of Sketches, Essays, and Poems by Practical Printers*, James J. Brenton, ed. (New York: Charles B. Norton, 1850), 54.

⁴⁹ For more on the tensions embodied in this shift from anonymity to celebrity, see Newbury, *Figuring Authorship*; Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses*; and Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

it is defined to be all of that fictitious stuff, and those imaginative writings indiscriminately, the production of which, originating in a morbid or vapid desire for the gratification of a *merely* ambitious notoriety, or from considerations of a *purely* pecuniary character, or both, by consequence vitiate the taste, pervert the judgment, and engender inflated hopes, not only in the writer, but in the reader.⁵⁰

Benjamin Franklin, Founding Author

It comes as no surprise that, for a class of writers who found their way to jobs as authors through the printshop and who were criticized as self-promoting, one of the most significant role models and points of comparison would be Benjamin Franklin. In an essay on Franklin included in a collection of essays and poems written by working printers, John Jewett wrote that printers should make every effort to link themselves to their illustrious predecessor: “we claim as ours every inference in favour of the capabilities of our profession, and of the meliorating influence of its associations upon the intellectual and moral character, which may fairly be drawn from his great attainments and blameless life.”⁵¹

It is understandable that any young man starting out as an apprentice printer would look to Franklin for reassurance that the career possibilities leading away from the composing desk were limitless. The 1850 volume in which Jewett’s essay appeared, *Voices from the Press*, contains several odes to Franklin, as well as a fascinating collection of brief biographies of its contributors, all printers-turned-authors, including

⁵⁰ *Confessions and Experiences of a Novel Reader*, By a Physician, (Chicago: Wm. Stacy, 1855), 11-12.

⁵¹ John Jewett, “Franklin: His Genius, Life, and Character,” in *Voices from the Press*, 189. I would argue that values such as “industry and application” were not solely the province of the middle classes in antebellum America. This is especially so given the extent to which embattled antebellum masculinity found expression not only in pugilism and saloon culture, but in the ability to work hard.

Horace Greeley, Bayard Taylor, and a young Walter Whitman. In the volume's preface, the editor, James Brenton, defended the right of printers to express themselves, "though we cannot all be Franklins." He argued that the "chief merit" of the volume lay not so much in its literary polish, "as in the evidence it exhibits of what industry and application, unaided by wealth and patronage, can accomplish," thus stating an explicit case for a model of authorship with its roots not in a specialized knowledge of Western culture and literature, but in the experience of work in the print industry.⁵²

The volume concludes with a brief essay by the popular magazinist and poet (and brother to novelist Fanny Fern) Nathaniel Parker Willis, who expands on Brenton's claims. Willis wrote that, "If there were an apprenticeship to the trade of authorship, it would be as essential that a young author should pass a year as a compositor in a printing office, as that a future sea-captain should make a voyage before the mast."⁵³ While Willis's claim that aspiring authors should begin as printer's devils rather than as scholars may be in part self-serving (he himself was made to work for several years as a teenager as a compositor at his father's newspaper in Boston before heading off to Yale and questionable poetic glory), it makes a persuasive case that a background in the print industry, in a position that was almost certainly considered to be "working-class," was effective training for a life in that industry as an author. Willis lists the many benefits—knowledge of proofreading marks, realization of the importance of good penmanship, expertise in punctuation, and an improved style emphasizing

⁵² James Brenton, Preface, in *Voices from the Press*, iv, iii.

⁵³ N.P. Willis, in "Printers and Authors," in *Voices from the Press*, 306. The list of nineteenth-century publishers and authors who began their careers in low-level print industry jobs is extensive, but it includes figures such as Robert Bonner, George Redding, Walt Whitman, and William Dean Howells.

brevity—available to aspiring authors through experience in a printshop, going so far as to suggest that the “whole character of American literature” would be altered should all authors be legally compelled to spend a year as a compositor before applying for a copyright. Yet what Willis does not mention explicitly, although it underlies his comments about the value placed on brevity, is that experience of working in a print shop, where one was paid by the word and had an opportunity to see first-hand what sold and what did not, would have been an excellent preparation for the antebellum literary marketplace and audience, for making a *commercial* life out of words.

The several admiring tributes to Franklin omit this point as well in their enumeration of Franklin’s many qualities, yet the concerted effort to make money from his writing was a hallmark of his career. As R. Jackson Wilson notes, writing works as commodities for sale to “the Publick” in a market context “was one of the most central and important facts of Franklin’s life. No serious writer in America, and few in England, enjoyed anything like Franklin’s success at reaching large audiences.”⁵⁴ Nor, as Wilson notes, did any writer in America before Washington Irving come close to making as much money from his writing as Franklin did.⁵⁵ Yet one contributor to *Voices from the Press* did take note of one item from the *Pennsylvania Gazette* from June 22, 1749 as bearing “unmistakable evidence” of having been written by Franklin: “All persons

⁵⁴ Wilson, *Figures of Speech*, 56.

⁵⁵ In 1748, when he retired from active participation in his printing firm, Franklin’s annual income was £2,000, of which only one-fifth came from printing jobs. The remaining portion came from the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, in which Franklin’s writing had always figured prominently, and from *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, which he continued writing long after his retirement (Wilson, *Figures of Speech*, 56–57). For more on Franklin’s career as an author, see Wilson, Ch. 2.

indebted to a year's Gazette or more, are desired to pay."⁵⁶ While this comment was likely intended as a sly dig at Franklin's renowned frugality, it underscores Franklin's awareness, if not that of his followers, that he had to live off of what he wrote.

Another parallel between Franklin and those who followed his career trajectory was that, in his day, Franklin's writing, by virtue of its style, its tone, and the fact that it was written to sell, was seen by some critics as causing irreparable harm to the republic. Joseph Dennie, an essayist and founder of the *Port Folio*, a high-brow review published in Philadelphia, viewed Franklin as "the dark architect of a new literary situation in which print culture was increasingly available and thus certain to be degraded."⁵⁷ Dennie explicitly targeted Franklin's market orientation as a writer for criticism, fulminating that Franklin "was the founder of that Grubstreet sect, who have professedly attempted to degrade literature to the level of vulgar capacities, and debase the polished and current language of books by the vile alloy of provincial idioms, and colloquial barbarisms, the shame of grammar and akin to any language rather than English."⁵⁸

The mantle of purveyor of "provincial idioms" would have been taken up enthusiastically by the Georges Lippard and Thompson, both of whom explicitly aligned their own careers with Franklin's. Lippard, especially while editing his short-lived newspaper *The Quaker City Weekly*, made numerous comparisons of his own situation with that of the editor of the *Gazette*, and the third-highest-ranking officer in Lippard's

⁵⁶ Anon., "A Century Ago," in *Voices from the Press*, 308.

⁵⁷ Weber, *Hired Pens*, 19. This view, that print produced in increased quantities would automatically be of lower quality, continued in some circles through the antebellum period.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Weber, *Hired Pens*, 19.

secret society, the Brotherhood of the Union, was the Supreme Franklin, whose position in the organization, according to Lippard, was that of “Prophet.”⁵⁹

George Thompson, in his 1854 “autobiography,” entitled *My Life: or the Adventures of Geo. Thompson*, gives an account of his early career that is a parodic homage to Franklin’s *Autobiography*. Thompson’s tale begins with him suffering durance vile under his uncle and his older brother, who is working as his uncle’s apprentice. After pushing his uncle down the stairs (breaking his leg) and shoving his aunt into a chamber pot, George strikes off on his own, first going on a bender, which leads him to a brothel and eventually to jail in the Tombs. Upon his release, “Aware that my limited finances would not admit of my obtaining a very sumptuous repast, and fully appreciating the necessity of economy, I entered the shop of a baker and purchased three rolls at the rate of one cent per copy.”⁶⁰ Already having displayed his shaky dedication to Franklinian standards of temperance and sexual continence, George adds moderation to the list, eating all three rolls himself, before seeing a sign for a job at a print shop: “I’ll be a printer! Franklin was one, and he, like myself, was fond of rolls, because he entered Philadelphia with one under each arm. Yes, I’ll be a printer.”⁶¹ Thompson’s autobiography deviates from Franklin’s in additional respects. He and his fellow printer’s devil publish their own newspaper, but it is a gossip sheet published on the Sabbath. His master, Mr. Romaine, and his wife are both having affairs with lodgers in their boarding house; Thompson catches them both *en flagrante* with their respective

⁵⁹ George Lippard, *B.G.C. (Philadelphia(?): for the Brotherhood of the Union*, 1850(?), 4-5.

⁶⁰ George Thompson, *My Life: or the Adventures of Geo. Thompson, Being the Auto-Biography of an Author*, written by Himself, (Boston: Federhen & Co., 1854), 19.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

partners, and proceeds to collect hush money from both sides. George's lifelong tendency, however, would be to spend his spare money in taverns, which produces a mock-Franklinian set of instructions on how to drink without getting drunk. Thompson's apprenticeship is cut unfortunately short when Mr. Romaine finds out about his wife's affair, and murders her, along with her lover, before killing himself.

Thompson claimed that "I never learned any thing at school.... All I ever learned was acquired in a *printing office*," but there is little sense that he was complaining, just as Franklin's earnest eulogist exhorted young printers to not give voice to "unmanly regrets that we do not inherit the advantages of fortune or station,—no ... complaint that our youth was not passed in academic bowers."⁶² It is clear that this lack of education was linked, by both writers of cheap fiction and their critics, with the kind of fiction that they produced. In an 1854 satire on Philadelphia literary figures, the author admonished Lippard to abandon his attempts to compete with Longfellow, since Lippard was writing books that would sell for only fifty cents, telling him "Go save thy money, put thy brains to school...."⁶³ What Thompson and his fellow writers of popular fiction did with what they learned as low-level workers in the publishing industry shows how they followed Franklin's example, however unconsciously, but it also highlights the drastically different context in which they worked.

At one of the many low points of his career, Edgar Allan Poe wrote to James Kirke Paulding, his old friend who was at the time Secretary of the Navy, asking for a

⁶² Thompson, *My Life*, 15; Jewett, in *Voices from the Press*, 189.

⁶³ Peter Pindar, Jr. [Nathaniel Chapman]. *Parnassus in Philadelphia. A Satire* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1854), 25–6.

job: “Could I obtain the most unimportant Clerkship in your gift—*any thing, by sea or land*—to relieve me from the miserable life of literary drudgery to which I now, with breaking heart, submit ... I would never again repine at any dispensation of God.”⁶⁴ Poe, like most of the other canonical figures of the American Renaissance, had other professional options than living by their pens (even though Poe was consistently unsuccessful in getting government work). Hawthorne had his custom-house job, and later a consular position in Liverpool under the administration of his college friend Franklin Pierce;⁶⁵ Melville could have stayed a sailor, or a pin-setter in a Honolulu bowling alley, but also found paying work in the custom house; Emerson took to the secular pulpit of the lyceum circuit; and Thoreau’s efforts to live cheaply enough so that his lack of success as an author was immaterial are all too familiar.

As William Dean Howells noted in his famous 1893 essay “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business,” all of the men he considers “authors” from the antebellum period “were either men of fortune, or they were editors, or professors, with salaries or incomes apart from the small gains of their pens; or they were helped out with public offices...”⁶⁶ Writers of popular fiction, however, such as Lippard, Jones, and Thompson, with little

⁶⁴ In John Ward Ostrom, ed., *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Gordian Press, 1966), 2: 681.

⁶⁵ Hawthorne was extremely fortunate that Franklin Pierce was elected in 1852 since G.P. Putnam wrote to Hawthorne in 1853 to tell him that the royalties for the past 18 months from *Mosses from an Old Manse* totaled \$144.09; Putnam was kind enough to inform Hawthorne that, by contrast, Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* had earned her \$4,500 in the past six months.

⁶⁶ William Dean Howells, “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business,” *Scribner’s Magazine* 14 (October 1893), 431.

formal education and few family connections, would have had more difficulty finding work in industries other than that which they knew, the industry of print culture.⁶⁷

What is more to the point is that there is little evidence that any of them *wanted* to find other kinds of work. For all of their occasional lamentations about the “bitter lot of the author,” all three men spent their entire working lives moving fluidly back and forth between different jobs in the print industry, often holding several at once. An 1849 broadside for “The Phonetic Advocate,” a Cincinnati newspaper that advocated a conversion to the use of the phonetic alphabet, advertised itself with the claim, “its Editors are its Publishers, and its Publishers are its Printers,” and George Lippard himself promoted the value to the reader of one of his novels appearing in the newspaper he edited, noting that, “in our case, the Author of the book is the Editor of the paper....”⁶⁸ “Authorship” for them was not a special, unique category of existence, incompatible with the whirl of everyday life; authorship *was* everyday life.⁶⁹

The fact that the preparation of words for publication, whether by putting type in a composing stick, owning a newspaper, or writing the words themselves constituted the

⁶⁷ In addition, at least in the case of Lippard, health may have played a factor. He died young, of consumption, and in a letter written long after his death, an acquaintance described him as having been “too weak physically ever to do a stroke of manual work.” He also, perhaps kindly, says that his “emotions were not always under the control of his easily-kindled intellect.” Sarah Lippard Bilbrough, “These few lines was written by a Gentleman while in Boston,” ms., ca. 1890, Brotherhood of the Union Collection, box 1, folder 1, Library Company of Philadelphia.

⁶⁸ “Grat Ralwa tw Nolej!” 1849, BroadSides Collection, New-York Historical Society; *Quaker City Weekly*, May 12, 1849.

⁶⁹ Nina Baym has written that, in antebellum writing, “the few comments about the private life (of a male author) tend to point out disjunctions between life and writing.” For genteel authors that may well have been the case. But for writers of cheap journalism and fiction, for whom writing was everyday life, since it was what they did to put food on the table, the line between “life” and “writing” is much blurrier, which is borne out by the frequency with which writers of city-mystery novels call attention to their personal conditions, describing where they write, their financial straits, physical health, and family status. Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 252.

principal vocation of all three men throughout their careers differentiates them starkly from those authors whose engagement with the culture industry was more intermittent. In addition, the fact that all three men (with the possible exception of Jones, when he was writing for his own publishing house) worked at a piece rate, or for a *wage*, under uncertain conditions of employment, rather than for a salary, and very likely often worked at home, further distances their model of authorship from those of more genteel writers, as well as from the emerging salaried middle-classes, and reflects the fact that, even though they were doing nonmanual work, they were structuring their incomes and their lives in ways increasingly associated with the working classes.⁷⁰

The Wages of Popular Authorship

Writing popular fiction for a living in antebellum America was not likely to make one either healthy or wealthy. The “Physician” previously mentioned wrote that, “... the fabricators of our ‘Yellow-Jacket Literature,’ comprise the vast catalogue of ‘penny-a-liners’ in prose or poetic fiction, whose hire, and the garrets in which they write, are synonymous terms—both *miserable enough!*”⁷¹ While these terms may be too dark, there is little doubt that writing novels alone, which, in the absence of an international copyright law, had to compete in the marketplace against European imports that cost

⁷⁰ Stuart Blumin claims that one of the key ways that nonmanual work was differentiated from manual work (and, according to his argument, the middle classes distinguished themselves from the working classes) in this period was in that it was performed for a salary instead of a wage (Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 68). Even the distinction of being a businessman who managed his own affairs that Blumin asserts was available to small tradesmen and mechanics would not have been open to these authors, who constantly complained about being at the mercy of publishers. Even in the cases where Thompson and Lippard ran their own newspapers, they required a financial backer to do so.

⁷¹ *Confessions and Experiences of a Novel Reader*, 13.

American publishers nothing more than their materials, was not likely to provide much in the way of financial support. (The continual complaints from authors across the political spectrum about the lack of an international copyright echoed in complicated ways antebellum political conflicts over the protective tariff.)

A more sympathetic writer than the “Physician” observed that, “of all the intellectual labors, those of authors are, in general, the worst rewarded. Now and then, indeed, a popular writer receives a liberal remuneration; but, for one of this description, there are probably fifty failures, and perhaps twenty do not receive for their efforts in this way the pay of a common laborer.”⁷² In the face of these market conditions, authors could most readily resort to selling work to one of the many periodicals in order to make ends meet, producing short stories and essays of various descriptions; or, as these three authors did, one could write longer pieces of fiction expressly for serialization in weekly papers.⁷³ As Mary Kelley has noted, however, the need to write for periodicals for

⁷² George Tucker, *Political Economy for the People* (Philadelphia: C. Sherman & Son, 1859), 126.

⁷³ See Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, Lawrence C. Wroth, and Rollo G. Silver, *The Book in America: A History of the Making and Selling of Books in the United States* (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1951), 112-13. Ronald Zboray, in his account of John Townsend Trowbridge, another antebellum toiler in the cheap fiction trade, writes that, during his work for story papers in Boston from 1847 to the mid-1850s, Trowbridge earned between fifty cents and a dollar per column. See Zboray, “A Glimpse of Cheap Publishers in Antebellum Boston: John Townsend Trowbridge’s ‘Martin Merrivale: His X Mark,’” in *Dime Novel Round-up* 60:5 (Dec. 1991), 78. Terence Whalen notes that Poe earned \$15 a week as an assistant editor at the *New York Mirror* and wrote freelance work on the side, which brought him approximately \$425 in 1844, compared to the \$5,000 his boss, N.P. Willis, earned from freelance work in the same year. Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses*, 17.

It is also important to keep in mind the cultural distinction between magazines, of the sort that Poe spent most of his time working for, such as the *Mirror* and the *Southern Literary Messenger*, and newspapers and story papers of the kind that Thompson, Lippard, and Jones all wrote for. While it would not be accurate to say that the two spheres of publishing were entirely mutually exclusive, the newspaper audience—and those who wrote for it—would have been seen as being significantly more down-market than that of magazines.

money frequently kept writers away from investing time in longer works that were a less secure financial proposition.⁷⁴

Should periodical writing not be sufficient, authors could diversify further, into plays, poetry, orations, biographies,⁷⁵ and other forms of ephemera; as George Thompson notes in the preface to *My Life*, in addition to his books, “I have written a sufficient quantity of tales, sketches, poetry, essays, and other literary stock of every description, to constitute half a dozen cart loads.”⁷⁶ One 1848 critic claimed that the best writing to be found was in the advertising columns of newspapers, since “Literary men are not above lending, or rather selling, their talents to the services of shopkeepers in recommending their merchandise.”⁷⁷ At the peak of his fame, George Lippard earned between \$3000 and \$4000 a year from his writing, and was not above flourishing his position at the top of the authorial heap, as he did in the December 15, 1849 issue of his *Quaker City Weekly*.⁷⁸

With this frank confession, be it also understood, that no American Author of his years, has been half so successful as the Editor of the Quaker City—we are now alluding to the prices which we have received from

⁷⁴ See Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*, Ch. 7.

⁷⁵ Hawthorne’s hastily-written campaign biography of Franklin Pierce was his only work which ever earned him any substantial money.

⁷⁶ Thompson, *My Life*, 5.

⁷⁷ *Holden’s Dollar Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 2 (August 1848): 502.

⁷⁸ Despite his claims of ill-treatment by publishers, Lippard’s financial success was no doubt aided by his contract with G.B. Zieber, the first publisher of *Quaker City*, which stipulated that Lippard and Zieber co-owned the copyright and the stereotype plates to the novel, and split the profits after expenses evenly. In addition, Zieber paid Lippard a weekly fee of \$5. In May, 1845, Lippard would announce in the *Philadelphia Saturday Courier* that he had purchased the copyright and plates of the novel outright, and would be hereafter issuing the novel under his own imprint. Yet he later sold half his interest in the plates and copyrights of his novels to his co-publisher of the *Quaker City Weekly*, and was eventually forced to sell his own half to cover the debts of the Brotherhood of the Union. Thus, for writers who worked with smaller, more ephemeral publishing houses, their copyrights and stereotype plates could act as a somewhat liquid medium of exchange, somewhat akin to goods that could be placed with a pawnbroker and later redeemed.

various publishers for our Books. *We can make more money by writing for Publishers, than we can by editing a paper.* That is clear.

Lippard claimed that his work at promoting himself had resulted in him having “more to do in the way of book writing, than we can possibly accomplish,” and in an advertisement for the *Weekly* crowed that the copyrights of the four original works of his fiction forthcoming in the next year would have brought him \$6,000.⁷⁹ Even so, at the end of his life Lippard would struggle to dismiss rumors of poverty (likely due in no small part to his repeated invocation of his sufferings as an author), and was upset over a portrayal of him on his deathbed as a penniless wretch.⁸⁰ Justin Jones, who wrote novels and owned the publishing house that published them, as well as, at least for a time, the story paper in which many of his novels appeared, was even more successful. The 1850 Census lists him living in Cambridge, age 35, profession listed as “Editor,” with real estate valued at \$8,000.

Thompson would meet with less success.⁸¹ Very little is known about his travels during his life, due in large part to the commonness of his name and his lack of a middle initial, but it is clear that he split the bulk of his professional life between Boston and New York. When he died in Boston in 1871, he left no will, having been preceded in

⁷⁹ Ad on back cover of volume one of *The Empire City* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1850).

⁸⁰ At least one of Lippard’s relatives would later discount the myth, writing that, “It is a mistaken idea about him being in poverty; he always had a comfortable home of his own, dressed well, and never knew what it was to want.” He went on to claim that people thought Lippard was poor because he liked old furniture. Microfilm, History of the Lippard and Ford Families, American Antiquarian Society.

⁸¹ A caveat is in order here, as there is a small level of conjecture in these statements about Thompson’s biography. Since he did not use a middle initial, Thompson is very difficult to trace, given the commonness of his name. Based on what is known of his career, he returned to Boston, where he started his writing career, after falling out with the editor of the *Broadway Belle*; whether he stayed there permanently is difficult to say. Based on extensive research in the Massachusetts State Archives and in Boston city directories from the period, however, I am reasonably confident that the George Thompson I discovered in the state death records for 1871 is George Thompson the author, but I cannot be completely sure.

death by his wife, and left an estate consisting solely of an account in the Boston Five Cents Savings Bank containing \$513.15.⁸² Other authors, who had longer careers, wound up being more successful; in the 1870s, following his introduction of Buffalo Bill to his readers, Ned Buntline was employed writing for the *New York Weekly* and earning \$20,000 a year, and he bragged that he “made more money than any Bohemian in New York or Boston.” Buntline also made clear that writing fiction, while not the most lucrative pastime in the world, certainly paid better than other forms of print work, especially if one had made oneself a recognizable brand name: “I did try writing temperance tracts once for a religious society, but they were altogether too frugal about the compensation, and so I turned the job over to a needy friend, and resumed the spinning of yarns.”⁸³

Although all these authors clearly shared a bias towards the writing of books as being more prestigious than other forms of print work, they did not hesitate to take on other roles within the print culture industry should they be required to do so.⁸⁴ While this bias was a common one—George Foster bemoaned his progression from the “dreamy poet of sixteen” to the “patient worker at the laboring oar of every-day journalism”—the line between periodical work and longer forms is not so easy to draw, since much of what all these writers (including Foster) wrote for periodicals eventually appeared in book

⁸² *Suffolk County Probate Record Books*, v. 308, 301, Massachusetts State Archives.

⁸³ Fred E. Pond (Will Wildwood), *Life and Adventures of “Ned Buntline”* (New York: The Cadmus Book Shop, 1919), 107.

⁸⁴ As an example of the bias for book writing, Lippard, in a letter to the editor of the *American Courier*, wished to clarify a comment that had been made in the paper the previous week: “And as to the statement, that I was formerly a contributor to the periodical literature of Philadelphia—it is not true. I have been, and am, a writer of books, but I never in my life, wrote an article for one of the Philadelphia *periodicals*; either Godey or Graham.” Letter to Andrew McMakin, Nov. 7, 1853, from the Dreer Collection of American Prose Writers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

form.⁸⁵ In addition, it is difficult to distinguish between an expressed longing to write in forms (such as poetry) that implied the writer had enough wealth to not care about sales and a longing for wealth itself.

Of course, it was through writing in short, popular forms that these writers gave themselves the best chance at achieving wealth, if not social acceptance. Lippard began his career writing for a newspaper, and, while spending most of his career in print as a novelist, he tried on at least one occasion to publish his own books (the firm of Lippard & Co.). He also founded two periodicals: his newspaper, *The Quaker City Weekly*, which was intended originally to be an outlet and distribution mechanism for serialized versions of Lippard's novels, and which appeared for about a year and a half in 1848-9; and a quarterly devoted to the Brotherhood of the Union called *The White Banner*, which debuted (and died) in 1851. In 1852, he worked for a short time as the literary editor of the *National Democrat* in New York. As indicated in his boast about his earning power, Lippard clearly saw editing a paper as something of a step down, but it would have offered him a potentially larger payday in the future had he been able to keep ownership of his copyrights.

Occupational Flexibility in the World of Cheap Print

Justin Jones showed even more flexibility in negotiating the frequent transitions between authorship and other roles within the print industry. According to his obituary, he became the proprietor of the semi-monthly *Boston Pearl and Literary Gazette* at 17,

⁸⁵ George Foster, *New-York Naked* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 185?), 12.

after completing his apprenticeship in Brunswick and moving to Boston. A succession of additional newspaper jobs, both as editor and printer, took him as far west as Cleveland, where he spent several years before returning to Boston.⁸⁶ His first appearance there is a listing in *Stimpson's Boston Directory* for 1840, as a partner in the printing firm of Prentiss and Jones. In 1841, the directory lists him as living at the Card Depot, 8 State Street, which was a large printing house, while the business directory in *Dickinson's Boston Almanac* lists the location of his job printing shop, no longer a partnership, at 2 Water Street. While he no doubt did a variety of job printing, Jones was starting to work his way into the popular fiction business, being listed as the "typographer" in Joseph Holt Ingraham's 1843 novella *Jemmy Daily; or The Little News Vender*, published by Brainard & Co.

In 1844, Jones was able to add "author" to his resume, when his first two novels, *The Belle of Boston* and *The Burglars*, were published. Both his residence and business moved several times over the next several years, following the concentration of his fellow Whig printers, before he settled his home in Cambridge in 1847. More interesting is the frequent variation in how his occupation was identified in both directories. In 1844, Jones established "Jones' Publishing House" at 82 Washington Street, which was evidently a separate business from his printing shop. In 1849, the almanac listed him as a "bookseller" at 82 Washington Street and as a "printer" at 1 1/2 Water Street, but in 1851 listed him as neither one. The directory, however, in 1851 listed Jones as neither a "printer" nor a "bookseller" but a "publisher." In 1853, the directory listed him as the

⁸⁶ Victor Berch, "Retrospective Notes," in *Dime Novel Round-up* 57:5 (October 1988), 93.

publisher of the *Yankee Privateer*, one of several story papers he owned during his career. In 1857, the business directory in the almanac listed Jones in the category of “Publications,” a subheading under “Booksellers and Publishers.” In 1859, Jones sold the subscription list for the *Yankee Privateer* to Street and Smith, and became a regular contributor to their story paper, the *New York Weekly*. In 1864, he bought a literary weekly, the *Yankee Blade*, converted it to a story paper, and published it until several years before his death in 1889.⁸⁷

This fluid occupational pattern is complicated even further when combined with Jones’ work as an author.⁸⁸ The publication of the (at least) 22 novels Jones wrote in the late 1840s was roughly evenly distributed between Frederick Gleason, a big Boston publisher of cheap fiction, and himself, either through “Jones’s Publishing House,” the “Star Spangled Banner Office” (Jones’s story paper at the time, which was housed at the same address as Jones’s Publishing House) or, in one case, simply “published by the author.” In one case, that of *The Nun of St. Ursula*, Gleason published the novel but Jones is listed as having printed it. After 1850, Jones evidently found it more lucrative (or less likely to make him appear an egomaniac) to have his books published by other publishers, most often H. Long of New York or T.B. Peterson of Philadelphia, making

⁸⁷ “Jones’s Publishing House,” in Peter Dzwonkoski, ed., *American Literary Publishing Houses, 1638-1899*, 2 vols., vol. 49 in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, (Detroit: Gale Research, 1986), 1: 231.

⁸⁸ Jones’s background in the print shop, and his evident class solidarity with the artisans against the dandyish mercantile clerks, makes a fascinating appearance in his 1849 novel *Tom, Dick, & Harry; or, the Boys and Girls of Boston* (Boston: Star Spangled Banner Office). In the novel, Abel Holmes and Lewis Marston, two compositors working on a Boston newspaper following their apprenticeship in their hometown, decide to punish Tom and Dick for seducing their sisters and turning them into prostitutes. Abel and Lewis, along with their friends, abduct Tom and Dick, tie them up in a print shop, and the printer’s devil, actually dressed like a devil, inks them all over with printer’s balls, after which they are tarred and feathered. Tom and Dick use alkali to get the ink off of their faces, which takes the skin with it, and they cannot leave their boarding house for three weeks (19-27).

him both an employee of other publishers and an employer of other authors. All along, Jones was also publishing novels by other authors of cheap fiction as well through his several enterprises. What this confusing situation indicates, more than anything, is the fluidity of roles within the antebellum culture industry, especially within the realm of popular fiction. As has been written of the confusing alignment of interests in the period, “Most publishers were retailers, but so were many printers, who also still functioned often as publishers.... Moreover, all the jobbers were retailers, and no one of them could handle the production of all publishers.”⁸⁹

George Thompson occupied space farther down the ladder of popular fiction publishing than did Justin Jones, but was, if anything, even more flexible than Jones in his accommodation to the realities of the print culture industry. In *My Life*, Thompson writes of returning to Philadelphia from New Orleans during an economic slump. He stresses that authorship, along with other forms of culture work, was a job like any other: “It was almost impossible to obtain employment of any description; and many actors, authors, and artists, as well as mechanics, were most confoundedly ‘hard up.’”⁹⁰ Thompson said that he left Philadelphia with his former boss’s mistress, Mrs. Raymond, who was headed to Pittsburgh. While waiting to spring her from jail (she attempted to murder a rival), George claims to have spent his time writing for several magazines in Pittsburgh. He then says that he was hired to edit a real newspaper in Charlestown, Massachusetts, *The Bunker Hill Aurora*, although he adds that his name was never

⁸⁹ Lehmann-Haupt, et al., *Book in America*, 213.

⁹⁰ Thompson, *My Life*, 43

publicly associated with it.⁹¹ After this, Thompson embarked on his career as a popular novelist, and he becomes somewhat easier to track. In 1855, he became the editor of a racy New York weekly, *The Broadway Belle*, whose proprietor was his sometime publisher P. F. Harris. Thompson did not, however, spend all his time as an editor, as his note to the readers in the paper's second issue makes clear:

The paper, small as it is, takes up a considerable portion of our time, for we take pains with it, and feel a professional pride in producing something decidedly superior to the common run of such things. Although we are profitably engaged in writing novels and other matters for the press, we can not and shall not slight our little BELLE, whose claims upon our gallantry and attentions are not to be neglected.⁹²

Thompson relied on other forms of cultural work for his income as well; his attack in the first issue of the *Belle* on another newspaper editor, most likely Horace Greeley, for not paying him \$2 he was owed for a column of theatrical criticism, indicates that he continued to do freelance periodical work. At the same time, he was branching out even further. In the January 22, 1855 issue of the *Belle*, beneath an ad featuring 25 of Thompson's novels for sale (25 cents each, or five for a dollar), an ad appears proclaiming that "George Thompson, Editor of the Broadway Belle and Professor of the Art of English Composition, offers his services to the public as a *General Writer*," of letters, essays, poetry, etc. While the ad may be a hoax, it is not out of the question that Thompson might have tried to earn extra money as a writing tutor.

The extra money would come in handy, since he and Harris had a tempestuous relationship. Thompson left the *Belle* and returned on several occasions, with each departure earning him insulting caricatures, usually of him drunk, on the front page, with

⁹¹ Ibid., 73.

⁹² *Broadway Belle*, January 8, 1855.

malicious notes from Harris inside. After the most vicious of the breakups, only three months into the *Belle*'s life, Thompson announced he was returning to Boston, yet several months later he was back on the masthead again. Thompson consistently maintained his connection to the printing fraternity, writing in the *Belle* notices of political benefits thrown by the local typesetters, yet he was constantly attuned to any opportunity to turn experience into published work, even under the worst circumstances. In Thompson's pseudonymous account of having been jailed in New York for appearing drunk in public, *Ten Days in the Tombs*, he says that he is sure to take careful note of everything he saw in jail, "storing them up in his memory for future use, he being resolved that the confinement of ten days should eventually 'put money in his purse.'"⁹³

In 1858, Thompson would serve a brief stint as both editor and proprietor of another incarnation of the *Broadway Belle*; unfortunately, only one issue exists, so it is impossible to know what led him to give it up. Thompson continued to publish novels, although his production slowed in the late 1850s and early 1860s. In 1863, a George Thompson listed as an "editor" appears in the Boston city directory. Another George Thompson, who may be the same as the 1863 "editor," is listed in the 1864 and 1865 directories as a "printer." Remarkably, the same man is listed in the 1866 and 1867 directories as a "writer," the only person in the 1866 directory to bear such an

⁹³ John McGinn [George Thompson], *Ten Days in the Tombs; or, A Key to the Modern Bastille* (New York: P.F. Harris, 1855), 27. Thompson also spent time in jail for publishing obscene material and perhaps for libel as well. In his *New-York Life*, writing of P. T. Barnum and no doubt referring to his satire on Barnum's autobiography, entitled *The Life of Petite Bunkum*, Thompson observes that Barnum's pre-Museum career "had been of the most instructive character. He had been the editor of a newspaper, and had been put in jail for libel. An editor who has never been imprisoned for libel, may be considered a green-horn in his profession. Barnum, whatever else he may be, is no green-horn." Thompson, *New-York Life: or, The Mysteries of Upper-Tendom Revealed* (New York: Charles S. Attwood, n.d.), 72–3.

occupational designation. A George Thompson, “printer,” at a different home address, is listed in 1869, then disappears. If these George Thompsons were George Thompson the novelist, which is certainly possible, given that the novelist most likely died in Boston in 1871, the example further underscores the extent to which, for writers of popular fiction, authorship was simply another job in the larger industry of print.⁹⁴

Artisanal or Industrial Authorship?

Michael Newbury has noted, in his study of genteel authors and their figurations of authorship, that, with the emergence of a market for printed work, “Writers could realize themselves precisely as professionals who performed no other sorts of work and who were respected, in public terms, primarily for the work they performed.”⁹⁵ While it is abundantly clear that almost no writers, least of all genteel writers, got by by performing “no other sorts of work,” the question remains of how, in an era that was seeing much working-class labor become increasingly industrialized and routinized, authors of popular fiction understood their work in relation to the forms of industrial labor by which they were increasingly surrounded. Newbury writes that to attempt to make parallels between “emergent industrial work and commercial authorship . . . is to make an improbable historical claim, one that must render utterly abstract the day-to-day

⁹⁴ Thompson made the class delineations within that industry abundantly clear in his *City Crimes*, when he attacked a Mr. Grump, a cruel and dishonest parvenu (who is also a New York alderman): “Low-bred and vulgar, he had made a fortune by petty knavery and small rascalities. He was a master printer; one of those miserable whelps who fatten on the unpaid labor of those in their employ. An indignant ‘jour’ once told him, with as much truth as sarcasm, that ‘every hair on his head was a fifty-six pound weight of sin and iniquity.’” (Thompson, *City Crimes*, in *Venus in Boston*, 285). Thompson clearly considers the “master printer” who has become an employer instead of an artisan to reside on the opposite side of the class divide from the journeyman printer with whom he so clearly aligned himself (given the journeyman’s rhetorical flourish, it is easy to imagine that it may actually have been Thompson).

⁹⁵ Newbury, *Figuring Authorship*, 5.

realities of two very different types of work.”⁹⁶ I do not wish to argue that these three authors saw their authorial work as being identical to industrial labor; all three of them, at different times and for different reasons, made claims for the “special” status of authorship as a way of making a living (Lippard went so far as to call it the “high priesthood of Author-life”).⁹⁷ But I would argue that, in large part due to their having begun their approach to authorship in artisanal positions in the print industry, these writers did see their form of popular authorship as having significant parallels to manual and industrial labor, and that this view was not solely a rhetorical pose.

Instead of reflecting what Newbury describes as “the necessary antagonism between industrial labor and literary work,” these three men in fact saw their literary labor as being more closely aligned to the work of the mechanic, the artisan, and the laborer (as they had experienced it) than to “professional” work, and so did many others in antebellum America.⁹⁸ In one of his many invocations of the hardships of the writing life, Lippard praised the self-sacrifice of “a Mechanic or an Author” who, having served the “cause of Humanity,” are left to die broken-hearted.⁹⁹ This class-based narrative was not simply self-glorification, as an obituary of Lippard in T. S. Arthur’s *Home Magazine* noted of Lippard that, “Against many disadvantages of education, position, and

⁹⁶ Newbury, *Figuring Authorship*, 32. In Chapter 1 of his book, Newbury details nicely how Hawthorne attempted to position his authorial work as post-industrial artisanal “craft” work, rather than as industrial labor.

⁹⁷ Lippard, George, *The Empire City* (Philadelphia: Joseph Severns, 1850), 202.

⁹⁸ Newbury, *Figuring Authorship*, 44.

⁹⁹ Lippard, *B.G.C.*, 139.

temperament, Mr. Lippard struggled up from the ranks, and made himself a name throughout the country ere he had gained his twenty-fifth year.¹⁰⁰

The most salient similarity between industrial labor and the labor of producing articles and serialized novels for periodicals was the introduction of time disciplines and scheduling. George Lippard, in a sketch of a fictional obscure writer in the *Quaker City Weekly*, writes that when the author finishes a novel, it comes bound in “a brown paper cover,” establishing him as an author of popular novellas. Yet he is unable to enjoy the satisfaction of having completed his book, for another deadline looms, and at the end of every day “a ragged boy comes for ‘Copy!’”¹⁰¹ The time pressures placed on popular writers came to be seen as a perverse badge of honor; when both Lippard and Thompson boast of never scratching out anything as they wrote, it is just as much a commentary on the haste with which they worked as it is on their satisfaction with their prose. Writers of popular fiction often worked at a breakneck pace. Lippard wrote three novels, including the 500-page *Quaker City*, plus a play based on the novel, along with several years’ worth of newspaper writing, by the time he was 22, and Thompson claimed in his autobiography to have written two novels during a brief stay in a Boston jail. Ned Buntline, another prolific author of popular fiction, claimed to have written a 600-page novel in 62 hours straight (in much of Buntline’s fiction, especially, as is clearly shown

¹⁰⁰ *Arthur’s Home Magazine*, vol. 3 (Jan.-June, 1854), 236. I am indebted to Mark Metzler Sawin for bringing this obituary to my attention.

¹⁰¹ *Quaker City Weekly*, Jan. 27, 1849.

in his manuscript of a play entitled “The Man in the White Coat,” writing on deadline is itself a scene of drama).¹⁰²

These claims may not simply be bravado; for the years 1844-45, Joseph Holt Ingraham personally accounted for 31% of the works of original fiction that were published in Boston.¹⁰³ Lippard was so constantly pressed for time in his writing that he employed a boy in his office to be sure he always had a lit cigar as he worked. This pace of work, perhaps combined with all the cigars, contributed to the impression that Lippard wrote himself to death, as his obituary noted: “His life was one long struggle with his own strong impulses, and the iron circumstances by which he was surrounded, and we doubt not, that in this struggle, his delicate physical organism was overtasked, and an early death the consequence.”¹⁰⁴ One contemporary reviewer highlighted the speed with which popular fiction was produced, writing that the books of popular novelists, “one might think, were *written*, as well as printed, by steam,.... To *live* by their profession, they have, we say, been compelled to write as if by steam....”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Ned Buntline, “The Man in the White Coat; or, The Widder Hunt,” MS of play in the Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

¹⁰³ 43 out of the 136 original novels published in Boston in 1844-45 were by Ingraham. Compare this with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *career* output of four novels and three published collections of stories, plus other miscellaneous tales and short works.

¹⁰⁴ *Arthur’s Home Magazine*, vol. 3 (Jan.-June, 1854), 236. This reference to Lippard’s struggle with his “own strong impulses” is emblematic of the way in which, even when they praised Lippard, people also found fault with his prose style and his self-presentation. The obituarist continued to damn with faint praise, stating that, “He was not a careful, finished writer; but possessed great enthusiasm, and a graphic power....”

¹⁰⁵ *The Nineteenth Century* 5:1 (1852), 96. Even Michael Newbury grudgingly admits this difference between writers of popular and genteel fiction: “Dime novelists, including Lippard, seem typically (though not universally) to have produced more work in less time according to a kind of rationalized standard than authors in the middle-class cultural sphere” (*Figuring Authorship*, 34). Terence Whalen notes that Poe found that “commercial writing was modeled less on the mercantile firm than on the new urban workshops and factories. Although literary production still involved buying and selling, Poe realized that the moment of exchange had penetrated inward to corrupt or regulate the labor process itself” (*Edgar Allan Poe and the*

The Perils and Profits of Authorship

Given the conditions under which they worked, it is perhaps understandable that antebellum authors of popular fiction understood their literary work as productive, industrial labor, as the “written by steam” analogy makes clear, rather than as unproductive “mind-work.” Lippard, the lone labor radical among the three, wrote in the most depth about authorship as labor, and was clearly aware of the monetary value of such labor. He claimed that the “literary labor” he expended in writing the *B.G.C.*, the ritual manual for the Brotherhood of the Union, “if applied in the usual channel of authorship,—that is in the composition of literary works for general sale—would have benefited me to the amount of thousands of dollars.”¹⁰⁶ Lippard and his ilk had a clear sense of their brand of rapid, popular writing as a specific craft. Lippard excoriated the “hackneyed paragraphists,” the “dwarfs and pigmies of the press” who attacked the morality of Lippard’s “yellow-covered” fiction, yet “to save their souls or ... to add another dime to their pockets, could not write the meanest ‘yellow covered’ pamphlet ever published.”¹⁰⁷ In his city-mystery *Ellen Grant*, Osgood Bradbury gives a parody of the aspiring writer, a foppish young man named Edwin who spends six hours writing an announcement for a newspaper; his mother fears that he will injure his mind with such

Masses, 26). Whalen’s study of Poe is especially insightful regarding the ways in which Poe internalized the logic of capitalism, and how this affected his writing.

¹⁰⁶ Lippard’s handwritten notes on the Brotherhood, c. 1852. From Historical Society of Pennsylvania Society Collection, George Lippard folder.

¹⁰⁷ George Lippard, “New York, Above Ground and Below,” *New York Daily National Democrat*, Feb. 2, 1853.

feverish work, and makes him some tea.¹⁰⁸ Many critics during the time, however, made special note of the difficulty of writing as work, whether it was as a journalist or a novelist, as well as of the extremely low and uncertain wages.

Lippard's experience in the culture industry, as well as his politics, informed his view of the work of the author as labor. In his interpretation of the print industry, the author was the laborer, while the idle publisher "riots in wealth on the false pretence of distributing your *Produce* to the *consumer*."¹⁰⁹ In line with Lippard's espousal of a modified version of Adam Smith's labor theory of value, in which labor expended is the sole measure of value, Lippard was even more explicit when he attempted to gain control of the production of his own works by starting his own story paper:

But a change has come over us. We are determined to write no longer for these mere Agents between the author and the Reader. We are determined to yield the produce of our brain no longer to these hucksters of thoughts—these people, who without education to refine their grossness ... sit themselves down to buy an author, body and soul, as a Southern Planter buys a Negro for his cotton-field.¹¹⁰

This comparison of authorial labor to that of a Southern field slave indicates, if melodramatically, how Lippard viewed his relationship as a worker to his work.

Even Justin Jones, who revealed himself to the public eye less frequently, pointed out the physical and mental demands of both the printer's and the author's life. In the preface to *The Burglars*, one of his first two novels, Jones asks for the indulgence of his readers, hoping that "the fact that it was written at intervals after the daily toils of an

¹⁰⁸ Osgood Bradbury, *Ellen Grant: or, Fashionable Life in New-York*, by a Member of the New York Bar. (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 185?), 50.

¹⁰⁹ *Quaker City Weekly*, April 14, 1849.

¹¹⁰ *Quaker City Weekly*, Jan. 20, 1849.

occupation of a complex character, will shield it from unjust censure....”¹¹¹ George Thompson, who seemed to enjoy the convivial aspects of antebellum urban authorship more than most, frequently attempted to use the physical and mental demands of authorship as an explanation for the frequency with which authors became drunks. In *Ten Days in the Tombs*, his defense of his own occasional falls off the wagon, Thompson asks his readers to:

Take for instance, a writer who has been busily employed, with his pen all day long, drawing upon his mind and imagination for materials with which to entertain his readers. As evening approaches, or as soon as his task is finished, he throws down his pen with a sensation of relief which is almost indescribable. Perhaps he has been writing on some subject that does not interest him personally, but which nevertheless, is looked for with eagerness by the mass of the reading community. His mind is fagged, tired, and worn out—but, as he has been seated all day long at his desk, his body needs exercise—he craves some excitement—he feels that he needs something to enliven him—he goes, perhaps, to the theater—mingles with jovial and congenial companions—and drinks.¹¹²

Despite these dangers of the writing life, however, all three men saw good reasons to write, pecuniary and otherwise. Lippard, the author most often given to extravagant claims about the privileged status of authorship was, in his calmer moments, quite honest about his reasons for writing: “I resolved to get my bread by my pen. I passed through all the gradations of a corrupt Press—from a newspaper down to a fashion plate magazine.... You will then understand, that every line ever penned by me, has been penned under the constant pressure of cold, unpoetical Want, or the fear of Want....”¹¹³

The power of Lippard’s open admission of writing for money is highlighted by his keen

¹¹¹ Harry Hazel [Justin Jones]. *The Burglars; or, They Mysteries of the League of Honor* (Boston: Hatch and Company, 1844), [3].

¹¹² Thompson, *Ten Days in the Tombs*, 113.

¹¹³ Letter to Theodore Parker, Oct. 16, 1847, in Theodore Parker Papers, vol. 8, 342-46, Massachusetts Historical Society.

awareness of the other authorial poses available to him. In the preface to *The Ladye of Albarone*, which was the first novel he wrote, he denies that he had been pushed into writing by “the request of a select circle of admiring friends, the wish to afford amusement merely for an idle hour, the approbation of any board of all-sufficient critics.... I cannot say that it was thrown off in a hurry, while I sipped my coffee, in the moments of scanty leisure....”¹¹⁴

A Middle Ground

Michael Newbury’s analysis of antebellum writers’ struggles with whether to adopt the genteel or professional model of authorship, and the relative benefits of each, presumes that “genteel” and “professional” were the only options open to writers, ignoring the possibility of any other class positions within the print industry. Yet these authors, in their lives and their novels, repeatedly invoked the trope of the author as worker.¹¹⁵ In Ned Buntline’s *The Death-Mystery*, his poor author character Edgar Avenel

¹¹⁴ George Lippard, *The Ladye Albarone* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson, 1859), v. Lippard’s biographer was aware of these other figurations of authorship as well, and rejected them as ill-suited to Lippard’s social mission: “But when a man happens to be born with an individuality throbbing in his brain ... can we ask him to cast himself in the mold of the old elegant stylists of literature? Lippard’s mission was not to sit in high judgment upon other literary men, like that of Johnson; nor was it, like Addison, to paint with soft pencil the graceful amenities of life; nor, with Irving, to revive the quaint humors and oddities of Knickerbocker times.” *The Life and Choice Writings of George Lippard* (New York: H.H. Randall, 1855), 96.

¹¹⁵ Their perspective was not idiosyncratic. The author of the 1853 article “Satanic Literature” posed the question, “What should be more sacred than genius; what more purified and elevated than a literary life?” Drawing a direct link between impurity and popularity, the article attacks authors of widely-disseminated popular works of fiction for corrupting the public taste: “What self-degradation must such authorship be! How must the bread obtained by it be embittered with the remorseful consciousness of its guilty and ruinous influence! What man whose moral sensibility is not totally depraved, would not rather turn street-sweeper for a livelihood than act thus as a scavenger of the moral filth of the world...?” (“Satanic Literature,” 27). This passage makes clear both that writing popular fiction was seen as work—as a way to earn a livelihood—and that it was seen as being a certain kind of work, analogous to the menial task of street-sweeping.

writes not in a downtown office, but in his attic room in Eldridge Street, “one of those miserable slaves of the pen who write for an existence, not a livelihood!” Describing the room, Buntline writes, “Paper, pens, ink, *ad libitum*—they, of course, were there. What would a workman be, if he had no tools?”¹¹⁶

This trope was a common one; one writer, in a preface acknowledging that his cheap novella did not measure up to “the model compositions of authorcraft,” defended himself by claiming that, “We like to write in our shirt sleeves and without suspenders. It is easier for the workman and, we fancy, produces better work. It is easier for the reader.”¹¹⁷ The author of a life of the swindler Col. Monroe Edwards apologized for the style of the work, calling attention specifically to the status of its writing as one task among others: “The chapters were originally written for *The National Police Gazette* of this city, in intervals of other pressing duties, on allotted afternoons at the distance of a week apart, and according to an arrangement which made the task imperative, despite the inclinations of the hour. A work prepared in this way, though its powers as a narrative may be very strong, can have but few pretensions on the mere score of authorship....” Such writing was emphatically not “purely literary,” as the author made clear, and was instead simply another part of a job at the *Police Gazette*.¹¹⁸ Unlike the genteel authors of the day, Lippard was not ashamed to be seen as writing for money, and in fact used it

¹¹⁶ Ned Buntline, *The Death Mystery: A Crimson Tale of Life in New-York*, in the *New York Mercury*, April 27, 1861. I am indebted to Jon Eburne for his transcription of this serialized novella. The fact that Avenel works in his home, as George Thompson often claims to have done as well, further differentiates such writers from Blumin’s emerging middle class of nonmanual workers, whose work in an office separate from the home is one of the factors separating this class from the artisanal class.

¹¹⁷ *The Fortunes of a Young Widow, A Veritable Revelation of New York Life in the Nineteenth Century*, By an Old Inhabitant. (Boston: Stearns & Co., 1851), iii.

¹¹⁸ *The Life and Adventures of the Accomplished Forger and Swindler Col. Monroe Edwards* (New York: H. Long & Brother, 1848), [5].

as a shield to protect himself from critics who censured the morality of his novels; in the preface to *Quaker City*, he claimed that he was forced to write it to feed himself and his orphaned sister.¹¹⁹

These writers' openness about writing for money is critical to understanding the class position that they staked out for themselves. As Stuart Blumin has shown, the class structure of antebellum America was in flux as the economy was being transformed and, while the era saw the emergence of a "middle class" of nonmanual workers, this class would not solidify until after the Civil War. There is little question that better-educated, more genteel writers such as Hawthorne were perceived as being higher on the class ladder than Lippard or Thompson, due to many factors including family background, wealth, education, the sort of writing they did, and the physical appearance of the books they produced. As their fortunes improved, Jones and, to a lesser extent, Lippard, very likely did approach some standards of incipient middle-class-ness. The class status of writers is notably vague; as George Foster noted, they needed to be sufficiently educated and genteel to be able to talk and write about anything, yet they made very little money. Blenheim, a "literary adventurer" in *The Fortunes of a Young Widow* who writes love stories for magazines as well as paragraphs for penny papers, can be mistaken for "a parson, or a blackleg. He dressed like the one, and talked like the other."¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ George Lippard, *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk-Hall* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press), 1-2. This strategy seems to have been somewhat effective. In a critical essay on Lippard in *Holden's Dollar Magazine* in 1848, the author notes that, "Had our author, before he published a line, been a patient labourer in the classic vineyard . . . he might have been more subdued, elegant, and chaste, though perhaps not so original or forceful. But he was doubtless forced into the literary field by necessity, and necessity also shaped his works—since we firmly believe the 'Quaker City' was written but to *sell*." "New American Writers," *Holden's Dollar Magazine*, July, 1848, 423.

¹²⁰ *Fortunes of a Young Widow*, viii, 23.

But if there did exist a “class line” between artisans and nonmanual businessmen, it was very unclear where it was drawn in this period, and these writers likely found themselves on different sides of it with some frequency. Authors of popular fiction compared their books to artisanal products—barrels, boots, houses, cloth—and themselves to workers—slaves, factory-girls, mechanics, cobblers. When George Foster discussed the beginnings of his career as a writer, he claimed that the wages he received for his first city sketches were “considerably less than that received by the compositors who set up the type for the paper”; it was to the manual laborer, not the nonmanual clerk, that Foster compared himself.¹²¹

Blumin claims that this period saw a “divergence of economic circumstances” between people who worked with their heads and people who worked with their hands, and in some respects the financial success of both Lippard and Jones bears this out. Yet he also contends that this divergence was driven by a new alignment of economic relations—“employees produced and owners managed”—which left writers firmly on the side of the workers.¹²² Proprietorship is here seen as the key to class membership, which is certainly in line with Lippard’s views on the antagonistic relationship between writers and their bosses, the publishers. While some of these writers’ claims of sympathy with manual labor in their relations with management must be read as posturing, it was not something that they imagined. The *Southern Literary Messenger* critic quoted earlier commented on the nature of the writer-publisher relationship: “It is a curious thing, that, from time immemorial, there has seemed to be a natural enmity existing between authors

¹²¹ Foster, *New York Naked*, 14.

¹²² Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 121, 75.

and publishers, although from their close connexion one would suppose otherwise; in most other trades, between the maker of a commodity and the vender of the same, a friendly relation subsists; not so with authors and publishers....”¹²³ No matter how much money they earned, writers of popular fiction were makers of a commodity, most often working for a piece rate; if at times they also became publishers, the disreputable nature of their writing would have kept them from taking up permanent residence on the upper side of the class line.

While all three men primarily wrote for money, they felt some obligation as craftsmen to give value for the dollar, which was especially understandable given the wide range of options for discretionary spending on entertainment in the antebellum period. Justin Jones’s preface to *The Burglar* is suffused with the anxiety that readers will think they’ve wasted money on the book. After the periodical organ of the Brotherhood, *The White Banner*, folded in less than a year, Lippard was clearly sensitive to possible charges that he had taken subscribers’ money and not delivered the goods. In his own handwritten notes, he wrote that, “I am still aware of the fact, that every subscriber, who paid *one dollar* for his year’s subscription, received the full value of that dollar cent for cent, in the first number of the White Banner. Such subscribers may regret with me, that I am unable to continue the publication of the organ, but they cannot upon due consideration deny, than in actual cost and as a permanent book, the Quarterly White Banner was a full equivalent for the dollar which they paid.”¹²⁴ In view of the number of

¹²³ “Cheap Literature,” 37.

¹²⁴ Lippard’s notes on the Brotherhood, circa 1852, Society Collection, George Lippard folder, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

plays, or panoramas, or menageries that his readers could have seen with that dollar, Lippard's anxiety over getting a reputation as a writer who does not deliver value is understandable.

Thompson, again asking for his readers to understand his convivial propensities, argued that an author "labors hard for the public entertainment," and, if he fulfills his side of the arrangement, is entitled to a drink now and then. Thompson took pride in his professionalism, proclaiming in the *Broadway Belle* that he did "not acknowledge his superior in the United States, in his peculiar style of writing," and showed little patience for the unskilled craftsmen in the industry, railing against "writers of no talent at all—petty scribblers, wasters of ink and spoilers of paper, who could not write six consecutive lines of English grammar, and whose short paragraphs for the newspapers invariably had to undergo revision and correction...."¹²⁵ He was especially enraged when such writers "caus[ed] themselves to be invited to public banquets and other festivals," since they were cashing in on rewards which their books had not earned them.¹²⁶ Thompson outlined his professional ethics more clearly at the conclusion of his autobiography, saying:

Should I conclude to continue in my business as a writer, I shall always, as heretofore, labor to produce that which is interesting, exciting, and founded on truth, and entirely unobjectionable in a moral point of view. Unlike many so-called writers who throw off a quantity of trash and care not how worthless it is so long as it fills up space, I am always willing to bestow time and toil upon my work, for the sake of my own credit, for the purpose of securing the rapid and extensive sale of the book—and in order to give the public perfect satisfaction.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ *Broadway Belle*, Jan. 29, 1855; *My Life*, 4.

¹²⁶ Thompson, *My Life*, 4.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

Popular Authors and their Publics

This easy, seemingly uncomplicated relationship with the mass literary audience marks another critical distinction between these writers of popular fiction and authors of both literary and sentimental fiction, male and female. Many scholars have noted that, in the antebellum period, for the first time “writers for the market contemplated an audience that was unknown, anonymous, and distant—a mere ‘mass,’ as people had begun to call it. And this helped to induce fantasies of alienation and solitude as urgent as the contrary, expansive messages that were encouraged by the market’s offerings of success, profit, and celebrity.”¹²⁸ As Mary Kelley has noted, the requirement to enter a new, public realm in order to appear as an author before an anonymous mass audience was especially difficult for women authors; she quotes Caroline Howard Gilman as saying that she cried all night when her first poem appeared in print, comparing the experience to “as if I had been detected in man’s apparel.”¹²⁹ In the era of P. T. Barnum, publishers and other entrepreneurs of culture were discovering new ways to stand out from the mass of print and other matter to “capitalize on psychic bonds and links of desire forged between the reading public and the objects of its fascination.”¹³⁰ With the development of stereotype technology, it became much easier for publishers to maintain a potentially lucrative backlist of books, and thus the promotion of specific books, and of authors as “brands,” took on even greater significance.

¹²⁸ Wilson, *Figures of Speech*, 14.

¹²⁹ Quoted in Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*, 180.

¹³⁰ Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity*, 5.

The discomfort of many canonical authors from the period with this process has long been noted. Thoreau, not known as the most gregarious of men, grouched that, “If you would get money as a writer or a lecturer, you must be popular, which is to go down perpendicularly.”¹³¹ Yet Lippard, Thompson, and Jones all seem to have avoided these internal conflicts over the necessity of relating to their audience, and, in fact, actively sought out a rapport with the reading public. Justin Jones continued to write under the pseudonym “Harry Hazel” long after his identity was widely known, perhaps out of a sense of impropriety at having so many books by “Justin Jones” be published by “Jones’s Publishing House.” In his initial authorial effort, Jones expressed his “mortification” at the thought of being the subject of public discussion, having his novel’s flaws “proclaimed to the world by his literary umpires,” yet in an 1850 satirical pamphlet entitled *The Jenny Lind Mania in Boston*, about Lind’s first appearance there, Jones is mentioned as being one of the local “celebrities” who was sure to get a prominent seat at the first concert.¹³² In his preface to his 1849 novel *Hasserac, the Thief-Taker*, a more confident Jones comfortably addressed himself to the full social spectrum of potential readers, hoping that “all classes, all grades, high and low, rich and poor, the just and the unjust, shall have a somewhat comprehensive view of each other.”¹³³

George Lippard consistently envisioned himself as writing for the mass audience, and in fact found such a formulation to offer the only possible legitimacy to a writer, enabling him to feel “that he his doing a better work by writing Novels, than he would be

¹³¹ Henry David Thoreau, “Life without Principle,” in *Reform Papers*, Wendell Glick, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 158.

¹³² Jones, *The Burglars*, [3]; Asmodeus, *The Jenny Lind Mania in Boston; or, A Sequel to Barnum’s Parnassus* (Boston: n.p., 1850).

¹³³ Harry Hazel [Justin Jones], *Hasserac, the Thief-Taker* (Boston: Jones’s Publishing House, 1849).

doing were he to put himself to making Sermons and tinkering Creeds.”¹³⁴ Lippard cultivated an eccentric manner of dress and grew long hair, which served throughout his career to make him an easily recognized public figure on the streets of Philadelphia, and he did nothing to discourage the cross-marketing of his works, saying nothing against the appearance of a line of “Monk-Hall” cigars, and writing a stage version of *The Quaker City* (the performances were cancelled because of a threatened riot).

On the many occasions when he was attacked in print, Lippard consistently returned fire in the most public manner possible. In fact, Lippard argued at one point that it was only through *greater* publicity, greater exposure of himself before the public, that the truth about his works would become clear: “But to hate a man, to poison his very home with slander, to follow him with unrelenting vengeance through every avenue of life, without knowing one fact of his private character, a solitary detail of his history... does it not seem an idle, a ridiculous kind of wickedness...?”¹³⁵ He claimed to have been pained by the wrong kind of publicity, such as the stories that circulated about his poverty during his final illness, but he was quick to remedy the situation with a suggestion that news be circulated that all concerned for his welfare could donate between \$20 and \$40 to a fund for his long-term convalescence (to be repaid upon his recovery, of course).¹³⁶ For Lippard, the only kind of bad publicity was that which diluted the market value of his name, such as that produced by the practice of publishers to whom he had sold his

¹³⁴ George Lippard, *Memoirs of a Preacher* (Philadelphia: Jos. Severns and Co., 1849), 59.

¹³⁵ Philadelphia *Saturday Courier*, January 1, 1849.

¹³⁶ Letter dated Jan. 30, 1854, in Henry Simpson, *The Lives of Eminent Philadelphians Now Deceased*, vol. 8, (Philadelphia: William Brotherhead, 1859).

copyrights of flooding the market with his novels, at times giving them away as premiums, thus limiting the prospects of any new works he might write.

Thompson, as usual, had an even less complicated, more convivial relationship with the mass audience. On the first page of his autobiography, Thompson hoped that his book made people like him, but informed that “portion of the world . . . which does not like me” that they had his “permission to go to the devil as soon as it can make all the necessary arrangements for the journey.” Yet despite this mock-pugnacious stance, Thompson agreed that, “*The life of an author*, must necessarily be one of peculiar and absorbing interest, for he dwells in a world of his own creation, and his tastes, habits, and feelings are different from those of other people.”¹³⁷ Thompson was perfectly comfortable making himself available to his audience in this way, and seemed to relish it. At times it worked to his benefit, as during his stint in the Tombs, when he claimed that thirty people came to visit him to plead for his release.¹³⁸ Eventually his celebrity paid off, when the “Fat Philosopher” was finally recognized by the clerk of the jail, who let him out a day early, saying, “I know you, now, very well. I am surprised to see *you* here. You will doubtless make disclosures concerning this place. Send us a copy of whatever you may print.”¹³⁹ In his newspaper writing, Thompson embraced the public role of the writer even more warmly. Reinstated at the *Belle*, in September of 1855, Thompson wrote that:

¹³⁷ Thompson, *My Life*, 3-4.

¹³⁸ Thompson claimed that because he was an American, and all his jailers were Irish, none of his visitors were allowed in, while the Irish prisoners were allowed conjugal visits with their wives. *Ten Days in the Tombs*, 36.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 97-8.

The thought has just occurred to us, as it has often done before, how pleasant it is for a writer to sit down at his desk and hold friendly communion with a vast myriad of persons, to the number of eighty or a hundred thousand! What preacher, what orator, can address a throng so immense? In some essential points, an editor is a privileged and fortunate person; yet his cares and perplexities are many. He is expected to please *everybody*. Almost every day we meet people who find fault with us; ‘we ought to do so-and-so, and we ought to alter this, that and the other thing.’ At first, this used to annoy us;--but now we have become philosophical.... Satisfied that we know our business perfectly, we shall go in our own way, heedless of the grumblers, and ever striving to deserve the good opinions of those who can appreciate us.¹⁴⁰

Little did Thompson know that he was to be fired yet again the following week, yet one gets the impression that for a man as sure of himself as Thompson, this would have posed no great worry.

As I have mentioned previously, it was in large part the experience these men had working in various parts of the print culture industry—print shops, daily and weekly newspapers, book stores—that brought them into such close contact with their audience, and gave them a clear sense of market conditions. Terence Whalen writes that Poe “confronted his audience through the medium of capital. In a literary workshop overseen by a profit-driven publisher, he produced texts for a mass of anonymous readers who were distinguished primarily by an act of purchase....”¹⁴¹ Jones, Lippard, and Thompson, by contrast, cannot be said to have “confronted” their audience at all, precisely because they were so closely in contact with it and, I would argue, because their audience was of a class and occupational background similar to their own. Grantland Rice has written that the increasing redefinition of authorship as an economic activity

¹⁴⁰ “Editor’s Chit-Chat,” *Broadway Belle*, Sept. 10, 1855.

¹⁴¹ Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses*, 5–6.

raised doubts about “what would separate the independent thoughts of authors from the tastes of their readers.”¹⁴²

For writers of popular books meant for a quick and wide sale, such a separation would have been neither desirable nor, for men in situations such as Thompson, Lippard, and Jones, would it have been possible. Living as they did amidst the swirl of commercial life in America’s largest cities, instead of in the sheltered quiet of Concord or Amherst, writers of popular cheap fiction would have encountered the mass audience and its desires every time they stepped outside. William Dean Howells ended his famous essay by concluding that the man of letters was never really a business man, “except in those rare instances where . . . he is the publisher as well as the author of his books.” Otherwise, he “is allied to the great mass of wage-workers who . . . live by doing or making a thing, and not by marketing a thing after some other man has done it or made it. . . . the author is, in the last analysis, merely a workingman, and is under the rule that governs the workingman’s life.”¹⁴³

Although all three of these popular writers made the attempt, along with more canonical figures such as Poe, to become their own publishers, their careers were defined by their initial and continued status as workers, not proprietors, in the print culture industry. Even Justin Jones, the only one of the three to succeed as his own publisher, chose after 1850, for whatever reasons, to write either for other publishing houses or for story papers—that is, as a “hired pen.” Whether Whig, Know-Nothing, or Loco-Foco

¹⁴² Grantland Rice, *The Transformation of Authorship in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 95.

¹⁴³ Howells, “Man of Letters,” 444-45.

Democrat, all three authors would maintain a relationship to writing that figured it as neither a “profession” nor a “calling,” but as work.

Chapter Five

Popular Fiction and the Mass Audience in Antebellum America

*Now the pulse of public curiosity beats high, the gaping
victims are fairly caught and immolated, the editions
multiply....*

—A Physician¹

If critics of popular fiction had as clear a sense of the “deluded multitudes” as the quote above indicates, those print professionals whose job it was to ascertain and cater to public tastes needed to have an even clearer one. But what did this audience look like, and why did they read sensational fiction like city-mystery novels? Lawrence Levine notes that, “the audience remains the missing link, the forgotten element, in cultural history. The creation, the creator, and the context are often accounted for; the constituency remains shadowy and neglected.”² The context for these novels—the growing city—and the creators have been discussed, as has the creators’ representation of the city as a place of excitement and possibility. But who were the consumers of this urban excitement?

While a move toward taking the audience seriously has moved from reader-response criticism into the broader field of cultural history, it is often more productive in the study of media such as film or television (where the audience is both more easily quantifiable and is often still alive) than it is in the study of readers of past centuries. The history of reading is a field fraught with speculation, since the experience of reading itself is something that we know so

¹ *Confessions and Experiences of a Novel Reader*, By a Physician (Chicago: Wm. Stacy, 1855), 20.

² Lawrence Levine, “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences,” *American Historical Review* 97:5 (Dec. 1992): 1269-1399; 1379. Levine correctly observes that the question of audience is directed at scholars of popular culture much more often than at scholars of “high” culture; we ask fewer questions about the relationship between Cotton Mather and the “audience” for his sermons and books.

little about, and our answers to questions about what and how we read are likely to be shaped by the fact that someone else is asking us those questions. Likewise, a diary kept by a reader or letters written by one reader to another cannot be taken as unmediated glimpses of an antebellum individual's response to what he or she read; both forms were highly constructed (the abundance of guides on *how* to write letters or keep diaries attests to this), and both are willful acts of self-presentation.³

Even if diaries of reading are to be accepted at face value, however, the fact remains that very few people who read city-mysteries wrote about having read them, and very few people who kept diaries of their reading wrote about having read cheap fiction. While this may be due in part to a certain shame on the part of some readers at having read “disreputable” books, a more likely explanation is that cheap stories such as these, many of which were serialized in daily or weekly newspapers, and thus were read alongside of accounts of the previous day's events, were part of the fabric of everyday life. Reading a city-mystery was likely not an *event* that one would recount in a diary or a letter, any more than reading a newspaper was.⁴ Nevertheless, this chapter will attempt to address the questions of who read sensational fiction and how they read it. The first question is that of what the larger audience these individual antebellum readers composed looked like.

³ As Cathy Davidson has written, “letters and diaries ... are more likely to indicate how readers thought they should read,” as defined by social conventions and mores, “than how they actually did read,” thus showing how such supposedly “private” documents “verged toward what they are now, the public record.” Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 75. Also see Brian Roberts' *American Alchemy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) for an excellent discussion of the ways in which the diaries of young men traveling west during the California Gold Rush conformed to prescribed literary formulas.

⁴ See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), Part 4; and vol. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), Ch. 8.

Much ink has been spilled about whether or not a true “mass” audience existed in the antebellum era, and what characteristics such an audience must have.⁵ Historians seem unable to agree on what the term “mass” means: does it simply mean a large group of people, or does it imply something more about the size of the audience, requiring that it be national in scope and reached by industrial methods of production, or does it imply something about the socio-economic makeup of the audience as well?⁶ Richard Ohmann argues that, before the Civil War, best-sellers were “isolated publishing phenomena”—essentially accidents—that did not create a “stable mass readership for a dependable succession of ‘hits.’”⁷ He goes on to claim that the fact

⁵ See, for the era in general and the emergence of an audience for “culture” in the modern sense, Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967).

⁶ Patricia Anderson, writing of nineteenth-century England, argues that in order for a “mass audience” to exist, it has to be large, and it has to cross class lines. Some additional considerations for “mass” culture include a “contemporary awareness that these publications were indeed notable for and previously unequalled in their circulation figures,” the use of mechanization in production, and the realization that the cultural product (in Anderson’s case, English pictorial magazines) was a product for sale. Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture, 1790-1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 2-11. Richard Ohmann, writing of magazines in America, argues that “a national mass culture was not firmly established in this country until the 1880s and 1890s,” requiring that the identical experience of homogeneous media must be the same nationwide in order for an audience to qualify as “mass” (as though different people’s experience of any media could ever be “identical”). Ohmann views mass culture as a byproduct of the needs of producers to stabilize sales and make them predictable through the creation of brand advertising, which helped people trust distant producers of commodities. Ohmann, “Where Did Mass Culture Come From? The Case of Magazines,” in *Politics of Letters* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 138, 147.

To a certain extent, I hope to sidestep these issues by addressing the question of the “mass audience” instead of the divide between “popular culture” and “mass culture.” Lawrence Levine, using an instrumentalist or “market-driven” definition, states that popular culture “is culture that is *popular*; culture that is widely accessible and widely accessed; widely disseminated, and widely viewed or heard or read.” In contrast, he argues that *mass* culture needs to have been distributed nationwide by centralized corporate or commercial structures, and that “not everything mass produced for the American people was popular.” (Levine, “The Folklore of Industrial Society,” 1373.) This definition perpetuates the focus on the producer of “mass” culture rather than the audience. Instead, I am more concerned with the question of whether or not city-mysteries novels reached a mass audience, and were not simply “popular.” For instance, a book that was read only by northeastern urban men in antebellum America could be said to have been “popular,” based purely on sales figures, but that audience would not be a “mass” audience.

⁷ Ohmann, “Where Did Mass Culture Come From?” 138–39. He goes so far as to include dime novels in this critique, claiming that they remained “essentially wildcat operations, with piracy and price-cutting as their strategies and without habituated audiences,” a grave misapprehension of the significance of the standardization that the dime novel genre created. While it is true that few novels attained the best-seller status of such books as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Lamplighter*, or *The Quaker City*, the sudden proliferation

that late-19th-century magazines were catering to a newly-formed “mass” audience can be seen in the shift in their editorial policies, away from exotic stories and toward stories of daily life and contemporary society that attempted to explain the opacity brought about by market relations.⁸ If any genre of fiction in antebellum America displayed precisely this orientation toward daily life and the mysterious changes brought about by new market and industrial relations, it is that of the cheap sensational urban novel.

I would argue that, at least on the part of the writers of city-mysteries fiction, there was a clear sense that a mass audience (or several mass audiences) existed in antebellum America, and that it was not created by manufacturers, from above, out of a need to sell a product. Rather, as the quote at the head of this chapter indicates, the creation of a mass reading audience was the product of a cycle of demand from the “public taste” and responses to that taste by writers and publishers, who “baited” the audience with sensational tales. Isabelle Lehuu attempts to chart a middle course, writing that the “qualifier ‘popular’ [which was invoked in almost all discussions of city-mysteries fiction, pro or con] indicates that these forms reached a mass reading public, even if their publication was short-lived and the public heterogeneous.” She argues that popular culture is best defined by what it is not – it is not learned or refined, and is instead a blend of older traditions and new needs, set apart from other forms in the cultural hierarchy.⁹ What I hope this chapter will demonstrate is that the perception clearly existed in antebellum America,

of vast numbers of novels in a genre such as city-mysteries in the wake of the success of Sue’s and Lippard’s examples indicates that antebellum publishers may not have been as ignorant of market trends as Ohmann suggests.

⁸ Ohmann, “Where Did Mass Culture Come From?” 149.

⁹ Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 27. David Grimsted’s suggestion that we describe cultural forms such as city-mysteries as “neglected culture” rather than “popular culture,” thus avoiding the need to define exactly what “popular” means, is useful here.

on the part of producers and critics alike, that these novels were produced with a mass audience in mind (meaning a numerically large group of readers who had certain expectations from the novels and treated them as a cultural commodity); that authors had some idea of what that audience looked like; and that that audience crossed class and gender lines. In addition, the appearance of an audience of this size was met with innovations in distribution and publicity on the part of publishers, and in the creation of new models of the authorial persona. The appeal of such books to such large numbers of people did not go unnoticed, and opponents and supporters of cheap fiction both deluged the public with advice on what to read and how to read it.

How Big Was the Antebellum Audience?

The anonymous Physician quoted above, in his attack on novel reading, admitted that this kind of reading “is indulged in by very near the great mass of reading minds in this country.”¹⁰ This much was a commonplace in the period; the description of Americans as a uniquely “reading people” can be traced back to Tocqueville, and probably much earlier. But the Physician went a step further, by actually trying to calculate (conservatively) the size of the national reading audience. Starting with a city of 30,000 people, assuming 7 people per family, he is left with 4,285 families. He assumed that two-thirds of them will own two “works of light literature,” resulting in 5,712 copies of such books in that city. He then extrapolated that ratio to the national population of 24 million, assuming that 10 million of those were illiterate or young children. These calculations resulted in a total of 2.5 million copies of cheap, “yellow-covered”

¹⁰ *Confessions and Experiences of a Novel Reader*, 31. The list of sample titles given on page 21 clearly indicates that by “this kind of reading,” the author meant to include city mysteries fiction; the titles include *The Disinherited*, *Crime in High Life*, *Rapine and Butchery (?)*, *Twin Brothers*, *A Tale of Seduction*, *Love and Fashion*, *False Husband*, *Lady of Fashion*, *Finished Libertine*, *Crime and Murder*, *Deed of Blood*, and *The Brigand*.

fiction in circulation, being read by 9.5 million people.¹¹ The author of an 1853 article entitled “Satanic Literature,” more aware of the ephemerality of such publications, extrapolated from figures given in a London newspaper stating that a list of sixteen cheap novellas accounted for a total of 100,000 copies a week and concluded that, “Their multiplication in this country must be vastly greater.”¹² Adopting a familiar conceit, the Physician offered to take his reader on a trip “through the length and breadth of our land. Let us visit the various cities upon our sea-board—our commercial emporiums—our high places of resort for amusement. Let us travel up and down our canals and railroads. Let us promenade the spacious saloons of the splendid steamers on our chain of lakes and navigable streams. Must I say it! Visit with me the social circle in the parlors of some of our best and most respectable families. Go further. Let us visit the dwelling of some professing Christians.”¹³ Needless to say, in all places, yellow-covered sensational novels had made their appearance.

This fascination with calculating the size and geographic scope of the audience was widespread. Dr. Joel Ross, enraptured by the possibilities of the new Hoe steam press, built for the *New York Sun*, did not confine his projections only to the United States. He claimed that, presuming a world population of 900 million, and six individuals to a household, the new Hoe press, if run day and night (except, of course, on Sunday), could print one newspaper per year for every family in the world, with “two hundred and forty thousand copies left to sell at the counter. Think of that! friends, out there on the Monongahela among the catamounts! You haven’t begun to ‘see the Elephant,’ yet, nor we either. . . .” Such benefits would not only extend to those on the

¹¹ *Confessions and Experiences of a Novel Reader*, 31-32.

¹² “Satanic Literature,” *The National Magazine* 2:1 (January 1853), 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

Monongahela, but also to the “Hottentot” and the “Esquimaux.”¹⁴ Amory Dwight Mayo, writing just of New York State, claimed that, according to the census of 1855, the state featured 559 newspapers and 112 periodicals, with dailies producing a combined circulation of slightly over 300,000, while weeklies claimed a total circulation of almost 1.3 million, as did monthlies. To underscore the fact that he saw popular fiction, or “fugitive literature,” as being essentially akin to periodical literature, he added to the totals “the vast number of books, written in essentially the same style” as the popular periodicals.¹⁵ These passages, and many others like them from the period, indicate the assumption that the audience for popular fiction was geographically widespread and diverse in terms of class, and that people purchased these books and story papers for the sake of amusement.

This appeal took place on a scale never before known, both in numbers and in geographic reach; by the late 1840s, America had produced the largest reading audience the world had seen, spread across an entire continent.¹⁶ Many antebellum critics viewed this development in a positive light, while occasionally complaining of the diminished standards, both in the content of books and in their physical form, that accompanied such an expansion of the reading public (they objected to the lightweight, cheaply constructed books that were ideal for a highly mobile population). Robert Vaughan, in 1843, said that, “large sales and small profits” had become a maxim with authors, as well as with tradesmen, explaining that, “all men are now looking to the

¹⁴ Dr. Joel Ross, *What I Saw in New York; or a Bird's-Eye View of City Life* (Auburn, NY: Derby and Miller, 1852), 214.

¹⁵ Amory Dwight Mayo, *Symbols of the Capital; or, Civilization in New York* (New York: Thatcher and Hutchinson, 1859), 156–57.

¹⁶ Some modern critics persist in seeing this expansion of the reading public as a bad thing. Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, writing fifty years ago, described the “lowering of prices and the debasing of standards which occurred in the forties” as a result of the “principle of cheap books for large numbers of people.” Lehmann-Haupt, et al. *The Book in America: A History of the Making and Selling of Books in the United States* (New York: R.W. Bowker, 1951), 130.

many. The many can read, the many can buy, and the proudest, accordingly, do not scruple to address themselves, by their economy in publication, to this new object of worship.”¹⁷

Authors of urban sensation fiction made frequent reference to the scale and composition of their audience. Joseph Scoville, describing the process of writing his novella *The Adventures of Clarence Bolton; or, Life in New York* for serialization, where it was “read chapter by chapter every week by thousands,” claimed that “it has been our aim as we have progressed to throw into it portions that would interest all and each individual reader, no matter to what class of society he or she might belong.”¹⁸ George Foster, who saw his collections of urban journalistic sketches as being written for the “Middle Million” rather than the “Lower Million,” gave specific sales figures for several of his books. In *New York Naked*, he wrote that his earlier collection *New York in Slices* sold between 30,000 and 40,000 copies in its 25-cent form in its first year, and continued to sell about 1,000 copies a month, and that *New York by Gaslight* was an even bigger seller. George Lippard’s habit of calling attention to the size of his audience has already been

¹⁷ Robert Vaughan, *The Age of Great Cities: or, Modern Civilization Viewed in its Relation to Intelligence, Morals, and Religion* (London: Jackson and Walford, 1843), 83. Vaughan may have been a bibliophile at heart; he admitted that, as a result of the trend towards publishing books for “the poor in common with the rich,” “the stately folio has long since disappeared, and even the moderate quarto has been obliged to give place to less aristocratic forms of type and paper,” until the works of the standard authors had become available to everyone. He also noted that this process was not confined to England, but took place throughout Europe and North America as well (83). Vaughan’s comments lend some credence to Isabelle Lehuu’s contention that it was not so much the democratization of knowledge that caused anxiety as it was the “emergence of a different, vernacular print culture—cheap, sensational, ephemeral, miscellaneous, illustrated and serialized—that transgressed the boundaries of conventional media and defied orthodox uses of the printed word” (*Carnival on the Page*, 7–8). Lehuu’s repeated references to the “official book culture” of which this new culture was a “parody,” a “carnavalesque inversion,” lead one to question what this official culture was and who ran it (9). It is true that these new kinds of books looked somewhat different than older books, and were produced in much larger quantities, but there is very little evidence either that there did not exist any cheap, vernacular print culture before the 1840s, or that for most readers the experience of print corresponded precisely with the activity of reading books. David Henkin’s *City Reading* provides a valuable counterpoint here by revealing how widespread textuality, print, and reading were in the everyday experience of urban life in antebellum New York

¹⁸ Joseph Scoville, *The Adventures of Clarence Bolton; or, Life in New York* (New York: Garrett and Co., 1853), 82.

noted in the previous chapter, and this sort of appeal was a common practice on the part of authors who were aware that their work was thought to be superficial or immoral.

While it is impossible to know the actual numbers in which city-mysteries novels sold, what is important to know is that they represented a form of print culture that was suddenly everywhere—cheap, sensational, ephemeral, intended for pleasurable leisure consumption—that straddled the boundaries between “books” (often the sole focus of historians of print culture), broadsides, pamphlets, and newspapers. It is also important to note that these books were accessibly priced, most costing 25 cents, and some half or even a quarter of that amount; only the longer examples from the genre, such as *Quaker City* (which is over 500 pages long) were bound in boards and sold for a dollar or more.¹⁹

Antebellum Reading Publics

Authors of sensational fiction were not the only actors in the print market in the antebellum period who saw the existence of a large, diverse market for their products, and who assumed that they could actually reach the entire market, and not just segments of it. The first issue of the New York *Herald*, from May 6, 1835, claimed that the new penny paper was for “the journeyman and his employer—the clerk and his principal.” Although the *Herald*’s success has often been attributed to its popularity with Democratic and working-class readers, the paper included both sensational stories and business news, clearly trying to appeal to the entire public.

As Isabelle Lehuu notes, the success of Horace Greeley’s New York *Tribune*, a Whig penny

¹⁹ Ronald Zboray, in his essay in *Reading in America* and in *A Fictive People*, states that most books were out of reach of working-class readers in the period, saying that the most common price of a paperback was 50 cents, and most hardbacks ranged from 75 cents to \$1.25. This conclusion depends on a rather selective definition of the term “book.”

paper, undermines any easy assumptions regarding the appeal of cheap print to only certain classes or political groups.²⁰ But does this mean that the antebellum reading public was a cohesive group, that there existed a unified “public sphere” to which writers attempted to appeal?²¹ Or was the reading public in fact composed of many smaller publics, divided along lines of gender, age, geography, religion, ethnicity, class, and preferred type of reading, to all of which a paper like the *Herald* could attempt to appeal? The anonymous Physician quoted above clearly felt that society was made up of many smaller publics, and he presciently predicted in 1855, perhaps in the wake of the success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, that, instead of knitting the public sphere together, print culture (especially novels) would tear the Republic apart.²²

The proliferation of different “niche” newspapers and magazines in the period clearly indicates the perception that the reading public was fragmented instead of unitary. As the narrator of *Asmodeus in New York* described it, “There are newspapers for women, for old men, and for children. Some are devoted to the married, some to bachelors and maidens; to the rich, to the poor; to the learned, to those who wish to learn; to every sect and religious denomination; to every system and theory; to every profession; and to every folly.”²³ This view of the reading public did not apply only to periodicals, but to bound books as well, as is indicated by the claim

²⁰ Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page*, 47.

²¹ Since Jürgen Habermas’ construction of the “public sphere” is used primarily to refer to the realm of politics, I am hesitant to use it here, save for the fact that the term has become so overused, both in its application to broader areas of the culture and to eras that clearly do not compare to the Enlightenment era of rational conversation described by Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In antebellum America in particular, I find the concept to be of little use. As Michael Schudson has written, “When we examine descriptions of what public life was actually like [in antebellum America], there is not much to suggest the rational-critical discussion Jürgen Habermas posits as central to the public sphere. Perhaps more distressing, for some periods there is not much to indicate even very general interest, let alone participation, in public affairs.” Schudson, “Was There Ever a Public Sphere? If So, When? Reflections on the American Case,” in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 146.

²² *Confessions and Experiences of a Novel Reader*, 62-3.

²³ *Asmodeus in New York* (New York: Longchamp & Co., 1868), 151.

in the September, 1859 issue of the *Knickerbocker* that, “There are novels in every style, suited to every taste, treating of every topic, revealing all conditions of life, discussing all branches of learning, rambling through every field of speculation ... demolishing and reconstructing society, penetrating all mysteries....”²⁴

The perception that the reading public was not one homogenous group, but was made up, in James Gordon Bennett’s words in the *Herald*, of “journeymen” and “employers,” “clerks” and “principals,” is crucial to understanding the diversity of the genre of city-mysteries and the polyvocal nature of many of the novels themselves. Just as the novels speak in different voices, they spoke to people who would have heard them differently; thus, it is crucial to step back from attempts to construct an image of “the reader,” which often can obscure our view of the variety of *readers*. Within the category of the “popular,” a term that indicates a shared set of norms or practices, these norms and practices were understood, used, and defined in widely divergent styles. Different audiences would have assigned a variety of often shifting meanings to city life itself, and to fictional representations of that life as well.²⁵ The variety of these reading responses would have been even wider for a genre of novels such as city-mysteries, which so often depended on the depiction of relations between different sexes, social classes, races, economic levels, and ethnic groups, and the often permeable boundaries between them. Apart from the split between “high” (embodied by the canonical figures of the American Renaissance) and the “low”—which can perhaps be more clearly understood as a split between writers who

²⁴ Quoted in Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 37.

²⁵ As Roger Chartier notes, “We must recognize ... a major tension between the explicit or implicit intentions a text proposes to a wide audience and the variety of possible reading responses.” Roger Chartier, *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, and Audiences from Codex to Computer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 89.

were commercial failures and those writers whose success they resented—what other cleavages existed in the antebellum reading public?²⁶

The Female Audience for City-Mysteries Fiction

The most obvious line of fragmentation in the popular audience was that of gender, between the audience for sentimental fiction, which is presumed to have been written by women for women, and the audience for everything else (especially sensational fiction), which is, broadly speaking, presumed to have been written by men for men. But were city-mysteries written at all with women in mind? The easy answer, indicated by Leslie Fiedler's 1955 essay on *The Quaker City*, entitled "The Male Novel," is No; no genre that is so breathlessly insistent upon lurid descriptions of the female body in various states of undress, it is presumed, would have appealed to women readers raised on a relatively genteel diet of Susan Warner and Maria Cummins. The assumption ran in the opposite direction as well. As Philip Hone wrote in his diary, commenting on the death of Miss Burney, "the works of Miss Burney, Mrs. Radcliffe, and Miss Porter afford no more enjoyment than do the marbles and tops of boyhood to the middle-aged man engrossed by the cares of this life."²⁷ It is all too easy to assume, given their frequently sensational content and the absence of any substantial evidence of the antebellum reading experience itself, that the reading of city-mysteries novels, along with the mammoth

²⁶ Isabelle Lehuu criticizes David Reynolds for his depiction of a "shared culture in pre-Civil War America" in *Beneath the American Renaissance*, due to his exploration of how the canonical figures of the period were influenced by popular literature. Both Lehuu and Reynolds, however, are really focusing on the same issue—an *aesthetic* split between different groups of writers. While this may have led figures such as Melville and Hawthorne to deprecate the unsophisticated reading public, it is fundamentally a discussion about different kinds of writers, not different groups of readers.

²⁷ *The Diary of Philip Hone, 1828–1851* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1927), v. 1, 468–9 (entry for March 19, 1840).

papers described by Lehuu as a sort of “printed rowdy” culture, belong in the context of drinking, gambling, and boxing—in short, to “a male conviviality, an urban street culture.”²⁸

This is not to claim that the readership of city-mysteries (or sentimental novels) was evenly split along gender lines, or that different kinds of texts were not targeted primarily at one gender or another, but that any assumptions we make about who read what in this period are necessarily largely conjectures.

There is evidence, both in the texts of city-mysteries novels and written on the covers of extant copies, that some women did read these novels. Many writers of sensational urban fiction implied a female audience in their frequent appeals to readers from the pages of their novels. George Thompson, perhaps with tongue firmly in cheek, before offering a coy but titillating description of the hero’s sometime companion in *Jack Harold*, cautioned his audience thus: “Now, the amorous reader must not suppose that we are going to gratify him by describing in detail the revealed beauties of the charming Kate; for, as we have the vanity to believe that the bright eyes of many of the fair sex will scan these pages, we fear to raise emotions of jealousy in their fair bosoms, should we happen to depict personal qualities of a loveliness surpassing their own.”²⁹ Later in the same novel, Thompson resorts to the same tactic, attempting to describe a scene in which Lopez, the villain, has paid a servant \$50 to allow him to watch Jack’s mother take a bath: “O! thrice gentle reader! ... If thou art one of earth’s fair daughters ... think of thine own sweet charms, whose praises are whispered to thee with mute eloquence by the faithful

²⁸ Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page*, 67. This assumption ignores the fact that the “mammoth” papers Lehuu describes, such as the *Brother Jonathan*, were in fact “family” story papers, very different from the male-centric antebellum “sporting” press, such as the *Whip*, the *Flash*, and the *Rake*.

²⁹ George Thompson, *Jack Harold, or, The Criminal’s Career: A Story with a Moral*, by Greenhorn (Boston: Wm. Berry & Co., 1850), 63. This practice of calling attention to the *bodies* of his female readers was standard in Thompson, and it can be argued that such comments redirecting a reader’s attention to his or her physical nature may have helped to shape the reading experience.

mirror ... then may'st thou conceive the loveliness of that superb woman, whose limbs were kissed by the most wanton waters of the bath.”³⁰

Several more sedate writers presented themselves specifically as addressing women. The narrator of *The Belle of Central Park* explains that, “I have determined to give to the world my history, for the purpose of warning such of my sex who may come after me of the fearful temptations of city life—where vice is so gilded over that it appears to be the very reverse of what it really is,” targeting the woman reader who was perhaps less fascinated with female nudity than Thompson’s.³¹ However overheated and facetious many of these invocations of a female readership may be, the people who sold Thompson’s books were more straightforward. In an ad inside the back cover of Thompson’s *The Brazen Star*, George W. Hill, proprietor of the Metropolitan Publishing Hall, “announces to the reading public ... that he is now prepared to furnish them with Books which are equally suitable to the Boudoir of the Lady and the counter of the dealer.”³² Similar evidence can be found in the advertisements on the back pages of the 1853 *Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco*—the inside back cover features an ad for *The Ladies’ Guide to Beauty: A Companion for the Toilet* (bearing the hard-to-resist tag line, “Who Would be Homely, When they May be Handsome?”), and the back cover bears an ad for Mrs. Ann Stephens’ *Ladies Complete Guide to Crochet & Fancy Knitting*. Any publisher, however dim, would not have been likely to have inserted these ads in a book that he did not expect any women to read.

³⁰ Ibid., 101–2. The titillation offered to male readers by such a strategy—imagining women readers imagining themselves naked in front of a mirror when reading about a naked woman in a novel—is not to be discounted, but the insistence on the bodily presence of a female reader is nevertheless striking.

³¹ Henry Edwards, *The Belle of Central Park. A Story of New York Life* (New York: Advance Publishing Co., 1867), 7. This novella was originally published in *Ned Buntline’s Own*.

³² In George Thompson, *The Brazen Star: or, the Adventures of a New-York M.P.* (New York: George W. Hill, 1853).

What the novels, and the discourse around them, clearly indicate, however, is that, just as we cannot assume that there was any such thing as a unitary public sphere of antebellum readers, neither can we refer to “women readers” of the period as an undifferentiated mass. Both writers of sensational urban fiction and their opponents made clear that women *did* read these books, as they were assumed to read *all* novels, but that it was a certain *kind* of woman—as George Hill’s ad evoked it, the kind of woman who would have a “Boudoir” rather than a simple bedroom—who read them. As will be discussed later in the chapter, many depictions of brothels or other resorts of “loose” women in cheap sensational novels describe the presence of just such novels in their parlors or “boudoirs,” especially given the presumed ability of racy prose to stimulate sexual arousal. In an 1844 novella entitled *Ellen Merton, The Belle of Lowell: or, the Confessions of the “G.F.K.” Club*, the author makes clear that the novel was written, if not primarily, then at least in part, for women, to show them how mill girls in Lowell are led astray: “It is the object of the following pages to exhibit truly and minutely the successive steps—the attractions, the allurements, the seductive influences, on the one hand; and on the other, the deception, perfidy, treachery and desertion, that lead to this lamentable result.”³³ As this indicates, it is mainly these sort of women who are susceptible to “allurements” and “seductive influences” who might benefit from these books, but who are also likely to read them once they have succumbed. One such fallen creature is the unnatural mother in prison in Mrs. Ann Stephens’ *Fashion and Famine*, who is depicted sitting in her filthy cell beating her children

³³ *Ellen Merton, The Belle of Lowell: or, the Confessions of the “G.F.K.” Club* (Boston: Brainard & Co., 1844), 4.

when they distract her from “a book with yellow covers, soiled and torn, [that] lay open upon this woman’s lap....”³⁴

In contrast to the standard set of works found in a genteel young woman’s library—described by John Chumaseo in *The Landlord and Tenant* as consisting of “Byron, Scott, Pope, Campbell, Dryden, Johnson, Bulwer, Channing, Cooper, and Irving” (given the pungency of his descriptions, Dickens was marginal)³⁵—or the list of periodicals received by the inhabitants of a genteel boarding house in Lowell outlined in the *Lowell Offering*—*Boston Daily Times*, *Signs of the Times*, *Herald of Freedom*, *Christian Herald*, *Christian Register*, *Vox Populi*, *Literary Souvenir*, *Boston Pilot*, *Young Catholic’s Friend*, *Star of Bethlehem*, *Non-Resistant*, *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, and the *Ladies’ Pearl* (they also owned a copy of the *Book of Mormon*)³⁶—the expected reading matter of women of questionable morality was very different. The author of the 1844 collection of city sketches *Life in Town, or the Boston Spy* not only assumed that a servant woman would be familiar with the utility of various arts of disguise in urban deception, but also assumed how she would have known about them: “She has *read* of such things in books; she has perchance *seen* them in the washtub....”³⁷

How to dress up to deceive people in the streets, however, was not the only thing women learned from sensational fiction. In *Norton: or, The Lights and Shades of a Factory Village*, another Lowell novel, the vain young heroine, Julia, is plied by her seducer with “French

³⁴ Mrs. Ann S. Stephens, *Fashion and Famine* (New York: Bunce and Brother, 1851), 291. Stephens’ attack on “yellow-covered literature” as a genre here is ironic, given that this very book’s first part, when it was published in 1843, appeared as an octavo volume in two columns with yellow paper covers.

³⁵ John C. Chumaseo, *The Landlord and Tenant: A Tale of the Present Day, Founded on Facts* (Rochester: William H. Beach, 1845), 10.

³⁶ “Our Household,” *Lowell Offering*, 2nd ser., 1:1 (1841), 364–5.

³⁷ *Life in Town, or The Boston Spy. Being a series of sketches illustrative of whims and women in the ‘Athens of America,’* by an Athenian (Boston: Redding and Co., 1844), 14.

romances,” a genre of books that was clearly associated by most readers, in form and content, with sensational urban stories. Compared to the favored reading of the moralistic Miss Elliston—Mrs. Hemans, Sigourney, Eliza Cook, Hannah More, Addison, Pope, Cowper, Young, Goldsmith—Alfred explains to the mysterious stranger Norton (who turns out to be Julia’s brother) that, “I learned her to read ... the ninepenny trash of the day; I gave her the works of George Sand and Paul de Kock, and such like authors.”³⁸ When Norton complains that “such books as those are enough to poison the mind of any virtuous girl,” Alfred chortles that “she’s now half mine, for she has so far progressed in her studies as to relish no other reading.”³⁹ Later, when Norton visits his sister and finds in the parlor, underneath a stack of respectable books, such as Rufus Griswold’s *Poets and Poetry of America* and Jared Sparks’ *Life of Washington*, a pamphlet copy of Paul de Kock’s *Milkmaid of Montmarnier*, he knows that her ruin is complete, despite her observation that the Lowell libraries carry de Kock’s works.⁴⁰ Thus, when we surmise that these novels may have had women readers, we should perhaps take the novels (and their critics) at their word, and not necessarily assume that this audience of women readers was made up of the same women who read Pope and Griswold (everyone, it seems, read Scott).

³⁸ “Such like authors” is a crucial phrase, since de Kock was often billed in America as the “Bulwer of France,” and George Lippard was called the “Bulwer of America”; some ads also described George Thompson as the “de Kock of America.”

³⁹ *A Tale of Lowell. Norton: or, The Lights and Shades of a Factory Village: Wherein are developed some of the Secret Incidents in the History of Lowell*, by “Argus” (Lowell: “Vox Populi Office,” 1849), 24-5, 10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 29. While de Kock was a real French writer, his name was often put on American works of urban sensation fiction, as was the case on one edition of George Thompson’s *New York Life*, and his works were sold by the same dealers and condemned by the same reformers as Lippard’s and Thompson’s. Because of the frequent occurrence of sexual content in books attributed to de Kock, he was thought to be a special favorite of female readers. See Thomas Low Nichols, *The Lady in Black: A Story of New York Life, Morals, and Manners* (New York: 1844) 29, for a mention of women’s sensational reading and de Kock.

Each Genre its Own Audience

Another division in the potential audience that was closely related to, but not coterminous with, gender is that of genre preference—then, as now, the mass audience was divided up into groups who preferred to read certain kinds of books. George Lippard, when starting up his *Quaker City Weekly* newspaper, clearly articulated this division in the reading public when responding to a letter about the target audience for his newspaper: “It seems to us that there is a medium between the sleepy weekly and the flash paper. We shall endeavor to ‘hit’ that half-way.” As Lippard saw it, there was an audience that liked “sleepy,” and an audience that liked “flash,” and this distinction applied to books just as clearly as it did to newspapers.⁴¹ While the general perception existed that “sentimental” stories or romances would appeal primarily to women, and adventure stories would appeal primarily to men, the divisions of genre appeal cut across lines of class, religion, and ethnicity as well.⁴²

⁴¹ Lippard failed in this attempt at crossover success. The *Weekly* went out of business in less than two years. *Quaker City Weekly*, January 6, 1849.

⁴² One particularly striking example of an attempt to appeal to a specific religious audience within the city-mystery genre is Rev. John T. Roddan’s *John O’Brien; or, The Orphan of Boston. A Tale of Real Life* (Boston: Patrick Donahoe, 1850). Following all the conventions of the city-mystery genre, tracking the fortunes of an orphan in Boston as he escapes the clutches of various and sundry—and invariably Protestant—figures who are all linked to a secret conspiracy, the novel is almost a mirror image of books like Lippard’s two New York novels, which follow a Jesuit conspiracy to take over the United States. Roddan stakes out his audience segment with remarkable specificity in his preface: “This little book was written for Catholics: if Protestants choose to read it, I have nothing to say.... So if a Protestant reads the book, and totally misunderstands it, it is no affair of mine: the book was not written for them. Neither was it written for all sorts of Catholics. ... I address myself to those Catholics who move in what are sometimes called the middle and lower ranks of society. ... those Catholic children who are running wild in the streets” (v–vi).

The audience was bifurcated along lines of ethnicity as well, especially for populations that did not speak English. In addition to the German translation of Lippard’s *Quaker City*, other American city-mysteries were translated into German as well, including George Thompson’s *Kate Castleton*, published by Barclay & Co. in 1860 as *Merkwürdige Geschichte der Schönen Putzmacherin Kate Castleton*. In addition to these translations, the vibrant German-language publishing industry in America produced several city-mysteries written in German about American cities. Most notable (because they have been reprinted in translation, all with valuable introductory essays by Steven Rowan) are: Ludwig von Reizenstein’s *Mysteries of New Orleans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Emil Klauprecht’s

As has been discussed previously, city-mysteries novels were themselves clearly viewed as a genre of their own, or perhaps as a sub-genre within the larger class of racy, sensational fiction. Much of this attributed generic classification, however, depended upon the physical appearance of the books and where they were serialized, if at all. Donald Grant Mitchell, writing pseudonymously as Ik Marvel, in his genteel 1850 book of urban observation, entitled *The Lorgnette: or, Studies of the Town*, devotes an entire chapter to discussing the various rumors surrounding the identity of the author of the serialized pieces. He claims that he has heard at least 30 names linked to the tales of which “I can find no trace either in the literary or moral world...” Given that he has never heard these names, he concludes that “they must belong to that numerous, and deserving class, who are immortalized by contribution of thrilling tales to weekly newspapers, and whose readers are devout admirers of Prof. Ingraham, and extravagantly fond of peanuts.”⁴³

Mitchell thus constructs a different segment of the reading public based on genre preference, a segment that incorporates, but does not exclusively rely on, categories of gender, age, and class. The one thing that defines this group of (presumably) young, male, working-class readers is their preference for a particular genre, that of “thrilling tales” (and peanuts); they are the young male workers, we are meant to understand, who did not spend their time in the Apprentices’ Library reading books on self-improvement. Nevertheless, it would seem that not all of the young men who read city-mysteries fiction were laborers. A biographer of Ned Buntline tells of the excitement felt by a man, “now a prominent patron of literature and art,”

Cincinnati; or, The Mysteries of the West (New York: Peter Lang, 1996); and Heinrich Boernstein’s *The Mysteries of St. Louis* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1990).

⁴³ Donald Grant Mitchell (Ik Marvel), *The Lorgnette: or, Studies of the Town. By an Opera Goer* 2 vols. (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 2nd ed., 1850), 1: 289.

who as a school-boy, “having read nearly all the sensational tales of the prolific writer,” saw Buntline on the street, and became the toast of his classmates.⁴⁴

The physical appearance of a text could also determine the genre to which it belonged, and therefore the audience to which it would appeal. For instance, Mrs. Ann Stephens’ *Fashion and Famine*, which has been mentioned previously, had its first part appear in 1843 in a slim yellow-covered, twelve-cent pamphlet, published by the Brother Jonathan Office—in short, it would have been indistinguishable from the school of “yellow-covered literature” that reformers were so fond of attacking. The 1854 complete edition, however, appeared in a more genteel-looking 12mo format, bound in red cloth, with the title gilt-stamped on the spine and a floral wreath blind-stamped on the boards. This edition, of the same text as the racy-looking 1843 pamphlet edition, would have clearly belonged to a different “genre” of literature, and would have appealed to a different sort of reader, solely based on its physical appearance.

This same distinction, that of the same story being told in different formats, and therefore belonging to different genres, is enacted in Winter Summerton’s genteel 1860 city-mystery *Will He Find Her? A Romance of New York and New Orleans*. In many respects, this novel is a typical antebellum “romance,” focusing on handsome, dashing heroes in scenes of high life; yet it also partakes of some of the conventions of more sensational city-mysteries, having chapters entitled “Underground Life in New York” and “Two Mysteries Unveiled.”⁴⁵ At one point in the novel, after a sensational trial in New York following the heroine’s kidnapping, all the cheap publishers in the city come out with pamphlet editions of the popular version of Lucretia’s

⁴⁴ Fred E. Pond (Will Wildwood), *Life and Adventures of “Ned Buntline”* New York: The Cadmus Book Shop, 1919, 54.

⁴⁵ Winter Summerton, *Will He Find Her? A Romance of New York and New Orleans* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1860).

story—that she is a French royal, and has been kidnapped by the current French regime for some obscure political reason. The narrator notes that, “These pamphlets were sold by thousands and sent to every section of the land. Of course the publication of such absurdities was the source of great annoyance....”⁴⁶ What renders these stories “absurdities,” it is implied, is at least in part their pamphlet format, since the novel itself, which is retailing essentially the same version of the same events as are the pamphlet editions, but is bound in boards in genteel brown cloth, at a sober length of 491 pages, is clearly *not* an absurdity.

The main cleavage in the audience along lines of genre appeal is highlighted by a subsequent comment of Summerton’s narrator on these pamphlet editions: “Nothing was too ridiculous for the romance-loving, wonder-seeking people.”⁴⁷ Authors of genteel and sensational fiction alike reserved their highest contempt for that portion of the audience (both male and female), who were “romance-loving”—that is, who preferred fabrications of the imagination to narratives based on facts drawn from the world around them. In his preface, Summerton declares that his story is based on facts, just like the authors of more sensational urban narratives did (although Summerton establishes his genteel credentials by explaining that he wrote the story to tell to his dying wife, to enliven her last days). George Thompson, embodying the other end of the spectrum of urban fiction, insisted that his books were based on fact, that they constituted “the romance of the real,” more consistently than most authors. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in his 1849 novella *The Countess; or, Memoirs of Women of Leisure*—a book he claims “is not of fiction, but of fact”—Thompson derides the “fiction of the present day” as a “mess of trashy nonsense, written by the freshmen and ‘sophs’ of such places as Cambridge or

⁴⁶ Ibid., 260.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 261.

Amherst....” Thompson claims that, “Romance reading, is very well for cross peevish old maids, and romping school girls,” but that, “To the sensible mind of man or woman, fact, uncontradictable and solid fact, is the food of which it loves to partake.” Thompson admits that,

Some portions of the story may seem impossible, but it is all true, a simple and plain narration of facts occurrent in the lives of sixteen of the loveliest and fairest of women. Would that a filling of romance could be woven in with the warp of fact; it might be more easy in its language, and its words might strike the ear as more graceful and attractive, but to the staff of truthful delineation of fact, has the banner been firmly nailed, and now thrown to the breeze, fearing no threat, and courting no favor.⁴⁸

Of course, Thompson’s claim that this collection of vignettes of sex-crazed urban courtesans is entirely true is rubbish. The distinction that these writers were making was not one between fiction and nonfiction, but rather one of setting, subject matter, tone, and relevance to a potential reader’s experience. Thompson and his ilk were not presuming that their readers were themselves prostitutes, or that they patronized them, but rather that those readers who lived in cities had, at the very least, seen prostitutes on the streets and shared some level of lurid (or moralistic) curiosity about their lives. Moreover, they were presuming that there existed a segment of the audience that preferred reading stories about things that were familiar to them (e.g., their cities, or cities they’d visited, or might someday visit) to reading stories about places they would never visit and people they would never meet.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ George Thompson, *The Countess; or, Memoirs of Women of Leisure, Being a Series of Intrigues with the Bloods*, by the Author (Boston: Berry & Co., 1849), 7–8.

⁴⁹ Unfortunately, some contemporary critics fail to grasp the distinction between fictions that “could happen,” that are set in places familiar to readers and roughly in present time, and those more fantastic narratives that would have been called “romances.” As Stuart Blumin writes of the genre of city-mysteries, these “sensational romances ... did not constitute the ‘meaningful representation’ that the first metropolitan generation sought. They did not *explain* the city or create a satisfying means of discourse about urban problems, even on a popular level.” He goes on to defend the middle-class reformist journalistic sketches of George Foster as the ideal alternative, since they were both “factual” and “popular”; Blumin, Introduction to George Foster, *New York by Gas-Light* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 26–7. Aside from ignoring the very obvious class overtones of Foster’s pieces, which were, after all,

An item printed in the *Lowell Offering* in 1842, entitled “Fiction: A Dialogue,” makes clear that this distinction was understood by readers at the time. The piece takes the form of a discussion of fiction between two young women, both residents of Lowell. After determining that the best fiction is also useful, they proceed to delineate the different genres of fiction currently available. One of the women observes,

Akin to the historical novel, is that which faithfully delineates the present manners, customs, appearance, and natural features, of some peculiar, or foreign country.

Then there are the novels of the new school of Dickens, Marryatt, and others, in which the aim is to portray the feelings, manners, &c., as naturally as possible: as much in accordance, not only with real life, but also common life. Hitherto the novelist had laid his scenes in high circles.... Virtue was too often rewarded here, and vice too signally punished, to be in accordance with our observations of real life.⁵⁰

This desire on the part of at least some readers for fiction that would be more “in accordance with our observations of real life” doubtless encouraged authors to continue their practice of cloaking their novels in the garb of reality

This practice involved employing differences of plot and tone that constituted this fictively constructed “real” as a genre of its own, with its own conventions, in opposition to the genre of “fancy” or “romance.” As Charles Averill informed his readers near the denouement of his epidemiological city-mystery *The Cholera-Fiend*, “Were we writing a mere romance, for the mere romance-reader’s amusement, we might easily have found some adequate retribution to be

written by a middle-class reformer for a Whig newspaper (Greeley’s *Tribune*), Blumin presumes to both know what was and was not meaningful for an entire generation of readers and to impute to a broad audience a desire for a “discourse about urban problems.” The distinction these authors of antebellum urban fiction (whether racy or genteel) made was not between “fiction” and “nonfiction” but between that which bore some resemblance, however fleeting, to everyday urban life and that which did not. It is a distinction between an attempt at explanatory, expository writing, and mimetic writing.

⁵⁰ “Fiction: A Dialogue,” *Lowell Offering* 2nd ser., v. 2 (1842), 258-59. There is little question that, to many antebellum readers, the burgeoning urban areas in the U.S. constituted a “peculiar” country.

dealt out to the hoary hypocrite, whose full punishment has yet to come. But the Reverend Newton Mathews is too true a character—and as such will be recognized—for us to deal in fictitious refinements.”⁵¹ This claim to avoid the easy evasions of pure fiction was not invoked only by the authors of racy urban fiction, constituting some sort of class-linked antebellum “street credibility.” Authors of genteel city-mysteries adopted the trope in the same fashion as did their more down-market brethren, both to explain their focus (“I’m just writing about what I know”) and to defend themselves from criticism, especially on moral grounds (“I’m just writing what actually happens”).

Charles Astor Bristed, the grandson of John Jacob Astor, chose to focus his 1852 volume on *The Upper Ten Thousand* rather than on the “lower million.” Still, in his introduction to his attempt to anatomize American urban life, he claimed that, “in sober earnest, I am writing about what I see and know. If, then, I tell you nothing about alligators, or regulators, or any such wild animals, it is simply because I have never met with any; nor that I think it much loss to either of us, for, sooth to say, we have lately had enough of this bowie-knife school of writing....”⁵² Despite Bristed’s obvious elite credentials, and the clear distinction he drew between his book and the “bowie-knife school of writing,” the recourse to a claim of having based the book on *observation* rather than *imagination* serves both to situate the book in generic terms and also to aim it at a particular audience.

⁵¹ Charles A. Averill, *The Cholera Fiend; or, The Plague Spreaders of New York. A Mysterious Tale of the Pestilence in 1849* (Boston: George H. Williams, “Uncle Sam” Office, 1850), 100.

⁵² Charles Astor Bristed, *The Upper Ten Thousand: Sketches of American Society* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1852), 7.

The Urban Audience for Urban Fiction

Bristed's comments about not having seen any frontier phenomena such as "alligators" or "regulators" highlights another cleavage in the mass reading audience that is especially salient for a genre that focuses on city life, that of geography. In his afterword, Bristed noted that, due to the interest his columns had generated, they had been reprinted "in the cheap and multitudinous style of American reprints, and thus to become known to the outsiders both of our own city and of other parts of the country...."⁵³ He clearly implied that it was the format of the cheap reprint that ensured his book's mobility, enabling it to be read by a large audience. Many contemporary scholars (like Blumin), however, have presumed that fictional narratives of city life were of interest only to residents of cities.⁵⁴ But it may be reasonable to assume that novels of city life appealed to the same audiences as non-fictional guides to city life, in which case our vision of the geographic audience for city-mysteries may need to be broadened. John Todd, in the introduction to his *The Moral Influence, Dangers, and Duties, Connected with Great Cities*, claimed that he was aiming his book at three groups of people: "those who reside in great cities; those who are about to come into the great city; and those who have sent, or are about to send, children and friends to reside in the great city."⁵⁵ If we can add to this group that segment of

⁵³ Ibid., 273.

⁵⁴ David Stewart makes the argument that sensational fiction, with its intense physicality and depictions of sexuality and violence, was of interest primarily to workers living in urban areas, where the "immense pressures brought to bear on the bodies who lived in them to behave, conform, and indeed produce" drained these workers of "vital energy," which could be experienced vicariously through consuming fictions that depict such energy in abundance. While this theory is very likely in some part correct, it is virtually impossible to support. However, the question of readers' physical responses to sensational fiction, which has been heavily influenced by Stewart's work, will be addressed later in this chapter. See David M. Stewart, "Cultural Work, City Crime, Reading, Pleasure," *American Literary History* 9:4 (Winter 1997), 676-701; quoted passage at 690.

⁵⁵ John Todd, *The Moral Influence, Dangers, and Duties, Connected with Great Cities* (Northampton, MA: J. H. Butler, 1841), iii.

rural residents who possessed some level of prurient interest in the low doings of city life, the audience for city-mysteries appears to be quite widespread indeed.

Given what we know about book distribution in the antebellum period, especially the relationships that existed between various publishers and those in other cities who acted as their agents, along with the fact that paper-covered pamphlet novels were explicitly associated with being sold at stalls in railroad stations, it is clear that the infrastructure existed for city-mysteries to reach a geographically dispersed audience. The frequency with which advertisements for works of urban fiction contained the advice that “Country Agents” would be supplied at a “liberal discount” implies that some effort was being made to cater to a rural readership, as does the frequently stated fear on the part of critics of the genre that country readers were especially exposed to these novels and their extravagant city ways. Nina Baym quotes one critic as denouncing writers of cheap fiction who have set out “to enervate and demoralize, with their wretched stuff bound up between yellow covers, the strong-hearted youth of New England.”⁵⁶ Critics repeatedly linked the spread of such books to new modes of transportation, such as steamboats and trains, claiming that “agencies and depots are organized for it [the distribution of cheap fiction] everywhere,” and that they are “the most omnipresent product of the press, except the newspaper.”⁵⁷

It is clear that such writers assumed that not only traveling urbanites but country folk as well would buy and read books distributed along such channels. George Lippard, in an editorial in his *Quaker City Weekly*, claimed that, in fact, he had always been popular with rural readers, so much so that “it has often been stated that we were unpopular with the large mass of readers

⁵⁶ Quoted in Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers*, 50–51.

⁵⁷ “Satanic Literature,” 25.

in the Quaker City.” Lippard reassured his public with the knowledge that, while his country popularity continued unabated, his works were “widely circulated and eagerly read ... not only in New York, but in the city which is more directly the scene of our labors.”⁵⁸ Indeed, Lippard’s public was so extensive that the Franklin Book Store, on Front Street, in Portland, Oregon, claimed in an 1857 advertisement to have “all the popular works” of Lippard, along with those of Emerson Bennett and J. H. Ingraham.⁵⁹

The range of cities examined in city-mysteries novels—New York, Philadelphia, Rochester, Cincinnati, St. Louis, New Orleans, San Francisco—indicates clearly that the genre’s appeal was not confined to the Northeast. But there is also ample evidence to support the notion that rural readers, whether from the Northeast or not, were presumed by the authors of city-mysteries to constitute part of their public. The hick, or “greenhorn,” visiting the city and ripe for the plucking, is a staple element of the plots of most city-mysteries, and the frequency and specificity with which it was deployed indicates that it was (at least partially) meant to serve as an object lesson to rural unsophisticates who were planning their own visits to the city. In Osgood Bradbury’s *Clara Hopkins; or, A Mirror of City Life*, Bradbury knowingly colludes with the reader at a greenhorn’s expense, as the fallen Clara steers her mark through the streets: “The reader need not be told that this house was one of ill-fame; but the young man was not so sure of it as the reader is. Clara Hopkins knew that the companion of her midnight walk was not accustomed to city life, and had not yet seen the elephant, and therefore managed accordingly.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ *Quaker City Weekly*, January 13, 1849.

⁵⁹ *Catalogue of New Standard Popular Books, Newspaper, Magazines, Cheap Publications, &c., constantly for sale at the “Franklin” Book Store, Front Street, Portland, Oregon*, published in S. J. McCormick’s *Oregon and Washington Almanac*, 1857.

⁶⁰ Osgood Bradbury, *Clara Hopkins; or, A Mirror of City Life, A Tale of New York and Philadelphia* (New York: Samuel French, 1855), 10.

Even the rural reader is not as much in the dark as this poor soul, being led to his doom. Thomas Low Nichols facetiously wrote that he thought of dedicating *Ellen Ramsay; or, the Adventures of a Greenhorn* to “the whole community of ‘green horns,’” who will benefit from it, as “they need some such exposure of the Tricks of the Town....”⁶¹ While it is difficult to find concrete evidence of the geographic dispersal of sensational urban fiction, since they are not the kind of books that appeared in library catalogs, the frequency with which rural residents were shown what lay in store for them when they visited a city, whether intended to alarm or attract, implies that they constituted part of the mass audience that the writers of city-mysteries were assuming they would reach.⁶²

Class and the Mass Audience

The division that is most frequently imputed to the mass audience for almost all fiction (and especially popular fiction) in the antebellum period by modern scholars, yet that which is hardest to pin down, is that of class. Because works of sensational fiction were inexpensive, and because they were often populist in tone, the supposition that most readers of city-mysteries were working-class readers is understandable, although it is not at all clear that this was the case. The fact that a writer as populist as Ned Buntline first appeared before the public not in the pages of the penny press but in the *Knickerbocker Magazine*, which displayed a continuing interest in his

⁶¹ Thomas Low Nichols, *Ellen Ramsay; or, The Adventures of a Greenhorn, in Town and Country* (New York: n.p., 1843), 4.

⁶² Many of the depictions of greenhorns in the city, of course, are purely satirical, and would not have been relished by rural readers. Lippard, in *Adonai, or the Pilgrim of Eternity* (one of his publications for the Brotherhood of the Union), included a very funny satire on how country people read city papers, describing how Gregory Grunakle and his black servant Sam, who lived near Poughkeepsie, were so alarmed by reports in the New York press of 1848 of a rampaging monster in the city recently arrived from France, by the name of Socialism, that they loaded their guns and headed for the city to hunt the Socialist (114-5).

doings, seems to indicate that the line between the audiences for high and low was somewhat blurry. Nevertheless, many disapproving contemporaries and later literary scholars have concluded that George Lippard (and his brethren) “was read by multitudes of people, who, if they were mechanics, laborers, shop-girls, farmers and farmers’ wives, never having seen a book before, were parts of the great body of the population to which the printing-press was now making its appeal.”⁶³ Taking a different approach, Michael Denning claims that our lack of knowledge about who read popular fiction in the nineteenth century is due to the “reluctance of cultural historians of the United States to use class categories to describe and analyze the reading public,” resulting in a “simple dichotomy between the few and the many, the discriminating and the mass, the elite and the popular.” Denning desires to focus on the class composition of this audience because the place of such literature in American culture “depends not only on the industrial character of their production but on the class character of their reading public.”⁶⁴

While Denning continually conflates antebellum sensational fiction, such as the works of George Lippard and Ned Buntline, with the dime novels that only achieved market dominance starting in the early 1860s, he applies his analysis of the audience for these books, distinguished by the “mechanic” or working-class accents of their narratives, across the entire nineteenth century. In doing so, he concludes that “the bulk of the audience” of such books “were workers—craftworkers, factory operatives, domestic servants and domestic workers—and that the bulk of workers’ reading was sensational fiction.”⁶⁵ Moreover, Denning concludes that the

⁶³ Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer, *Literary History of Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: George W. Roberts, 1906, 252.

⁶⁴ Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1987), 27. While Denning was speaking of current historiography, the notion that cultural critics in the nineteenth century were reluctant “to use class categories to describe and analyze the reading public” is clearly baseless.

⁶⁵ Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 27.

audience “clearly was predominantly young,” and that the bulk of the audience was “often of Irish or German ethnicity.”⁶⁶ He also attempts to infer the place of sensational fiction in working-class culture from its role in labor newspapers, arguing that because labor papers often ran serialized fiction that was similar to urban sensational fiction in title and subject matter, such fiction must have belonged exclusively to working-class readers.⁶⁷

He bases the primary portion of his argument for a working-class readership for the genre, however, on the ways in which poor and rich people are presented in the books, on the way that “social cleavages are figured in a period when the very categories of social cleavage are changing,” implying that the novels’ depictions of the lives of “good” workers, juxtaposed with “bad” rich people, grants them the status of “working-class” cultural expressions.⁶⁸ While this ignores the facts that the novels are filled with examples of principled wealthy characters who are devoted to charitable works and that almost all the poor characters in the novels actively long to become rich, it distorts the character of the novels, which in fact rarely featured the sorts of descriptions of working-class life that is so central to Denning’s analysis. Instead of showing actual working-class life, when city-mysteries examined life from the “lower sort,” most novels in the genre focused on the lives of two sub-classes—the destitute and the criminal—and on the cleavages *between* classes in cities, not on the actual lives of working people themselves (their focus on the daily life of the rich, while showing many wealthy people to be superficial and/or

⁶⁶ Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 30, 45. While both of these claims are impossible to support from any documentary perspective, it is surprising to think that an audience composed largely of immigrants would have purchased the novels of Ned Buntline, one of the most prominent Nativists in antebellum America, in such great numbers.

⁶⁷ Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 41.

⁶⁸ Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 79. Denning interprets as evidence of actual class struggle what I would view as expressions of an almost universal strain of antebellum populism.

unhappy, is much more often cloaked in paternalistic rhetoric encouraging readers to “be happy with what they have” rather than in the language of labor radicalism).

The primary difficulty with this analysis of the audience for city-mysteries is its teleological nature: if we begin with a working-class reading audience as a given, and then try to discern what they read, sensational urban fiction is a good guess. But if we work from the sources—the novels and what contemporaries said about them—a slightly different picture emerges, one that by no means marginalizes working-class readers but at the same time does not claim that they were the only people who read city-mysteries. A fuller discussion of the vision of class that is articulated in the novels themselves will follow later in the work, so I will not focus on the texts here (save where they explicitly comment on issues of readership), instead dealing with the discourse about the genre and its audience, in order to address Denning’s claim that “the actual readers were the working people of the city; and the mysteries of the city, including the novels of Sue, remained (as Nina Baym has noted) a scandal to the middle class reading public.”⁶⁹

While I will address the issue of “real” readers of city-mysteries fiction at greater length in the next chapter, it is appropriate to mention here two cases of “real” readers from the “middle class reading public” who were not scandalized by sensational urban fiction. In his famous diary, Philip Hone, *ur*-Whig, former mayor of New York, and wealthy self-made auctioneer, offers brief glimpses of what he read for pleasure, along with his meditations on the process of change in New York City. In an 1843 entry, Hone, predictably for someone of his political, economic, and religious status, railed against the “Licentiousness of the Press,” singling out a

⁶⁹ Denning, *Mechanic Accents* 105; cited passage in Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers*, 213.

placard he saw advertising the sale of the “Crim.-con. Reporter” (a gossip sheet centered on stories of marital infidelity), claiming that, “the same character prevails in all the transient publications.”⁷⁰ However, Hone was not as concerned with rumors of licentiousness in his fiction reading, as his diary shows him to have been an admirer of the oft-condemned Bulwer-Lytton and G. P. R. James, the two British writers with whom George Lippard was most often (unfavorably) aligned.

In June of 1844, according to the editor of Hone’s diary, he was engaged in reading Eugene Sue’s *Mysteries of Paris*, which was held by critics of the day to be the fount from which most of the scurrility of American city fiction flowed.⁷¹ While Hone’s editor claims that he felt Sue’s novel to be “trash,” the fact remains that he bought it and read it.⁷² Most telling, perhaps, is Hone’s own account from 1841 of reading the novels of the even more licentious Paul de Kock, whose work was held to be the model for the raciest examples of American sensational fiction:

I have just finished reading ‘Madeline,’ one of the little French stories which have lately proceeded from the prolific pen of Paul De Kock. It is the third one I have read with infinite pleasure. They are lively, witty (or as the French more properly express it, *spirituelle*), sometimes extremely touching, and the characters true to nature as nature’s self. There is occasionally some *mauvaise plaisanterie*, and some pages which ladies should skip when there is company by,

⁷⁰ Philip Hone, *Diary of Philip Hone, 1828–1851*, edited by Allan Nevins (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1927), v. 2, 667; entry for August 30, 1843.

⁷¹ See the *United States Saturday Post*, September–November 1846, for a series of columns that resulted in a pressure campaign against Harper Brothers to stop publication of Sue’s *Martin, the Foundling*, a campaign that started with attacks in the *Post* against Lippard’s *Quaker City*. In a column entitled “Immoral Works” in the Sept. 12, 1846 issue, the *Post*’s editor, Samuel Patterson, made the linkage between Sue and his American imitators clear: “A fearful error they have committed, who have scattered by the thousands, aye, the millions, the works of such writers as Paul de Kock, Eugene Sue, and their host of vile American imitators, over the land.” Several months later, on November 7, the *Post* repeated a claim made in the *Philadelphia Chronicle*, that Major Pollard, the father of a woman involved in a famous murder in Richmond that year, “imputes the dereliction of his daughter to reading the works of Bulwer and Eugene Sue...” The campaign against the Harpers was ultimately successful, yet a reader as respectable as Hone read the works of every author Patterson labeled as especially pernicious.

⁷² *Ibid.*, v. 2, 705.

but I doubt if these novelettes would be so much read if it were not known that these passages occurred occasionally.⁷³

If the patrician Philip Hone, a leader in the New York City Whig machine and prominent churchman who owned a library of over 2,000 books, was reading Eugene Sue and Paul de Kock, a writer assailed by Henry Ward Beecher as “the literary prince of nastiness,” who would not have been?⁷⁴

The second example comes from Ronald and Mary Zboray’s study of the reading diary of Daniel and Mary Child and their family. The Childs were part of the Transcendentalist subculture within the Unitarian world of antebellum Boston, and were solidly middle-class (the Zborays describe them as “upwardly-mobile”). Daniel was the treasurer of a railroad, and they were sufficiently affluent to have running water put into their house in 1849.⁷⁵ The bulk of their reading is just what one would predict for such a family: Scott, Dickens, Stowe, Lydia Maria Child, Theodore Parker, William Hickling Prescott, Jared Sparks, etc.⁷⁶

In May of 1846, however, the family spent some time reading “*Our First Men.*” While this may sound like a typical example of “great-men” American history, it was actually a paper-covered volume, precisely resembling a city-mystery novel, that was subtitled “A Calendar of Wealth, Fashion and Gentility, containing a list of those persons taxed in the city of Boston, credibly reported to be worth One Hundred Thousand Dollars; with Biographical Notices of the principal persons.” Whenever possible, these “biographical notices” included

⁷³ Ibid., v. 2, 542; entry for April 19, 1841.

⁷⁴ Henry Ward Beecher, *Lectures to Young Men, on Various Important Subjects* (Salem: John P. Jewett & Co., 1846), 214. Beecher makes this comment in a long footnote attacking Sue’s *Mysteries of Paris*, where he says that a bookseller from the Ohio valley told him that he sold more books by de Kock than by any other author.

⁷⁵ Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, “Reading and Everyday Life in Antebellum Boston: The Diary of Daniel F. and Mary D. Child,” *Libraries and Culture* 32:3 (Summer 1997), 285, 301.

⁷⁶ The Zborays compiled a calendar of the family’s reading from the diary; see *ibid.*, Appendix A.

unflattering details about how the rich man in question had obtained his money, producing a real-life analog to a city-mystery novel.⁷⁷ In November and December of 1842, sandwiched around a reading of Dickens' *American Notes*, the Child family read two city-mystery novels by the incredibly prolific Joseph Holt Ingraham, first *The Dancing Feather*, a story of a gang of New York river pirates, followed by *Harry Harefoot; or, The Three Temptations. A Story of City Scenes*, a typical city-mystery of urban manners and dissipation, including lengthy depictions of (among other things) drunkenness, whoring, bank robbery, and murder.⁷⁸ In April of 1844, evidently heedless of the "scandal" that Denning claims middle-class readers would have associated with the name, the family read Eugene Sue's *The Female Bluebeard*.

These two instances, while they may be exceptional, offer anecdotal support for the widely-shared sense that existed in antebellum literary circles that, while there were different "class" publics within the mass audience, some texts, more often "low" ones than the reverse, managed to cross the boundary. George Lippard's biographer claimed that *The Quaker City* "divided society into two parties" in Philadelphia, one group defending the novel and the other attacking it, and that "The laborers, mechanics, the great body of the people, were on Lippard's side."⁷⁹ But this claim does not support the argument that such novels had a primarily working-class readership, and in fact directly contradicts it, for it clearly implies that *all* groups of society *read* the novel, and that "the great body of the people" were on Lippard's side; those who were

⁷⁷ [Richard Hildreth], *"Our First Men: A Calendar of Wealth, Fashion and Gentility, containing a list of those persons taxed in the city of Boston, credibly reported to be worth One Hundred Thousand Dollars; with Biographical Notices of the principal persons.* Boston: Published by all the booksellers, 1846.

⁷⁸ The full title is *Harry Harefoot; or, The Three Temptations. A Story of City Scenes. Showing the Allurements to VICE, with the incentives to VIRTUE, which a Metropolis offers to all young Adventurers, and how the one may be attained and the other avoided.*

⁷⁹ John Bell Bouton, *The Life and Choice Writings of George Lippard* (New York: H. H. Randall, 1855), 19.

not on Lippard's side—those who were not mechanics and laborers, presumably—still were familiar with the book.

City-Mysteries as a Crossover Genre

This sense of a shared acquaintance with the texts and conventions of the city-mysteries genre was widely held. Charles Bristed Astor, in *The Upper Ten Thousand*, engages in a satire on George Foster and his *New York in Slices* and *New York by Gas-Light*, a satire that would have been meaningless had his audience not been familiar with the genre in which Foster was writing.⁸⁰ Lippard could claim for rhetorical effect in *The Mysteries of the Pulpit* that he never wrote “for that large and respectable class of people, who are always ready to exclaim ‘Humbug! Humbug! I will not believe any thing but that which is as tangible ... as the Dollar which I get for a yard of Dry-goods,’” but for his books (especially *Quaker City*) to have generated the kind of notoriety they did, they would have had to have been known to dry-goods merchants as well as hand-loom weavers.⁸¹

This crossover appeal was acknowledged both by those who attacked the genre and those who promoted it. Amory Dwight Mayo, a clergyman who published a series of sermons on city life, complained that even the best publications in New York “teem with the lowest details of crime and folly,” “because there are so many respectable people who like to sit in their arm-chair in the family, and look through this popular telescope down into the lowest hells of creation.”⁸²

The anonymous physician author of *Confessions and Experiences of a Novel Reader* could have

⁸⁰ Bristed, *Upper Ten Thousand*, 35.

⁸¹ George Lippard, *Mysteries of the Pulpit; a Revelation of the Church and the Home* (Philadelphia: E.E. Barclay, 1851), 80.

⁸² Mayo, *Symbols of the Capital*, 158-9.

been talking about Philip Hone and the Child family when, in his attack on popular novels, he asked if professing Christians “buy, sell, and read, what they know cannot reconcile with the precepts of the religion which they profess...?”⁸³ The author of an 1857 article published in a Charleston magazine on “Cheap Literature—Its Benefits and Injuries” presumed that “cheap literature,” by which he meant “that class of publications which embraces Reviews, Romances and News—in short, periodical and light literature,” would enter into “every man’s house, rich or poor...”⁸⁴ While he claimed that “works of this class are most eagerly sought for by the unthinking masses,” he felt that such reading would do little damage to laborers, who had little spare time for reading, and might well do them good by giving them a taste for reading in general; sensational fiction was more dangerous to “those who, from their profession, should be students and not merely readers,” that is, readers of a class with the education and leisure time to read in more depth. Cheap reading is especially hazardous to “physicians, lawyers and divines,” men who have “a reputation for learning to maintain” and thus are compelled to display at least a passing familiarity with all that is in print. Not only may such readers be infected by the views contained in racy fiction, but the time required for their perusal will gradually push “heavy books” of “close reasoning and protracted argumentation” out of their libraries.⁸⁵

Coming from the other side, writers of city-mysteries seemed more than willing to acknowledge that their books might be read across a broad class spectrum. Ned Buntline, in one of his many sequels to *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, prefaced a plea for charity for

⁸³ *Confessions and Experiences*, 28.

⁸⁴ “Cheap Literature—Its Benefits and Injuries,” in *Russell’s Magazine* 1:5 (August 1857), 416, 418.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 419, 420.

fallen women with the phrase, “Reader, if you are a wealthy citizen of New York....”⁸⁶ Joseph Scoville gave the chronological setting for his New York novel *Clarence Bolton* by relying on the memories of “all of our commercial readers who read this history” to recall “the memorable year when cotton rose from twelve cents for ordinary New Orleans to eighteen cents per pound.”⁸⁷ If Lippard was willing to write off the patronage of dry-goods merchants, Scoville seems to have been relying on it almost exclusively.

Even those writers who proclaimed their appeal to a working-class audience, whose claims Denning and others seem to take at face value, almost always would have had reasons other than class solidarity for doing so (marketing acumen comes to mind). Ned Buntline, whose appeal to “wealthy citizen” readers is mentioned above, was described in an ad for another one of the sequels to *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, as having been “emphatically called the FRIEND OF THE WORKING MAN.” While this label no doubt suited Buntline’s Know-Nothing political purposes, the line that follows it muddies this seemingly clear statement of the intended class audience of the book: “this book is calculated not only to give the laboring man a just appreciation of his rights, but also for the employer, that he may see the justice of the maxim—‘the Laborer is worthy of his hire.’ It is, in fact, *the book for the people*.”⁸⁸

In *Silver and Pewter, or The Contrasts of New York Life*, the author describes the furor caused in New York by the exhibition of Dubufé’s nude painting of “Adam and Eve,” saying that the upper classes were initially divided over it before accepting it on the grounds that it

⁸⁶ Ned Buntline, *Three Years After; A Tale of Mysteries, Gambling, & City Crime* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, n.d.), 67.

⁸⁷ Joseph Scoville, *The Adventures of Clarence Bolton; or, Life in New York* (New York: Garrett and Co., 1853), 4.

⁸⁸ Ad for Buntline’s *The G’hals of New York* bound in George Foster, *New York by Gas-Light* (New York: DeWitt & Davenport, 1850).

contained a “great moral truth”: “As for the low circles of New York, the sensation among them was not the character of the paintings ... but was the fun they enjoyed in seeing those above them come down to their own standard of taste, and endeavor to make black white in the way of chaste feeling.”⁸⁹ This passage neatly encapsulates my interpretation of the cleavages of the mass audience along class lines in the antebellum period—there *were* separate “publics,” structured along class lines, who responded to the same cultural product in different ways, but the line between them was not impermeable. Cultural products frequently appealed to both groups, and the higher classes went down-market just as often as the lower classes went up. The fact that a certain novel was read by working-class readers does not mean that it would have been totally unknown to upper-class readers. To argue, as Denning does, that “working-class culture was different from and antagonistic to the culture of the dominant classes” as a result of “the boundaries drawn between Culture and non-Culture in the exercise of cultural power” is to take only half the point.⁹⁰

The fact that different audiences existed that were relatively clearly distinguishable along class lines does *not* mean that each audience had its own individual “culture” that was totally separate from the culture of the others. As Patricia Anderson has noted, the equation of “popular” with “working-class,” *a la* E. P. Thompson (and Denning) is misleading and “inimical

⁸⁹ M. M. Huet, *Silver and Pewter, or The Contrasts of New York Life* (New York: H. Long and Brother, 1852), 77.

⁹⁰ Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 58.

to a nuanced approach to the relationship of class and culture.”⁹¹ The realm of culture, especially that of leisure activity, simply was not “political” in the same way that work was.⁹²

I am not attempting to argue that antebellum American culture was unitary, shared and enjoyed equally by all. Clearly, differences between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” existed, and a burgeoning “middlebrow” culture is evident in the period as well.⁹³ But neither the variety of cultural products nor the segmentation of the mass reading audience requires that the divisions between reading publics be absolute. As Henry Nash Smith observed, “The notorious vagueness of class lines in the United States precludes any close linkage between brow levels and the actual social structure.”⁹⁴ Writers of novels of the mysteries of urban life, whether low-, middle-, or highbrow, while certainly aware of where they stood in the cultural pecking order, did not expect that their books would only appeal to a certain economic class of readers because of their “brow” level.

The awareness of this cultural pecking order, however, was clearly at times a cause of conflict for authors who, as mentioned in the previous chapter, were forced to negotiate a middle way between having to write for a mass audience if their books were to be at all successful while trying not to appear too mercenary. This negotiation was especially charged for authors who traded in sensational subject matter, which exposed them even more to the charge of pandering to low tastes just in order to make money. Henry Edwards, in *The Belle of Central Park*,

⁹¹ Patricia Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture, 1790–1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 8.

⁹² As Gareth Stedman Jones notes, deciding how to spend your free time is not the same as deciding whether to go on strike. See Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁹³ See Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

⁹⁴ Henry Nash Smith, *Democracy and the Novel: Popular Resistance to Classic American Writers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 8–9.

admitted that, while writing this book, “the compiler ... has had to fulfil the difficult duty of showing virtue to be more brilliant by its contrast with vice, and at the same time to make the narrative so acceptable to popular taste as to be readable.”⁹⁵ As Michael Newbury has noted, the idea of pleasing a large and unknown audience made authors increasingly aware of their commercial role, and accepting commercial success as the measure of accomplishment as a writer meant “that one relied on and had to please an increasingly anonymous public distanced by the mediations of commerce to attain one’s sense of professional legitimacy.”⁹⁶

This reliance on the purchasing habits of an anonymous public raised for some the question of what would separate an author’s thoughts from those of the public, leading to the fear that books would now be written merely to reflect opinion rather than guide it.⁹⁷ As Osgood Bradbury wrote, “We live in an age of the world, the tendency of which is to run into masses. The people have, in some good degree, lost their individuality,” and he might well have added that authors had lost their distinctness from the audience as well.⁹⁸ If authors felt keenly the fact that their success depended on their ability to appeal to a sufficiently broad audience, they were even more aware of what segment of that audience they were attracting.

Such class-linked discomfort about the reception of one’s works is perhaps more understandable in a middle-class author like Mortimer Thompson, the humorist behind the pen name “Doesticks,” who wrote several volumes of light urban exposé. Thompson was aware that

⁹⁵ Edwards, *The Belle of Central Park*, 96. Edwards defended himself on this score by claiming that, “In all this he has been actuated by an undiluted desire to contribute something towards morality.”

⁹⁶ Newbury, *Figuring Authorship*, 24.

⁹⁷ See Grantland S. Rice, *The Transformation of Authorship in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 95-96.

⁹⁸ Osgood Bradbury, *Helen Clarence* (Boston: H.L. Williams, n.d.), 1.

the business of reaching a large audience was a *business*, as he showed in the self-deprecating preface to *Doesticks*:

This book, like Hodge's razors, was 'made to sell'; and if the sometime good-natured world will pay the price, and have its huge grim smile over these unlicked fancies—although in a political, moral, or utilitarian sense it will have gained nothing—it will, in a literal if not literary view, lose nothing. But if it is in a surly mood, and chooses to look with dignified contempt upon this avowed and candid literary humbug, some one will be disappointed to think he has miscalculated the fickle taste of the aforesaid world and some one will be out of pocket by its sulky humor....⁹⁹

Thompson seems to fear equally the “dignified contempt” of the high-brow reader and the “huge grim smile” of the mass of low-brow readers.

More down-market writers like Lippard were perhaps even more aware of the need to please as many people as possible, for they could not count on the higher profits brought in by sales of expensive editions of their works to elite readers. In his *Quaker City Weekly* in 1849, after weeks of promising his readers the impending serialization of the revised version of *The Quaker City*, Lippard said that he would instead republish in serial form the first of his New York novels, *The Empire City*, claiming that, “This will make our paper especially interesting to the readers of the whole Union—for who is there that would not like to read a work on ‘The Empire City,’ its good and evil, lights and shadows?”¹⁰⁰ He was clearly aware that the national mass audience he was aiming at was more interested in reading about New York, which had by then firmly established itself as the nation's cultural capital, than it was in reading about Philadelphia.

⁹⁹ [Mortimer Thompson], *Doesticks: What He Says, by Q.K. Philander Doesticks P.B.* (New York : Rudd and Carleton, 1859), vii.

¹⁰⁰ *Quaker City Weekly*, January 6, 1849.

Authors vs. the Audience

This awareness of the demands of the mass of readers at times lapsed, for writers of all “brow” levels, into what one critic (writing of Poe) has called a “barely repressed enmity toward the reading public.”¹⁰¹ Lippard proclaimed that, if American legislators persisted in refusing to pass an international copyright law, American authors could avenge themselves by writing “only such books as please the masses,” using literature as a weapon to bring down the government.¹⁰² Much more common, however, was the awareness on the part of authors that they could not count on the “masses” to reliably do *anything*, much less help them bring down a government over the issue of copyright. The anonymous author of *Wilfred Montessor* began his novella with an imagined conversation between himself and a reader; the reader informed the author that, “You were under no compulsion to write, yet you have written this book—you have winked at its publication—virtually you ask me to read it—and when you ask me to read a book, you assume the obligation of pleasing me.” The author can only throw up his hands in the face of the reader’s assertion that, “The day of aristocracy is over in the literary as in the political world. Everybody writes and everybody reads. I have bought your book—I shall read it and criticise it.”¹⁰³

This anxiety about the indifference and potential hostility of readers to the product of so much authorial labor was the cause of some antagonism toward the mass audience, especially for the kinds of authors with careers that lay in nearer proximity to the models

¹⁰¹ Terence Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 76.

¹⁰² *Quaker City Weekly*, June 2, 1849.

¹⁰³ *Wilfred Montessor: or, The Secret Order of the Seven* (New York: Charles G. Graham & Co., 1844), iii.

of manual labor, and who were more preoccupied with their craft as a competition for money.¹⁰⁴ Donald Grant Mitchell, writing as “Ik Marvel,” assailed the reading habits of the mass audience and the desire for best-sellers for their effect on authors: “Our book-reading world has, I find, its periodic fevers of literary fancy, a sort of author cholera-morbus, which leaves the public mind in a very debilitated condition; nor does it operate much more favorably upon the writer; since it reduces him in most instances to a state of sad depletion, if not of decided collapse.”¹⁰⁵

If some authors were hostile toward the audience for demanding too much work from them, some other authors—most notably Joseph Holt Ingraham—held the audience in contempt for not demanding enough work. This criticism of the laziness of the reading public, and of the way that such laziness was manifested through the marketplace of print, was the most commonly displayed form of hostility towards readers. In *Rodolphe in Boston* (a blatant attempt to piggyback on the success of *The Mysteries of Paris*, since virtually all antebellum readers would have recognized “Rodolphe” as the hero of Sue’s novel), Ingraham explained that he had introduced so many characters into the narrative

with the intention of making this work double or thrice the usual length of the novelettes recently written by the author. But as the public prefer the shorter form of the novel we are under the necessity of winding up our story in this ‘Conclusion,’ to make it fall within the limits which the fashion of the day seems to have set for works of fiction. We shall therefore in this chapter endeavor to clear up the mysteries in the foregoing, though we should much prefer that they should work themselves out in as many more chapters according to the first intention of the author.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Newbury, *Figuring Authorship*, 151–52. See also David Leverenz, *Manhood in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

¹⁰⁵ Mitchell, *The Lorgnette*, 1: 274.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *Rodolphe in Boston* (Boston: E.P. Williams, 1844), 47.

Ingraham was even more explicit with his audience in outlining the commercial implications of this desire for short books later in the year, in *La Bonita Cigarera*, a version of the Mary Rogers murder case. Responding to the criticism that he was in the custom of crowding in too many events in his final chapters, Ingraham pleaded guilty, but said that he was powerless against it, since “the fashion of books has changed, and the short novel for ‘a shilling York,’ has usurped the place of the two volume duodecimo, which used to sell at the dignified price of twelve York. Nothing, says the publisher (who ought to know) will sell for more than a ninepence, and to a ninepenny cut the author must treat his readers or he must cut them altogether. So, dear reader, if our stories wind up too roundly at the finale of the tenth chapter bear in mind that ten chapters makes a modern novel neither a line more nor less; and duly commiserate with him who has to condense his brain into this compact X.”¹⁰⁷ Here Ingraham did not complain of not having been required to work enough, but of the additional labor that was required to fit a long story into a short space, yet the veiled hostility toward the tastes of the mass audience is clearly linked to their financial implications for the author.

The more easy-going George Thompson was better at veiling his impatience with lazy readers, but felt compelled to mention it nonetheless in his *Adventures of a Pickpocket*. Explaining that he liked short chapters because they allowed a reader to “stop and rest and then proceed, or remain where you are, just as you choose,” he

¹⁰⁷ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *La Bonita Cigarera; or, The Beautiful Cigar-Vender! A Tale of New York* (Boston: “Yankee” Office, 1844), 44–45. For reasons that are unclear, in the antebellum period a shilling, which everywhere else in the country indicated the sum of twelve cents, in New York referred to nine cents. Thus the distinction between a “shilling York” and “twelve York.” The confusion this regional difference generated was frequently played for laughs in fiction about out-of-towners who visited New York.

breezily informed his audience that, “I don’t know, and, indeed, I don’t care whether my reader has followed me even this far; but this I do know, if he leaves me here in disgust he will lose the confessions of as precious a rascal as ever lived.”¹⁰⁸ This characterization of the reader as lazy and inattentive was often coupled with veiled complaints from authors that they were forced to write different *kinds* of books than they would have liked. Solon Robinson, a middle-class reformer whose sensationalistic book *Hot Corn* combined city-mysteries fiction with journalistic vignettes, concluded one section thus: “I shall draw the curtain now. It may remain down for one or two or more years, what does it matter to the reader? It is facts that he wants, he cares nothing for time, or which scene comes first. If the reader is a woman, she cares nothing for time nor facts, so that the story is good.”¹⁰⁹ At times, this tension led the author to directly insult his audience. Newton Curtis, in *The Victim’s Revenge*, described a particular incident as “mysterious,” then added immediately following, “The love of mystery, of the dark and inexplicable, is a powerful passion in vulgar minds.”¹¹⁰

It was a short step from authors impugning their readers’ intelligence and attentiveness to questioning their morality, which was the most extreme form of hostility authors displayed toward the mass audience. As Donald Grant Mitchell noted, “Book-making has become so much a matter of trade, mere accommodation of supply to demand, that it seems to me far more reasonable, on all principles of public economy, to

¹⁰⁸ George Thompson, *Adventures of a Pickpocket: or, Life at a Fashionable Watering Place*, by Himself (Boston: Berry & Co., 1849), 17.

¹⁰⁹ Solon Robinson, *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York Illustrated* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1854), 305.

¹¹⁰ Newton Mallory Curtis, *The Victim’s Revenge* (New York: Williams Brothers, 1848), 75.

rail at the readers of bad books rather than their writers.”¹¹¹ This comment captures perfectly the anxiety about the lack of separation between the audience’s desires and the author’s thoughts that the commercialization of print was thought to imply. By deflecting any attacks on the morality of their books onto the readers who demanded them, authors depicted themselves as both slaves to the audience and as morally superior to it. The author of the murder pamphlet *Life and Confession of Ann Walters* included an address to his readers, “either moral or immoral,” acknowledging the fact that both kinds of readers existed.¹¹²

Henry Edwards explicitly acknowledged why his readers may have been reading his *Belle of Central Park*; after describing the charms of his main character, which “were sufficient for the captivation of a mere sensualist,” Edwards commented parenthetically that, “after all, dear reader, you are actuated more by this very part of your nature than you are perhaps aware of, or than you would like to admit, if you were aware of it.”¹¹³ Henri Foster seemed to feel that immoral readers predominated in the audience, when he sighed in *Ellen Grafton; or The Den of Crime*, “How many who read this mysterious volume—how few have profited by its truth,” a sentence that some anonymous reader underlined (whether out of agreement or offense is unclear).¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Mitchell, *The Lorgnette*, 1: 8–9.

¹¹² *Life and Confession of Ann Walters, the Female Murderess! Also the Execution of Enos G. Dudley, at Haverhill, N.H., May 23d, 1849. To Which is Added The Confession of Mary Runkle Who Was Executed for Murder* (Boston, n.p., 1850), 22

¹¹³ Edwards, *Belle of Central Park*, 18. This direct and unflattering address to the reader could have been seen as bolstering the potentially instructive role of fiction. One critic writing in *Harper’s* magazine in February, 1860, wrote of the possibility that readers could see their own “secret sympathies, impulses, ambitions—his vices, his virtues, his temptations” reflected in characters in novels, perhaps leading to reformation. Quoted in Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers*, 55.

¹¹⁴ Henri Foster, *Ellen Grafton; or The Den of Crime: A Romance of Secret Life in the Empire City* (Boston: Star Spangled Banner Office, 1850), 8.

George Foster was most extreme in questioning the morality of the reading public. Writing of his experience interacting with denizens of the streets of New York—middle-class reformers’ nightmare scenario of who constituted the mass audience—Foster described these segments of the public as “the prolific soils, abounding in composts and guano of the most precious description, which produced those brilliant and evanescent flowers, whose aroma, drawn from the sources of inmost inspiration in my inmost soul, conferred a flavor and a quality upon the tasteless insipidity of a daily journal.”¹¹⁵

The Rise of Authorial Celebrity

If some authors saw the reading public as “abounding in composts and guano,” most authors nevertheless tried to reach readers as best they could. The antebellum period—the Age of Barnum—saw the rise of new models of publicity and new methods of reaching a mass audience, enabling savvy authors to tap “into the storehouse of commonly held assumptions” and make it pay.¹¹⁶ The need to create a marketable authorial persona that would be quickly recognizable to readers was especially important

¹¹⁵ George Foster, *New York Naked* (New York: R. M. DeWitt, 185?), 15–16.

¹¹⁶ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), xvi. For more on mechanisms of publicity and marketing celebrity in antebellum America, see: Bluford Adams, *E pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); James Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America*; Benjamin Reiss, *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum’s America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Mark Metzler Sawin, “Raising Kane: The Creation and Consequences of Fame in Antebellum America, or, The Thrilling and Tragic Narrative of Elisha Kent Kane and his Transformation into Dr. Kane, the Hero of the Romantic Age,” Ph.D. Diss. (University of Texas at Austin, 2001); Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses*.

in urban markets, where there were so many other leisure activities competing for a potential reader's time and money.¹¹⁷ As Robert Vaughan noted, with the rise of urbanization, popular books would “not speak to men luxuriating at ease, so much as to men occupied in labour, or living in scenes of constant excitement. They know, accordingly, that what they write must be characterized by the obvious and the striking—that men must not be expected to ponder in order to get at their meaning....”¹¹⁸

One way for authors to get access to this large and busy audience was to ensure that their works were as accessible as possible; thus, George Lippard, when he started his own newspaper, immediately set about serializing all of his novels, providing yet another point of entry for readers into the Lippard universe. The similarity between city-mysteries novels and the stories printed in newspapers, and their frequent appearance in serial form, made the genre accessible to a much broader public than would have publication in book form alone. The proliferation of newspapers and other periodicals not only provided more venues for the serial publication of popular fiction, but also offered more streams through which to promote books, either through book reviews (which were often paid for by publishers) or by letters to the editor. Reviews did not need to be positive in order to generate attention, as the aspiring novelist Ned Lorn discovered in *Freaks of Fortune* when he read the reviews of his first novel: “He says my

¹¹⁷ In this regard, it is less useful to think of reading popular fiction—in all periods, not just in antebellum America—as competing with other forms of reading, as is most often the case both on the part of reformers and historians of reading, than it is to think of reading popular fiction as competing with other forms of leisure activity. Thus the battle is not one between reading Lippard or Hawthorne, George Thompson or Emerson, but between reading Lippard or Thompson and drinking, going to prizefights, visiting Barnum's museum, attending minstrel shows, etc.

¹¹⁸ Robert Vaughan, *The Age of Great Cities: or, Modern Civilization Viewed in its Relation to Intelligence, Morals, and Religion* (London: Jackson and Walford, 1843), 143.

work is crude in style, coarse in language, and deficient in plot. Nevertheless, it still sells; my publishers told me so to-day.”¹¹⁹

The proliferation of book reviews aligned with the rise of paperback book publishing to allow for the appearance of a now-familiar phenomenon—the blurb. Although it is unclear when the book-jacket blurb first occurred, in 1852 the back cover of John Vose’s city-mystery *Fresh Leaves from the Diary of a Broadway Dandy* was covered with positive blurbs from newspapers all over the country. The inclusion of advertisements for a book *in that same book* was an extreme form of this blurbing practice; the American publishers of the racy novels of Paul de Kock proclaimed in an ad for de Kock’s books inside the front cover of his *Six Mistresses of Pleasure* that, “So great is the excitement about them in France and England, that Blackwood’s Magazine says, ‘The people in both countries appear to have forgotten all their other authors and gone Paul de Kock mad!’”¹²⁰ An 1860 article in the *National Quarterly Review* described in detail how enterprising book agents incorporated blurbs into their marketing strategies. The article claimed that the publisher would send advance copies of sensational novels to rural papers, along with ready-made blurbs from the metropolitan press; as more good notices were printed, the publishers, in their travels, would surreptitiously cut out positive notices from the copies of local papers in hotel reading rooms. When they had enough glowing “opinions of the press,” the publisher would have them printed as circulars,

¹¹⁹ John Beauchamp Jones, *Freaks of Fortune: or, The History and Adventures of Ned Lorn* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson, 1854), 355.

¹²⁰ Ad in Charles Paul de Kock, *The Six Mistresses of Pleasure, and the Story of Madame de Fleury* (New York: Holland & Glover’s Depot for Cheap Publications, 1844).

which would be distributed on steamboats, railroad cars, and in hotels, followed after several minutes by an agent selling the book described.¹²¹

In addition, advances in printing technology allowed for new forms of packaging for books that were more likely to command attention in crowded antebellum bookstalls. Donald Mitchell wrote that a “popular publisher of startling pamphlets” approached him and suggested that he could sell a lot more books not only by “giving more details of private life” (i.e., sex) but also by publishing in a pamphlet form with “some extravagant diablerie upon the cover, printing in blue and crimson....”¹²² The author of the eloquently titled article “Satanic Literature” called special attention to the role played by the physical format and appearance of these novels—“Got up in cheap form, rendered attractive by meretricious engravings and exaggerated titles”—in gaining the attention of young customers confronted with crowded bookstalls.¹²³ The fact that the city-mysteries genre as a whole could be characterized and condemned by the color of the books’ paper covers—the “yellow-jacket school of literature”—indicates how important a colorful cover and a racy cover illustration could be both in creating a sense of the genre and in generating sales.

Another key element in the attempt to reach a wide audience, however, was the development of an identifiable authorial persona, thereby creating the illusion of a personal relationship with the mass of anonymous readers (a process at which Mark Twain and Tom Wolfe, *inter alia*, have excelled). The shift to a model of professional

¹²¹ “French Romances and American Morals,” in *National Quarterly Review* 2:3 (December 1860), 143-44.

¹²² Mitchell, *The Lorgnette*, 1: 141-2.

¹²³ “Satanic Literature,” 25.

authorship was not just the product of structural shifts in the publishing industry. It was the result of new possibilities of self-definition becoming available to writers, where writers came to see themselves less as teachers and more as entertainers. In his study, which focuses on how authorship was imagined through other modes of labor, Michael Newbury focuses more on the costs to authors of having to develop a persona that would be accessible to a large audience—the celebrity linked to the slave as a “consumable worker”—than on the benefits such a persona offered.¹²⁴ Thomas Baker, in his study of N. P. Willis, more correctly focuses on the new importance of personality in public life, on the “growing capacity of ... entrepreneurs of print to capitalize on psychic bonds and links of desire forged between the reading public and the objects of its fascination.”¹²⁵ As Nina Baym has noted, “Author, ... after subgenre classification, is the chief way of describing a book, and the corpus of works by a given author becomes a way of describing an author,” allowing authors to create a form of brand identity around their names that was widely accepted.¹²⁶ The new emphasis on the performative aspects of authorship was grasped with varying degrees of success by authors of city-mystery fiction, some of whom were able to use their connection to the audience to create a marketable authorial persona.

¹²⁴ Newbury, *Figuring Authorship*, 84. Newbury also exaggerates the extent to which this shift from a small circle of readers to an anonymous mass audience would have been difficult for authors to negotiate. Only the few authors whose careers spanned the transition—Cooper and Irving come to mind—would have had to deal with the difference between writing for an intimate circle versus writing for a mass audience. Authors of sensational fiction, who were both younger and more likely to have gotten their start working for a newspaper, would have been more at ease with the notion of writing for a large group of anonymous readers.

¹²⁵ Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity*, 5.

¹²⁶ Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers*, 250.

George Lippard, in introducing his new newspaper, declined to introduce himself to the public, feeling that he was already sufficiently well known: “Those who like his writings, will buy and read the Paper; and even those who do not like him, or have imbibed a prejudice without reading, may possibly learn something from the columns of ‘The Quaker City.’”¹²⁷ Antebellum authors of popular fiction grasped the value in giving (or at least appearing to give) their readers a glimpse behind the curtain of the author at work. Mrs. Ann Stephens, in *Fashion and Famine*, observed that, “the history of a book—the feeling, sufferings, and experience of its author—would, if truly revealed, be often more touching, more romantic, and full of interest, than the book itself,” just before informing her readers that “Here, here! between this chapter and the last,” her brother had died.¹²⁸

Ronald and Mary Zboray, in their study of readers in antebellum Boston, note that the literary scene in Boston was sufficiently small so that many readers heard quite intimate news about both local and visiting writers, and that these readers “sometimes emphasized authors’ personalities over the texts they produced.”¹²⁹ David Henkin notes that the “possibility of making money or developing a reputation through the mechanical reproduction of printed messages also destabilized the grounds of personal identity on which fame and fortune had previously been built,” but this destabilization offered an

¹²⁷ *Quaker City Weekly*, Dec. 30, 1848. Those Philadelphians who did not know Lippard through his work may have known him by his appearance, as he was notorious for stalking the streets of the city in unusual garb, often wearing a flowing velvet cape.

¹²⁸ Stephens, *Fashion and Famine*, 141. The most canny simultaneous deployment and depiction of this strategy in antebellum letters is, of course, Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall*.

¹²⁹ Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, “‘Have You Read...?’: Real Readers and Their Responses in Antebellum Boston and its Region,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 52 (September 1997), 157.

opening for undistinguished authors with no other claim to fame.¹³⁰ Thomas Low Nichols revealed himself to be acutely aware of the importance of capitalizing on this opening; in his preface to *Ellen Ramsay*, he said that there was an “awkward abruptness, in coming down upon the public in this sort of way, without so much as a ‘by your good leaves, ladies and gentlemen!’ for though by no means my first appearance, it is the first in this character.”¹³¹ The lack of a clearly articulated authorial persona left him uneasy regarding his book’s prospects.

George Thompson was more successful than most writers of city-mysteries at creating an identifiable persona through which to, as he put it, “mentally shake hands with the reader.”¹³² The persona Thompson cultivated was that of an avuncular, knowing urban habitué, a skilled craftsman at the sort of writing he did who knew his limits but also knew he was good at his chosen genre. Thompson frequently referred to the success of his previous books to sell his most recent one, deploying a reliable “brand identity” to promote his novels.¹³³ Thompson went to greater lengths than most authors in this respect, consistently using the jesting pseudonym “Greenhorn” to highlight his urban

¹³⁰ David Henkin, *City Reading*, 156.

¹³¹ Thomas Low Nichols, *Ellen Ramsay*, 3.

¹³² George Thompson, *The Demon of Gold; or, The Miser’s Daughter* (Boston: William Berry & Co., 1853), 96.

¹³³ See especially his *Dashington; or the Mysteries of a Private Mad House*, by Greenhorn (New York: Frederick A. Brady), 81. The development of this kind of a brand identity was especially important given the level of literary piracy that was common in the antebellum period; as Paul de Kock’s publishers warned their readers, several American publishers had issued “trashy novels, which he never saw, with his name prefixed as author,” but “Those who have read any of the genuine works, can easily discover the cheat...” (in de Kock, op. cit., 31). What these publishers may not have known was that Thompson was one of the writers who often published books under de Kock’s name (see *Mary Ann Temple* and *N.Y. Life*, both of which are attributed to de Kock in certain editions; the latter book was published under Thompson’s own name as *The Locket: A Romance of New York*). O. E. Durivage, the translator of one of de Kock’s novels, did admit to making up sections of the American edition of the book and to essentially re-writing the entire novel, but only because the French edition “is so replete with indelicate allusions, that a literal translation would be unfit for publication” (note in Paul de Kock, *Paul de Kock’s Married Men*, Boston, 1843).

expertise, and publishing a highly fictionalized autobiography—in which he called attention to his own physical appearance, so that he would be easily recognized by his substantial girth—along with an account of his brief imprisonment for public drunkenness, entitled *Ten Days in the Tombs: or, A Key to the Modern Bastille*, under the pseudonym “John McGinn.” In one novel, Thompson described his Greenhorn persona as “a writer of talent who has studied both the high and low classes of society, for no other purpose than that of benefiting his fellow men,” a tongue in cheek description of a writer confident enough of his rapport with the audience to tease his readers at the conclusion of another novel by saying that, “the author is perfectly satisfied with his performance, however other people may approve or condemn it; and, in this blissful state of feeling, he makes his parting bow.”¹³⁴

When Thompson wrote author characters into his novels, instead of showing the flighty, effeminate satirical types that occur most often in city-mysteries, he made his authors knowing connoisseurs of the urban demimonde who got in fights, knew the names of barmaids, and were noted for their sexual prowess. At times he conflated his own persona with that of the author as action hero, as he did in *The Countess*, which is set in Boston, where Thompson got his start in the world of print. Thompson describes a scene at a raffish ball, where one found in attendance “a young and very pretty gentleman

¹³⁴ Thompson, *The Countess*, 49; *The Demon of Gold*, 96. The Greenhorn persona was one of lasting value. Frederic A. Brady, a New York publisher of cheap fiction, in the 1860s offered for sale a set of novels called the “Jack Harold Series,” after Thompson’s popular novel *Jack Harold*, but included in the list as being by “Greenhorn” several novels that were not by Thompson. Thus, the “Greenhorn” name came to act almost like a modern brand.

who was working in a daily newspaper office, in company with a Mrs. Moore, who was the forewoman of a cap shop,” along with references to other local friends of his.¹³⁵

In contrast to the Greenhorn persona, an easy-going fellow who certainly enjoys a drink, Thompson included in *The Locket* a long set piece entitled “Bob Towline; or, Some Revelations of a Reformer,” about a “small, sickly-looking individual” with a “list of initials ... in long single file” preceding his last name, clearly referring to Ned Buntline, whose real name was E. Z. C. Judson.¹³⁶ Ned Buntline created perhaps the most successful persona of any of the city-mystery authors, so successful that he became a political figure and used his public profile to help instigate the Astor Place Riots in 1849, where he appeared in the streets of New York in full Bowery B’hoys regalia, in the process following “‘Big Lize’ into the streets and bars in an endless round of self-promotion.”¹³⁷ Where Thompson was coy and humorous in his insertions of his persona into his novels, Buntline was insistent and breathless. Buntline wrote himself and his indignant views into his novels so often that he virtually became another character, and at times a family member; in *The B’hoys of New York*, he described the lovely young Agnes as “just such a girl as Ned would like to have for a sister.”¹³⁸ Later in the same novel, Buntline called attention to his career as a “reformer,” attacking the practice of displaying pictures of naked women in saloons and claiming that, “The writer of this work had one

¹³⁵ Thompson, *The Countess*, 22. In the 1843 directory of Boston, there is a Jane Moore, milliner, listed as living at 3 Winter St.

¹³⁶ Thompson, *The Locket: A Romance of New York* (New York: P. F. Harris, 1855), 79.

¹³⁷ Peter G. Buckley, “The Case Against Ned Buntline: The ‘Words, Signs, and Gestures’ of Popular Authorship,” *Prospects* 13 (1988): 264. As Buckley notes of Buntline and the Astor Place Riots, “If the juncture of genre and popular audience determined a shift in the author’s persona, local politics orchestrated the voice and directed the outcome.” This article presents the fullest discussion of Buntline’s development of an authorial persona and its intersection with his political career.

¹³⁸ Ned Buntline, *The B’hoys of New York: A Sequel to the Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1850), 21.

man indicted” for just such a practice. In the same passage, Buntline made sure to call attention twice to the fact that the authorities have “consigned the author to a felon’s cell” for his role in the Astor Place Riot.¹³⁹ Later in the same novel, Buntline again inserted himself into the narrative, relying on the audience’s familiarity with his life history to identify him with the former U.S. Navy officer who now worked as the commander of the Count’s ship.¹⁴⁰ Buntline was also not above taking a combative stance toward his audience, teasing them with such asides as, “Don’t it make you mad when I break off a chapter, and leave you all in the dark? Wouldn’t you get madder still if you knew I did it on purpose, and had a good deal of fun in thus teasing you who have the bump of curiosity strongly developed?”¹⁴¹

The prominence of Buntline’s persona, along with his strong political positions and perhaps questionable personal and business practices, generated a considerable backlash (it is also unclear how Buntline’s readers responded to his constant references to the amount of money he made from his books). George Lippard suggested that Buntline

¹³⁹ Ibid., 37–8, 173. Buntline’s time in jail did have one good effect; in his guide to New York, Dr. Joel Ross mentioned in his section on the prison on Blackwell’s Island that “a library of 450 volumes has been presented in the past year by Mr. E. Z. C. Judson...” (*What I Saw in New York; or, A Bird’s Eye View of City Life*, [Auburn, NY: Derby & Miller, 1852], 116).

¹⁴⁰ The best biography of Buntline is Jay Monaghan, *The Great Rascal: The Life and Adventures of Ned Buntline* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1952). In his satirical chapter on Buntline, Thompson made wonderful use of Buntline’s naval career, to which he constantly referred. Thompson claimed that “Bob Towline” got his name from his job riding a tow-rope horse on the Erie Canal, to which he refers as “the internal marine, or New York Navy.” Thompson mocked Buntline’s proclivity for sea stories, saying that, “Romantic adventures on various parts of the canal, from Buffalo to Albany, he has contributed to various newspapers, and afterward collected under various imposing titles, such as ‘The Crooked Setting Pole,’ ‘The Stricken Stove Pipe,’ ‘The Demon Lock Tender,’ ‘The Plundered Melon Yard,’ and other horrid and characteristic titles...” Thompson also satirized Buntline’s well-known problems with bigamy, noting that, “Unfortunately for Bob, his heart is but too impressible...” (*The Locket*, 80–81). Of course, such satire is only funny if the reading public is familiar enough with the target to get the joke; a writer as aware of his market as Thompson was must have known that Buntline’s history and persona were known widely enough so that his audience would find it amusing.

¹⁴¹ Buntline, *Three Years After*, 104.

should not have been jailed for his role in the riots, but *should* have been jailed for publishing his scandal-sheet *cum* story-paper *Ned Buntline's Own*.¹⁴² George Foster, in a satirical magazine he co-edited called the *John-Donkey*, under a reference to Buntline's novel *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* inserted the note, "The greatest mystery of the city is, how Ned Buntline ever got a publisher—the misery is that his book has no purchasers."¹⁴³ The *Anti-Know Nothing*, a Boston political newspaper, attacked Buntline as "a concentration of various eccentricities," claiming that he assembled his newspaper primarily by copying things from the *Patriot* and that he had a habit of running out on hotel bills.¹⁴⁴

The dangers of an overly-developed authorial persona, however, are perhaps best illustrated by the trouble to which Thomas V. Paterson, a former employee of Buntline's, went, in 1849, to write, print, and publish a pamphlet entitled *The Private Life, Public Career, and Real Character of that Odious Rascal Ned Buntline!! As Developed by His Conduct to his Past Wife, Present Wife, and His Various Paramours! Completely lifting up the Veil, and Unmasking to a Horror-stricken Community, his Debaucheries, Seductions, Adulteries, Revelings, Cruelties, Threats and Murders!!!* Paterson makes Buntline out to be a real-life city-mysteries villain, an outwardly respectable man who lectures others on morality but is secretly guilty of, among other things: sharing the profits of an abortion mill with the doctor; being cowhided by a prostitute in the middle of Broadway (which actually happened); plagiarizing his best-known novel from an

¹⁴² *Quaker City Weekly*, October 6, 1849.

¹⁴³ *John-Donkey* 1:3 (Jan. 15, 1848).

¹⁴⁴ *The Anti-Know Nothing and True American Citizen*, October 28, 1854.

English penny-dreadful; corrupting the morals of the youth of New York; escaping from jail in Nashville by dressing as a woman; and of, just after issuing a lengthy tirade against intemperance, being found “more than half seas over in a Brothel, at No. 77, Lispenard-street.”¹⁴⁵

Whatever Buntline’s actual exploits, however—and he seems to have led a more adventurous life than most—the *reputation* for leading an exciting and dangerous life was crucial to the authorial persona he created. One of Buntline’s admiring biographers numbered Ned among the writers “who have not only put forth a liberal amount of stirring fiction, but have led adventurous lives similar to those represented in their novels,” a comparison that could backfire with readers who found the novels distasteful.¹⁴⁶ While Buntline may not in fact have been possessed of “a face like a bladder of lard, almost goggle-eyed, humpbacked, and red-headed,” Paterson’s screed indicates that the cultivation of a familiar persona through which to relate to a large anonymous readership could work against a writer as well as for him.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Thomas V. Paterson, *The Private Life, Public Career, and Real Character of that Odious Rascal Ned Buntline!! As Developed by His Conduct to his Past Wife, Present Wife, and His Various Paramours! Completely lifting up the Veil, and Unmasking to a Horror-stricken Community, his Debaucheries, Seductions, Adulteries, Revelings, Cruelties, Threats and Murders!!!* (New York: Thomas V. Paterson, printer and publisher, 1849), 21–22. The charge of intemperance was most frequently leveled at Buntline, both because of his later activities as a temperance lecturer and his earlier drinking problems. In Fred Pond’s highly favorable biography of Buntline, several of Buntline’s friends recount the author’s struggles with alcoholism; one friend said that after completing a long story or novel, instead of staying at work, Buntline would go on a bender and drink all his pay. Fred E. Pond, *Life and Adventures of “Ned Buntline,”* 59.

¹⁴⁶ Fred E. Pond, *Life and Adventures of “Ned Buntline,”* 2. This same biography contains numerous anecdotes of Buntline’s urban derring-do, including an incident recounted by a fellow-writer where Ned intentionally pushed through a crowd on a sidewalk in Five Points one night and was forced to shoot his way out (43).

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

None of these authorial personas would have mattered, however, if there was no way for a wide audience of readers to actually get hold of cheap fiction. While the issue of book distribution in antebellum America is a subject much too large to be addressed here, it is important to note that city-mysteries novels—inexpensive, paper-covered, relatively short novels—were seen by critics as being *uniquely* accessible to a wide audience, that they somehow inherently lent themselves to wide distribution.¹⁴⁸ It is crucial to remember, however, that these books were not distributed to an “audience” or a “market”—they were distributed to individual readers, who bought, borrowed, or stole them, read them or didn’t read them, sometimes wrote in them, and then moved on to other reading. The following chapter will examine the act of reading city-mysteries novels themselves, looking at specific advice about and encounters with city-mysteries novels to uncover ways that actual readers responded to popular urban fiction.

¹⁴⁸ For more on book distribution in nineteenth-century America, see: Michael Hackenberg, ed., *Getting the Books Out: Papers of the Chicago Conference on the Book in Nineteenth-Century America* (Washington: Center for the Book, Library of Congress, 1987); Richard John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Chapter Six

The Dangers and Benefits of Consuming City-Mysteries Fiction

Then this is a bookish age; we swarm with books, such as they are. This fact proves that it is pre-eminently a reading age also.

—George Lippard¹

The proliferation of print culture in the antebellum period, and the attendant identification of the era as a “bookish age,” was so frequently noted as to have been a commonplace. Critics on both sides of the debate about cheap reading were able to agree that the nation was awash in print to an extent never before known. William Alcott was exemplary when he marveled that, “There never was a time when so many books and newspapers were circulated as at the present day.”² Another critic, who took a less positive view of mass reading habits, made an explicit linkage between increased distribution of books and cheap sensational fiction: “The embodiment and propagation of thoughts in the shape of books and yellow-covered novels and pamphlets ... seems only to be outdone, and perhaps not that, by the increased facilities for their dissemination, which almost annihilate time and space.”³

But the facilities for the dissemination of city-mysteries novels, however much they relied on dazzling new technologies like the telegraph and the railroad, were firmly situated in time and space, and were very much a part of the fabric of urban life. These mechanisms of distribution were the avenues by which individual texts were made available to individual

¹ George Lippard, in *The Nineteenth Century* 5:1 (February 1852): 96.

² William A. Alcott, *Familiar Letters to Young Men on Various Subjects* (Buffalo: Geo. H. Derby & Co., 1850), 79-80. Commenting on the extremely low price of newspapers and magazines, Alcott claimed that he found few families that did not take at least one newspaper or magazine, and that, “One family I visited lately—that of a mechanic—takes fourteen” (80).

³ *Confessions and Experiences of a Novel Reader*, by a Physician (Chicago: Wm. Stacy, 1855), viii-ix.

readers, who stepped out from the mass of the national audience to purchase or borrow books and periodicals for leisure reading. In their reading experiences, these individual readers left traces that indicate that, to whatever extent they were horrified by the urban miseries these novels described, they were equally if not more enthralled by their depictions of urban possibility.

Books in the City

Cheap fiction was available at bookstalls and newsdealers in every city in the country, as well as at general stores, through the mail, and at private circulating libraries.⁴ As a result, the power of the new networks of distribution allowed authors of popular fiction to put a face on the mass audience, envisioning specific readers in specific locations, as George Lippard did in this vision of a neglected author:

While he is sitting there, unknown, uncared for, his Book goes out all over the land. It travels over thirty States. There is a mechanic reading it in a garret in New York; there is a traveller reading it in the cabin of a Mississippi steamboat; there is a planter reading it, in an aristocratic mansion of Virginia; there is a forester reading it, by a watch-fire built in the woods among the snows of Maine; and all at the same moment of time. Nay, it crosses the bounds of the Union—by the watch-fires of Monterey, a band of home-sick volunteers, grouped in a circle, listen with laughter and tears, while one of their number, perched on a cannon, reads from the pages of this Book. It crosses the Ocean. At the same moment of time, it is read by sixty thousand of the English

⁴ For more on libraries in the nineteenth century, see David Kaser, *A Book for a Sixpence: The Circulating Library in America* (Pittsburgh: Beta Phi Mu, 1980), Haynes McMullen, *American Libraries Before 1876* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000) and Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Kaser notes that, in addition to public libraries, privately-owned circulating libraries proliferated in the antebellum period, and that many such libraries were run by women, often in dress or millinery shops, in addition to being found on board most steam boats and canal boats. Furthermore, after the rise of the philanthropic and public libraries in the 1840s, which tended to understock fiction, private circulating libraries “came increasingly to be viewed, both by the public and by their proprietors, as purveyors solely of fiction,” and that in the printed catalogs of private rental libraries from after 1850, the mean percentage of fiction was 81 percent (86, 102).

People—it goes on its way, and dressed in a German garb, speaks to people who live by the Rhine—among the Hartz mountains—under the snows of the Alps.⁵

This vision of such wide distribution for Lippard's novels was not farfetched. Due to the networks of exchange that existed between booksellers and publishers and book-agents, it was not uncommon for the cover of a city-mystery, such as *Clara Hopkins; or, A Mirror of City Life* to list bookstores where readers could purchase it in Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Detroit, St. Louis, Baltimore, Cincinnati, Cleveland, New Orleans, Chicago, and San Francisco.⁶ Smaller towns had access to such books as well. *The Mountain Village; or Mysteries of the Coal Region*, a city-mystery set in a small mining town in Pennsylvania, listed dealers carrying the book in Pottsville, Minersville, Port Carbon, Tamaqua, Reading, and Harrisburg.⁷ The railroad that connected these cities embodied both the means of dispersal and, often, the site of consumption of city-mysteries. The American Antiquarian Society's copy of Dennis Hannigan's *The Orange Girl of Venice* bears a small label from "J. Entistle & Son, Bookseller, Alexandria, VA," but the reader was more specific on the title page, where he wrote in pencil, "Alexandria London & Orange R.R./ J. Frank Torczyulny/ April 14, 1862"—clearly, this particular reader bought the book at the railroad station, and at least intended to read it on the train.

⁵ *Quaker City Weekly*, Jan. 27, 1849. Lippard was clearly referring to his own *The Quaker City; or the Monks of Monk-Hall*, which appeared in a British edition under the title *Dora Livingstone*, and was pirated in a German translation published under Friedrich Gerstäcker's name, entitled *Die Quäkerstadt und ihre Geheimnisse*.

Lippard's repeated mention that all these readers were reading his book "at the same moment of time" underscores the similarity that such works of popular fiction bore to newspapers in the ways that they were used by readers since, as Benedict Anderson has noted, the notion of simultaneous reading, of "calendrical coincidence" is the "essential literary convention of the newspaper." (Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* [New York: Verso, 1991], 33.)

⁶ Osgood Bradbury, *Clara Hopkins; or A Mirror of City Life, a Tale of New York and Philadelphia* (New York: Samuel French, 1855). It is ironic that these books were originally made for broad geographic dispersal, yet now it is the reader who has to travel the country to rare book libraries to see the few extant copies of such novels, to Worcester, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and San Marino.

⁷ Ralph Rural, *The Mountain Village; Or Mysteries of the Coal Region. A Romance Founded on Fact, Illustrating Life, Mystery and Crime, in the Coal Region* (Pottsville, PA: G. L. Vliet, Printer, 1849).

Regardless of the sophistication of the burgeoning transportation networks in America, however, both critics and practitioners of the genre of sensational urban fiction saw the city street as the prime locus of distribution and consumption for city-mysteries novels, and the practice of buying and reading books amid the bustle of city streets firmly situated the experience of print culture in a definite shared physical space, thus “collaps[ing] the distinction between imagining a community and participating in it.”⁸ As the author of a slightly later work describing various urban scams pointed out, his book would “follow the railroad,” but would be of most use in cities: “As the book will be sold by newsdealers generally, and especially on all the principal routes of travel, it will reach the traveler opportunely, when its disclosures are most likely to prove of value...”⁹ The “Physician” underlined even more clearly that the reading of popular fiction was a fundamental by-product of the parallel processes of industrialization and urbanization, noting that, “In our more densely populated cities, and where the telegraph and the railroad converge the rays of glittering wealth, the traveler is met at every corner and proffered, again and again, the public aliment, novels, romances! romances, novels!”¹⁰ Just as the convergence of networks of transportation was seen as being a crucial element of the rise of large cities, novels about these cities both profited from the process of urbanization and helped influence the shape these cities took in the national imagination, in much the same way that the railroads that spread the books shaped the fabric of the cities they helped build.

⁸ David Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 11.

⁹ *Tricks on Travelers; an exposure of the frauds and impositions practiced on various routes of travel, and on strangers in various cities*, by the author of "The Rogues and Rogueries of New York" (New York: Jesse Haney & Co., 1871), 4.

¹⁰ *Confessions and Experiences of a Novel Reader*, 29.

Authors of city-mysteries clearly grasped that the urban site of consumption of their novels could be used as a tool to bring readers into the narrative, and they often wrote city booksellers into their novels, thus situating the act of reading the book that could well have been purchased from just such a bookseller at a very near remove from the plot of the novel. Joseph Holt Ingraham began his *Herman de Ruyter; or the Mystery Unveiled* with a chapter entitled “The Book-man’s Stall,” describing a stall near Chatham Street in Manhattan that dealt in pamphlets and broadsides whose hunch-backed proprietor, Rolfe Brant, is in love with the heroine of the novel and murders a rival for her affections. In one George Thompson scene set in a low dive in Philadelphia called the “Red Ball Tavern,” among the assorted criminals and other urban riff-raff present are “vendors of almanacs, song-books, and other ‘cheap literature’”¹¹ The newsstand, where all available texts were visible for comparison and one could see who bought what, “offered a key to the social taxonomy of the city, presenting a stage on which silent and anonymous individuals might make themselves legible to the urban connoisseur.”¹² It is just such an urban connoisseur who, in *The Matricide’s Daughter*, is able to explain to his friend who he is guiding through Five Points in New York that the pamphlet version of a murderer’s confession, along with similar works being hawked by a street vendor “sell here, and in similar places, beyond all calculation.”¹³ Henry Ware, Jr. captured the sense of

¹¹ George Thompson, *The Criminal; or, The Adventures of Jack Harold*, by Greenhorn (New York: Frederic A. Brady, n.d.), 60.

¹² Henkin, *City Reading*, 113.

¹³ Newton Mallory Curtis, *The Matricide’s Daughter. A Tale of Life in the Great Metropolis* (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1850), 72.

the street as the site of consumption of cheap fiction, and therefore of danger, when he wrote that cheap printed matter was “offered at every corner like cheap spirits.”¹⁴

This fusion of the site of consumption of city-mysteries fiction and the events that such novels tended to describe was a common rhetorical device, one employed by both critics and practitioners of the genre. A. J. H. Duganne, in a triple-city mystery (Boston, New York, Philadelphia), described as one of the landmarks of Boston a small store, very likely either William Berry’s bookstore or Frederick Gleason’s bookstore, which served as “a general depot for patent medicine, cheap literature, and other correctives of the popular taste. But, though the vending of those articles was the ostensible vocation of the proprietor of the establishment, those who best knew, could tell tales of dark goings on in the small rooms of the building.... In that place, in the most fashionable and public portion of the city, amid churches and temples, was kept a secret, secure, and unsuspected assignation house. ... Here were lured young girls, and borne thence dishonored. Here came harlots, while the mayor’s house was within a stone’s-throw, and the City-Marshall passed, each hour, perhaps.”¹⁵

The Perils of Reading Cheap Fiction

Given the linkages that some felt existed between urban vice and urban reading, how were antebellum readers expected to read city-mysteries novels? A great deal has been written about literacy and advice on reading in nineteenth-century America, especially with regard to the

¹⁴ Quoted in Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 137.

¹⁵ A. J. H. Duganne, *The Knights of the Seal, or the Mysteries of the Three Cities* (Philadelphia: G. B. Zieber and Co., 1848), 106.

value of reading fiction.¹⁶ But relatively few scholars have focused on the advice given specifically about how to read cheap sensational fiction. In addition, the antebellum period has (perhaps too simplistically) been seen as a pivotal period between the early republic, when reading was presumed to help make a reader a citizen, and the late nineteenth century, when phenomena such as dime novels and mass-market magazines made a reader a consumer.¹⁷ Some critics—most, predictably, taking a dim view—did address themselves to readers of cheap fiction in particular; the anonymous Physician, cited previously, differentiated between “novels,” by which he meant bad cheap fiction, and “standard works,” by writers such as Dickens or Scott, which were not as harmful.¹⁸ William Alcott defined “light reading” as “such books, papers, and

¹⁶ This literature is too large to be mentioned here, but most relevant and/or useful are: Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Cathy Davidson, ed., *Reading in America: Literature and Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); William Gilmore-Lehne, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); David Hall, *Cultures of Print* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996); Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); James Machor, ed., *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Machor, “Fiction and Informed Reading in Early Nineteenth-Century America,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 47 (1992):320–48; Steven Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982); Mailloux, *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and Cultural Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Michele Moylan and Lane Stiles, eds., *Reading Books: Essays on the Material Text and Literature in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996); Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Garrett Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); James Wallace, *Early Cooper and His Audience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Zboray, *A Fictive People*. Several relevant sources that address the subject of working-class readers and popular fiction in the British context are: Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life with Special References to Publications and Entertainments* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957); Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man, 1830-1850: A study of the literature produced for the working classes in early Victorian urban England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963); and Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page*, 15.

¹⁸ *Confessions and Experiences of a Novel Reader*, 16.

periodicals as amuse and enable you to ‘kill time,’ or at least ‘while’ it away; but leave little or no lasting impression....”¹⁹

The Physician, along with many other critics, assailed cheap sensational fiction through guilt by association, identifying such prominent figures as the executed sailor in the Somers Affair or the perpetrators of the famous Crowninshield murder in Salem as avid readers of cheap fiction.²⁰ For some critics, city life and the dangers of reading about city life were synonymous, as they were for John Todd, who claimed that one of the main temptations of city life is to waste one’s time in light reading: “The feverish excitement which is all around you, instead of giving you an appetite for sober history, ... will naturally lead you to the exciting novel, and to the highest place in the world of romance. To meet the taste of the age, a common novel ... is altogether too tame. We must have pirates and highwaymen for heroes, and no seasoning short of blood, butchery, and murder, is at all fitted to meet the taste.”²¹

It is to be expected that a genre of literature known as the “raw head-and-bloody-bones” school was often criticized for its excessive violence and other forms of immorality, things that were felt to lead readers like those in Salem to commit crimes as grave as murder. The special fear of critics of the genre was that inexperienced readers would be taken in by the attractive surroundings in which immorality was presented, that the books gave “currency to filth, by

¹⁹ Alcott, *Familiar Letters to Young Men*, 78–9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

²¹ John Todd, *The Moral Influence, Dangers and Duties, Connected with Great Cities* (Northampton: J. H. Butler, 1841), 201–2. Isabelle Lehuu’s interpretation of antebellum print culture as a battleground between the “genteel” and the “ephemeral” is much too broadly drawn. She claims that the “defenders of cultural legitimacy,” men like Alcott and Todd, were opposed to anything “ephemeral,” by which she means newspapers, magazines, and picture books, along with ephemeral novels. On the contrary, I find that most critics were very positive about most periodical literature and its role in spreading literacy through the population, and that they were extremely specific about the certain *kinds* of newspapers and books that they found dangerous. Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page*, 33.

coining it in the mint of beauty” instead of presenting vice bluntly.²² As Henry Ward Beecher railed against the literature that “reek[ed] with a filth which Pagan antiquity could scarcely endure,” he stated that these novels were “both the cause and the effect of the age,” that they had created a market for “exquisitely artful licentiousness” that they in turn fed.²³ If sensational fiction could lead readers to commit crimes of violence or sexual dereliction, such crimes were inseparable from the political threat to the Republic that such a generation of readers represented. The author of *Life in New York* described a society that had been set up in the city to “make war upon the ‘light reading’ or ‘licentious literature’ of the day,” namely writers like Sue and Bulwer “and such panders to lust as these authors of fiction are, while the hydra-headed monster of socialism is left to work silently and fatally....”²⁴ Readers, it was feared, would learn bad morals and bad politics from the same book.

A more common assault against cheap fiction reading was more economic in nature—it was simply a waste of time. Emerson recommended in 1858 that novels of current city life were not worth reading, since one should “not read what you shall learn without asking, in the street and in the train.” He felt that it was an “economy of time to read old and famed books,” but that “the spawn of the press on the gossip of the hour” was a waste of time. His prescription was to not read any book that was not at least a year old.²⁵ William Alcott claimed that he was “no enemy ... to light reading,” but that “the tendency to excess will need to be watched and guarded against. Few, if any, read light works too little.”²⁶ John Todd was more direct when he

²² Henry Ward Beecher, *Lectures to Young Men, on Various Important Subjects* (Salem: John P. Jewett & Co., 1846), 175.

²³ *Ibid.*, 180–81.

²⁴ *Life in New York*, 2nd ed. (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), 198.

²⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1858, 343–53.

²⁶ Alcott, *Familiar Letters to Young Men*, 81.

cautioned his readers who enjoyed cheap fiction that they could not “suppose they can waste hours every day, or every week in such reading, and yet make up the loss by hard application in after times.”²⁷ William Elder castigated readers of cheap sensational fiction as being capable of nothing above “the intense idleness of reading them—persons who devour tales as they talk gossip, stare at processions, and attend church, just to enjoy some keener consciousness of life than their own emptiness ... can afford them.” Elder implies that some fiction *did* have useful lessons to teach readers, but that a confluence of bad books and dim readers resulted in “these greedy guzzlers of fiction” simply wasting their lives.²⁸

The most dangerous sort of time wasting that cheap fiction was thought to promote also involved the wasting of sperm. John Todd’s *The Student’s Manual* had a section written entirely in Latin entitled “Beware of bad books,” where he argued that solitary reading of sensational fiction led to masturbation. Henry Ward Beecher, in his attack on “black-lettered literature,” suggestively noted that such fiction “is *fingered* and read nightly, and hatches in the young mind broods of salacious thoughts.”²⁹ William Alcott also perceived this danger of such reading which, according to Isabelle Lehuu, “instead of contributing to an ethic that encouraged production and reproduction, ... ran the risk of unmanning the self-absorbed reader.”³⁰ This threat of “unmanning” was clearly the reference point for one critic who claimed that sensational

²⁷ Todd, *Moral Influence*, 203.

²⁸ William Elder, “Fiction—Its Abuses,” in *Quaker City Weekly*, August 18, 1849.

²⁹ Beecher, *Lectures to Young Men*, 211; italics mine.

³⁰ Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page*, 139. See David Stewart’s “Cultural Work, City Crime, Reading Pleasure,” *American Literary History* 9:4 (Winter 1997) for an especially cogent analysis of the anxieties about economic productivity that many reformers linked to the reading of cheap fiction, and of the simultaneous release and correction of the bodily energy that was constrained and commanded in the antebellum workplace. The anxiety about the “abuse” of fiction as being related to “self-abuse” underlies a great many discussions of reading for pleasure, and the rhetoric involved in condemning wasteful reading was frequently the same as that employed in decrying the waste of sperm, as in William Elder’s lament that, “It is sad, this abuse of fiction by the lust of luxury divorced from use....” Elder, *Quaker City Weekly*, August 18, 1849.

fiction offered readers views of “spectacles most unchaste” and “enkindled passions in the breasts of the young, for which they know no name.”³¹ In one famous example of bad reading being associated with specific actions, Charles Sutton, the former warden of the Tombs prison in New York, wrote of Richard Robinson, the man widely thought to have murdered the prostitute Helen Jewett, that, despite being “graceful in person,” Robinson’s “reading was extensive, but it had a tendency to erotic literature that produced no good results.”³²

The almost compulsive and excessive love of cheap reading—the “abuse” of books—was linked to the quality of city-mysteries novels that critics pointed to most frequently: they were *exciting*. A Scottish minister writing in the period outlined the danger: one might start out reading good books, but “Works of fiction are from their very nature exceedingly fascinating. A taste for them once acquired, the appetite will be in danger of going on to gratify itself with less and less of scruple as to the quality of what it devours....”³³ The rhetoric of the temperance movement was often deployed to compare this addictive quality of cheap reading material to liquor, rendering such books as the opiate of the American masses, distracting them from the serious business of republicanism. Some reading was of course good, but reading the kinds of books that overheated the mind (and body) with “feverish excitement” were to be feared for producing just that effect. This quality of literature could be felt both mentally and physically; one critic affirmed that, “I never read a novel or romance in my life, that I did not arise from its perusal, either under the immediate influence of some one specific passion particularly called

³¹ “Cheap Literature—Its Benefits and Injuries,” 419.

³² Charles Sutton, *The New York Tombs; Its Secrets and its Mysteries* (San Francisco: A. Roman & Co., 1874), 103.

³³ Rev. Henry Angus, *Works of Fiction: Their Use and Abuse* (Aberdeen: A. Brown & Co., 1853), 28-9.

forth, or the whole catalogue of legitimate effects.”³⁴ This ability of literature to excite could cause one to become addicted and to read compulsively, but it could also change the reading experience, leading one to read in fragments, which Benjamin Rush claimed would cause brain damage, as well as to other sins. As one critic of the genre noted, “the best recommendation that a work can possess to thousands is, that it has something in it to excite the baser passions of our nature.”³⁵ This ability to create physical excitement in the reader was one of the most dangerous—and most desirable—effects of sensational reading.

Cheap Fiction Defended

Yet if “excitement” was a term of danger when applied to light reading by critics, it could also be a good thing for those who thought differently about cheap fiction. By no means all pundits were critical of the effects of reading popular fiction. Some defended it on the grounds of its comparative morality, as did Amory Mayo, who claimed that, “altogether our popular writing is purer and more elevating than the whole body of English literature in some of its most illustrious periods.”³⁶ Rev. E. H. Chapin, writing specifically of city fiction, admitted that a great deal of immoral literature was being produced, but that it was better to have it out in the open than to keep it hidden, and that it also accurately reflected what urban conditions were

³⁴ *Confessions and Experiences*, 36. For a fascinating examination of the somatic effects that reading was thought to produce, albeit in a very different period, see Adrian Johns, “The Physiology of Reading in Restoration England,” in *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, edited by James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), in which Johns situates accounts of readers’ responses within the context of contemporary discourses on anatomy and the passions.

³⁵ “Cheap Literature—Its Benefits and Injuries,” *Russell’s Magazine* 1:5 (August 1857), 419.

³⁶ Amory Dwight Mayo, *Symbols of the Capital; or, Civilization in New York* (New York: Thatcher & Hutchinson, 1859), 159.

like.³⁷ William Elder actually praised the “excitement” that novels could afford, saying that they “are also read by many who are capable of their best influences, much as they listen to music or attend theatres, for the easily got up excitement and pleasant relaxation which they afford,” and claiming to have spoken to “professional men” who “habitually” read cheap fiction who didn’t like Bulwer-Lytton’s *Zanoni* precisely because it was *too* serious.³⁸ For Elder, whatever abuses of fiction he saw, they existed only insofar as there were potentially positive uses.

Overwhelmingly, however, those ministers and essayists who praised cheap fiction did so for two intertwined reasons: it represented the dissemination of reading matter to a wide audience, and it was better for that audience to spend their leisure time reading than doing more harmful things. An 1852 *Waverley Magazine* article on “How a Young Man Should Spend His Evenings” addressed itself to the problem created by the fact that, “In all large cities there are so many different ways in which time may be spent....” The best possible solution to this problem offered by the writer was to have “any one, who has never yet done so, begin a regular course of reading.” Not wishing to prescribe for the young man in question “a list of books which are to convert him into a deep thinker or a philosopher at once,” the writer allowed that, “If he has no great liking for History or Biography, or works of Sciences, and perhaps has a hankering after fiction, by all means let him read fiction.”³⁹

This praise of fiction reading as a way to spend one’s leisure hours offered the added benefit of being less expensive than some other modes of amusement, which, in addition to their

³⁷ Rev. Edwin Hubbell Chapin, *Humanity in the City* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1854), 102.

³⁸ Elder, *Quaker City Weekly*, August 18, 1849.

³⁹ “How a Young Man Should Spend His Evenings,” *Waverley Magazine* 4:18 (May 8, 1852), 281. The writer cautioned his readers that they should not devour “every novel that comes in [their] way,” but did assume that they would read popular works as well as more canonical novels, assuring them that a diet of Cooper, Scott, and Dickens would enable readers to correctly judge the merits of “the thousand and one *mere* Romances which are issued continually from the Press.”

questionable morality, often led young men to overextend themselves financially. As Asa Greene wrote in a guide to New York, the majority of the people in the city “would be entirely destitute of any species of reading” were their preferred newspapers and pamphlet novels not so cheap. Greene went on, “By having an agreeable source of amusement, many people are kept from devoting their leisure hours to bad company, to drink, to gaming, and to many other vicious, foolish, and unworthy pursuits. There are few men, who have not some leisure hours, when, if they are not reading, they will be very likely—especially in a large city, full of dram-shops—to be doing worse.”⁴⁰ Greene saw the low cost of cheap reading as a mark in its favor, and as an indicator of the general law of progress the fact that books and all other kinds of publications “have been constantly getting lower in price, while all other commodities have been getting higher.”⁴¹

This tendency was viewed as a positive by some writers, regardless of the kind of literature involved, as long as it got people reading. Amory Dwight Mayo offered one of the most spirited defenses of cheap fiction along these lines, arguing:

It is one of the cheapest ways of affecting superior culture to sneer at this whole mass of popular literature; but it is a wiser thing to examine the phenomenon and report on its significance. This rage for transient reading proves, not that the taste of the cultivated has declined, but that *the people are learning to read*. Never were so many persons reading anything before as now in a few of the states of the Union. Whole classes now read that once were wholly ignorant. Of course, when a State begins its journey in the world of literature, it takes the easiest path; reads the news of the day; is interested chiefly in pithy and sketchy methods of conveying information; ... and if it enters the domain of books, craves those which have grown out of the newspaper and the magazine, and demand only an ordinary comprehension for enjoyment. Thus we should rather rejoice that so many have learned to read in New York, than turn with disgust from much they do read.⁴²

⁴⁰ Asa Greene, *A Glance at New York* (New York: A. Greene, 1837), 133.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴² Mayo, *Symbols of the Capital*, 157–58.

This view of popular literature and of the value of reading, no matter what was read, was not exclusive to professional critics of culture. Henry Patterson, the young hardware store clerk mentioned previously, made notes in his diary of the meetings of his literary and debating society. One night the debate was on the question, “Does reading works of fiction have an injurious effect?” in answer to which Patterson argued that, “as a general rule they were of more benefit than injury, by cherishing, & producing a love of literature....”⁴³ A month later, arguing against the need for an international copyright law between the U.S. and England, Patterson claimed that such a law would primarily benefit English authors, and that England was in favor of the law because “she knows it would strike a death blow to cheap reading, which is the means by which our poorer classes receive their education; & she knows that education is the bulwark of our republican institutions, which are a stumbling block in her path.”⁴⁴ Far from arguing that cheap reading made Americans worse citizens, Patterson saw it as an essential element of the process of becoming a citizen.

The idea that reading better equipped one for life, regardless of what one read, stands in stark contrast to the notion purveyed by some critics that reading fiction, no matter how genteel, would corrupt. Perhaps predictably, Walt Whitman would offer the most enthusiastic defense of cheap reading:

... the three thousand different newspapers, the nutriment of the imperfect ones coming in just as usefully as any—the story papers, various, full of strong-flavored romances, widely circulated—the one and two cent journals ... the sporting and pictorial papers ... the sentimental novels, numberless copies of them—the low-priced flaring tales, adventures, biographies—all are prophetic;

⁴³ Henry A. Patterson Diary, vol. 3, entry for March 19, 1842, New-York Historical Society. Patterson did admit that fiction reading could be “carried to excess,” but that such cases “were only exceptions to the general principle.”

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, entry for April 16, 1842.

all waft rapidly on. I see that they swell wide, for reasons. I am not troubled at the movement of them, but greatly pleased. I see plying shuttles, the active ephemeral myriads of books also, faithfully weaving the garments of a generation of men.... What a progress popular reading and writing has made in fifty years!⁴⁵

The “Usefulness” of Light Reading

Before examining how these “low-priced flaring tales” instructed their readers in how to read them, and how they depicted reading, I wish to briefly discuss several possible approaches to understanding the history of leisure reading. Much of what has been written about how city-mysteries were read stems from an instrumental, or cultural work model, of reading. According to Jane Tompkins, this approach involves seeing literary texts as “attempts to redefine the social order,” reflecting the ways a culture thinks of itself, trying to influence minds, and “articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment.”⁴⁶ Stuart Blumin has written of George Foster’s quasi-nonfictional *New York by Gas-Light* that it “ought to be seen first and foremost as one of a number of attempts to undertake the significant task of *explaining* the new metropolis to a society that was in so many ways affected by its development.”⁴⁷ As David Stewart has described this cultural work model as it is applied to antebellum urban fiction, this approach lumps city-mysteries novels together with other, nonfictional genres of urban writing, and concludes that such books “performed interpretive functions that helped readers navigate the urban environment in which they lived.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Walt Whitman, “Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson,” in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, vol. 1, edited by Nina Baym, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 2019.

⁴⁶ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, xi.

⁴⁷ Blumin, introduction to *New York by Gas-Light*, 11.

⁴⁸ Stewart, “Cultural Work, City Crime,” 680. Or, in T. J. Jackson Lears’ words, popular culture provides “tools for coping.” Lears, “Making Fun of Popular Culture,” *American Historical Review* 97:5 (Dec. 1992): 1417-26; 1417.

There is a good deal of textual evidence to support the idea that antebellum readers read city-mysteries in order to make sense of the new urban environment. In their study of antebellum New England readers, the Zborays conclude that readers “reacted positively to texts they deemed useful or instructive, and necessarily accurate,” and authors of city-mysteries went to great lengths to justify their novels on both counts.⁴⁹ Justin Jones, in a prospectus for one of his Boston city-mysteries, claimed that the book would include “none but Conspicuous Living Characters,” a claim to grounding in the real world that was a substantial part of the genre’s appeal.⁵⁰ George Lippard, defending his novel *The Quaker City* against charges of immorality, wrote, “I determined to write a book which should describe all the phases of a corrupt social system, as manifested in the city of Philadelphia,” and claimed that the novel was “accurate” in that it was based on facts he learned while working as a clerk for the attorney general of Pennsylvania.⁵¹ Lippard’s biographer wrote that the accuracy, or lack thereof, of the novel as a guide to Philadelphia was the source of much of its appeal, claiming that “What gave to the book a fearful interest, apart from the enchantment of the story *as* a story, was the suspicion that a certain recent tragical event in Philadelphia was the substance of the plot. . . . People began to pick out other portraits in the volume, until, at last, every character of the fiction had its living original about town.”⁵²

Even authors who wished to avoid the notion (and the attendant legal complications) that their novels described particular individuals still claimed that their books possessed some power to explain city life, as John Chumasero noted to his readers in his 1848 *Life in Rochester*: “But

⁴⁹ Ronald J. Zboray, and Mary Saracino Zboray, “‘Have You Read...?’” 153.

⁵⁰ Justin Jones, *Star Spangled Banner*, Oct. 7, 1848.

⁵¹ Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 2.

⁵² John Bell Bouton, *The Life and Choice Writings of George Lippard* (New York: H. H. Randall, 1855), 19–20.

do not thyself the discredit, or me the injustice, to imagine that this or that person is portrayed in these pages. Believe me when I again assure thee that the strongest portraits that are here presented, are those of classes, and not of persons.”⁵³ (Chumasero then implied that the story was, in fact, based on real people, but that they were already dead.) Numerous novels, such as *Caroline Tracy, the Spring Street Milliner’s Apprentice* (1849) included copies of letters and newspaper items that purported to provide factual support for the story, for the benefit of readers who did not live in the city in question and were not familiar enough with the news to know the characters already. Even critics of the genre like Henry Ward Beecher realized that one reason a geographically dispersed audience might read city-mysteries was to learn about cities, and especially how to act in them:

We are such a migratory, restless people, that our home is usually everywhere but at home; and almost every young man makes annual, or biennial visits to famous cities.... It is at such times that the young are in extreme danger, for they are particularly anxious, at such times, to appear at their full age. A young man is ashamed, in a great hotel, to seem raw and not to know the mysteries of the bar and of the town. They put on a very remarkable air, which is meant for ease; they affect profusion of expense; they think it meet for a gentleman to know all that certain other city-gentlemen seem proud of knowing.⁵⁴

As Michel de Certeau has written, this understanding of reading stems from an “ideology of ‘informing’ through books,” an ideology that situates the producers of media in an elite position vis-à-vis consumers. “Even protests against the vulgarization/vulgarity of the media often depend on an analogous pedagogical claim,” de Certeau observes: “inclined to believe that its own cultural models are necessary for the people in order to educate their minds and elevate their hearts, the elite upset about the ‘low level’” of any medium “always assumes that the public

⁵³ John Chumasero, *Life in Rochester, or Sketches from Life; Being Scenes of Misery, Vice, Shame and Oppression, In the City of the Genesee*, by a Resident Citizen (Rochester: D.M. Dewey, 1848), 100.

⁵⁴ Beecher, *Lectures to Young Men*, 224–25.

is moulded by the products imposed on it.” De Certeau argues that this view constitutes a misunderstanding of consumption, because it assumes that “‘assimilating’ necessarily means ‘becoming similar to’ what one absorbs, and not ‘making something similar’ to what one is, making it one’s own....”⁵⁵ This challenge to the assumption that consumption is passive lies at the heart of much of the debate over popular culture, but it is especially applicable in the case of reading city-mysteries fiction, where the evidence indicates that readers created a multiplicity of responses, making these texts their own by entering into dialogue with them. I do not wish to argue that such “instruction,” or cultural work, did not take place when antebellum readers read cheap fiction, but to suggest that it was not the only possible response.

The Bodily Response to Reading

In contrast to the cultural-work model, but also differing slightly from Certeau’s model of reading as “poaching,” or collecting bits of meaning from various places, is that view of novel reading discussed earlier—reading as generating a bodily response, or reading for pleasure and excitement.⁵⁶ Henry Ward Beecher, while all too aware that young men might read city-mysteries as manuals for urban behavior, was also aware that pleasure was another reason for reading them, and opposed “gadding, gazing, lounging, mere pleasure-mongering, reading for the relief of *ennui*,” claiming that “these are as useless as sleeping, or dozing, or the stupidity of

⁵⁵ Michel de Certeau, “Reading as Poaching,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 166.

⁵⁶ For versions of this argument as applied to culture in general, see Lears, “Making Fun of Popular Culture”; Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Noonday Press, 1975); Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

a surfeit.”⁵⁷ This opposition clearly implies that at least some readers *did* read for “mere pleasure-mongering.” David Stewart has written that a continued focus on the “productivity” of the experience of reading popular fiction is a misapprehension of the purpose that such reading served for antebellum readers.

In an era when such pleasure reading would have been seen by many, like Beecher, as in direct opposition to the productive ethos of the time, Stewart observes a profusion of explicitly unproductive sentiment and sensation in the popular literature of the period. As he notes, if we study more recreational literature now than before, due to the efforts of the cultural-work model to expand the canon, we disregard what made such reading recreational in favor of focusing on its productivity, and in the absence of any nonproductive categories for reading we render much popular antebellum fiction functionally inexplicable.⁵⁸ Stewart attempts to recover the affective pleasure of the kind of reading that, for many antebellum readers, was “emphatically not work,” and was engaged in during the time that people were free of labor.⁵⁹ A writer for the Lowell “Voice of Industry” mentioned the large number of lectures and libraries available to the factory girls, but wrote that most girls were simply too tired to go: “The unremitting toil of thirteen long hours, drains off the vital energy and unfits for study and reflection. They need amusement, relaxation, rest, and not mental exertion of any kind.”⁶⁰

It is clear, from both sides in the antebellum debate over fiction, that novels were thought to generate a powerful, bodily affective response. As the anonymous novel reader mentioned earlier observed, “Novels proverbially involve deep emotions; indeed, this is their cohesive

⁵⁷ Beecher, *Lectures to Young Men*, 15.

⁵⁸ Stewart, “Cultural Work, City Crime,” 677–79.

⁵⁹ Stewart, “Cultural Work, City Crime,” 678.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Eric Foner, ed., “Factory Life--Romance and Reality,” in *The Factory Girls* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 93.

power, and all the more dangerous. ... Novels are like the underground railroad, the deep heaving ground swell, the swift undercurrent, and though issued ad infinitum, the private or public taste is never satiated.”⁶¹ William Alcott was aware of the somatic effect exciting novels could have, and (one can only guess why), discouraged the readers of *Familiar Letters to Young Men* from reading exciting books late at night, claiming that “Fancy and imagination are apt to predominate, at this hour of the day, and sober judgment seldom gains the ascendancy. If exciting books are read at all, they should be read in the forenoon, and not in the evening.”⁶²

These hints that readers in the past enjoyed books physically and viscerally indicate the vast range of potential responses to literature that are lost to historians, highlighting the fact that “the story of man’s travels through his own texts remains in large measure unknown.”⁶³ Nevertheless, such responses also indicate the extent to which texts only have meaning through their readers. Although I would argue, along with Certeau, that readers, in both the way they read and in the infinite combinations of what they have already read, make meaning out of books, I would also argue that books themselves, through their physical appearance, genre affiliations, and depictions of reading in their texts, can lead readers toward certain readings.

⁶¹ *Confessions and Experiences*, 33-4.

⁶² Alcott, *Familiar Letters to Young Men*, 77. This anxiety about the potential linkage between reading and masturbation is borne out in J. Henry Smith’s, *The Green Family; or, The Veil Removed* (Springfield, MA: Smith & Jones, 1849). One scene in this novel offers one of the best depictions of the purchasing and consumption of racy books I have read. James Green, after getting a job as a clerk, begins checking dirty books out from the Hartford Athenaeum, which then leads to his visiting with a friend Peter Cooke’s, a Hartford bookseller, to buy small pornographic works, including *Becklard’s Physiology* and the *Physiology of the Wedding Night*, both of which were kept underneath the counter (41-2). Later that night, James and his friend both have wet dreams after reading their new purchases, underscoring Isabelle Lehuu’s point that, “Nineteenth-century reformers understood that reading involved not just the words on a page but also the time and place of the act of reading. Thus they were far more concerned with the interaction between readers and texts than with a classification of reading matter by literary genre” (132).

⁶³ Michel de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 170.

Reading Books in City-Mysteries Fiction

City-mysteries novels are filled with references to reading other cheap sensational fiction, and often make intertextual references to other well-known city-mysteries. In doing so, they provided hints to readers of how they should read the book in their hands, either aligning themselves with or differentiating themselves from other texts with which the reader was likely to be familiar. In depicting scenes of characters consuming cheap fiction, authors gave readers a template to follow (or to shun) in their own reading. At times, such depictions were used to make clear to readers to what genre the novel belonged; the young hero of *Minny Lawson* informs another character that his history, “exceeding in interest any novel I have ever read,” is a “romance in real life,” which was one of the most common subtitles for novels in the city-mysteries genre, calling attention to the generic affiliations of the narrative and clearly situating it within a familiar body of works.⁶⁴ In *Phasis of Life; or, Mysteries of Catskill* (whose subtitle is, incidentally, “A Romance of Real Life”), the elderly and drunken Mrs. Mudge, when asked for information, inserts Rodolph of Saxony and Elizabeth of Gerolstein, two prominent characters from Sue’s *Mysteries of Paris*, into her version of local Catskill events, noting that Rodolph, having “broken his consort’s head with a stone pot,” is now cooling off in the county jail.⁶⁵

In addition to frequently mentioning other works of sensational fiction, city-mysteries novels often referred more generally to the usefulness of books as cultural indicators. The fashionable minister in George Thompson’s *Dashington*, Cyrus Montgomery, has a library that

⁶⁴ Charles Red Swan, *Minny Lawson: or, The Outlaws League. A Romance of Gotham* (New York: n.p., 185?), 58.

⁶⁵ *Phasis of Life; or, Mysteries of Catskill. A Romance of Real Life* (Catskill: J. H. Van Gorden, 1845), 14, 42.

“included a few religious works, which looked very new, and a considerable number of popular novels, which seemed pretty well worn,” offering a clear clue as to exactly what kind of minister he is.⁶⁶ Frank Hennock, the ex-convict poet in the *Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, when trying to talk his way into a job in a rich man’s family and being asked what church he attended, was able to quickly catch sight “of a large ornamental prayer-book, upon the centre-table,” and to immediately (and correctly) respond, “To the Episcopal, sir.”⁶⁷

If the ability to quickly interpret the cultural meanings carried by certain books in order to deceive was important, it was just as important to keep in mind that these meanings were not always reliable. In the same novel, a young woman is initially misled as to the character of a “respectable” brothel to which she has been taken by the fact that the parlor table is “covered with periodicals and annuals,” which could not possibly be read in a house of ill fame.⁶⁸ The portability and small size of most volumes of sensational and obscene fiction meant that they could be used even more deceptively, as Mrs. Monk, one of the elderly keepers of the private insane asylum in *Dashington*, hides a “rather loose French novel embellished with numerous ‘spicy’ engravings which were executed in the highest style of art” behind her Bible.⁶⁹ This ability of cheap fiction to be easily concealed, therefore obfuscating the obvious cultural messages carried by its distinctive appearance, was taken to an extreme in *The Green Family*, a very bawdy and highly specific city-mystery set in Hartford. One of the Green children finds her way to a “boarding house” in Mulberry Street that is of course really an assignation house. As

⁶⁶ George Thompson, *Dashington; or the Mysteries of a Private Mad House*, by Greenhorn (New York: Frederic A. Brady, n.d.), 7.

⁶⁷ Ned Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York: A Story of Real Life* (New York: Berford, 1848), 57.

⁶⁸ Buntline, *Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, 42.

⁶⁹ Thompson, *Dashington*, 49.

three men bowl to determine which one of them will have her first, Susan browses in the parlor and discovers that the house has numerous pornographic works bound as *Franklin's Essays* or the *Book of Common Prayer*.⁷⁰

So what rules did characters in city-mysteries follow in their reading of these sensational books, disguised or not? Some certainly agreed with Harry Harefoot's friend Ralph, who derided Harry for his love of reading, saying, "Pooh! who would be so silly to stay stuck up in the house these fine evenings, when there is so much life and amusement going on all over town. ... But all books are bores, and reading is dull business."⁷¹ But many characters in these novels found that reading cheap fiction contributed to, rather than distracted from, their enjoyment of the city and its pleasures. Many novels tried to explain to their readers what kinds of books were good to read by explaining (or showing) what books were bad—namely, French ones.⁷² Ned Buntline, in his fictionalized autobiography, praised a ship captain's library for containing Cooper, Scott, and Irving, and decried "the sensualist and libertine [who] dwells and revels in the

⁷⁰ J. Henry Smith, *The Green Family; or, The Veil Removed* (Springfield, MA: Smith & Jones, 1849), 115.

⁷¹ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *Harry Harefoot; or, The Three Temptations* (Boston: H. L. Williams, 1845), 19, 36.

⁷² See Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers*, 176–91, for more on responses of critics to bad "French" books. Henry Ward Beecher was characteristically enthusiastic in his attacks on literature from France, "where religion long ago went out smothered in licentiousness," according to Beecher, and a nation that "has flooded the world with a species of literature redolent of depravity. ... I am ashamed and outraged when I think that wretches could be found to open these foreign seals, and let their plagues out upon us—that any Satanic Pilgrim should voyage to France to dip from the dead sea of her abomination, a baptism for our sons." (Beecher, *Lectures to Young Men*, 209, 211).

This sense of French books being corrupting was not exclusive to America. A Scottish minister writing in 1853 alluded to "a villainous sort of novel of modern growth, sprung in France, spread thence like many other things not good into this country, and appearing mostly, I believe, in the serial form of publication. Our higher literature of fiction is refining, but it is sending down a base and poisonous precipitate." Reverend Angus of course claimed that "I know nothing of the works referred to except by report," but made clear that, even in Scotland, the fact that a book had a French pedigree meant that it was "of the vilest and most mischievous description" (Rev. Henry Angus, *Works of Fiction*, 27–28). The tastes of readers in the British Isles seem to have been quite sensitive, as Louis James, in his 1963 study *Fiction for the Working Man*, claimed that some of the cheap fiction imported from America to England in the nineteenth-century "was crudely sensational and morally unpleasant, and may have had a bad effect on English tastes" (James, *Fiction for the Working Man*, 135).

loose fancies and licentious pictures of Paul de Kock or a Reynolds....”⁷³ Osgood Bradbury, in his *Modern Othello*, his version of the Edwin Forrest divorce scandal, attributed the fashion for “model artist” exhibitions to “the obscene literature of the French school,” such as “Paul de Kock’s novels; Alexander Dumas’s indecent epics and George Sands’ infidel as well as other unsexed Smut together with Eugene Sue’s polished infamies....”⁷⁴ The prostitute heroine of George Thompson’s *The Mysteries of Bond-Street*, in her first place of employ in New York, found a library “for the benefit of the house” containing various pornographic works, along with the “equivocal works of Paul de Kock,” which were the “most virtuous” books in the library.⁷⁵

By singling out these works for criticism, these authors were treading a fine line, since the very works they were identifying as most immoral were the books that city-mysteries were thought to resemble most closely, both in appearance and content.⁷⁶ The difference between reading dirty books and showing people reading dirty books is at times a slim one, as in George Thompson’s *City Crimes*, where the Reverend Sinclair finds the beautiful, voracious Josephine

⁷³ Ned Buntline, *Ned Buntline’s Life-Yarn* (New York: Garrett & Co., 1849), 178.

⁷⁴ Osgood Bradbury, *The Modern Othello; or, The Guilty Wife, a Thrilling Romance of New York Fashionable Life* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 1855), 80.

⁷⁵ George Thompson, *The Mysteries of Bond-Street; or, The Seraglios of Upper Tendom* (New York: n.p., 1857), 32. In an American edition of a novel attributed to Paul de Kock, entitled *The Great City*, the author makes the interesting argument that licentious books are only sought after by good people, since a prostitute can learn nothing from such books. (Charles Paul de Kock, *The Great City: A New and Graphic Picture of Paris* (New York: Holland and Glover’s Depot for Cheap Publications, 1845), 17.) Thompson was especially insistent on depicting obscene books and prints as being tools of the prostitute’s trade. In *City Crimes*, the hero spends the night with Maria Archer, a beautiful young woman whose cruel husband has become her pimp. Thompson notes the hero’s surprise that, “No obscene pictures or immodest images were to be seen—all was unexceptionable in point of propriety,” indicated what sort of print products he expected to find in a whore’s room. (George Thompson, *City Crimes; or, Life in New York and Boston. A Volume for Everybody: Being a Mirror of Fashion, a Picture of Poverty, and a Startling Revelation of the Secret Crimes of Great Cities* (1849), in *Venus in Boston*, edited by David S. Reynolds and Kimberly R. Gladman [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002], 111.)

⁷⁶ Many critics were, of course, alert to the similarities between racy French novels and American sensational fiction. The author of the 1853 article “Satanic Literature” condemned American publishers for “descend[ing] into the sewers of French demoralization, and gather[ing] up for American homes the worst literary abominations of the old world,” but noted that their catalogs also featured a steady stream of “flimsy, trashy abortions from native anonymous scribblers of the lowest rank....” (“Satanic Literature,” 25)

Franklin reclining in her chamber looking over a portfolio of what she calls “‘views from nature.’” Examining the portfolio, the minister finds, “somewhat to his astonishment, that the engravings were of rather an obscene character, consisting principally of nude male figures;--and upon these specimens of a perverted art had she been feasting her impure imagination.”⁷⁷ (He is not so surprised that he doesn’t spend the night with her.) What these repeated mentions of racy French works represent, however, is more an effort to show the audience what American city-mysteries are not—if they’re racy, they’re not as bad as *The Lustful Turk* (a popular pornographic work), and no matter how bad they are, at least they aren’t French.

These novels tended to depict reading as entertaining in a positive way, offering distraction from the cares of everyday life, and even recommended the particularly engrossed mode of reading that so concerned critics, as one female criminal stated in *Nick Bigelow*: “‘Reading! pshaw! do you call that reading when the eye only sees the words before you, and you do not hear them as if they were whispered in your ears? I was looking over the book, but my thoughts wasn’t on it; and I only call that reading in airnest, when I can fancy that some one is telling me the very words I see in print before me....’”⁷⁸

Leisure readers in city-mysteries fiction are often depicted as reading for simple pleasure, either to pass the time or to take one’s mind off less pleasant matters. Thomas Butler Gunn, in his *Physiology of New York Boarding-Houses*, describes the female boarders at the “hand-to-mouth” boarding house devoting their time not spent on Broadway to “the novels of Mr. G. W.

⁷⁷ Thompson, *City Crimes*, 214.

⁷⁸ *Nick Bigelow: and the Female Burglar; and Other Leaves from a Lawyer’s Diary*, by a Member of the New York Bar (New York: Burgess, Stringer & Co., 1846), 77.

Reynolds” [author of *The Mysteries of London*] and the *Police Gazette*.⁷⁹ Male readers were also depicted as using cheap fiction to pass the time, as Gus Livingston in Buntline’s *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* is shown “laying back on a sofa, with a glass of hot whiskey punch in one hand, and one of Paul de Kock’s books in the other, seeming to be enjoying both,” clearly drawing the link some reformers saw between Buntline’s own books, along with de Kock’s, and drinking.⁸⁰ Reading cheap fiction was also shown as a method (usually ineffective) for distracting oneself from larger cares or the demands of work. A young woman in *Herbert Tracy; or the Trials of Mercantile Life* takes sick when she learns that her true love has married her cousin, and “she tried to drown reflection in the perusal of exciting works of fiction....”⁸¹ Timothy Shay Arthur’s *Confessions of a Housekeeper* describes the dangers posed by having an “overly literary cook”; one such cook was so absorbed in reading “brown covered pamphlet novels” like *The Mysteries of Paris* that she frequently burned dishes. As Arthur’s narrator, Mrs. Smith, said on discovering the cook thus distracted while the lemon pudding for a party that afternoon burned: “I never saw anyone more entirely absorbed in a book.”⁸²

If reading sensational novels offered this form of distraction, it could also lead to “distraction” in the nineteenth-century sense of the word: madness. One daughter of a rich hardware merchant in Mrs. Anna Ritchie’s *The Fortune Hunter ... A Novel of New York Society* has become, through “an excessive and unrestrained indulgence in novel-reading,” “intoxicated with romance, and requires this stimulus as much as an inebriate does his daily dram.” She

⁷⁹ Thomas Butler Gunn, *The Physiology of New York Boarding-Houses* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1857), 61-2.

⁸⁰ Buntline, *Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, 52.

⁸¹ *Herbert Tracy; or the Trials of Mercantile Life, and the Morality of Trade* (New York: John C. Riker, 1851), 135.

⁸² Timothy Shay Arthur, *Confessions of a Housekeeper*, by Mrs. John Smith (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1852), 24, 26.

eventually becomes so delusional that she convinces herself that a young man, who is really in love with her sister, is in love with her, and when matters do not follow the novelistic narrative she has formulated in her head she literally goes insane.⁸³

Printed Aphrodisiacs

However often they depicted readers reading cheap fiction for distraction, city-mysteries much more frequently showed readers reading for somatic pleasure, often to titillating effect, appealing to the “amorous reader” George Thompson addressed in *Jack Harold*, instead of the “gentle reader” of sentimental fiction. The elderly Mrs. Monk mentioned previously, who kept her racy French novel hidden in her Bible, was clearly aroused by her reading, as “the old lady’s smiling countenance and heightened color announced the pleasure which she derived from the perusal of those voluptuous pages....”⁸⁴ Thompson was the master of such descriptions of the effects of reading sensational fiction, and clearly took similar pleasure himself in writing them. In *The Road to Ruin*, he offers his readers very specific instructions on how to read similar books, although it is unfortunately impossible to know how many followed it. Jack Harold, the burglar hero of a series of Thompson’s novels, discovers the beautiful young Mary sitting in the parlor, engrossed in the dashing and amorous exploits outlined in *The Adventures of the Chevalier De Faublas*. While reading, she evidently became too warm in her men’s clothes (Mary had been cross-dressing), and so put on a gauzy ballet costume that had conveniently been left in the house by a troupe of actors. Thompson describes her reader’s response thus:

⁸³ Mrs. Anna Cora Mowatt Ritchie, *The Fortune Hunter; or, The Adventures of a Man About Town. A Novel of New York Society* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1848), 9, 57.

⁸⁴ Thompson, *Dashington*, 49.

... and the newly-fallen snow is not of a more dazzling whiteness, than were those two large and exquisitely moulded globes, which rose and fell in the excitement produced by the perusal of the fascinating pages of 'Faublas.' The admirably told adventures of the gay Chevalier—so graphic and particularly attractive to an amorous and passionate girl like her—had dyed her lovely cheeks with a rich glow, and imparted a sparkling fire to her splendid eyes, that greatly enhanced her wondrous beauty.⁸⁵

Following this discovery, Jack and Mary spend the rest of the day acting out several choice episodes from the book, thus offering Thompson's readers at least one model of how to read sensational novels.

The utility of cheap literature as a tool for sexual arousal is one of the most consistently emphasized aspects of reading in city-mysteries novels, regardless of how that sexual arousal is valued. Thompson offered a more conventional take on this phenomenon in *Jack Harold*, in a chapter entitled "The Millionaire and the Belle of Broadway at Home. The latter indulging in reading Books of a doubtful Reputation. A spoilt Child inevitably." Emeline Searsmont, the belle in question, reads racy books in the original French, which "perverts" her mind and renders her easy prey for seducers and libertines.⁸⁶ More typical of Thompson, however, is a scene in *The Ladies' Garter; or, The Platonic Marriage*, in which the beautiful young wife has been locked in the attic by her elderly husband, where she "beguiled my time by reading several delicious (but forbidden) French novels, by a certain free-and-easy author whose name cannot with strict propriety be pronounced by female lips," leading to all manner of sexual fantasies about robust young husbands.⁸⁷ This sexual response to reading is especially associated in city-

⁸⁵ George Thompson, *The Road to Ruin: or, The Felon's Doom*, by Greenhorn (Boston: William Berry & Co., 1851), 48.

⁸⁶ George Thompson, *Jack Harold*, 75.

⁸⁷ George Thompson, *The Ladies' Garter; or, The Platonic Marriage*, by Greenhorn (New York: Howland & Co., 185?), 14.

mysteries novels with women who are not sexually satisfied, either because they are widows or because their husbands are too old.⁸⁸

In Thomas Low Nichols' *Ellen Ramsay*, Edward Freeman, the young protagonist, is raised in a home where his mother dominates, and where she "supplied him with books of a character his father did not always approve." At age 15, Edward finds himself reading a volume of Byron borrowed from the library of the attractive young wife of an elderly deacon, Mr. Simpson. While reading, Mrs. Simpson lays her hand on his arm and tells him that he looks like Don Juan; under Byron's spell, "His passions were springing up, warmer and stronger, but so tender, that the least touch alarmed them."⁸⁹ In his next novel, *The Lady in Black*, Nichols made additional reference to women and sensational reading, claiming that they especially enjoyed Paul de Kock and Maria Monk.

In *Mary Ann Temple*, which was published under de Kock's name but was almost certainly by an American author, given its Boston setting, the use of sensational reading for sexual pleasure is located specifically in the urban context. A young woman borrows a book of sexually explicit illustrations from a friend, "whose opportunities for the study of comparative anatomy had been much more extensive" than hers had been. Walking home from her work as a milliner's apprentice, the girl comes to a corner of Dock Square in Boston, where young men

⁸⁸ The sexual inadequacy of older husbands was a particular fixation of Thompson's; many of his novels involve plots of beautiful young women married to rich old men who can only stimulate their wives' sexual appetites without satisfying them. In a marvelous scene in *City Crimes*, Thompson connects the efforts made by older men to sexually rejuvenate themselves to reading. Mr. Hedge, the elderly husband of Julia Sydney, is described in his lavish library, surrounded by books while reclining in a bathtub full of wine: "Such luxurious bathing is often resorted to by wealthy and superannuated gentlemen, who desire to infuse into their feeble limbs a degree of youthful activity and strength, which temporarily enables them to accomplish gallantries under the banner of Venus, of which they are ordinarily incapable" (263).

⁸⁹ Nichols, *Ellen Ramsay*, 7, 9. Nichols was bizarrely (and clumsily) graphic in this, his first novel. Things progress between Edward and Mrs. Simpson, until he "sat down in her petticoat, which was so white that it seemed a pity to soil that as well. But ladies don't mind soiling their undergarments so much" (10). In his next novel, Nichols referred to reviews of *Ellen Ramsay* that criticized it for not being "nice."

gathered to ogle passing women; trying to ignore them, she focuses on her book, but a plate of a couple having intercourse blows out and lands on the sidewalk in front of the loafers, two of whom then follow her. She manages to elude them, but cannot escape the erotic dreams that her evening reading produces.⁹⁰ Thompson, again in *City Crimes*, anthropomorphized the corrupt Reverend Sinclair's library to the extent that his books seem to be enjoying for themselves some of the physical pleasures that they describe: "On the mantle-piece are books, thrown in a confused pile; the collection embraces all sorts—Watts' hymn book reposes at the side of the 'Frisky Songsters,' the Pilgrim's Progress plays hide-and-seek with the last novel of Paul de Kock; while 'Women of Noted Piety' are in close companionship with the 'Voluptuous Turk.'" ⁹¹

This model of reading as producing physical—and specifically sexual—pleasure often mingled with the other model of reading discussed above, that of reading for instruction, of reading doing "cultural work." Rather than existing purely to produce pleasure, popular fiction is presented in these novels as being able to instruct readers in many ways, good and bad. In *The Star of the Fallen*, a young girl who finds herself inveigled into a genteel brothel run by a Mrs. Alhurst is given a set of books "with which to employ her idle hours." The titles are not specified, but their genre can be surmised, since the first page she reads causes "the blush to mantle to her cheeks," and the "story appeared to her the history of her own circumstances and situation." She cannot stop reading the books, "could not resist the malign, yet pleasing influence that enticed her onward," but she is not only receiving physical pleasure—"the blush"—from reading; she is also "receiving impressions upon her plastic heart, that time would

⁹⁰ Charles Paul de Kock, *Mary Ann Temple. Being an Authentic and Romantic History of an Amorous and Lively Girl* (New York: n.p., n.d.), 8–9.

⁹¹ Thompson, *City Crimes*, 261.

never be able to obliterate.”⁹² Unwittingly, she is being instructed. Poor Frances is not a quick study, however, since halfway through the novel, after several months, she is still living at Mrs. Alhurst’s yet is unaware that she is living in a whorehouse. She admits to a friend that “somehow ... I never feel at ease in the society of the ladies that I meet at the table of our kind hostess,” but is well aware that the problem is “my own lack of knowledge, and my entire ignorance of fashionable life.”⁹³ In other words, if she read more of these novels, she’d be fine.

City-mysteries themselves offered instruction in such matters. In *Ellen Merton, The Belle of Lowell*, Charles Howard, a young Lowell rake, offers step-by-step instructions on how to gradually seduce a young woman, beginning with petting on the parlor sofa and culminating in a philosophical discourse (based on Emerson!) in which he persuades her to surrender her virginity to him.⁹⁴ Such instruction was not always sexual in nature; in *Violet, a Child of the City*, a young street urchin is taken in by a burglar, Timothy Flint, who gives him “the rudiments of an education—even bringing you so far in history as the life of ‘Jack Shephard,’ and the ‘Adventures of Murrell, the Land Pirate’” Such instruction in the ways of the street from the pages of sensational fiction, along with trips to the Chatham Theatre to see Mose, the Bowery B’hooy, is equated with more straightforward training in picking pockets.⁹⁵

⁹² Newton Mallory Curtis, *The Star of the Fallen* (New York: Williams Brothers, 1848), 11.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁹⁴ *Ellen Merton, The Belle of Lowell: or, the Confessions of the “G.F.K” Club* (Boston: Brainard & Co., 1844), 18.

⁹⁵ Robert Greeley, *Violet, the Child of the City: A Story of New York Life* (New York: Bunce and Brother, 1854), 109–10.

The Instructive Novel

Offering instruction in how to be a better prostitute or street thief was not the only “cultural work” that city-mysteries fiction performed, however. These novels, both through depictions of how various urban criminals practiced their craft and through their explanations of the urban scene more generally, offered a great deal of information about city life that could have been of use to antebellum readers. Even if a reader of a city-mystery never visited a large city, if he felt himself to “know” something about city life—however incorrect, and regardless of whether the knowledge was ever used—the novel can be said to have done “cultural work.” If a reader was persuaded *not* to move to a city because of what she read in the pages of city-mysteries fiction, the novels most definitely can be said to have performed work. As George Foster wrote in a chapter about city “intelligence offices” in *New York in Slices*, he did not have “the slightest intention of designating individuals—that is the duty of the authorities, not the press. Our only purpose is to characterize and expose the system.”⁹⁶ Writing for a middle-class audience that would have had little reason to worry about the names of specific “intelligence offices” (essentially employment agencies) that were actually fronts for brothels, Foster severs the linkage of cultural work to usefulness; exposing the system itself, rather than giving specifically useful information, is work enough.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ George Foster, *New York in Slices: by an Experienced Carver* (New York: William H. Graham, 1849), 40.

⁹⁷ In this regard, I would place less emphasis on the “productivity” that is imputed to a given reading experience in David Stewart’s analysis of leisure reading, and instead focus on what, for lack of a more elegant term, I would call “perceived use value.” That is, the information contained in a novel did not actually have to be useful to readers in order for it to do cultural work; they simply had to perceive that it was useful. Thus the enjoyment of a text does not depend so much upon actual “productive” work coming from the reading experience as on the supposition that something has been gained.

The tremendous amount of specific detail about urban environments cannot help but have conveyed some information to residents of particular cities on where to go (or not), what to wear (or not), how to act (or not), and what to read (or not).⁹⁸ The author of *Luke Lovell*, a short novel about a young man from Maine and his life in Boston, repeated the frequent statement made by authors of city-mysteries about how they hoped their works would be received: “These traps and snares are set all over the city, and the history of Luke may teach other young men how to avoid them. If it does, this story will not have been written in vain.”⁹⁹

This idea, that novels *could* have instructive value, but that that value could be obscured by (or exist simultaneously with) their exciting content, was widespread, and seems to me to best capture the way in which antebellum readers may have read city-mysteries. Lippard’s biographer claimed that Lippard’s mission was to “attack social wrongs”—in short, to do cultural work—but that, in doing so, he had to “drag away purple garments and expose to our shivering gaze the rottenness of vice—to take tyranny by the throat and strangle it to death”—that is, do his cultural work in the most titillating, erotic, affective way possible. I would argue, however, that affective responses such as terror or sexual arousal are not the only forms of “pleasure” that sensational urban fiction offered its readers. In addition to these somatic pleasures, at least for some readers, was added the intellectual pleasure of mastery—in short, they made instruction pleasurable. As one British reader of nineteenth-century popular fiction later wrote of his youthful reading, “To my mind, the most fascinating part of the old stories was the fact that they

⁹⁸ This newly-inscribed body of knowledge about city life was not confined to sensational fiction; David Henkin, in chapter three of *City Reading*, perceptively notes how the rise of commercial signage helped to map the geography of New York and to “decode or demystify urban spaces that might otherwise have appeared strange or ominous” (51).

⁹⁹ *Luke Lovell, the Widow’s Son; or, the Adventures of a Young Gentleman from the State of Maine, Who Went to Seek His Fortune in Boston* (Boston: for sale by H. B. Skinner, 1848), 25.

often treated of places you knew ... I can remember first reading the story of ‘Jack Sheppard’ and spending much spare time in exploring Wych-Street, and Clare Market....”¹⁰⁰

Even though the city in question here is London instead of New York, I would argue that the experience of reading cheap urban fiction, and the pleasure derived from it, would not have been so different in the U.S. Many city-mysteries did not so much impart knowledge about city life (although they certainly did that) as they offered their readers a chance to figure out what took place where and who was who; in solving that puzzle, and thus in demonstrating one’s “insider” status in city life, lay much of the pleasure of the novels.¹⁰¹ Such “navigational” advice did not mean that the reading experience itself would not be pleasurable—the pleasures of the body and of the mind could be evoked by the same text. As George Thompson wrote in his the conclusion to *City Crimes*, “if the foregoing pages have in the least degree contributed to the reader’s entertainment, or initiated him into any mystery of CITY CRIMES heretofore unknown ... then is the author amply repaid for his time and toil,” indicating the expectation that the same text could be expected to both amuse and instruct.¹⁰²

Evidence of the Antebellum Reading Experience

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in James, *Fiction for the Working Man*, 164.

¹⁰¹ As David Stewart has noted, the “lower, the meaner, the more noxious the criminal life infecting the city streets, the greater the thrill in navigating them,” both in reading and in every day life (Stewart, “Cultural Work, City Crime,” 692). I would not argue, as Stuart Blumin does of George Foster, that “by explaining the realities that lie beneath the deceptive appearances of the city and its people, Foster offers the reader the solution of expertise”(53). It is the *illusion* of expertise that such books offered, along with the pleasure of applying whatever version of urban expertise any particular book was selling to particular urban conditions and testing its explanatory power.

¹⁰² Thompson, *City Crimes*, 309-10. It should be noted, however, that Ronald and Mary Zboray, in their extensive research into the responses of antebellum New England readers, have found that, “Readers also reacted positively to texts they deemed useful or instructive, and necessarily accurate,” stating that “accuracy” was a particular desideratum of any text. (Ronald Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, “Have You Read...?,” 153.)

An examination of the minimal evidence of the reading experiences of actual antebellum readers, in the form of marginalia existing in many copies of existing city-mysteries in archives around the country, offers some glimpses of how antebellum readers may have read these sensational, but ephemeral, novels. Despite the authoritarian perspective that would render reading as the process of receiving a text “from someone else without putting one’s mark on it,” many antebellum readers did put their own physical marks on the texts they read, if only to write their name on the cover.¹⁰³ However, gaining insight into the reading experiences of readers in the past is necessarily the most speculative aspect of book history, especially for the experience of reading popular novels such as city-mysteries. An analysis based on marginalia, which are notoriously unreliable and on which relatively little research has been done, is by definition speculative, although not necessarily more so than any other mode of studying the history of reading.¹⁰⁴ While marginalia constitute proof that an actual person read an actual book, without witnessing the marks being made, it is impossible to know who made them, or when.

¹⁰³ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 169.

¹⁰⁴ By far the most thorough treatment of marginalia is H. J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). Her Chapter 8 is especially provocative concerning the role marginalia can play in the history of reading. Also of use are Anthony Grafton, “Is the History of Reading a Marginal Enterprise? Guillaume Bude and His Books,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 91:2 (June 1997); Roger Stoddard, *Marks in Books, Illustrated and Explained* (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Library, 1985); and D. C. Greetham, ed., *The Margins of the Text* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997). As is the case with virtually all studies of marginalia, however, these sources focus primarily on marginalia left by public figures, or at least by people who can be identified, and on periods prior to 1800. Jackson’s privileging of the discursive note as “real” marginalia, over underlining or other more rudimentary marks of emphasis, tilts the balance of what is studied, since very few “ordinary” readers write in their books at all, much less write lengthy prose comments in the margins.

Jonathan Rose, among others, has reacted against what he calls the “receptive fallacy,” and suggests that we rely on things such as library records, trade statistics, and autobiographies to discover how “ordinary” readers actually read. But such sources are much more distant representations of reading, if they are in fact representations of reading at all. How do researchers who use library records know that people read the books they checked out, or those who use probate records, that people read the books on their shelves? This points to what Simon Eliot has described as “the first and greatest caveat in the history of reading: to own, buy, borrow or steal a book is no proof of wishing to read it, let alone having read it.” Diaries, that most self-conscious of literary forms, are (I would argue) no more reliable in this regard.

Another caveat is in order regarding the quasi-mystical category of the “real reader.” A great deal of emphasis is placed in the history of reading on finding “real” readers—readers to whom a name, or an age, or an address, or some other scrap of identifying information can be attached. But for the vast majority of antebellum readers, who were and who remain undistinguished and largely unknown to history, how truly useful is such information? On the flyleaf of one copy of Mrs. Ann Stephens’ *High Life in New York* is written, in a flowing, feminine hand, “Mrs. F. M. Nichols, #634 Tremont St., Boston, Mass.” But, even were a researcher to pore through census and tax records and find out how old Mrs. Nichols was and what Mr. Nichols did for a living and how many children she had, what do we actually know about how she read *High Life in New York*?¹⁰⁵ Do we even know that she read it? How does knowing her address make her any more “real”?

The one exception to the general lack of responses to city-mysteries fiction from individuals to whom names can be attached is George Lippard, whose papers contain at least one fan letter, although it is from the daughter of his friend Sumner Lincoln Fairfield, the poet, who says she has read *Quaker City* “with much pleasure,” admits to having seen his portrait on display in Surrey’s Gallery, advises Lippard to get a copy of her sister’s novel “Senerra or the History of a Portrait,” and refers to Lippard’s enthusiastic critics as “hell’s vilest devils.”¹⁰⁶ Lippard was also the recipient of a remarkable example of reader-response, in the form of a letter from a G. W. Hanson of Van Buren, Arkansas, dated May 6, 1853, in which Mr. Hanson

Jonathan Rose, “How Historians Study Reader Response; or, What Did Jo Think of *Bleak House*?” in *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and the Circulation of Books*, edited by John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 195; Simon Eliot, Background essay for the Reading Experience Database, at www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/redback.htm

¹⁰⁵ This copy is in the collection of the American Antiquarian Society.

¹⁰⁶ Letter from Evelyn B. Fairfield to George Lippard, dated November 5, 1852. In Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Small Collection, George Lippard folder.

informed Lippard that he had written a book-length sequel to Lippard's *Nazarene*, and that "I have been offered more than satisfactory pecuniary inducements to do so by publishers in Cincinnati, and St. Louis.... Please write to inform me if you would consider it any infringement upon your copyright if I made use of the same names in the second that you have in the first volume?"¹⁰⁷ These two examples of otherwise unknown antebellum readers offering detailed responses to city-mysteries fiction are noteworthy in their own right, but also for their exceptional status. The fact that in the case of George Lippard, arguably the most successful and best-known American author of city-mysteries, we have only these two responses indicates that to privilege information from "real" readers of sensational urban fiction is to confront the difficulty of knowing anything about how they were read.

I would argue that the anonymity of the marginalia I have studied, along with the frequency with which they appear, do combine to create a picture of the role sensational urban fiction played in the lives of some, if not all, antebellum readers. Far from extrapolating from an individual reading diary conclusions about how readers in a given period read, a study of a wide range of marginal annotations can help create a picture of what people thought of these cheap books, how they used them, and how they read them.

Much of the marginalia I have found in city-mysteries novels falls into the category of indications of the everyday status of reading popular fiction, rendering an image of an experience more akin to reading the newspaper than to reading a "literary" novel. Several novels I have

¹⁰⁷ Lippard did, in fact, consider it an infringement upon his copyright. This letter is quoted at Ch. 17, p. 3 of Joseph Jackson's unpublished manuscript, "George Lippard, Poet of the Proletariat," in Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Joseph Jackson Collection.

seen were clearly used simply as paper on which to practice writing, including signatures.¹⁰⁸ The Huntington Library's copy of George Thompson's *The Demon of Gold* has written in juvenile penciled script on the back of an engraving, "The Demon of Gold or the Miser's Daughter," and at the bottom of the last page "the end of the Miser Daughter." (Also written, in the same script, on the title page is the wonderfully cryptic "John Mayo is a Spiritualist/To the back bone.") In addition to offering a place to practice writing (most often of names) and spelling, many of these novels were used to do arithmetic as well; one reader used page 10 of the copy of Benjamin Barker's *Clarilda; or the Female Pickpocket* now in the Huntington to add small sums of money.¹⁰⁹ A copy of Charles Barrington's *Nancy Waterman* in the collection of the American Antiquarian Society features a great deal of arithmetic on the inside of the front cover and on the title page, on which is also written "henry and tom"; inside the front cover, in the midst of the math, is written "5 hogs." On the last page of the Antiquarian Society's copy of *The Mysteries of Manchester*, one reader wrote, perhaps to a classmate, "L? is your health to day well?" The answer must have been in the negative, since underneath the question is the exclamation "Oh! Dear."

¹⁰⁸ According to Jackson, this is one of the most common forms of marginalia, especially for children. Jackson's contention that such marginalia is evidence that it was left by "immature" readers "with little experience of books who have not yet learned the customary use of different areas for annotation" is indicative of the elite nature of the texts which she examined for her study (*Marginalia*, 20). While some marginalia—such as practiced handwriting—indicates youthful readers, I would argue that most writing in books that are this cheap and ephemeral indicates a different attitude on the part of readers toward a certain kind of book.

¹⁰⁹ This tendency to practice writing in the margins is evidently one of quite long standing; Michael Camille quotes Richard de Bury's *Philobiblon*, written in 1345: "But the handling of books is specially to be forbidden to those shameless youths, who, as soon as they have learned to form the shapes of letters, straightaway, if they have the opportunity, become unhappy commentators, and wherever they find an extra margin about the text, furnish it with monstrous alphabets...." Camille goes on to note, since in the medieval period the pen was often a euphemism for the penis and writing had been allegorized as intercourse, that "the shameful youths described in the epigraph were doing more than merely doodling; they were masturbating in the margins," pointing out the historical continuity of anxieties linking young men's reading and masturbation. (Camille, "Glossing the Flesh: Scopophilia and the Margins of the Medieval Book," in Greetham, ed., *Margins of the Text*, 245.)

Such comments seem to run against Jackson's claim that marginalia "must be responsive. They do not stand on their own, but are permanently attached to the text that stimulated them; they are consequently restricted in their range of reference."¹¹⁰ While such inscriptions in books may not meet Jackson's standard for marginalia of discursive, responsive notes, they nevertheless do tell us something about how these readers lived with these books. The very everydayness of experience that such manuscript evidence points to indicates that popular cheap reading such as city-mysteries was seen as a different sort of reading from reading serious literary fiction, or reading the Bible.

Along with evidence of the everyday status of popular reading, much of the marginalia I have found in these novels underscores their sensational, affective appeal for readers. Most often this takes the form of underlining or circling especially racy or explicit passages. In one copy of Henri Foster's *Ellen Grafton; or the Den of Crime*, the description of the unfaithful wife of a minister as being "of that voluptuous beauty which charms and ensnares the soul. Those seductive forms and winning glances, that often lead us into trouble" is underlined.¹¹¹ Later in the same novel, the sentence, "Her eyes were soft and languishingly blue, and shaded by long silken lashes" is left alone; but the sentence directly following, "She was clad in a rich silk night-robe, open in front, which left the treasures of her snowy bosom open to the beholder's view" is underlined, perhaps making that particular reader's interests all too clear.¹¹² Just to reassure later scholars that he or she did not have a one track mind, even later in the novel, the reader treated a sentence thus: "'I am satisfied,' said he, as he sprang forward and bathed his right hand in the

¹¹⁰ Jackson, *Marginalia*, 75.

¹¹¹ Henri Foster, *Ellen Grafton. or The Den of Crime: A Romance of Secret Life in the Empire City* (Boston: Star Spangled Banner Office, 1850), 17. This copy is in the collection of the American Antiquarian Society.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 33.

crimson stream.”¹¹³ Of course, it is impossible to tell if these passages were underlined by an overheated adolescent or by a disapproving parent who somehow got hold of the book, but the pattern is consistent either way—the most viscerally stimulating passages are underlined.

Other works that have been customized by their readers in such a fashion include the Antiquarian Society’s copy of George Thompson’s *The Mysteries of Bond-Street*, which features many racy passages that have been underlined, checked, or marked with stars. In the AAS’s copy of *Julia King; or the Follies of My Life*, marginalia exist from a reader who preferred parentheses as the mode of highlighting salacious fragments of text. Early in the novel, the phrase “pillow her head upon her swelling bosom” is highlighted with parentheses, and a later passage describing female masturbation is rendered as follows: “(I had habituated myself to the secret pleasure his temerity had made me acquainted with), but in its most exhilarated moments I failed to derive any satisfactory enjoyment.”¹¹⁴

If many readers responded affectively in the margins of city-mysteries to their sensational content, other readers’ marginalia indicates that some readers read these novels as texts that helped explain city life. Many readers were highly attentive to what was going on in these novels, however cheap. In the Huntington Library’s copy of *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco*, an incredibly sloppily-written narrative that makes very little sense, one reader crossed out an incorrect reference to a character and wrote in the correct name.¹¹⁵ The juvenile reader of the copy of Thompson’s *The Demon of Gold* now in the Huntington had sufficiently

¹¹³ Ibid., 66.

¹¹⁴ *Julia King, or the Follies of My Life* (New York: William Berry, 1850), 8, 18.

¹¹⁵ *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco*, by a Californian (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1853), 153. Jackson found much more marginalia in non-fiction and persuasive works than she did in works of fiction, and focuses particularly on marginalia that correct or disagree with an author. This is one of the few examples I have found in fiction that fit her criteria.

internalized the temperance message to pencil “bad rum” in the margin next to a description of two old women getting violently drunk (82). On the title page of the Antiquarian Society’s copy of *The Mysteries of Worcester; or Charley Temple and His First Glass of Liquor*, one reader wrote “this is a capital story,” and above the subtitle, “A Temperance Tale,” added, “exceedingly beautiful.” Interestingly, such moralistic marginalia also appeared in works attacking city-mysteries as well; in the New York Public Library’s copy of Beecher’s *Lectures to Young Men*, a reader wrote in pencil “strong language” next to one of Beecher’s more inflamed rhetorical flights.¹¹⁶

More important, though, for the status of city-mysteries as guides to urban life, and central to my argument that the ability to identify the real-life versions of the characters constituted a kind of reading pleasure of its own, is the frequency with which readers annotated their copies of books to show their mastery of the urban scene.¹¹⁷ As Jackson notes, “When satires were published with fictional names or blanks to disguise living subjects, readers rushed to fill them in. ... All narratives in which names have had to be concealed—satires, secret histories, romans à clef, allegories—invite knowing readers to reveal them,” and it is precisely in the effort to appear knowing that many antebellum readers responded to city-mysteries texts.¹¹⁸

The AAS’s copy of Osgood Bradbury’s *Julia Bicknell*, which was based on a Boston murder, has

¹¹⁶ Beecher, *Lectures to Young Men*, 133.

¹¹⁷ According to the Zborays’ study of the Childs’ reading diary, the interaction of everyday events and surroundings with the reading experience was crucial to its enjoyment: “The Childs read less often for the sake of reading (i.e., because they valued the experience for its own virtues) than to reflect, reinforce, or enhance other experiences. ... This embeddedness in everyday life—and not its pull into imaginative flights or escapist reveries—gave the Childs’ reading, and that of other antebellum Americans, its peculiar power.” (Ronald Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, “Reading and Everyday Life in Antebellum Boston: The Diary of Daniel F. and Mary D. Child,” *Libraries and Culture* 32:3 (Summer 1997): 304.

¹¹⁸ Jackson, *Marginalia*, 57, 76. Jackson notes that the practice of filling in names was a “common practice, a kind of parlor-game, throughout the long eighteenth century,” which, as the golden age of satire, offered plentiful source material (57). She claims that Alexander Pope did just this with his volume of racy poems written by the Earl of Rochester.

the names of the real-life *dramatis personae* written next to their names in the text (23). AAS's copy of Bradbury's *The Modern Othello*, which was based on the Edwin Forrest divorce case, has the names of James Gordon Bennett and Horace Greeley penciled in next to the names of their thinly-disguised fictional counterparts, "Jennet" and "Orris Freely" (23). Typically, city-mysteries authors were coy about giving an exact date for the setting of their tales; Justin Grammont, in his *Mysteries of Manchester*, begins the book with the line, "It was early in the spring of 184-." Some reader, perhaps Mrs. Eunice W. Post of East Lebanon, whose name is on the cover, has helpfully filled in the space for the missing digit with a "4," demonstrating her familiarity with the real events alluded to in the narrative.

Perhaps most notable in this regard is the AAS's copy *The Green Family; or, The Veil Removed*, a novel set in Hartford that has been mentioned above. According to a note at the back, the book was written by a committee of seven young men who lived in the same boarding house, and they made quite liberal references to many of their contemporary townspeople. The "Climax" bowling alley is identified as being the bowling saloon of "Hurlburt & Weeks." Most helpfully, numerous names are underlined throughout the novel, both first and last, with either different or supplementary names written next to them in the margins. With the added or corrected names, most of the figures in the book can be identified in the Hartford directory from 1849. Clearly, some reader, at some point, most likely for their own satisfaction, set about showing how privy *they* were to the hidden life of Hartford by connecting his or her neighbors with the characters in the book. The frequency with which authors of other city-mysteries alluded to similar actions on the part of readers indicates that this intellectual pleasure of solving

the puzzle of who was who in the novels was a significant element of how antebellum readers read them.¹¹⁹

The limited textual evidence indicates that antebellum readers had it both ways, that no reading was ever strictly utilitarian or strictly pleasurable. As is the case with much recreational reading today, such as westerns or historical romances, whose authors often strive for historical accuracy, the function of reading as recreation does not imply that no information is being conveyed. It is true that a purely utilitarian explanation of such reading fails to explain the relish with which readers underlined sexy passages, and it is equally true that an explanation based solely in the affective pleasure of reading fails to explain the extent to which readers filled in facts from the urban environment about which the authors were coy. An age whose urban literature included guidebooks to brothels in at least two American cities (Philadelphia and New York) clearly did not see the distinction between explication of urban space and somatic pleasure as absolute. As Amory Dwight Mayo noted, antebellum readers were characterized by an emotional “capacity of miscellaneous enthusiasm which leaves our metropolitan mind the victim to any powerful excitement from the horrors of a Burdell tragedy, or the fervors of a Great Awakening...,” yet he saw this “vulgar” tendency as representing the effort of the people to “*create a society and art expressive of their existence.*”¹²⁰ It is this concern with the “vulgar,” the “people,” or the “common reader,” that Jonathan Rose states distinguishes the “history of

¹¹⁹ For instance, Charles Astor Bristed, in a letter to Nathaniel Parker Willis printed in Bristed’s *The Upper Ten Thousand: Sketches of American Society* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1852), wrote regarding the various characters in the book that, “should one of your ‘country readers,’ anxious to ‘put the right names to them,’ address—not *one*, but *five* or *six*—of his ‘town correspondents,’” that reader would be given different answers from everyone (10). Clearly authors knew that readers, both in town and in the country, would be trying to figure out which real-life people were the basis for certain characters.

¹²⁰ Mayo, Amory Dwight, *Symbols of the Capital; or, Civilization in New York*, New York: Thatcher and Hutchinson, 1859, 229. Emphasis in original.

audiences” from literary-critical “reception history.”¹²¹ But how did authors of city-mysteries conceive of the “vulgar,” that is, how is class represented and reproduced in these novels? This is the question to which we shall turn in the next chapter.

¹²¹ Jonathan Rose, “Rereading the English Common Reader: A Preface to the History of Audiences,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53 (1992), 51.

Chapter Seven

The Mysteries and Miseries of Capital and Labor

*The best intelligence one could give
Would be to tell HOW SOME MEN LIVE,
For really now (we would be serious)
Of all things this is most mysterious”*

—*The Mysteries of Charleston*, by Eugene Sue, Jr.¹

In 1852, the Harvard professor Charles Eliot Norton wrote that, “the distinguishing characteristic of the literature of the present age is the attention which it bestows to that portion of society which is generally called ‘the lower classes.’ ... From the folio report to the novel, the essay, and the poem, the claims of labor and the laborer are set forth with various power, but with a single object.”² While Norton likely did not have city-mysteries fiction in mind, there were few genres of antebellum fiction that were more closely associated with the “lower classes” and their “miseries.”

Yet city-mysteries novels did not limit their attention to the poor, just as they did not focus exclusively on urban “miseries,” and in fact offered a depiction of the full spectrum of the urban classes, leaving the minute depiction of the woes of urban poverty to middle-class reformers like George Foster and James Dabney McCabe. Authors of these novels were keenly aware of the changing class dynamics in America’s cities, spurred by an upward distribution of wealth, waves of foreign immigration, changes in traditional structures of labor in the trades, and the proliferation of nonmanual forms of

¹ *The Mysteries of Charleston*, by Eugene Sue, Jr. (Charleston: Printed at the Typographical Repository Down Town, 1846), 8.

² Quoted in Nicholas K. Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 18.

work. These men and women had grown up in the age of the market and transportation revolutions; they had seen wage labor moved primarily out of the home, and had experienced the attendant changes in family structure. In short, they lived during a period when the rules of the marketplace were taking on added significance in daily life, and they had to negotiate that encounter.

Despite the class flexibility of these narratives, however, there is little question that, as cultural products, city-mysteries novels represented a prime example of the class diversification of the cultural sphere in nineteenth-century America, which would have been one of the many forms of possibility (instead of misery) that the antebellum city offered. Alexander Saxton has written that the class-charged electoral politics of the antebellum era were “only part of a wider upsurge that challenged and frequently overturned elite dominance in the cultural media. Cultural insurgency furnished the context of egalitarian politics.”³ Cities in city-mysteries novels are presented as the primary arena for this redefinition of class in America as well as the main site of extreme class mobility, both downward and upward. In addition, the proximity to others that cities enforced on their residents made the markers of class that much more evident, providing an incentive for ostentation in order to make class distinctions more clear. E. H. Chapin described cities as places where “everybody says that all men are equal, and everybody is afraid they will be.”⁴ The representation of the urban class structure in city-mysteries fiction makes clear that the noisy populist insistence that all men are equal was

³ Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990), 95.

⁴ Rev. Edwin Hubbell Chapin, *Humanity in the City* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1854), 71.

just as much a response to an increasingly stratified society as it was a spur to that stratification.

Instead of revealing some quantitative criteria for class membership of the sort that social historians seek out, popular urban narratives shaped thinking about class on a less explicit level, helping to set expectations and offering information that would help readers place both themselves and their neighbors within the socioeconomic structure of America's cities. As was discussed in the previous chapter, we must keep in mind that these readers (and these authors) were not overwhelmingly from one particular social group, and that the class messages contained in these novels would have been interpreted differently by different readers depending upon (among many other factors) their class.⁵ More to the point, it is impossible to base any discussion of class in antebellum America on purely economic terms—cultural, ethnic, religious, and moral factors must also be taken into account. John Denison Vose wrote in *Seven Nights in Gotham*, “see what a difference exists between Mr. Capital and Mr. Labor—between Miss Virtue and Miss Vice,” implying that, if the categories of class and morality were not identical, they were at least related.⁶ City-mysteries novels helped reflect the way that class was experienced

⁵ As Roger Chartier, notes, “A sociology implying that the classification of social groups corresponds strictly to a classification of cultural products or practices can no longer be accepted uncritically.” Chartier, *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, and Audiences from Codex to Computer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 87.

⁶ John Denison Vose, Esq., *Seven Nights in Gotham* (New York: Bunnell & Price, 1852), 42. While I would not go as far as Wyn Kelley, who writes that “the fictional construction of urban form worked to solve the problem of class struggle over space in New York,” since it is not at all clear that that problem has ever been solved, the fictional construction in these novels of cities as landscapes increasingly inscribed by evidence of class distinctions makes them valuable examples of the range of antebellum texts that helped explain the changing and highly fluid class structure of the nation. Wyn Kelley, *Melville's City: Literary and Urban Form in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 16.

in everyday urban life, or, perhaps more importantly, the way that people imagined they would experience it.

Urban Class Mixing

Antebellum cities saw a level of class mixing that was unprecedented in American history; never before had such large numbers of people from such diverse stations in life mingled so promiscuously.⁷ Theaters, stores, and above all streets brought together citizens from the full range of the urban class spectrum, yet the intermingling often took place merely at the spatial level. As one city-mystery set in Boston described the passage of rich and poor women down Washington Street, “Their feet pressed the same pavement, and their garments swept the same walks, and yet they had no sympathy with each other. They were of different caste....”⁸ The proximity of those of “different caste” was dangerous, both because it forced the rich into contact on some sort of equal footing with those who they would have preferred to avoid and because it exposed the “have-nots” to the benefits of being one of the “haves,” resulting in either envy or misery. As Junius Henry Browne put it, the “inequality of Fortune” made it hard for the poor to

⁷ The mixing of people from different classes was thought to be one of the main things that made a settlement a city. While San Francisco was in this, as in all things, an extreme example, the social fluidity of the city, which saw actors and Bowery ruffians socialize with merchants and lawyers, was thought to be one of its most remarkable—and most urban—qualities. See John Boessenecker’s introduction to Charley Duane, *Against the Vigilantes: The Recollections of Dutch Charley Duane*, ed. John Boessenecker (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999) for a vivid description of San Francisco’s class mixing and the shock it provided to arrivals from smaller, more traditionally structured locales.

⁸ John Hovey Robinson, *The Lady’s Dream; or, The Fortune Teller of Copp’s Hill. A Legend of Boston* (Boston: W. W. Page, 1846), 28.

“believe that God is good, and Life a blessing, when they see every hour that thousands, in no way worthier, lie softly and fare daintily, while they go hungry and cold....”⁹

But if class mixing was potentially inflammatory or depressing, others thought that it could perhaps have positive consequences. Nathaniel Parker Willis, the creator of the label the “Upper Ten” for the New York elite, sought to promote a “general refinement of habits and taste” through class emulation. He objected to the New York Hotel’s introduction of room service in 1844 because he believed the common hotel dining room to be an important arena of social mixing, where those whose habits were less polished could follow the example of their “betters” and improve themselves. As Thomas Baker argues, Willis did not hope to eliminate social distinctions but rather to mitigate the “insulation of classes.” He was especially vocal on the reluctance of the wealthy (especially women) to ride in public omnibuses, claiming that it constituted “another step ... towards separating the rich from the middle classes by barriers of expense.” He later made this point even more explicitly: “We are a democrat to a Tammany pitch on one point—wishing that high and low should mingle as often and as closely as can be mutually agreeable, and that rich and poor should enjoy the same conveniences of life together,” all in the service of elevating the lower classes via emulation.¹⁰

⁹ Junius Henry Browne, *The Great Metropolis: A Mirror of New York* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1869), 26.

¹⁰ Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 102–3. As Baker notes, this appeal to his wealthy audience backfired, and Willis was seen as promoting increased separation of the classes. His name became a symbol of effete urban snobbery for writers of popular fiction.

As different classes were mixing more freely than ever in the streets of America's cities, however, neighborhoods in those cities were becoming increasingly segregated along class lines. The separation of workplace and domestic space divided cities loosely into business and residential districts. As this division progressed, the further segregation of the residential districts along class lines highlighted the difference between the "two great and distinct classes of people—those who pass their days in trying to make money enough to live; and those who, having more than enough, are troubled about the manner of spending it."¹¹ Increasingly, specific locations in cities could be invoked to stand in for the classes with which they were associated—Fifth Avenue, "above Bleecker," Tremont Street, and Chestnut Street with the rich, and Five Points, the Bowery, Ann Street, and Moyamensing with the poor.

Geographic segregation within cities was nothing new, of course—there had always been neighborhoods characterized by certain trades, and certain areas were always more pleasant (and more expensive) than others. But what accompanied the tendency toward more explicit residential class segregation was a sense that the social distance between classes was growing. This increasing isolation of class groups in America's cities served to make cities more "mysterious," since the home and social lives of the people one saw passing by in the street were suddenly removed from the circuit of everyday experience. Louis Wirth's description of the early twentieth-century city is apt

¹¹ Browne, *The Great Metropolis*, 23.

for the antebellum period as well: “Our physical contacts are close, but our social contacts are distant.”¹²

William Ellery Channing claimed that it was the “unhappiness of great cities” that “they consist of different ranks, so widely separated as indeed to form different communities. In most large cities there may be said to be two nations, understanding as little of one another, having as little intercourse, as if they lived in different lands.”¹³ M. M. Huet, in *Silver and Pewter*, even went so far as to characterize the rich as not only a different nation, but a different race.¹⁴ What made the situation so mysterious was that these two nations were so close to each other, yet so widely separated, bearing out the observation that the experience of class in the antebellum city was characterized by the “process by which people were brought together and kept apart, attracted to one another and repelled.”¹⁵

¹² Wirth, quoted in Stuart Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 13. Wyn Kelley argues that, “The visible evidence of class difference violently ruptured the old framework and produced a widespread sense that the city had become mysterious to its dwellers,” and she identifies this “framework” as a “democratic ideology that refused to acknowledge class divisions” (*Melville’s City*, 95). I would argue that it was precisely the contrary—that it was the *lack* of visible evidence of how people from other classes lived that made cities mysterious. Knowing little to nothing about the people that you would see walking past you on the sidewalk every day—beyond their clothes, which admittedly offered a great deal of information—was a disconcerting experience for many Americans, but that does not imply that they “refused to acknowledge class divisions.” The American insistence on political equality does not mean that class divisions were rejected, or that the fact of class difference came as some sort of shock. Americans of all eras have been perfectly well aware of class divisions; where they have differed is in the prerogatives that they were willing to accord to members of certain classes. As Blumin notes, it was not necessarily the case that society was becoming more unequal (although income was being redistributed upward at a striking rate), but that there was a “shift in the nature of inequality and of unequal social relations as the personalized, face-to-face hierarchies of the eighteenth century gave way to the more distant, categorical hierarchies of the nineteenth century...” (231).

¹³ William Ellery Channing, *The Obligation of a City to Care for and Watch Over the Moral Health of its Members...* (Glasgow: James Hedderwick & Son, 1841), 4.

¹⁴ M. M. Huet, *Silver and Pewter, or The Contrasts of New York Life* (New York: H. Long and Brother, 1852), 58.

¹⁵ Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 231.

Upper Tens and Lower Millions

As they reflected the new physical reality of American cities as spaces that were increasingly segregated along class lines, the overwhelming message that city-mysteries novels conveyed to their readers was that this state of affairs was what wealthy people wanted. However much they differed on other matters, almost all authors of city-mysteries seemed to agree that the very wealthy—the “Upper Ten”—did not want to have anything to do with people from the working or middle classes, save for purposes of exploitation or the occasional dispensing of charity. As a wealthy seducer explains to his poor sewing girl victim in Osgood Bradbury’s *The Rival Lovers*, “persons of great wealth will always keep themselves distinct from the laboring classes. They are a class by themselves, and their money enables them to live just as they please.... In a city like this such wide distinctions will always exist.”¹⁶ John Vose informed his readers that, “Fashionable people would like to have their sons and daughters to know nobody but fashionable people,” implying that such a view did not fit with the desires that the unfashionable had for their children.¹⁷ Accompanying this focus on the desires and habits of the “Upper Ten” was a tendency to figure the rest of the city as “the Lower Million”—that is, to imagine the city as a “shockingly abnormal collection of the very rich and the very poor,” a polarized community with no middle ground.¹⁸

¹⁶ Osgood Bradbury, *The Rival Lovers; or, The Midnight Murder* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 1857 [?]), 32. This novel is Bradbury’s *Louisa Martin* republished under a different title.

¹⁷ John Denison Vose, Esq., *Fresh Leaves from the Diary of a Broadway Dandy* (New York: Bunnell & Price, 1852), 24.

¹⁸ Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 15. Blumin attributes this tendency to the example set for American authors of city-mysteries by their European precursors who wrote about London and Paris. I would argue, however, that to a certain extent this view of the city was more characteristic of the post-Civil War middle-class reformist discourse shared by such writers as Junius Henry Browne or James Dabney

The “Lower Million” was the subject of a great deal of urban literature, fiction and non-fiction, in the antebellum period. Readers all over the country seemed to be fascinated by information about who the “lower million” were and how they lived, and they received plenty of it, primarily from middle-class reformers like George Foster and Solon Robinson. Robinson, in *Hot Corn*, revealed to his readers aspects of New York life that would have been familiar to most lower-class readers, and wrote in a very specific middle- or upper-class “accent” about poor parts of the city: “We were soon treading a narrow alley, where pestilence walketh in darkness; and crime, wretched poverty, and filthy misery, go hand in hand to destruction.”¹⁹ Robinson went on to reveal some of the “mysteries” of the urban poor, as his narrator explains that an old woman begging on the street with an “opium-drugged infant” is not the “pitiable object” she appears, but a “professional beggar,” who has rented the baby in order to appear more sympathetic.²⁰ The trope of the phony beggar was a common one for middle-class reformers, who were concerned with distinguishing between the “deserving poor” and the vicious. One author of a travel narrative about New York claimed that, “I have been informed that there is a regularly formed association of men, with a president and directors, secretary and treasurer, who have persons hired by the month to beg. Don’t doubt it at all.”²¹

McCabe. As I will argue below, city-mysteries often offered a clear statement on the existence of a large “virtuous middle” in America’s cities.

¹⁹ Solon Robinson, *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York Illustrated* (New York: Dewitt and Davenport, 1854), 110.

²⁰ Robinson, *Hot Corn*, 270.

²¹ *Glimpses of New-York City*, by a South Carolinian (who had nothing else to do) (Charleston: J. J. McCarter, 1852), 35. This putative association of beggars is a perfect example of the pervasiveness of the idea that secret conspiratorial organizations would structure themselves along business lines.

Authors of fictional narratives of city life, on the other hand, were less interested in exposing the mysterious habits of the poor, and in general offered fewer descriptions of the material conditions of poverty. When they did describe the “lower million,” city-mysteries authors tended to focus more on the social and emotional consequences of being poor. Thomas Low Nichols offered the conservative argument that the poor are happier than the rich, since they did not have to worry that their friends only liked them for their money, but a more common theme concerned the mental and spiritual effects of grinding poverty.²² John Chumasero, one of the more politically engaged authors working in the genre, countered Nichols’s argument:

Be poor and happy! senseless paradox! preposterous absurdity! the rich man may lounge upon his easy sofa, and philosophize upon the charms of poverty, talk about the curse of gold, and filthy lucre, but gentle reader, did you ever hear a poor man do so? Never! Oh, it is a blight, a fearful curse, is that same curse of poverty! it clips the wings of young ambition; makes a man dishonest, when he would be just and righteous; perverts our nature; chills the warm heart; deadens the soul; paralyzes the will; curbs the affection; enchains the mind; Poverty is bad enough, but above all—it is the only crime, the world NEVER forgives!²³

What is evident, even in this passionate attack on the ills of poverty, is the fascination Chumasero shared with almost all authors of city-mysteries with the “rich man” lounging on his “easy sofa.” Of far more interest to readers of city-mysteries than the woes of poverty were the mysteries of the “Upper Ten”: Who were those rich people?

²² Thomas Low Nichols, *The Lady in Black: A Story of New York Life, Morals, and Manners* (New York: n.p., 1844), 41.

²³ John C. Chumasero, *The Landlord and Tenant, a Tale of the Present Day, Founded on Facts* (Rochester: William H. Beach, 1845), 11–12.

How do they live? What do they wear? And how did they get so much money?²⁴ In another Chumasero novel, a wealthy young man asks a poor woman if the poor talk about rich people often: “‘Talk about them, yes,’ answered the woman, ‘not a day passes, that is, when we get time to rest a moment from our toils, but what we talk about them.’”²⁵

This fascination runs throughout the genre.

Charles Astor Bristed devoted an entire book to the study of the *Upper Ten Thousand*, noting that since, in his earlier writing he had “found it necessary to mention Bowery Boys and newspaper editors, and various other low characters, ... I shall, on the present occasion, introduce you to none but the real respectable, fashionable, exquisite part of New York society, the very cream of the cream....”²⁶ Once Nathaniel Parker Willis introduced the term “Upper Ten” to describe the “cream of the cream” in the *Evening Mirror* on November 11, 1844, the term rapidly took on a life of its own, becoming a stock element of urban argot and a target for class resentments.

The most prominent form such resentment took was the frequent revelation in city-mysteries that rich people had become rich, if not through outright crime, then at least through behavior that was beneath their supposed reputations for morality and gentility. In George Thompson’s *The Demon of Gold*, Augustus Marlow discovers a secret passageway in the family home that explains his father’s sudden affluence—it leads to a subterranean room used by counterfeiters. But Mr. Marlow is not the only

²⁴ In George Lippard’s novel *New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million*, the city mystery that most explicitly advertised this understanding of the urban class structure in its title, the ratio of attention given to rich versus poor characters is almost precisely the opposite of that suggested by the book’s title.

²⁵ John Chumasero, *The Mysteries of Rochester* (Rochester: W. H. Beach, 1845), 126.

²⁶ Bristed knew whereof he wrote, as he was the grandson of John Jacob Astor. Charles Astor Bristed, *The Upper Ten Thousand: Sketches of American Society* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1852), 37.

wealthy Bostonian implicated. He kept detailed account books of his transactions with his confederates, which contain

the names of men who are now distinguished for their piety and benevolence as much as for their immense wealth. ... People point to these merchant princes as bright examples of industry, integrity and business talent; and little imagine that these merchant princes instead of employing the qualifications which have been named, have built of their fortunes in a manner which, if detected, would ensure their permanent residence in the State Prison.²⁷

George Lippard asked in *The Midnight Queen*, “Where is the man who dares trace to their real source five out of ten of the great fortunes of this metropolis? The man does not live who dares do it,” yet Lippard dared, at least in fictional form, to outline how the New York elite came by their ill-gotten wealth.²⁸

While sensational novels about all cities took an interest in how the local elites got where they were, it seemed to be a subject of particularly compelling interest in Boston. In 1846, Richard Hildreth published an octavo paper-covered pamphlet, precisely resembling a city-mystery novel, entitled “*Our First Men: A Calendar of Wealth, Fashion and Gentility, containing a list of those persons taxed in the city of Boston, credibly reported to be worth One Hundred Thousand Dollars; with Biographical Notices of the principal persons.*”²⁹ In justifying this extraordinary

²⁷ George Thompson, *The Demon of Gold; or, The Miser's Daughter. A Romance of Boston*, by Greenhorn (Boston: William Berry & Co., 1853), 85.

²⁸ George Lippard, *The Midnight Queen; or, Leaves from New-York Life* (New York: Garrett & Co., 1853), 73.

²⁹ [Richard Hildreth], “*Our First Men: A Calendar of Wealth, Fashion and Gentility, containing a list of those persons taxed in the city of Boston, credibly reported to be worth One Hundred Thousand Dollars; with Biographical Notices of the principal persons* (Boston: Published by all the booksellers, 1846). Twenty years later, a similar book was published in Boston as an extra to the *Boston Traveller*, entitled *Incomes of the Citizens of Boston, and other cities and towns in Massachusetts* (Boston: A. Williams, 1866) which provided an alphabetical listing, by congressional district and ward, of everyone who paid taxes and what their assessed income was.

publication—a local version of the *Forbes* 400—which was full of nasty comments about rich Bostonians who had made their money in unsavory ways, Hildreth explained that:

We are told and taught that all men are born equal; yet they do not long stay so. When we look around us, we see a very great inequality existing: this man in a hovel—that man in a palace.... Whence this difference? Who are these rich men, in whose hands such a large proportion of the wealth of the community is concentrated? and how did it get there? Are they gods,—favorites of Heaven? or are they mere puppets of fortune; mortal men and women, like the rest of us?³⁰

Hildreth was sure that this “first attempt ever made to produce this much talked of aristocracy ... visibly and palpably” would meet with loud complaints about the invasion of privacy, but he held it “to be the inalienable right of all Yankees to inquire into, and to thoroughly sift and examine, their neighbor’s affairs; and those who have wealth must recollect that it is one of the penalties of good fortune, or distinction of any sort, to be an especial object of curiosity and public notice.”³¹

The dominant impulse motivating Hildreth, and no doubt many authors of sensational urban novels as well, was to show that the rich had feet of clay, that they were no more deserving of their good fortune (and perhaps less so) than anybody else. The desire to look “behind the veil” at the “mysteries” of the lives of the urban upper class was born out of resentment at hypocrisy and class privilege, but it was also the product of a sincere fascination with what we would now call the “lifestyles of the rich and famous.” (Rich people were not presumed to just have more money than other people, but more fun in general, and more sex in particular.)

³⁰ Hildreth, “*Our First Men*,” 4.

³¹ Hildreth, “*Our First Men*,” 3.

However radically egalitarian their language may have been, it is crucial to remember that authors of city-mysteries were in it for the money, and that they—like pretty much everyone else in antebellum America—were hoping to wind up rich.³² For every depiction of the rich dedicated to showing that “fashionable society is the most corrupt society,” there was one like Ned Buntline’s description in *The Death-Mystery* of the different sorts of lavish banquets at which specific New York nabobs—the Stetsons, the Lelands, the Delmonicos—excelled, emphasizing not wretched excess but sincere admiration at their luxury and good taste.³³ As Michael Denning notes, city-mysteries are simultaneously “reveling in minute descriptions of material luxury and denouncing the moral depravity of the ‘merchant princes.’”³⁴ While Denning interprets this as part of the “mechanic accent” of such narratives, I read this tension as revealing a more ambivalent and less radical class stance. Implicit in the critique of the rich as immoral is the assumption that the reader would behave better in that situation, and this requires the reader to fantasize about what she would do if *she* were rich. The minute description of wealth, and even the heated assault on those who abuse it, cannot be separated from the desire to possess it, which complicates the reading that these narratives are representative of some mythical “artisanal republicanism.”

³² As Alexander Saxton so brilliantly shows, the two concepts are inseparable, since “the egalitarian commitment in American served to legitimize that other commitment, individual success.” Saxton claims that the sharpening of class conflict was attributed to conspiratorial causes in America as a way of getting around the problem of how individual success, the goal of radical republican ideology, could have negative results. Saxton, *Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, 221.

³³ Edwin H. Chapin; *Moral Aspects of City Life* (New York: Henry Lyon, 1854), 69; Ned Buntline, *The Death-Mystery: A Crimson Tale of Life in New-York*, serialized in the *New York Mercury*, spring and summer of 1861. My thanks to Jon Eburne for allowing me to see his transcription of this novel.

³⁴ Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1987), 92.

The Emerging Middle Class

While the abjectly destitute—as opposed to the criminal—rarely figure prominently in city-mysteries (when they do, they have most often fallen from higher class positions), and the Upper Ten are often assumed to be licentious and dishonest, the novels articulate a vision of a broad, virtuous middle class of American society. In contrast to European city-mysteries, which Richard Maxwell argues highlighted complicated modern crimes that could only be committed by the educated elite, American city-mysteries tended to focus on crimes that were the product of either bestial lower-class vices, such as intemperance and sexual promiscuity, or of quasi-aristocratic assumptions of privilege, such as crooked financial manipulations or seduction—that is, crimes that were directed from the extremes toward the middle.³⁵ And it is clearly this broad middle to whom most city-mysteries were directed, and whose experiences of the urban class structure they were most often attempting to anticipate, a group that Richard Hildreth identified as those people who, “while they can hardly pretend to be rich, are yet very unwilling to confess themselves poor.”³⁶

City-mysteries novels offer a valuable glimpse onto who was thought to belong to this group that would later come to be known as the “middle class.” George Foster referred in *New York Naked* to the “Amusements of the Middle Million,” and made clear that he did not think that society contained a “lower million.” The extremes of the

³⁵ Richard Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 165.

³⁶ Hildreth felt that his work would be of special interest to such people, since, “next to being rich themselves, it is for such persons a very delightful thing to have the reputation of being ... at least an acquaintance of those who are rich. ... by the diligent study and judicious use of this little book, they may appear very knowing, and may even be able to pass themselves off as part of the aristocracy!” Hildreth, “*Our First Men*,” 4–5.

“elegant” and the “destitute and squalid” were small, while the bulk of society was composed of the “common-place,” the “great middle working class.”³⁷ Instead of bifurcating society along occupational or “collar” lines, Foster (along with George Lippard) placed “nine-tenths of all our population” in the “respectable middle class.” Instead of separating out urban firemen and Bowery B’hoys and other groups associated with artisanal labor, Foster aligned all these groups with the striving, middle-class, entrepreneurial culture of artisans and small businessmen.³⁸ I do not mean to argue that no cultural distinctions existed within this large middle. For instance, Henry Patterson, a young Whig clerk in a New York hardware store, felt that the crowd at a public ball “were mostly of too low a caste for me to find much enjoyment among them; the largest portion of them being what is termed Soap Locks, &c.,” by which he meant artisans of the Bowery B’hoy stripe (many of whom likely made more money than Patterson did). Rather, I would argue that it is precisely these *cultural* distinctions that played such a crucial role in a conception of class based on many other criteria than simply income.³⁹

Shelley Streeby argues that George Lippard would have “especially resented being aligned with the middle classes,” citing his statement that, “In every age, the classes improperly styled by this title have been the veriest lick-spittles of Power.”⁴⁰ But this reading is precisely wrong—Lippard was not objecting to the label, but to its application to people who were really part of the elite. Lippard described the “masses,” a

³⁷ Foster, *New York Naked* (New York: R. M. Dewitt, 185?), 114–15.

³⁸ Foster, *New York Naked*, 146–7.

³⁹ Henry A. Patterson Diary, v. 3; entry for February 12, 1843; collection of the New-York Historical Society.

⁴⁰ Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 305, n. 16; Lippard, *Quaker City Weekly*, June 2, 1849.

group that would include those later to be known as middle class, as “that portion of the human family who are doomed to work and suffer for the benefit of a mere fraction of the whole sum of humanity. By the word masses we mean just Nine-Tenths of the human race.”⁴¹

Stuart Blumin bases his definition of the middle class by their income level on an editorial by Walt Whitman from 1858, where Whitman described “the middle class, the men of moderate means, living at the rate of a thousand dollars a year or thereabouts,” a level that Blumin finds especially important because it was unattainable by “nearly all who worked at the manual trades and less skilled jobs that Whitman so often described in his poetry, and who asserted respectability only by setting themselves apart ... from those who asserted superiority by means of wealth and manners.”⁴² Blumin argues against the idea that America has a “middle class culture” instead of a “middle class,” but that was very clearly the case in antebellum America: culture, values, and morality made up the middle class in the 1840s and 50s that was distinguished by a “double boundary” from the “vulgarity of the common laborer” as well as from the “excesses of the wealthy.”⁴³

⁴¹ George Lippard, “Editorial Department,” *The White Banner* (Philadelphia, 1851), 148. This vision meshes with Michael Schudson’s delineation of an antebellum middle class that included both merchants and artisans, and runs against Stuart Blumin’s definition of the middle class that is defined by income level, “white-collar” work, and the trend toward suburbanization.

⁴² Cited in Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 1. I do not wish to argue with Blumin’s larger point that the emergence in the antebellum period of white-collar work done outside the home would eventually lead to a social formation that we now think of as the middle class, but I do argue that it is anachronistic to apply the term “middle class” to this group in the antebellum period purely based on their earnings. Beyond the extremes of income past which one was either rich or destitute, earnings were not a reliable indicator of class status in antebellum America. Even the merchants and other white-collar workers who make up the core of Blumin’s middle class would have begun their careers as clerks working for very little pay; but it is difficult to see how a well-educated young man of some ambition who worked as a clerk in an antebellum mercantile concern would not be considered “middle class” simply because he did not make over \$1000 a year.

⁴³ Brian Roberts, *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 26. Roberts cites the diary of Franklin Buck, a young New

The difficulty in identifying the “middle class” precisely in the period in part lies in the fact that popular antebellum writers primarily defined it by what it was not. George Thompson, in opposition to the aristocracy, referred to the “mediocracy,” while the narrator of *The Green Family; or, The Veil Removed*, described a landlord as being “neither of the ‘upper,’ nor yet of the ‘under crust;’ but somewhat of a ‘betweenity.’”⁴⁴ Thomas Butler Gunn, in his *Physiology of New York Boarding-Houses*, defined the middle classes as living in the sorts of buildings between “our palace hotels” and “the most squalid tenements of the Five Points,” adding, “there are heights to which we shall not care to soar, depths to which we will not descend. We intend to be neither statistical nor subterranean.”⁴⁵ A young man in the urban sex novella *Mary Ann Temple* who abandons his attempted seduction of a young woman in the Jones Wood in New York when he discovers that she is still a virgin is described thus: “His dress was decent enough, though not remarkable for neatness, and his whole appearance was that of an ordinary citizen of the middle class.”⁴⁶

York City clerk originally from Maine, who took special offense at the “snobs” in their private carriages, as an example of the need middle-class Americans felt to police the upper boundary of their class position as well as the lower (30). For more on the cultural and moral distinctions between the middle and lower classes, in the case of England, see Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular,’” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 227–240, esp. 229. As Christine Stansell has observed of antebellum Protestants, “The language of virtue and vice, traditionally laden with social connotations, became for the evangelicals a code of class, which described their own mission of social domination in the language of ethical mandate. ...[they] understood class in religious terms.” Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 66–7. The connections between morality and class, particularly within the notion of “respectability,” will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter.

⁴⁴ George Thompson, *The Countess; or, Memoirs of Women of Leisure, Being a Series of Intrigues with the Bloods* (Boston: Berry & Co., 1849), 43; J. Henry Smith, *The Green Family; or, The Veil Removed* (Springfield, MA: Smith & Jones, 1849), 85.

⁴⁵ Thomas Butler Gunn, *The Physiology of New York Boarding-Houses* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1857), 20.

⁴⁶ Charles Paul de Kock, *Mary Ann Temple, Being an Authentic and Romantic History of an Amorous and Lively Girl; of Rare Beauty, and Strong Natural Love of Pleasure* (New York: n.p., n.d.), 48. His devotion

Apart from these negative descriptions, then—the middle class man was neither poor nor rich, neither shabbily nor extravagantly dressed—what made one “middle class”? It is clear from most antebellum sources that “middle class” was meant to mean white, largely native American (although not exclusively), primarily Protestant (although not exclusively), not prone to extremes of fashion in dress, and not visibly given over to the primary vices of the day—drinking, gambling, or whoring. An article in the *New York Tribune* in its first week of publication in 1841 identified its readership as “being mainly among the active and substantial Middle Class of our citizens”; instead of defining that class by their income (beyond the ability to afford a newspaper), the *Tribune* described this class as “those who live by their labor or their business, and are neither above the necessity nor devoid of the ability to buy and sell to the best advantage.”⁴⁷

Greeley’s final clause here points to what I take to be the key element of middle-class status in the antebellum era, that of the promise (or threat) of class mobility. The middle-class reader of the *Tribune* had an eye out for “the best advantage,” for that which might possibly usher him into the ranks of the wealthy. Karen Halttunen writes that by the 1830s, “to be middle class was to be, in theory, without fixed social status”; the middle classes strove to move up, yet were threatened by economic instability or family

to the preservation of virginity is another marker of his class status, since in the moral framework of city-mysteries novels aristocratic libertines are shown to be obsessed with taking girls’ maidenheads, while lower-class men are shown to not care one way or another. Only a man firmly within the moral universe of the middle classes would have halted a sexual encounter at such an advanced stage in order to avoid deflowering a virgin.

⁴⁷ *New York Tribune*, May 3, 1841; cited in David Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 122.

disaster with moving down.⁴⁸ It is this mobility—the hope to move up and the constant, looming threat of moving down—that best characterizes the depiction of class in city-mysteries fiction. In focusing on the potential for mobility, primarily for the middle classes, these novels do not speak with the radical “mechanic accents” that have been attributed to them, but instead stake out a broad middle ground in opposition to the excesses of the lower and upper classes.

Rufus Small, a miserly employer in *The Fortunes of a Young Widow*, claims that the “middle class” in New York “is not the middle class that politicians talk of just prior to an election.” Instead of that “patient, hopeful, and ... intelligent” class, the *real* middle class is trapped: “the newest and most hideous aristocracy ... is pressing upon it from the one side, while utter poverty is galling it on the other.” This description, from a novel in a genre that is frequently associated with “radical democratic” politics, matches perfectly with the “embattled middle establishment” that Alexander Saxton has argued was the primary constituency of the Whig Party in the antebellum era.⁴⁹ This constant threat is

⁴⁸ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 29. As Richard Stott and others have made clear, for single urban working men in antebellum America, marriage also presented a significant risk of downward mobility. The archetypal urban male of the period, the Bowery B’hoy, is white, native born, has sufficient disposable income to buy fancy clothes and go to the theater, and is above all unmarried. Cyrus, the lover of one of the unfortunate girls in George Thompson’s *Catharine and Clara, or The Double Suicide*, gave as his reason for not wanting to marry the fact that both of them were poor, and he did not make enough money to support two people: “Our remaining apart, you see, will be to the advantage of us both, while our union would entail misery and hopeless poverty upon us.” Thompson, *Catharine and Clara, or the Double Suicide: A True Tale of Disappointed Love* (Boston: Federhen & Co., 1854), 15. For more on the youthfulness of the urban workforce, see Richard Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis: Class, Ethnicity, and Youth in Antebellum New York City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 45–96; on their consumption patterns, see 281–328. For more on urban bachelors and their unique cultural world, although focusing primarily on the late nineteenth century, see Howard Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁴⁹ *The Fortunes of a Young Widow, A Veritable Revelation of New York Life in the Nineteenth Century*, By an Old Inhabitant (Boston: Stearns & Co., 1851), 27; Saxton, *Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, 66. Small pays his head clerk, a married father of two, \$700 a year, and tells him that he could fire him and

borne out in city-mysteries by the fact that any native-born white characters who are genuinely poor have either come to the city from the country, where their standard of living was higher, or have fallen from better circumstances; only blacks and foreign-born whites have always been poor.

The Mysteries of Mobility

According to antebellum sensational urban fiction, by far the most “mysterious” aspect of class in the urban context, and the thing that above all else these novels would have conditioned readers to expect in the city, was a high level of class mobility. Edward Pessen has convincingly argued that social mobility was becoming more constrained in the antebellum era, and Isabelle Lehuu writes that skills such as reading that had previously served as reliable levers of improvement were now coming to be seen as simple necessities.⁵⁰ Apart from education, other methods existed for advancing one’s class status. In certain areas, converting from Catholicism to Protestantism conferred

advertise his job for \$500 a year and be flooded with candidates; he advises his clerk to tell the doctors to let his consumptive wife die, so that his salary will go farther.

⁵⁰ Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 132. For more on antebellum social mobility, see: Edward Pessen, “The Egalitarian Myth and the American Social Reality: Wealth, Mobility, and Equality in the ‘Era of the Common Man,’ *American Historical Review* 76 (October 1971): 989–1034; Pessen, *Riches, Class, and Power Before the Civil War* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1973); James Henretta, “The Study of Social Mobility: Ideological Assumptions and Conceptual Bias,” *Labor History* 18 (1977): 166–78; Clyde and Sally Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers: The Ordering of Opportunity in Nineteenth-Century Poughkeepsie* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); Stuart Blumin, “The Historical Study of Vertical Mobility,” *Historical Methods Newsletter* 1 (1968): 1–13; and Peter Decker, *Fortunes and Failures: White-Collar Mobility in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). Stuart Blumin interprets Anthony Giddens’s theory of the significance of class thus: “Where there is an inconsistent relation among type of work, authority, and levels and patterns of consumption, and at the same time a high degree of vertical mobility, the class principle will be weak. Where these relations are consistent within a setting of ‘mobility closure,’ they reinforce each other and reaffirm the significance of class” (Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 9). By this line of thinking, then, the antebellum era is one in which people *thought* a high degree of mobility existed, but was when those avenues were in fact beginning to be closed off.

certain class advantages. In addition, cities made it easier for men to change occupations entirely, and enter fields that offered more alluring prospects.

Regardless of the extent to which opportunities for social mobility were expanding or contracting, however, city-mysteries fiction reflects the fact that antebellum cities were thought to be sites for huge and sudden variations in class status. Emerson Bennett articulated the fear that such radical class mobility evoked in *The Forged Will*, when he asked, “What are the sufferings of the miserable wretches who have never known aught but poverty, compared with those who feel it for the first time?”⁵¹ Whatever the social reality, the meanings that people took away from the financial panics of 1837 and 1857, sandwiched around the tremendous generation of wealth of the 1849 Gold Rush, created a cultural environment in which the market was viewed as a place of almost chaotic mobility, and success and failure became cultural obsessions.⁵² But the potential for class mobility not only frightened people; it also made it easier to adjust to urban life.⁵³

“Asmodeus,” the fictional demon narrator of *Sharps and Flats; or, The Perils of City Life*, proclaimed, “Change! what volumes does that word speak!”⁵⁴ The “Change” here was the common abbreviation for “Exchange,” or the stock exchanges that

⁵¹ Emerson Bennett, *The Forged Will; or, Crime and Retribution* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson and Brothers, 1853), 26.

⁵² Scholars are beginning to focus attention on this crucial aspect of American cultural and economic history. See, for example, Edward J. Balleisen, *Navigating Failure: Bankruptcy and Commercial Society in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁵³ As Thomas Bender argues, “a belief in the possibility and value of social mobility was an important aspect of the emerging urban consciousness....” Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 114.

⁵⁴ Asmodeus, *Sharps and Flats; or, The Perils of City Life. Being the Adventures of One Who Lived by His Wits* (Boston: William Berry, 1850), 46.

dominated the financial life of antebellum cities, on Wall Street in New York, State Street in Boston, and Market Street in Philadelphia. But the shortening of the name of the site of urban financial activity to the phenomenon of mutability itself is telling, because the two factors—urban economics and change—were linked in the antebellum imagination. According to George Lippard, the “fear of poverty and its fathomless miseries” was responsible for the “utter perversion of the best faculties of the heart,” while numerous other authors of city-mysteries blamed the perversion of people’s hearts, namely in the form of extravagance and competition, for their poverty.⁵⁵ John Denison Vose blamed “extravagance in living” for the tremendous class mobility he described in New York in *Fresh Leaves from the Diary of a Broadway Dandy*: “In this city, when rich men are up to-day and down to-morrow—when failures for half and a whole million of money is often known, one has but to revert to facts, when the question is asked, ‘why is it so?’”⁵⁶ Vose specified women’s spending as the main culprit, giving a list of all the fashionable places in New York for women to waste men’s money, but male vices, such as gambling, were often invoked as well. (In *The Fortunes of a Young Widow*, Mrs. Small is rescued from a brawl at a cockfight by a man who tells her that in 1839 he had lived in the Astor House, but in 1840 lived in the Alms House.)⁵⁷

The level of class mobility described in city-mysteries novels contradicts the image of near-absolute class segregation, both geographic and cultural, in antebellum cities. On the contrary, city-mysteries seem to imply that if you are poor, you probably

⁵⁵ Lippard, *Midnight Queen*, 4.

⁵⁶ Vose, *Fresh Leaves*, 38.

⁵⁷ *Fortunes of a Young Widow*, 65. This former gentleman demands a fee of \$20 a week, along with sexual favors, to keep quiet about having found a woman as respectable as Mrs. Small at a cockfight in a dive bar. Ever the resourceful urban woman, Mrs. Small escapes after blinding him with cayenne pepper.

know some formerly poor people who are now rich (usually from the fortuitous death of a wealthy uncle), and some of your poor neighbors probably used to be wealthy. As a lawyer argued in Frances Whipple's *The Mechanic*, "'With us one condition is continually merging itself in another. Spendthrift sons rapidly squander the estates which were hoarded by their miserly fathers; while noble sons, ay, and daughters too, are continually rising, Phoenix-like, from the ruins of inefficient, or unfortunate parents....'"⁵⁸ The reformer Charles Loring Brace preferred cities to small towns as homes for the poor for just this reason, arguing that the constant change of urban life broke the pattern set in villages that kept them poor generation after generation.⁵⁹

The Changing World of Work

This mutability in social status was being brought about not only by financial panics and booms, but also by changes in labor and in the economic structure of the rapidly growing nation. Many Americans, including most authors of city-mysteries novels, espoused some variation on the labor theory of value that was articulated by Adam Smith and David Ricardo.⁶⁰ In antebellum America, however, in the wake of the first stirrings of the labor movement in the 1830s, the "value" attached to labor did not only belong to commodities, but to people as well. From Benjamin Franklin's observation that, "Trade in general being nothing else but the exchange of labor for labor,

⁵⁸ Frances Harriet Whipple (Green McDougall), *The Mechanic* (Providence: Burnett & King, 1842), 94.

⁵⁹ Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision*, 141–42.

⁶⁰ Smith wrote in *The Wealth of Nations* that labor, "never varying in its own value is alone the ultimate and real standard by which the value of all commodities can at all times be estimated and compared. It is their real price; money is their nominal price only." Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 1:51.

the value of all things is most justly measured by labor,” it was a small step to denigrate the value not only of trade but the tradesman.⁶¹ George Lippard, in the initiation ceremony for the “Supreme Fulton” of the Brotherhood of the Union, wrote that a “Mechanic,” or laborer, is “one who builds, constructs, creates,” while elsewhere he wrote that the wealth of a capitalist was simply “the work of ten thousand common people petrified into bank notes and brick walls.”⁶²

It is important to note that this resentment was not directed against all wealthy men—as the novelist and editor George Wilkes put it, those “who by industry, economy and ability have acquired small fortunes as their just reward” were exempt—but against “the chronic millionaires and speculative capitalists who, without industry, without economy, but with dangerous ability, have grown enormously rich out of the labor of others.”⁶³ The resentment reflected in city-mysteries against those who did not add value with their physical labor was exceeded only by the contempt for those who had inherited wealth, who George Thompson claimed did “not even make a blade of grass grow—he does nothing for human sustenance. He is a drone of the human hive, and if the working bees should sting him to death some sharp morning, it would only be carrying out the laws of nature.”⁶⁴

⁶¹ Franklin quoted in Ronald L. Meek, *Studies in the Labor Theory of Value* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1956), 40.

⁶² Lippard’s handwritten notes on the Brotherhood, c. 1852. From Historical Society of Pennsylvania Society Collection, George Lippard folder; Lippard, *Mysteries of the Pulpit: A Revelation of the Church and the Home* (Philadelphia: E. E. Barclay, 1851), 156–7.

⁶³ Wilkes quoted in Saxton, *Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, 221.

⁶⁴ George Thompson, *New-York Life: or, The Mysteries of Upper-Tendom Revealed* (New York: Charles S. Attwood, n.d.), 88. Heirs were frequently assailed as paragons of “aristocratic privilege,” a tendency that, as Shelley Streeby notes, obscured the nature of the economic changes that were reshaping America: “Mysteries-of-the-city novels also often attack wealthy nonproducers by misrecognizing capitalism as the

In the face of this continued insistence on the value of physical work, however, profound changes were underway in antebellum America, both in the way that the market for labor operated and in the kinds of labor that were required. The transition away from the traditional craft model of apprentices working for masters, eventually to become masters themselves, to a model of more sharply delineated categories of workers and owners has been well chronicled, but the proliferation of commercial enterprises not focused on production was even more prominent in the popular urban fiction of the day.⁶⁵ A young gambler in *Clara Hopkins*, while himself no archetypal “workie,” attempted to articulate this sense when he damned “these soulless corporations”: “They are nothing but Jews’ shops. ... They don’t dig and earn their money as other people are compelled to do. Their gain is all usury and nothing else!”⁶⁶ The rising importance of commerce, combined with the increasing complexity of many commercial and manufacturing enterprises, required a great many more people to work in positions of mental instead of physical labor, a change that posed problems for traditional class structures.

This anxiety about the expansion of nonmanual work that was not materially productive took many forms, especially for authors who were themselves nonmanual

intrusion of a feudal/aristocratic mode of production into liberal democratic America.” Streeby, *American Sensations*, 60.

⁶⁵ On changes in labor see, for example, Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Bruce Laurie, *Artisans Into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989); David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market During the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis*; and Stephen Rice, “The Mechanics’ Institute of the City of New-York and the Conception of Class Authority in Early Industrial America, 1830–1860,” *New York History* 81:3 (July 2000).

⁶⁶ Osgood Bradbury, *Clara Hopkins; or, A Mirror of City Life, A Tale of New York and Philadelphia* (New York: Samuel French, 1855), 40.

workers. One form it took was concern over how workers who had been left behind in the realm of purely manual labor, and who were beginning to look more and more like a potentially restive European-style proletariat, were spending their time. The fear that these men would reject “old notions of hard work, loyalty to the employer, frugality, sobriety, and self-restraint” and focus on the pursuit of leisure as their primary goal was evidenced by George Lippard’s taxonomy of the Philadelphia street gang the “Killers” as being made up of three groups—older career criminals, followed by rowdies in their 20s, and then “beardless apprentice boys who after a hard day’s work were turned loose upon the street at night, by their masters or bosses.”⁶⁷

But this anxiety also concerned exactly how to place these men who were not members of the learned professions yet did not work with their hands. In Osgood Bradbury’s *The Eastern Belle*, a handsome young clerk from the city impresses the belle of the title with his smooth manners; she prefers him to her stereotypical Yankee suitor, James Sawyer. Yet one senses that Bradbury—an urban “mind-worker” himself—was not entirely convinced by his intended defense of yeoman simplicity. Indeed, as the rake explains, “It is true, madam ... that we may not know how hard it is to clear up a farm, but then we who live in the city are obliged to work early and late, or we should come up

⁶⁷ John Boessenecker, in introduction to Charley Duane, *Against the Vigilantes*, 5; George Lippard, *Life and Adventures of Charles Anderson Chester, the Notorious Leader of the Philadelphia “Killers”* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1849), 27. The tendency of some scholars to romanticize the pre-industrial era, where “work and play were [allegedly] intertwined, and there was no clear line where work ended and leisure began,” overstates the impact of the structured leisure time that was the product of new time disciplines in the workplace; it is difficult to believe that laborers in, say, the seventeenth century did not know when they were working. The emergence of leisure as a “category separate from and subordinate to work,” devoted to preparation for the next day’s labor, is an important development, but leisure was not a new invention—in most trades, leisure would have begun when the light ran out (Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page*, 149).

short. We have a good deal of head work to do, and that is quite as fatiguing as felling trees, and digging the soil.”⁶⁸

While the questionable morality of Bradbury’s white-collar worker casts doubt on his claims regarding the difficulty of his labor, John Chumasero, a radical Democrat, defended the “great disparity of compensation between the laboring and professional classes” on the grounds that “the laborer goes to his daily toil unembarrassed by the cares and perplexities which beset the man of business,” as “merry as a lark,” while the same cannot be said of “the lawyer, the doctor, the business man. Oppressed with the multifarious cares which throng his path at every step, he is a stranger to the laborer’s undisturbed repose.”⁶⁹ By this account, the mental laborer, the subject of the new demands of urban commerce, in some respects worked *harder* than the artisan.⁷⁰

In many city-mysteries novels, mechanics from the country who move to cities meet with economic success, building businesses and achieving affluence, while mercantile clerks or aspiring authors or lawyers often fail. Thus, the more one’s aspirations tended toward the “mental” end of the spectrum of work, the more tenuous

⁶⁸ Osgood Bradbury, *The Eastern Belle; or, The Betrayed One! A Tale of Boston and Bangor* (Boston: H. L. Williams, 1845), 3.

⁶⁹ Chumasero, *Mysteries of Rochester*, 75–6.

⁷⁰ Theodore Sedgwick argued in 1836 that “the more a man labours with his mind, which is mental labour, the higher he is in the scale of labourers; all must agree to that whether they will or no.” (Quoted in Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow*, 26.) Another factor that raises serious questions about any discussion of class that neatly divides the working population according to color of collar, or physical and mental workers, was the sheer variety of ways of making a living that metropolitan growth implied. In a city of nearly a million people, made up of citizens from all ethnicities and walks of life, employment niches emerged that are simply uncategorizable. In *Adams’s Directory* of Boston in 1866, for example, the following occupations, which are only listed for one individual, indicate the diversity of employment that urbanization created and raise questions about which class, if any, these jobs fall into: wizard, bottlegatherer, diver, cricket teacher, check-numberer, magician, anklet-maker, clogdancer, agent for discharged convicts, pyrotechnist, aeronaut, and gymnast.

one's class position.⁷¹ Edward Chapin decried the fascination the city, and especially mercantile life, held for young men from the country:

They quit the sphere of creative work for that of barter; a mere shifting from hand to hand of what somebody else has made; so crowded, in proportion to the other, that community has become like a reversed pyramid; they quit the fields, where they might make the grass grow, and increase the abundance of corn, to lean over counters, to stifle at writing-desks, and, too often, to throw themselves away in the tide of dissipation; to break down in fortune, to live and die in the endless, tantalizing chase of experiment. And all this, because the business of the Trader is thought to be more noble than the sweaty toil of the Producer. It is a great mistake. If there are any genuine distinctions, over and above those of character—and I do not believe that there are—then he who makes a thing is greater than he who passes it to and fro and speculates upon it.⁷²

This description goes beyond simply defending the purity of farm labor, however, and calls into question the class position and stability of urban nonmanual workers.

Since class was so strongly linked in this period to morality, and a mercantile life was presented in many city-mysteries as offering unique moral challenges—whether through dealing in immoral goods, such as liquor, or being constantly exposed to large sums of money, or through frequent interaction in retail establishments with attractive young women—these novels called into question the status of merchants as “the most worthy and respected class of our fellow citizens.”⁷³

City-mysteries make clear the uncertain class status of at least some businessmen, along with the continuing prejudice against merchants as “mere tradesmen” as opposed to

⁷¹ For examples of this contrast, see Osgood Bradbury's *Louise Martin, the Village Maiden; or, the Dangers of City Life* (Boston: George H. Williams, 1853), or Joseph Holt Ingraham's *Harry Harefoot; or, The Three Temptations. A Story of City Scenes*. (Boston: H.L. Williams, 1845), in which aspiring clerks fail but a blacksmith and a carpenter, respectively (both from Maine) meet with success in Boston.

⁷² Chapin, *Moral Aspects of City Life*, 42.

⁷³ Harmer S. Warden, *Black Rolf; or the Red Witch of Wissahickon ... A Tale of Secret Crimes and Hidden Mysteries of Quakerdom* (Philadelphia: A. Winch, 1856), 27.

professionals with a specialized education. Yet if merchants and other non-manual workers felt their class status threatened by condescension from above, they were also subject to a blurring of class lines from below. The narrator of the children's book *About New York* says that, "I had always thought of a New York merchant as a great man, with warehouses and goods, and clerks, and heaps of money. But I have since learned that any man is a merchant who acts between the producer and consumer; and that this ragged man [a sidewalk porgie vender], who bought fish from the man who caught them, and sold them to him who eat them, was really a merchant."⁷⁴ In *The Mechanic*, one woman argued that the dignity of any calling stood in direct proportion to the amount of thinking it required, and thus that artisans stood higher "than the lower orders of merchants and retailers...."⁷⁵

Such semi-satirical statements reflect an uncertainty about what exactly it was that men who did not work with their hands actually did. They didn't produce physical objects, yet they still "did work"—they were not the leisured elites of an earlier era, nor (for the most part) had they gone to college. So what were they? The uncertainty surrounding these new economic roles and their class status suffuses city-mysteries novels, in part, perhaps, because of the similarly nebulous status shared by authors, who did work yet did not produce physical commodities themselves. One novelist's description of a merchant's work—"Tongue was his working stock. Words his staple

⁷⁴ Philip Wallis, *About New York: An Account of What a Boy Saw in His Visit to the City* (New York: Dix, Edwards & Co., 1857), 40.

⁷⁵ Whipple, *The Mechanic*, 108–9.

manufacture.”—could have applied to antebellum authors, save for the sentence that immediately follows: “The expenses were small,—the profits enormous.”⁷⁶

The “instruction in the superiority of nonmanual occupations” that Stuart Blumin writes was the “hidden agenda” of much popular fiction is especially contradicted by city-mysteries novels’ descriptions of clerks, the most visible and frequently mentioned representatives of urban nonmanual labor.⁷⁷ While popular urban novels reflect the commonly assumed class divide between mercantile clerks and artisans, they also undermine its basis, not only ridiculing clerks as superficial fops but revealing the disconnect between their actual living conditions and their presumptive class status. In some novels, clerks are shown moving in genteel urban society, such as in *Anne Melbourne: or, The Return to Virtue*, where two young men in Boston, Henry Sefton (a bookkeeper in a bank) and Frederick Morse (a clerk in a dry goods store), “moved in a high circle; the remuneration for their services being adequate to their purpose of supporting a genteel appearance.”⁷⁸

More common—and likely more realistic—are depictions of clerks showing the disparity between their compensation, which was often very low, and their class

⁷⁶ “Benauly,” *Cone Cut Corners: The Experiences of a Conservative Family in Fanatical Times* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1855), 153. As Michael Newbury argues, authors had opportunities to align their labor with physical labor that were not open to other nonmanual workers. See Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 122 passim.

⁷⁷ Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 129–30. “Clerk” was a very flexible term, covering everything from a sales assistant to a head bookkeeper, but its general meaning was more associated with serving customers in retail establishments, especially those in the dry-goods trade, than it was with doing desk-bound work of the kind associated with Melville’s *Bartleby*. “Tape-cutter” was a common derogatory slang term for clerks, and the yardstick (used for measuring cloth) was their most common symbol. For a particularly nuanced analysis of the marginal class status of antebellum clerks, see Brian Luskey, “The Marginal Men: Merchants, Clerks, and Society in the Northeastern United States, 1790-1860” (Ph.D. Diss., Emory University, 2004).

⁷⁸ Augustus Franklin, *Anne Melbourne; or, the Return to Virtue. A Tale of Boston* (Boston: H. L. Williams, 1846), 19.

aspirations. In Joseph Holt Ingraham's *Harry Harefoot*, the title character arrives in Boston from Maine and is placed in a store where his first year's wages is two suits of clothes. His fellow clerk, Ralph Mosely, owes \$27 at the "soda fountain" up the street, which he uses in his seductions of millinery girls who are taken in by his ability to perform a higher class status than he actually possesses. Extravagance was another alleged trait of clerks, since they thought they belonged in high circles and had to look the part but couldn't really afford it. One clerk in *Life in Rochester* does an accounting of his yearly finances, and finds that he is \$488 in the red, despite a rather high annual salary of \$600 a year (\$312 goes to maintaining a pretty female "cousin" in rented rooms).⁷⁹ A scion of the Boston elite in Osgood Bradbury's *The Mysteries of Boston* equates artisans and clerks, telling his girlfriend that a young man they had met is "a mechanic, or some counter-jumper from the country."⁸⁰ Bradbury was especially well attuned to the liminal class status of clerks. In the novel's sequel, a clerk is able to go walking with his boss's daughter only with the assistance of Tabitha, a chambermaid: "Being of the lower class herself, her sympathies would of course be all enlisted in behalf of Frederick. ... she was perfectly willing to lend a hand in breaking down this kind of aristocracy."⁸¹

⁷⁹ John Chumasero, *Life in Rochester, or Sketches from Life; Being Scenes of Misery, Vice, Shame and Oppression, In the City of the Genesee*, by a Resident Citizen (Rochester: D. M. Dewey, 1848), 50.

⁸⁰ Osgood Bradbury, *The Mysteries of Boston: or, Woman's Temptation*, by a Member of the Suffolk Bar (Boston: J. N. Bradley & Co., 1844), 17.

⁸¹ Osgood Bradbury, *The Empress of Beauty; Second Series of the Mysteries of Boston* (Boston: J. N. Bradley & Co., 1844), 7.

Such depictions work against the claim that clerks made “significantly more” than the \$600 a year that was allegedly the upper earnings limit of skilled artisans.⁸² Despite their potential future earnings, these “clerks in stores” —even if they “are dressed a la mode, ape the airs of aristocrats, and seem to be men of means, present or prospective”—labored under the common perception, as George Thompson put it, that “ten to one they are the offspring of poor and honest shoemakers ... with salaries barely sufficient to keep them from the poor house. They starve their bellies to clothe their backs.”⁸³ While clerks certainly had the potential to make a substantial amount of money once they went into the mercantile trade for themselves, the contemporary cultural imagination, at least as reflected in city-mysteries novels, was aware that, just as often as clerks succeeded in business, they could go broke, victims of the vagaries of the antebellum economy, shipwreck, fire, or their own ambition.⁸⁴ And success was rare. The narrator of *Shinning It; A Tale of a Tape-Cutter; or the Merchant Turned Mechanic* lamented the frequent aspiration (from which he, a former watchmaker, suffered) on the part of producers to become “a mere exchanger of commodities,” and cautioned his readers that men who were not raised in a store would not, “unless their minds are very

⁸² Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 111–12.

⁸³ George Thompson, *Adventures of a Pickpocket; or, Life at a Fashionable Watering Place*, by Himself (Boston: Berry & Co., 1849), 67–8.

⁸⁴ As is noted in H. T. Sperry’s *Country Love vs. City Flirtation* (New York: Carleton, 1865), a long poem about Reuben Grey, a young man from the country who moves to New York to make his fortune as a merchant, the two potential outcomes were “an avenue palace, a wealthy wife, And a blazoned and princely station” or “a very intense sensation, By shame and dishonor attended ... Caused by the curseful word, ‘Suspended’” (24–5). Reuben is offered a way out of his disgrace only by the onset of the Civil War, which enables him to shed his effeminate clerkly ways and become a man again.

susceptible of true mercantile principle, trade successfully with those who have, from early years, been familiar with the store and the counting room.”⁸⁵

How to Move Up (or Down) the Class Ladder

The dangers of life as a clerk exposed some of the specific mechanisms by which class mobility in urban America was thought to operate. City-mysteries paid a great deal of attention to the obstacles to urban class mobility—exorbitant rents, low wages, would-be seducers, conspiratorial organizations of all stripes—but paid even more attention to how people moved up or down the class ladder. This fascination bled beyond the boundaries of the genre. One children’s book about city life, in advocating giving to beggars, said that,

Many have been thus reduced by misfortunes. Their houses have burned down, or their employer has no more need of their services, or something else has happened to deprive them of their living, and at last after many a struggle they have been obliged to go a begging. But extravagance has ruined others; they have tried to get fine houses, and carriages, and such things, when they could not afford them, and in a few years, instead of being very rich, they have found themselves beggars.⁸⁶

In addition to misfortune and extravagance, downward class mobility could be the result of being defrauded in business, of marrying the wrong person, speculating during an economic bubble, endorsing the wrong person’s notes, or, in Joseph Ingraham’s *Rodolphe in Boston*, something more mundane, as the son of a country minister laments:

⁸⁵ *Shinning It; A Tale of a Tape-Cutter; or the Merchant Turned Mechanic*, by One Who Knows (New York: M. Y. Beach, Sun Office, 1844), 2. According to the narrator’s own example, he was making \$12 a week as a watchmaker, compared to \$300 a year his first year as a clerk. Because of his higher living expenses as a clerk, at the end of his first year he was \$150 in debt.

⁸⁶ *City Characters; or, Familiar Scenes in Town* (Philadelphia: G. S. Appleton, 1851), 31–2.

“I have lost my place—I have sold all my clothes except these shivering ones—I have no friends—and all because you made me go to the theatre....”⁸⁷

The specific mechanisms of upward mobility were often the inverse of those mentioned above, but not always. In *Sharps and Flats*, Frederick Trask, a merchant who tried to be honest in all his dealings but was ruined by dishonest partners, resolves to be dishonest himself in order to rise again, “so that he might ... kick the curs who had fondled him when in prosperity, and snarled at him ... when the gale of adversity had blown upon him.”⁸⁸ Traditional and time-tested methods of upward mobility, such as hard work, education, saving, and—most frequent—marrying someone rich are all mentioned as mechanisms of upward class mobility, as are less savory methods such as counterfeiting, fraud, and abortion (an especially lucrative line of business).

Speculation, either in mercantile goods or in real estate, plays a prominent role in the narratives of class mobility in city-mysteries novels, because of its potentially huge rewards, its equally huge potential downside, its similarity to gambling, and its linkage (in the case of real estate speculation) to the expansion of the city. The variety of modes of upward mobility presented in the genre makes clear that these novels did in large part envision a “democracy of expectant capitalists” as their audience, and that the notion of a relatively open, opportunistic society was central to the vision of America that these novels shared. Perhaps the genre’s signature mode of upward class mobility, though, was the surprise inheritance. Not only did it provide an easy *deus ex machina* for wrapping up stories quickly, but such plots provide vehicles for evading the uncomfortable facts of

⁸⁷ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *Rodolphe in Boston* (Boston: E. P. Williams, 1844), 6.

⁸⁸ Asmodeus, *Sharps and Flats*, 10.

class mobility: “Appearing at the last minute, they assured readers that even the poorest characters had never really been poor, that they really, and naturally, belonged in the more elevated stations of society all along.”⁸⁹

Of special concern to those who had enjoyed the upward mobility provided by these mechanisms, however, was the frequent desire to conceal their status as “new money.” This particular class subset—too rich to be “middling,” but too unpolished to belong in the Upper Ten—was seen as a uniquely urban phenomenon, and provided (and continues to provide) a fat target for delineators of urban manners. As Joseph Scoville wrote of this class whose “family bibles contain the names of the ‘Harpers’ or other contemporaneous book and bible publishers” instead of the names of their grandparents, they “grow well and flourish best when planted in city soil, and more particularly in a city that contains a Wall street. It is a delightful hot-bed for the growth of hearty, though very common plants.” Scoville’s withering assault on this group is only striking if one expects all cheap fiction to be characterized by “mechanic accents.” He describes them as a “mongrel class,” made up of “men who have acquired wealth and consequent distinction, from blundering stupidity and lucky circumstance” rather than from talent or industry and who possess “no claim by birth, cleverness, occupation, habits or manners, to the title of gentleman, which they assume.” Their lack of a pedigree, combined with their wealth, cloaks them in “utter worthlessness, deformity, and hideousness.”⁹⁰ Less vitriolic, Joseph Nunes, Jr., in *Aristocracy, or Life in the City*, writes of a Mr. Lewison

⁸⁹ Roberts, *American Alchemy*, 24.

⁹⁰ Joseph Scoville, *The Adventures of Clarence Bolton; or, Life in New York* (New York: Garrett & Co., 1853), 10. The right to claim the title of “gentleman” is what is in dispute; the existence of “gentleman” as a distinct and elevated category is never questioned.

who is “an aristocrat in feeling,” living in a beautiful mansion in Walnut Street in Philadelphia, yet is annoyed “that he could not boast of his birth....”⁹¹

City-mysteries novels reflect a fascination with the specific occupational and class background of these *nouveau riches*. Mr. Lewison, for instance, is the son of a drayman, and began his career as a grocer before becoming a broker. He is sure to “never salute Miss Moleskin by taking off [his] hat, lest she should construe it as a personal affront. Her father, you know, is a retired hatter...”⁹² In the *Mysteries of Rochester*, a group of girls exclaim that men that work are “filthy creatures,” despite the fact that their own fathers are shoemakers, blacksmiths, and oil and match sellers.⁹³ Osgood Bradbury noted in *Agnes the Beautiful* that many of those who “figure in the upper circles of New York City Life” are “the sons of shoemakers, and not a few sprung from coopers.” Farleigh, the artist turned counterfeiter in *The Matricide’s Daughter*, does not get any portrait commissions because he was born in America, and “The ‘Aristocracy,’ of course could not patronize a man, who might know that they were descended from butchers, tinkers, shoe-makers, and stage drivers.”⁹⁴ It is telling that these paragons of new money have

⁹¹ Joseph Nunes, Jr., *Aristocracy; or Life in the City*, by a Member of the Philadelphia Bar (Philadelphia: S. G. Sherman, 1848), 13. According to Thomas Hamilton, a British visitor to the U.S., “There is no American city in which the system of exclusion is so rigidly observed as in Philadelphia. The ascent of a parvenu into the aristocratic circle is slow and difficult.” Hamilton attributed New York’s greater social openness to the fact that there, “the vicissitudes of trade, the growth and dissipation of opulence, are far more rapid. Rich men spring up like mushrooms. Fortunes are made and lost by a single speculation,” while in Philadelphia “there is no field for speculation on a great scale ... and Philadelphia continues comparatively untroubled by those fluctuations of wealth, which impede any permanent and effective union among its aristocracy.” Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1833), 205–6.

⁹² Nunes, *Aristocracy*, 36.

⁹³ Chumasero, *Mysteries of Rochester*, 86.

⁹⁴ Osgood Bradbury, *Agnes the Beautiful; or, The Gamblers’ Conspiracy. A Vivid Picture of the Secret Transactions of New York Life* (Boston: George H. Williams, 1853), 60; Newton Mallory Curtis, *The Matricide’s Daughter. A Tale of Life in the Great Metropolis* (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1850), 28.

not simply risen from a background of manual labor, but generally from the most menial—and most masculine—forms of work. In contrast, the pretension that drives these newly affluent tradesmen to ape the manners of the urban elites is almost always presented as being the product of female social ambition.

The twin themes of artisanal republicanism and upward mobility are fused in the city-mysteries genre in the ridicule of those former artisans who had lived the dream and achieved sufficient success to retire. As the author of *Glimpses of New-York City* puts it, a “snob” is an “upstart, who is aping greatness, rich people, and those to the ‘manor born.’ The ignoramus who is fortunate enough to get rich either by labor or otherwise, and attempts to lead, or even keep up with the manners and customs of the rich and wise.” The author avers, of course, that an “honest mechanic is ... better than the man to the ‘manor born,’” yet it is the *former* mechanic, the “pretender,” the one who has dared to succeed, that is singled out.⁹⁵ This tendency to “pretend,” to look down on the class of which one used to be a member, is also presented in city-mysteries novels as being a particularly urban trait. Just as the urban economy was thought to give rise to “mushroom aristocrats” who sprung up overnight, it was thought to encourage them to attempt to conceal their “true” class status which, no matter how wealthy they became, was indelible. In John Beauchamp Jones’s *The Spanglers and the Tingles*, Mr. Tingle (originally O’Tingle), a wealthy Philadelphia merchant, is so anxious to prevent people from finding out about his background that he has paid all of his father’s friends to go into business far away from Philadelphia (Mr. Spangler, a jeweler, is the only one who

⁹⁵ *Glimpses of New-York City*, 173.

will not move). If the pursuit of wealth was a crucial component of antebellum democratic individualism, then city-mysteries novels seem to have told readers that—failing an unknown blood connection to an already wealthy relative who can leave you an inheritance—there were limits to upward class mobility.

Reading Urban Class

The fact of social mobility highlighted the problem of how to tell where people fit in the urban class system. As one character in Timothy Shay Arthur's "Story of the 'Upper Ten'" mused, "It is hard to tell who is or who is not rich now-a-days. The man of fifty thousand emulates the style of the man of half a million, and the public never discover the difference, until the gilded bubble blown by the former bursts, and he disappears with his vanishing greatness."⁹⁶ City-mysteries novels offered their readers instruction not only in how to read the markers of class, so as to more accurately taxonomize the urban environment, but also gave insights into the ways in which class could be obfuscated, concealed, or performed.⁹⁷ The visibility that was a result of the dense urban environment made appearance more important than ever before in one's self-presentation, and this performative tendency was yet another veil behind which authors of city-mysteries offered a glimpse.

⁹⁶ Timothy Shay Arthur, *Love in High Life: A Story of the "Upper Ten"* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1849), 25.

⁹⁷ Blumin argues that, due to the separation between manual and nonmanual work, "social definition had become easier, not more difficult, in the large, industrializing cities of the antebellum era," a claim that the obsessive concern with class passing in antebellum popular fiction seems to contradict. Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 137. See Blumin, ch. 5 and Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, for a discussion of the role of consumption and consumer goods (especially clothes) in class distinction and class disguise.

Donald Grant Mitchell wrote in *The Lorgnette* that, “the poor buck from Greenwich Street, or the critical chair of the smaller newspapers, living on forty dollars a month, who swaggers upon Broadway of a Sunday afternoon with a poor cigar, and one glove,” are easy targets of derision.⁹⁸ But city-mysteries made clear that American cities were full of manipulators of the symbols of class more adept than these would-be beaux. A common assumption was that the rich “of course had a free passport to all classes of society,” and could go slumming at will, but city-mysteries showed that certain members of the lower classes could pass in the upper reaches of society as well.⁹⁹ Since such a large portion of antebellum urban status depended upon who were one’s “friends,” meaning both acquaintances and relatives, simply by listening to gossip and reading the newspapers one could put on a class disguise sufficiently convincing to fool even supposed relatives, as “Clarkson Hamilton,” actually a gambler, does in *The Gambler’s League* when he presents himself as a cousin of the “Hamiltons from Utica.”¹⁰⁰

The trope of “vulgar plebeians, aping the Ton” was the most common image of class “passing,” but those who knew the city well enough could be much more convincing.¹⁰¹ Osgood Bradbury warned, describing Job Snyder in *Emily, the Beautiful Seamstress*, that, “There are some characters in our cities whose wardrobes contain suits for several occasions as circumstances may require.” Snyder has beggar’s rags as well as broadcloth suits, along with a Methodist parson’s outfit, and brags of the skill with which

⁹⁸ Donald Grant Mitchell (Ik Marvel), *The Lorgnette: or, Studies of the Town. By an Opera-Goer*. 2 vols. (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 2nd ed., 1850), 1: 113.

⁹⁹ Osgood Bradbury, *The Belle of the Bowery* (Boston: H. L. Williams, 1846), 61.

¹⁰⁰ Osgood Bradbury, *The Gambler’s League; or, The Trials of a Country Maid* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 1857), 20–22.

¹⁰¹ H. T. Sperry, *Country Love vs. City Flirtation*, 18.

he uses them: “‘Did’nt you know that some of the biggest bugs in the city are my best friends and most familiar acquaintances? I move in the upper circles, among the upper ten.’”¹⁰² The same flexibility was necessary for passing downward as well; John Vose informed prospective Broadway dandies that a “young gent in the city of New York, who intends to be one of the ‘upper crust,’ ... aside from the ways of a gentleman, ... must also know how to act the part of a knave, a rascal, and be acquainted with the rounds of the city so as to carry out his part well.”¹⁰³

These skills of class impersonation were not only necessary for carrying out urban crime, but also for fighting it. Tom Turner is able to be the “urban superman” in *Ellen Grant: or, Fashionable Life in New York* precisely because he has no class—his clothes, which are always the same (brown suit and green vest) and are custom-made to be just slightly out of fashion and give no clues as to his class identity, and he has “the tact to suit himself to any kind of society....”¹⁰⁴ A clear understanding of the language in which urban class was read enabled even women to manipulate its messages, as a genteel woman in Mrs. Ann Stephens’s *Fashion and Famine* does, going to visit her former lover at the Astor House: “The lady had meantime changed her dress to one of black silk, perfectly plain, and giving no evidence of position, by which a stranger might judge to what class of society she belonged.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Osgood Bradbury, *Emily, the Beautiful Seamstress; or, The Danger of the First Step. A Story of Life in New York* (New York: Samuel French, 1853), 61, 69.

¹⁰³ Vose, *Fresh Leaves*, 85.

¹⁰⁴ Osgood Bradbury, *Ellen Grant: or, Fashionable Life in New York*, by a Member of the New York Bar (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 185?), 13. Even Tom’s best friends cannot figure out who he is or how he lives, since he does not appear to work yet can always pay his bills.

¹⁰⁵ Mrs. Ann S. Stephens, *Fashion and Famine* (New York: Bunce & Brother, 1854), 53. As in men’s clothes of the period, a uniform of solid black in a plain fabric acted as the most versatile class mask.

Despite the flexibility of these various markers of class, however, city-mysteries novels outlined various signs that, when pieced together, helped to construct a model of how urban class lines were drawn. One of the most frequently deployed of these class markers was language, in the form of the distinctive Bowery B'hoy slang—"Val I swow, tis a darned good place, ... 'de majestic 'udson, an' dis great city"—and the affected lisp of urban dandies—"The-ah people who-ah visit these places are perfwect bwutes so far as fathion is-ah concerned."¹⁰⁶ In many city-mysteries where characters' class status suddenly changes, either through marriage or inheritance, their language changes as well. But as a class disguise, the appropriate language was presented as difficult (though not impossible) to acquire. A married woman in *The Fortunes of a Young Widow* carries on an affair with a lower class man who dresses like a dandy but can't complete the act linguistically. "You look very like one of the gentlemen one meets at the opera," she tells him, "but your disguise would fail you if you were to open your mouth. You must learn to lisp, to mince your words, and be very fastidious."¹⁰⁷

Geographical location was another marker of class that was held to be reliable, although it too could be faked. The primary residential divide in New York between gentility and the *hoi polloi* was Bleecker Street, the antebellum version of the late twentieth-century "landlord's frontier" at 96th Street, except that the rich in the 1850s lived north of the divide. This corresponded to the distinction between Broadway and the

Blumin has argued that the pervasiveness of the "plain dark democracy of broadcloth" that made so many clothes look the same accounts for the middle class emphasis on decorating and differentiating domestic space (*Emergence of the Middle Class*, 179).

¹⁰⁶ Frank Hazelton, *The Mysteries of Troy: Founded Upon Incidents Which Have Taken Place in the City* (Troy, NY: Troy Publishing Company, 1847), 9; George Thompson, *Adventures of a Pickpocket*, 63.

¹⁰⁷ *Fortunes of a Young Widow*, 19.

Bowery that applied for purposes of commerce and entertainment, where “Broadway is one crowd, and the Bowery another,” the former thronged with “the ‘fashionables’—the latter with the hard-fisted mechanic, and the laboring classes in general.”¹⁰⁸ Dandies, another marginal class group, were thought to live all over the city, but congregated at street corners, in public parks, and on the front steps of fancy hotels where, according to Thomas Low Nichols, they would go to pick their teeth after having a nine-cent steak in a cheap diner, so that people would think they had eaten at the hotel.¹⁰⁹

The rapid changes in urban fashion meant that a location that one year was a favorite of urban elites would be the haunt of loafers and parvenus the next, as one city-mystery claimed had happened to the Battery in New York.¹¹⁰ Even in a smaller city, geographic differences carried clear class messages. Gillett, the bowling shark who is the main villain in *The Mysteries of Springfield*, tries to rise in society through introductions to some of the city’s elite families, and “it seemed to him as it does to every one else, that each individual belonged to a particular set, that each set was very small, and formed usually by proximity of shops, dwelling houses, or by the neighborhoods from which the individuals composing it originally came.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Vose, *Seven Nights in Gotham*, 41.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Low Nichols, *Ellen Ramsay; or, The Adventures of a Greenhorn in Town and Country* (New York: n.p., 1843), 26.

¹¹⁰ *Fortunes of a Young Widow*, 92.

¹¹¹ J. Wimpleton Wilkes, Esq., *The Mysteries of Springfield: A Tale of the Times* (Springfield, MA: William B. Brockett, 1844), 18. Mary Ryan, in her study of antebellum New York, San Francisco, and New Orleans, offers a useful analysis of the pattern of neighborhood markets that indicated the “meiosis of each city into separate sectors and neighborhoods, some of which corresponded with a social segmentation of the people.” Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 35. For another useful discussion of the class connotations of specific locales in antebellum New York, see Peter G. Buckley, “Culture, Class, and Place in Antebellum New York,” in *Power, Culture, and Place: Essays on New York City*, ed. John Hull Mollenkopf (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988), 25–27.

Another marker of urban class that is limned quite specifically in city-mysteries fiction are cultural practices of leisure or entertainment. Thomas Baker notes that the “class segmentation of amusements played a crucial part” in fostering class resentment since, as the opera and other elite entertainments drew the upper classes, the “cheap” theaters on the Bowery became characterized by a more volatile class consciousness.¹¹² This conflict reached its zenith with the Astor Place Riots of 1849, but the gradations were more subtle simply than an alignment of aristocrats with European arts and workers with melodrama and minstrelsy.¹¹³ To be certain, city-mysteries novels did outline the commonly accepted class boundaries of leisure activity. Urban workers were shown to be fond of prizefights, the penny papers (the *Herald* and the *Sun* in New York), cheap fiction (such as city-mysteries), and the melodramatic, popular theatrical forms of theaters such as the Bowery and the Chatham, while the upper classes were depicted as enjoying horse racing, the more genteel newspapers (the *Tribune* or the *Commercial Advertiser*), highbrow books and journals (N. P. Willis and the *North American Review*), and the more European-influenced theater of the Park or the Opera House.¹¹⁴

The scene in the “pit” of a popular theater, crowded with newsboys eating peanuts, was held to be the pinnacle of urban working-class leisure enjoyment. In *Three Years After*, Ned Buntline recommends visiting just such a theater, being sure only to

¹¹² Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity*, 109–10.

¹¹³ For more on the Astor Place Riot, see Richard Moody, *The Astor Place Riot* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958); Peter G. Buckley, “To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820–1860,” Ph.D. Diss. (SUNY-Stony Brook, 1984); and Buckley, “The Case Against Ned Buntline: The ‘Words, Signs, and Gestures’ of Popular Authorship,” *Prospects* 13 (1988): 249–272.

¹¹⁴ Elliott Gorn’s *The Manly Art: Bare-knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986) outlines the way in which working-class saloon and boxing culture constituted a plebeian inversion of middle-class masculinity. For more on working-class leisure, see Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis*, chapters 8 & 9.

bring along a shilling, to anyone wanting to “see the b’hoys life” (a visitor from Tennessee in the novel takes his advice, but the smell in the theater makes him vomit).¹¹⁵ But the boundaries that marked a form of entertainment as being either for the “b’hoys” or for the “upper ten” could often be blurred. Contrary to our modern conception of minstrelsy as an entertainment form primarily of the urban working classes, Brian Roberts describes a young New York clerk who both went to minstrel shows and to the opera wearing his white kid gloves, and George Foster wrote that, “the grand point of attraction for our respectable middle class, is the inimitable and inevitable Christy’s Minstrels.”¹¹⁶ Male sporting culture often acted to bring together men from disparate class backgrounds, drawn together by their shared leisure activities of gambling, horse-racing, sailing, and visiting brothels.¹¹⁷ John Vose wrote of an antebellum cockfight that, “It may be supposed that none but the low and vulgar could be found among the frequenters of a

¹¹⁵ Ned Buntline, *Three Years After; A Tale of Mysteries, Gambling, & Crime* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, n.d.), 43.

¹¹⁶ Roberts, *American Alchemy*, 30; Foster, *New York Naked*, 146. Again, Foster describes these “middle classes” as making up “nine-tenths of all our population.” For more on minstrelsy, see Saxton, *Rise and Fall of the White Republic*; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford, 1993); and W. T. Lhamon, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹¹⁷ Christine Stansell has noted the extent to which it is shared leisure preferences, not workplace experiences, that defined “Bowery B’hoys” status in the antebellum city (Stansell, *City of Women*, 91). Timothy Gilfoyle, expanding on Stansell’s work, reveals the extent to which “even the supposedly sharp distinction between those who frequented the Bowery and those who went to Broadway, often seen by contemporaries and later historians, as indicative of class divisions, was in fact quite fluid, and the areas were economically integrated.” Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), 107.

Chapter 5 in Gilfoyle and Chapter 6 in Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), along with Elliott Gorn’s *The Manly Art*, are especially useful on the emergence of masculine sporting culture as a cross-class phenomenon. See also Eric Homberger, *Scenes from the Life of a City: Corruption and Conscience in Old New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 186. The prime embodiment of this tendency, as cited by Homberger, is John Morrissey, a famous boxer, street fighter, and gang leader from downtown New York who parlayed a career as a thug for the Democratic machine into ownership of several gambling halls. In 1861, however, he opened the first casino in Saratoga, and two years later was instrumental in opening the first racetrack, linking the Democratic street “elite” and the traditional elite through sporting culture.

cock-pit; yet this is not so. Gentlemen of exalted reputation, scholars, philosophers, even divines are here, mixed up with stable-boys, market hucksters, fishermen, thimble-riggers, gamblers, and loafers of every description.”¹¹⁸

But even within the realms of sporting culture that appealed to a wide spectrum of people, city-mysteries novels helped readers read the fine distinctions. Vose was describing a “high-class” cock-pit in the Bowery, but he later describes a “low” pit in Water Street, and, if cock-fighting held some cross-class appeal, rat fights (usually pitting a terrier against a swarm of rats) were depicted as purely working-class entertainments. Nor did the novels only describe the extremes of the class spectrum when it came to entertainment. In *The Road to Ruin*, Frank Wildeye inherits a modest amount of money and embarks on a path of “middle-class extravagance in dissipation,” eschewing the “extravagances of champagne [sic] and the opera” for “billiards, races, the Adelpia, and the cider cellars.”¹¹⁹ Additional markers of class were closely aligned with leisure activities, such as religion and politics, especially through the role played by the temperance movement. In general, when religion and class are discussed in tandem in the novels, it is primarily with a view toward criticizing the elitism of Episcopalians or the mercenary tendencies of Quakers, or toward satirizing the hypocrisy of any evangelical sect that embraced the poor and benighted overseas but would have nothing to do with their starving neighbors.

¹¹⁸ Vose, *Seven Nights in Gotham*, 29.

¹¹⁹ Edwin Roberts, *The Road to Ruin; or, The Dangers of the Town. A Career of Crime* (Cincinnati: U. P. James, 1854), 8.

Class and Clothes

Beyond all other markers of class, however, city-mysteries novels devoted by far the most space and detail to discussing the intricacies of clothing, since it was both the most finely nuanced way to read class and the most easily manipulated sign of class status. Blumin writes that, “it is important to note that if the clothing of the middle and working classes grew more alike, the places in which that clothing was displayed, after as well as during working hours, grew physically more separate.”¹²⁰ City-mysteries novels, however, directly contradict this statement on both counts. If white-collar workers were now working outside the home, they had to get to work somehow, which took them into the streets of the city, revealing them to the gaze of their fellow-citizens. To an untrained eye, perhaps, the dark-colored outfits of the middle and working classes may have looked similar, but popular urban fiction was devoted to nothing if not training the urban eye, teaching readers the fine distinctions that would help them safely navigate the streets of the city. And it is in these streets, sites of promiscuous class mixing, *not* separation, that clothing was most on display and was most minutely described. It was on the urban street that dramas over “extravagance” and the “excesses of imported fashions” were played out, as the “extremes of dress and display adopted by status-conscious arrivistes refracted the nation’s growing disparities of wealth and culture most alarmingly.”¹²¹

¹²⁰ Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 144. The fullest discussion of men’s clothing in this period is Michael Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy: A History of Men’s Dress in the American Republic, 1760-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

¹²¹ Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity*, 97–8. As Baker notes, the extravagance of many antebellum fashions was inseparable from their association with France, particularly Paris, and the attendant connotations of both aristocratic privilege and sexual immorality.

If such contrasts gave urban residents a lifestyle to aspire to, they also fed envy and resentment. Some authors were concerned by the semiotic power of clothing—Joseph Holt Ingraham decried the tendency of apprentices toward “forming clubs and adopting certain styles of hat, of wearing the hair, or of shaping the coat, for the purpose of appearing rowdy and independent,” describing it as “one of the evils of their position, as censurable as that of fine dressing, vanity, and aping fashion among clerks”—but in his condemnation he provided information on how to read the code of urban dress.¹²² City dwellers of all classes would have been acutely aware of the messages that their clothing carried, perhaps no group more so than the insecure middle class, who went to significant expense to maintain appearances, hoping to be thought worthy of elite status while staving off the thought that perhaps they really belonged farther down the class ladder.

Clothing in the antebellum city spoke eloquently, conveying messages fraught with economic, religious, political, and cultural import, and city-mysteries helped decode those messages. Fellow mercantile clerks who supported Richard Robinson, the accused murderer of the New York prostitute Helen Jewett, wore “Robinson caps” during the trial to indicate their allegiance, while David Broderick, a Democratic functionary, wore a “Helen Jewett mourner” hat to indicate his class and political opposition to Robinson’s supporters on an outing to welcome President Polk to the city.¹²³ The simple black garb of Philadelphia Quakers and the plain dark clothes of Methodist clergymen conveyed

¹²² Ingraham, *Harry Harefoot*, 47.

¹²³ See Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett*; for Broderick, see Saxton, *Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, 208. The “Robinson cap” was described as a “fancy glazed cap,” while the “Jewett mourner” was described by Broderick’s biographer as a “white beaver hat with a band of crepe or bombazine half way up the crown” (quoted in Saxton, 208).

messages about class, political affiliation, and morality. The common assumption that volunteer firemen wore boots and red flannel shirts told other citizens that a young man wearing such an outfit was either a selfless urban hero or a dangerous drunken rowdy, depending on their perspective.

Most of all, city-mysteries novels stressed the importance of clothing in conveying the desired message about oneself in the highly charged urban semiotic environment. As Frank St. Clair warned the readers of *Six Days in the Metropolis*, “good clothes ... are rather important items, in the minds of most city people. ... A good hat and nicely-fitted boot have been the making of many a man, even of ordinary caliber. Don’t make a fool of yourself by false promises, and of all things don’t wear old clothes in Boston.”¹²⁴ The noble Mr. Dudley in *The Forged Will* wears “nothing showy or gaudy, and yet every garment was rich, and fitted his person with utmost exactness,” providing a “true index to his mind—as in fact dress generally is....”¹²⁵ This lack of gaudy display was taken to be one of the key elements of “respectable” or “genteel” dress. A uniform of black and white was a marker of at least middle-class status (although an experienced observer could tell by the fabric and tailoring precisely where one ranked), while a dandy or a parvenu might adopt “the flashy scarfs, and rainbow vests, which make a man look like a boa constrictor, escaped from a menagerie.”¹²⁶

City-mysteries novels did not offer sartorial tips only for the upwardly mobile. Above all, they offered information on how to use clothes to fit in to any environment. In

¹²⁴ Frank St. Clair, *Six Days in the Metropolis, or Phases of Life in Town* (Boston: Redding & Co., 1854), 16–7.

¹²⁵ Emerson Bennett, *The Forged Will*, 76–77; italics mine.

¹²⁶ Thomas Low Nichols, *The Lady in Black*, 11.

Jack Waid, the Burglar, Justin Jones ridicules a rich Southern family visiting New York, since they have shown up at the Bowery Theatre in their finest clothes; not knowing the rules of urban dress, they had dressed in the same fashion they had for the Park Theatre the previous night.¹²⁷ But clothes could also carry more specific information about where someone was from. John Vose wrote that, “New Yorkers can tell a Bostonian, or in other language an ‘Eastern man’ by the singularity of his ways and dress; while a Gothamite is ‘spotted’ by the way he acts and wears his hat—on an angle!”¹²⁸ Tellingly, most novels in the genre focused on the intricacies of men’s clothes much more so than women’s.¹²⁹ Sexually available women were described as wearing gaudy, colorful, low-cut dresses, and as almost always without hats, but were more easily distinguished by their behavior and location (any woman walking the street at night was assumed to be a prostitute). The clothing worn by women from all walks of life was described more precisely in the extent to which it revealed the “outlines of her heaving bosom” than in its particular socioeconomic details.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Harry Hazel, *Jack Waid, the Burglar; or The Cobbler of Gotham* (Philadelphia: A. Winch, 1852), 57–8. Appropriateness to one’s specific locale was a key focus of many urban texts. A writer in a Whig journal noted, “No sensitive man could walk up the Bowery, for example, with exactly the same step he would use in Broadway, nor can any slouch or elbow his way through Bond street as he might in Chatham, or withstand the sweet influences of Division with the same carelessness with which he might suffer himself to be jostled along Front.” The desire to develop such “sensitivity” was no doubt one of the many reasons that readers read city-mysteries. G. W. P., “The Physiognomy of Cities,” *American Whig Review* 6 (Sept. 1847), 241.

¹²⁸ Vose, *Fresh Leaves*, 96.

¹²⁹ This may indicate their ties to male sporting culture which, as Helen Horowitz notes, “was a sociable world in which wealthy associated with poor and old with young, linked by the pursuit of thrills. It valued fancy clothes and jewelry, the outward appearance of gentlemen.” (Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, 127.)

¹³⁰ Bennett, *The Forged Will*, 87. Some exceptions to this are the city-mysteries novels that were written by women, who tended to pay more attention to the details of their female characters’ clothing. An exceptionally specific description of sartorial detail is in F. A. Durivage’s *Edith Vernon: or, Crime and Retribution* (Boston: F. Gleason, 1845), where Durivage describes the promenade along Washington Street in Boston, comparing current styles with those of 30 years before (11).

Men's clothing was described not just with a view toward appearing "respectable," but toward fitting in and keeping safe. In George Lippard's *Mysteries of the Pulpit*, a policeman tells a man he has just arrested that he will come up before "Judge Choctaw" the next morning: "Chocktaw is an ornament to any Christ'en community. ... If you come up before him, he just takes a squint at your dress, and in a squint he knows your character, and measures your punishment. He's down on rags, I tell ye. Rags always gets a full dose in the Pennytensherry, rags does when Chocktaw's on the bench. But broadcloth—Lord! How he loves it, and smoothes over its weaknesses, and remembers what a good family it comes from!"¹³¹ Conversely, George Thompson informed his readers that in the decrepit neighborhood of Southwark in Philadelphia, if "Mackerel Jim should happen to envelop his neck in a flashy blue scarf," it would be considered "coming it too strong for these diggins," and he would likely get a beating.¹³²

Another Philadelphia novella relied on the keen eyes of its readers to pick out the identifying mark of the "Bouncers," a Philadelphia gang of thugs whose "emblem of distinction ... is in the bottom of their pants, which have two tucks, and are turned up so that the white lining is visible."¹³³ The author of *Black Rolf*, instead of providing advice for the upwardly mobile, instructed his readers how to dress like "one of the b'hoys," going so far as to tell Philadelphia readers where to shop. Balty Sowersby, a young butcher from Spring Garden, was the picture of a b'hoys, "even from the crown of his Florence glossy manufactured hat, to the sole of his sturdy cow-hide boots, fashioned by

¹³¹ Lippard, *Mysteries of the Pulpit*, 147.

¹³² George Thompson, *Mysteries and Miseries of Philadelphia*, By a Member of the Philadelphia Bar (New York: Williams & Co., 185?), 76.

¹³³ *Mysteries of Philadelphia, or: Scenes of Real Life in the Quaker City*, by an Old Amateur (Philadelphia: n.p., 1848), 65.

that venerable agrarian and working-man's friend, St. Crispen Young, whose cobbler's stall was then located on the banks of Pegg's Run, or what is now the neighborhood of Sixth and Buttonwood."¹³⁴ Thus city-mysteries impressed on readers both the power of clothing in the city to convey very specific messages about class and the importance of dressing the right way to be sure that the desired message was sent.

Of course, if clothing was such an expressive (and easily learned) language of class, it was also easily manipulated, which destabilized entire frameworks of urban meaning and legibility. Karen Haltunnen has described the antebellum anxiety regarding the confidence man and his ability to adopt various class disguises, but the manipulation of clothing and other markers of class could be deployed for other than criminal purposes. City-mysteries novels made frequent mention of a group of city dwellers, almost always men and most often dandies, who managed to live without any visible means of support, rendering it impossible to place them in the urban class structure. John Chumasero described a man named Bonneville as "one of that singular class of beings existing in every populous city, who excite the interest of the community by living in a state of apparent affluence and comfort, without any ostensible or visible means of procuring a livelihood. Being in no regular occupation, he dipped into them all, and ... his name was never mentioned ... without the accompanying exclamation, 'I wonder how he lives'"¹³⁵

George Lippard described a man as "one of those mysterious, well-dressed people whom you meet every day in Broadway, and who are mysterious because no one can tell

¹³⁴ Harmer Warden, *Black Rolf*, 21.

¹³⁵ Chumasero, *The Landlord and Tenant*, 12.

where all those fine clothes, eye-glasses, and gold chains come from.”¹³⁶ This trope of the inexplicable genteel lifestyle was so firmly associated with the “mysteries” of the city that a song entitled the “Mysteries & Miseries of New-York City,” written and sung by a J. S. Berry at his “Academy of Fun” theater on Broadway, concerned itself with this very phenomenon:

Standing on Broadway, you can see, every day
Dressed up in the height of fashion,
A certain lot of swells that never, never tell
Where they get the means to dash on.
They’ve always cash on hand, but I never can understand
Where they get it: for, work they never do;
At the St. Nicholas they’ll put up, and on Champagne wine they’ll sup:
It’s wonderful how they do it, but they do.¹³⁷

While some readers might have concluded that these dandified loafers were pimps or gamblers, those occupations brought other urban mysteries to mind. Other authors claimed to unveil the mystery of how these men led lives of fashion with no visible support, revealing that they “sleep in Chatham-street, in some fifth story or the garret, and live on hard bread, cheese, dry-codfish, and ale.” In *Violet, the Child of the City*, the accomplished dandy Pinkerton Podge lives in a cockroach-infested hole in order to afford his genteel clothes, while other novels showed in great detail how such men avoided paying their tailors, hatters, and bootmakers’ bills, offering almost a how-to in debt evasion.¹³⁸ At least one author took these stories too literally. George Foster, according

¹³⁶ Lippard, *The Midnight Queen*, 94.

¹³⁷ J. S. Berry, “Mysteries & Miseries of New-York City,” printed broadside (185?), Broadside Collection, New-York Historical Society.

¹³⁸ Vose, *Fresh Leaves*, 33; Robert Greeley, *Violet, the Child of the City: A Story of New York Life...* (New York: Bunce and Brother, 234); for a typical delineation of debt evasion, see Mrs. Anna Cora Mowatt Ritchie, *The Fortune Hunter; or, The Adventures of a Man about Town. A Novel of New York Society* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1848).

to the New York *Tribune* of Jan. 9, 1855, was arrested for trying to give a Philadelphia tailor a forged check in the name of William Burton (the owner of Burton's Theatre in New York).

Not being able to explain one's standard of living could be dangerous in the antebellum city. The second Committee of Vigilance in San Francisco frequently heard charges against people of "having no visible means of support," which implied a lack of industriousness, and most likely a gambler's lifestyle.¹³⁹ Regarding the vagrant ordinance in antebellum St. Louis, Jeffrey Adler describes how, by the early 1850s, "visible" had become the crucial term, since "men without visible means of support, merchants and city officials reasoned, had invisible or illegal means of support." As a result, men who had money but no employment were arrested as vagrants and fined heavily. Adler reports that a youth named James Brady was arrested because he "was possessed of no real estate or honestly obtained money in the bank, though he always wears a good suit and can stand treat to any amount." George Battles was convicted because he wore "patent leather shoes, fancy pants, and the latest styles generally."¹⁴⁰ Thus physical appearance, as conveyed through clothing, when it did not match a man's social standing (or when that standing could not be ascertained), became an indicator of criminality.

¹³⁹ San Francisco Committee of Vigilance Papers, Unclassified Papers, 1853–56, Box 3, Henry E. Huntington Library.

¹⁴⁰ Jeffrey S. Adler, "Vagging the Demons and Scoundrels: Vagrancy and the Growth of St. Louis, 1830–1861," *Journal of Urban History* 13:1 (November 1986), 10–11. Adler's outstanding article charts how attitudes toward vagrancy in St. Louis changed as the rate of the city's growth altered; when there was plenty of work, vagrants were less of a concern, since they could be put to work somewhere. There is evidence that some of these men who lacked visible means of support very likely were indeed criminals. Adler writes about Theophilus George, the king of the St. Louis vagrants, a native of Philadelphia who was charged with vagrancy at least eleven times between 1852 and 1860. Instead of going to jail, George paid the \$1000 fine each time (14).

In minutely outlining such markers of urban status, city-mysteries novels both helped readers understand the urban world around them and, more importantly, shaped their expectations of how that changing world worked. If the signal characteristic of the urban class structure was rapid and drastic mobility, and if class status was expressed through signifiers such as dress, sensational urban narratives provided up-to-the-minute indices of how class could be read and interpreted. While they were charting the cycle of urban fashion and poverty, however, authors of city-mysteries fiction were also reflecting changes in the very nature of class itself, beyond the emergence of a “middle class” of nonmanual workers. The antebellum urban milieu not only served as a crucible for class mobility, it also fostered a sea change in what was thought to constitute distinction or respectability in the United States.

Chapter Eight

Radicalism, Respectability, and the Class Politics of City-Mysteries Fiction

*It is the magic that can all bewitch,
YOU'RE SURE TO BE RESPECTABLE IF RICH*

--*The Golden Calf*, by John Hunt Strother

The years in which city-mysteries flourished saw a profound transformation of the American class system, as traditional elites were broken down by both the rising wealth created by America's economic expansion and by the strongly populist tendencies of antebellum politics. The era that began with the election of a scion of the Virginia aristocracy to the presidency (William Henry Harrison) running as a "Log Cabin" candidate and ended with the election of the first *actual* "Log Cabin" president (Abraham Lincoln) offers a valuable window onto changes in America's class structure. Since they took as their primary subject America's cities, where these changes were most visibly played out, city-mysteries novels chart in useful ways the changing conceptions of class—what it was, who had it, what it meant—in antebellum America, as was discussed in the previous chapter.

Modern scholars often attribute to the genre of city-mysteries fiction an artisanal (if not outright radical) class-consciousness. But what did these novels actually say about the social structure of America's cities? Did city-mysteries depict urban areas as hellholes of wage slavery? Or did they show antebellum cities as sites of opportunity, where one's class status could be elevated and redefined? While the discussion in the previous chapter addressed how the various classes in antebellum America were defined,

or how class *worked*, this chapter will examine what membership in those class groups *meant*.

In the absence of any distinctly drawn boundaries of social status, class in America has always been largely notional, or a question of identification rather than classification (witness the huge majority of Americans who consider themselves to be “middle class”).¹ Although occupational status and income or wealth played significant roles in constituting one’s class status in the period, the line between manual and nonmanual labor is too blurry and too simplistic to be relied on entirely.² For instance, to rely on stereotypes of the day, if two men were both proprietors of urban dry-goods stores, and both made the same amount of money, but one was a native-born temperance Whig and a committed Episcopalian and the other was an Irish Roman Catholic who voted Democrat and drank a good deal, their perceived status in the antebellum city would have been quite different.

City-mysteries novels attempted to chart this murky territory while espousing a populist pro-labor ideology of individual success that seemed to encourage readers to try to become wealthy but, when they did, not to forget where they came from. In Eliza

¹ Anthony Giddens’s distinction between “class consciousness,” which requires the recognition of other distinct classes and the belief that certain attitudes constitute a certain class affiliation, and “class awareness,” which is identification with a certain group through an assumption of shared attitudes and lifestyle, is useful in trying to understand what constituted class in antebellum America. In fact, Giddens states, class awareness may “take the form of a denial of the existence or reality of classes,” which describes a large portion of the American population. Anthony Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1973), 111. For a comparative perspective on city-mysteries fiction and class, see Kimberly R. Gladman, “Upper Tens and Lower Millions: City Mysteries Fiction and Class in the Mid-nineteenth Century,” Ph.D. Diss., New York University (2001).

² As Mary Ryan notes, “the shifts in occupational structure did not sort themselves into clear class divisions. ... The militant producer consciousness of Anglo-Saxon Protestant artisans waxed its strongest just as unskilled foreign-born, often Catholic laborers came to dominate the manual work force.” Mary Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 23.

Leslie's *The Maid of Canal Street*, a snobby young widow, Mrs. Edgecumbe, after averring that "mechanics, tradesmen, shopkeepers belong to the people" and, as such, "cannot be admitted into society," is asked to define "society" or "the aristocracy." She replies, "Well, then—the aristocracy is composed of lawyers, doctors, fashionable clergymen, and merchants. By merchants, I mean wholesale dealers, or importers. ... The aristocracy of America is a thing that cannot be explained or described. ... Still, we all understand what it is."³ It is this common understanding of where class lines lay, lines that could not be "explained or described" by easy resort to census records or tax valuations, that popular texts like city-mysteries help to clarify.

The records of the Second Vigilance Committee in San Francisco, which has been described as the "Businessmen's Revolution," provide a valuable window onto antebellum attitudes concerning class. Patterned on the 1851 Vigilance Committee, which had organized in response to a wave of crime sweeping the city that was attributed to an influx of foreign criminals, primarily convicts from the British Isles who were arriving from Australia, the 1856 Vigilance Committee was prompted by another wave of crime and fires, but also by a perceived wave of political fraud. The Vigilantes usurped all the functions of government, capturing a shipment of arms from the federal government intended for the state militia and arresting and trying the chief justice of the California Supreme Court.⁴

³ Eliza Leslie, *The Maid of Canal Street* (Philadelphia: A. Hart, 1851), 19.

⁴ Philip Ethington, *The Public City: The Political Construction of Urban Life in San Francisco, 1850–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 89.

The Committee also identified certain men as suitable for membership and others as suitable for deportation based on criteria that I would argue constitute crucial elements of the antebellum vision of class—elements such as respectability, usefulness, and morality. An examination of the records of the Committee, including membership applications and supporting statements, indicates that, instead of viewing the city’s population as divided between a nonmanual “middle” class and a “lower” class composed of manual laborers, antebellum San Franciscans saw society as being divided between those who were respectable and not, useful and not. The Vigilantes’ language “asserted that meaningful divisions in society arose not from the type of work men did (criminal behavior was not considered work), but from the way they did it (honestly or dishonestly).”⁵ In practice, the primary things that could get one labeled as not useful or respectable were being single, being Irish, being illiterate, living with no visible means of support, drinking to excess, gambling, and having been convicted of a crime.

Far from representing religious or moral or ethnocentric critiques that were divorced from any conception of class, I would argue that these factors were crucial elements of what we would describe as class, or what antebellum Americans would have called “respectability,” which was the central element of most understandings of class in the period. If it seems natural to us to equate class with money, it is crucial to keep in mind that this is a connection that was taking shape at this time but was by no means a given. Of far more importance to the antebellum understanding of class were the qualities of respectability and its allied virtue, “usefulness.”

⁵ Ethington, *The Public City*, 155.

Many city-mysteries narratives draw their vision of antebellum America's class structure from a populist elevation of the artisan or yeoman farmer. In *The Countess*, George Thompson writes of his heroine, who grew up in Portland, Maine, that, "Her parents did not belong to a miserable, mawkish, flounder aristocracy. They were not patrons of the Opera, nor members of the Philharmonic or Musical Fund Societies, ... nor were they in itinerant circumstances. She is of noble blood and birth.... Her father was a mechanic, an honest hard working man.... He was of the bone and sinew of the nation...."⁶ Yet she is not of simple laboring stock, as her maternal grandfather was one of the original signers of the Declaration of Independence. Thus, in light of the heritage of manual labor on one side and Colonial elite status on the other, Thompson identifies her family as being firmly "middle class," which is to say, respectable and useful, neither of the aristocracy of new money that aped European manners nor of the "itinerant" laboring poor.

Respectability

The moral dimension of the class issue was very real. In a story in the Lowell *Offering* from 1841, one character argues, "the rich and poor ought to be equally respected, if virtuous; and equally detested, if vicious."⁷ Material distinctions were not insignificant in this understanding of class, but *virtue* was the key to an individual's social standing. The central value of this conception of class was respectability,

⁶ George Thompson, *The Countess; or, Memoirs of Women of Leisure, Being a Series of Intrigues with the Bloods* (Boston: Berry & Co., 1849), 10.

⁷ "Prejudice Against Labor," Lowell *Offering*, 2nd ser. 1:1 (1841), 138.

indicating that antebellum class was just as much about morals and culture as it was about money.⁸

The primary point of emphasis for this moral conception of class was the temperance issue. It was possible to be an aristocratic drunk, since aristocrats were not “respectable,” in that they performed no useful function in society (to the extent that one was “aristocratic,” one was precluded from “respectability,” which was a term of the virtuous middle). And it was expected that the destitute would be drunk (how better to explain their poverty?). But it was very difficult to be intemperate and be secure in remaining “respectable,” or middle-class, in the eyes of society. George Thompson, whose convivial propensities have been discussed previously, frequently satirized the extent to which temperance and respectability went hand in hand. His narrator in the *Adventures of a Pickpocket*, beginning to reconsider his course of life and to think about going straight, admits that, “It is only necessary in this community, in order to be considered the very model of a nice young man, to join either a church or a temperance society.”⁹

It was a common claim from both genteel reformers and sensational novelists alike that if rum were abolished, “you will shut up nine-tenths of the brothels and gaming

⁸ In Horatio Alger’s *Ragged Dick*—the first of his vast series of novels of urban uplift—the hero’s frequent refrain is, “I want to grow up ‘spectable.’” Whenever Dick refers to aspirations to be “rich” or “fashionable,” they are always in jest; his sincere hope is reserved for “respectability.” As the novel shows, he can become respectable by studying, going to church (a Protestant church), wearing neat clothes, and ceasing his visits to the theater and oyster cellars. Once “respectability” is achieved, wealth will follow, but it is the respectability that is the determinant of his class status. Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick, or, Life in the Streets* (Boston: A. K. Loring, 1868), 163.

⁹ George Thompson, *Adventures of a Pickpocket; or, Life at a Fashionable Watering Place, by Himself* (Boston: Berry & Co., 1849), 61–2.

houses in this city. Without rum they could not live over the first quarter's rent day."¹⁰ Closely aligned with the importance of temperance for respectability, as the linkage of rum and brothels indicates, was sexual continence. Again, aristocrats were expected to be libertines, as were the depraved poor, but the virtuous middle was expected to be precisely that—virtuous. Solon Robinson wrote that libertine sons were common in families of the mercantile elite, and that if a poor sewing girl “should be caught in the snare of such a son, how the mother would rave and drive her away unpaid, because she had disgraced her ‘respectable boy.’”¹¹

Robinson's use of quotation marks around the term “respectable boy” when used to describe a rakish son of the mercantile elite indicates how exclusively the notion of “respectability” in this more traditional conception of class was thought to belong to the broad middle of honest artisans and nonmanual workers. George Lippard, who tended toward the radical end of the spectrum of antebellum labor politics, drew a clear line between the “respectable workers” and what he saw as the rowdy street culture of the b'hoys that modern scholars have embraced as a distinct “working-class culture.” To Lippard, this demimonde of “the low blackguards of the street, the rowdies of the city” constituted a “dish so nauseous” that all respectable people would be sickened by it.¹²

One of the major plots of Ned Buntline's series of novels that began with *The Mysteries*

¹⁰ Solon Robinson, *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York Illustrated* (New York: Dewitt and Davenport, 1854), 91. For more on the linkage between temperance and respectability, see Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 59–60; Stuart Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 184–5.

¹¹ Robinson, *Hot Corn*, 137.

¹² Lippard, *Quaker City Weekly*, Oct. 6, 1849. Lippard was reviewing a play featuring the popular b'hoys character “Jakey of the Engine” at the Chesnut Street Theatre, a role that he thought beneath the actor involved.

and Miseries of New York involves the resentment of Carlton, an affluent family man who just happens to run a gambling parlor, toward his sometimes partner Shirley, a respected member of New York society who, behind the veil of urban secrecy, has a penchant for seducing innocent young girls. It is clear that the pressure to conform to the standard of respectability was exerted just as strongly on the elite as it was on the lower classes. One author's plea to those urban residents who were accumulating fortunes so rapidly in the era was that wealth should not be displayed "ostentatiously, but with true grandeur," that those who were becoming rich should not think money was "all in all, but that they had a character to maintain, a standard of respectability to conform to, while increasing their store."¹³

Part and parcel of this vision of respectability as a moral marker of social status was "honesty," not solely in the trope of the "honest laborer" but in a broader sense as well.¹⁴ Honesty, in republican ideology, was thought to repose primarily (but not exclusively) in the "working" part of the population, which conforms to Lippard's division of the population into the ninety percent that worked and the ten percent that lived off the labor of the majority. By this theory, work implied a certain level of morality or honesty, which was then taken as a marker of status. There was thought to exist a ruffian underclass who lacked honesty, and also an aristocratic elite who had become rich through their dishonesty, but, as the author of *The Three Widows* made clear,

¹³ G. W. P., "The Physiognomy of Cities," 241.

¹⁴ Philip Ethington has observed that in this republican ideology, "the notion of social class hinges on the ideas of virtue and industriousness. What separated a philanthropist and a pickpocket was not wealth, but that one gave and the other stole money." Ethington, *Public City*, 57.

honesty or “virtue” was thought to be equivalent with such terms as “hard-working” and “industrious.”¹⁵

Honesty, however, was not simply a virtue that accompanied labor, but was thought to belong to an era that was passing away. The author of *New York Aristocracy* described a Mr. Dennis who had accumulated a large fortune by “failing rich,” or having his business go bankrupt and refusing to pay his creditors while having profited significantly from the business himself but avoiding liability. The practice was enough to “make our old fashioned, honest Knickerbocker merchants of the last century, turn over in their graves with astonishment, could they hear of it.”¹⁶ Mr. Dennis, a typical example of the urban *nouveau riche*, is wealthy but, according to the republican understanding of class, would not be “respectable.”¹⁷

The difficulties presented by a rapid change in economic condition could lead to dishonesty, and a consequent loss of respectability. Many authors agreed with Henry Tappan when he wrote, “Two of the worst forms of evil peculiar to city life, are the fictitious grandeur, growing out of a sudden and rapid accumulation of wealth; and the

¹⁵ “I do not deny that there is some virtue there, but if we would find the greatest amount of it, and in its parent state, we must look for it among the hard-working and industrious portions of the community, where there is but little wealth and less show and style.” *The Three Widows: or, The Various Aspects of Gotham Life*, By a Member of the New York Bar (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1849), 35. As Amal Amireh notes, the economic vagaries of antebellum America created a new class of people—the “honest unemployed,” people who did not fit the earlier category of the “idle poor” and were willing to work but could not find employment, thus complicating the linkage between “industrious” and “honest.” Amal Amireh, *The Factory Girl and the Seamstress: Imagining Gender and Class in Nineteenth Century American Fiction* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000).

¹⁶ *New York Aristocracy; or, Gems of Japonica-dom*, by “Joseph” (New York: Charles B. Norton, 1851), 100.

¹⁷ Christine Stansell appropriately observes that there “were many varieties of republicanism in antebellum America; different groups—masters and journeymen, for example—could invoke republican ideas to justify directly competing social interests.” Nevertheless, the emphasis placed on respectability and virtue cut across all of these different strains of republicanism. Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 146.

idleness and dissipation attendant upon wealth inherited....”¹⁸ These evils were not simply failures of taste—not knowing which fork to use—but failures of character. The pursuit of social and economic advancement posed certain moral perils (avarice, envy) while their achievement posed others (pride, sloth, gluttony).

Likewise, those among the poor most likely to turn to crime, or to become “dishonest,” were those who had once been wealthy, and who knew what they were missing, or those who had been educated to a higher station than they occupied. George Thompson presented this in vivid fashion in *The Twin Brothers*, where Julian, the bad twin, is confronted with the possibility of extreme downward mobility:

“What desecration, to labor with these hands that so oft have toyed deliciously with the soft hands of lovely women, and roved in wanton dalliance amid the snowy charms revealed by their distractingly low-necked evening dresses!—Shall I insert my diminutive feet in cow-hide boots, irritate my satin-like skin by wearing a check shirt, and, as a common mechanic, sport a square paper cap and a leather apron? Horrible thought! The dread of starvation might possibly induce me to steal or beg; but to work—never!”¹⁹

Although Julian did not conform to republican standards of honesty before his fall, the difficulties of urban class mobility prompted him to further dishonesty—to steal—rather than inspiring a return to republican standards of industriousness.

The Eclipse of Republican Respectability

Over the period of their popularity, city-mysteries novels charted a transformation in urban conceptions of class from the republican ideology outlined above, which

¹⁸ Henry P. Tappan, *The Growth of Cities: A Discourse* (New York: R. Craighead, 1855), 27. Mrs. Mary Ide Torrey’s *City and Country Life: or, Moderate Better than Rapid Gains* (Boston: Tappan & Whitmore, 1853) is a wonderful example of the dangers that the combination of the urban environment and sudden (in this case, inherited) wealth were thought to pose.

¹⁹ George Thompson, *The Twin Brothers: or, The Fatal Resemblance* (New York: Perry & Co., 185?), 18.

emphasized respectability and virtue, to a new model of class which, according to these popular authors, focused more heavily on money. This perceived shift away from virtue and good conduct had been under way for some time, given the intensity of the debates in early America about excessive luxury, but it took on new force as people moved more frequently to places where they were relatively unknown, as more Americans began rapidly accumulating fortunes, and as new cities grew up around the industries that fueled them.²⁰ In *The Mysteries of Springfield*, J. Wimpleton Wilkes, Esq. attacked Springfield (Mass.) for its snobbery, explaining that, because it is a new-money city, people only measure each other by their wealth and not by their qualities:

This is a truth—a bitter truth, that not only exists through the wide world, but in this beautiful village of Springfield to a greater extent than in almost any town in New England. ... Look through the length and breadth of the village, and but a few merchants can be found that have been residents more than ten years, and few have been here half that length of time. They enter the town, come out with a blazing sign, dress extravagantly, and whatever place in society they assume, is at once accorded to them by all classes. Society is the wrong word to use, however, in connection with any thing we can say of the village, for there *is no society here*. ... No standard apparently exists but *money*. ... Even the very men who condemn this state of things, and talk most of the evils of fashion and aristocracy, all unconsciously perhaps, dress to imitate the rich, and with every faculty of their minds and bodies exert themselves to scrape together enough of the golden dust to enable them to take their places among them.²¹

While this incredibly conservative message—written by an author who chose a pen name that marked him as a member of the professional elite—indicates the flexibility of a genre

²⁰ See, for instance, Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1765* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992); and Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: Published for the United States Capitol Historical Society by the University Press of Virginia, 1994).

²¹ J. Wimpleton Wilkes, *The Mysteries of Springfield: A Tale of the Times* (Springfield, MA: William B. Brockett, 1844), 17.

that can both decry the perfidy of bankers and bemoan the infiltration of “society” by “trash,” it also highlights the perceived transformation in how status was being defined.

The widely shared belief that the old elites—who were imbued with the saintly aura of the Revolution and were therefore more virtuous—were disintegrating was central to this understanding. “Joseph,” in *New York Aristocracy*, lamented the tendency of society in 1851 to admit people who were morally unfit to serve as urban exemplars of fashion, claiming that “Society, in its recognition of those justly interdicted, [is] guilty of a violation of the very principles upon which it stands, the evil influences of which must descend to the third and fourth generation....”²² Ironically, according to some observers of urban life, the very success of the earlier generation was to blame for the degeneracy of the current one, since the degradation brought about by inherited wealth was thought by some to be “an absolute deterioration of the race which nothing can restore.”²³

The senescence of the early American elite was pointed up in “*First Families*,” *A Novel of Philadelphia Good Society*, by a “Descendant of the Penns,” in which a dinner party composed entirely of descendants of families that “occur in the early and romantic history of the colony” is described as being “insufferably dull,” not only to outsiders but to the members of society as well.²⁴ Indeed, the old elites were described, however facetiously, in some city-mysteries in terms identical to those used to describe Indians at

²² *New York Aristocracy*, 104. “Joseph” specifically targeted what he called the “mercenary prostitution” of fathers marrying their daughters off for financial purposes.

²³ Tappan, *The Growth of Cities*, 28. In his account of an unrefined urban heir, Tappan (who was the president of the University of Michigan) describes a trajectory that could have been lifted directly from a city-mystery, in which the young buffoon tries to learn refinement from his tailor, practices fancy airs, and begins frequenting “haunts of dissipation,” where he is surrounded by hangers-on who rob him of both health and money.

²⁴ “*First Families*, *A Novel of Philadelphia Good Society*, by a Descendant of the ‘Penns’ (Philadelphia: Whilt & Yost, 1855), 203.

the same time. Blenheim, a fashionable “literary adventurer” in *The Fortunes of a Young Widow*, describes the “antediluvian relics of New York aristocracy” as being made up of

“half a dozen families at most, and mostly descendants of the Dutch, who look with contempt on our fresher liveries, refuse to take pews in our new churches ... who fancy they can smell cod-fish, despite our perfume, and detect plebianism, inside of our patrician looking coaches. ... they must die out, just as the aborigines are dying out—they can’t survive civilization. We should have some of their portraits taken for preservation....”²⁵

While some authors welcomed the demise of traditional elites in favor of what they saw as an aristocracy of wealth achieved through merit rather than endurance, others sincerely regretted the passing of a class whose status they saw as being the product of liberal enlightenment and republican virtue. The author of *Silver and Pewter* compared the new mercantile elite to the “old genuine Knickerbockers, who alone were entitled to be called the aristocrats of New York.”²⁶ In Osgood Bradbury’s *The Modern Othello*, two British visitors are astonished that such people as merchants with European affectations and a thinly veiled parody of N. P. Willis make up New York’s “Upper Ten”: “But what about the old families; the educated merchants, the eminent Professional men, the Legislators of the State, and General Government, the Military and Naval officers; respectable and talented editors, and the members of their families; what, I say, about them?” They are told that some of the old elite allowed themselves to be “seduced by this impudent class. But others avoid it as a plague. The truly respectable and eminent

²⁵ *The Fortunes of a Young Widow, A Veritable Revelation of New York Life in the Nineteenth Century*, By an Old Inhabitant (Boston: Stearns & Co., 1851), 24.

²⁶ M. M. Huet, *Silver and Pewter, or The Contrasts of New York Life* (New York: H. Long and Brother, 1852), 8. In Huet’s novel, the parents of an ambitious young social climber want him to marry the aptly named Mary Meek, a child of the sensible Knickerbocker aristocracy, but she has no time for Fred Carter’s dandyish ways, preferring a learned professional (and an unsuccessful one at that), Edward Masterson.

live quietly among themselves without noise or ostentation. They practice morality and virtue in their households and preserve their habits of republican simplicity.”²⁷

The linkage of the earlier elite with modesty and “quietness,” as opposed to the noisy self-promotion of the arrivistes, was a frequent theme. The author of *The Fortunes of a Young Widow*, explaining the “violent and uncompromising” antagonism that exists between the “bastard aristocracy” of New York and the lower classes, attributes the disdain of the lower classes for the “codfish aristocrats” to the latter group’s noisy self-promotion and “vulgar pretension.” “There are indeed some fine old families resident among us, who, for services rendered to the public, for refinement and education, and who, distinguished for their gentleness and quietness, for the non-resistance of true politeness and good breeding, keep their place in the respect and love of the community,” the author writes, embracing an aristocracy of merit (and wealth) without display over one defined by conspicuous consumption.²⁸

The tension involved in this change is played out in Timothy Shay Arthur’s *Love in High Life*, in which Kate Harrison takes a liking to Martin Lane, a relatively poor young lawyer who nevertheless is admitted into society because of “his connexions,” since “his family was an old one.” Given his status as a sprig of the dying aristocratic tree, “Unlike a large majority of those into whose society he came, Lane was a

²⁷ Osgood Bradbury, *The Modern Othello; or, the Guilty Wife, a Thrilling Romance of New York Fashionable Life* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 1855), 18. Bradbury went farther in this fictionalized version of the Forrest–Macready controversy, claiming that the massacre at the Astor Place Riot was the direct result of “that lax morality which the encouragement of a new order of things amongst a portion of uppertendom was so calculated to provoke and engender” (83). The attribution of urban disorder to the immorality of the new elite, or the “new order of things,” is full of longing for the less fluid, but also less disorderly, urban order of the early republic.

²⁸ *Fortunes of a Young Widow*, 50.

gentleman, as well as a man thoroughly educated and accomplished.” Kate’s father, however, objects to the match, referring to Lane as a “penniless adventurer” and comparing the situation to stories he has heard of rich men’s daughters running off with the coachman. Mr. Harrison tells his daughter that Lane only “holds his place by virtue of family connexions.” When his daughter asks if it isn’t true that Lane belongs “to one of our best families,” her father replies, “Does that make him any better?”²⁹ The difficulty of reconciling a nostalgia for an era of clear class distinctions based on virtue with a more democratic ethos that viewed hereditary social privilege as a pernicious step on the road to monarchy is reflected in many city-mysteries narratives. There was rarely any debate that there would be an elite; the confusion was over who deserved the designation—those who had always had it, and thus were linked to the era of republican virtue, or those who were suddenly able to dress the part.

A way around this dilemma was to stress the obsession of the new-money—and, therefore, more “democratic”—urban elites with European aristocracy. By alleging that the new urban elites, who had risen to prominence through the antebellum gospel of individual success, were actually more obsessed with hereditary privilege than were the “actual” aristocrats of American cities, authors of city-mysteries articulated a message that was simultaneously populist and radically conservative, calling for a preservation of the traditional class hierarchy instead of opening “society” to parvenus, who were mocked for putting on airs. While this attack on the vogue for aping European aristocrats goes back at least as far in American letters as Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast*, the

²⁹ Timothy Shay Arthur, *Love in High Life: A Story of the “Upper Ten”* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1849), 12, 14, 17.

antebellum era saw the birth of a new trope—the rich but stupid American heiress fleeced by a fortune-hunting European. The presumed belief that an alliance with a European aristocrat would lend an air of legitimacy to a *nouveau riche* American family had some basis in fact. John Moore's *Life in America* offers a conversation in a boarding house full of Europeans, purportedly located at 202 Broadway, in which the American interest in “good blood”—reported to be “nearly epidemic with the ton”—is attributed to “the marriage of Miss Astor to Baron Romff,” after which “three-fourths of our fashionable ladies have gone title mad.”³⁰

The character of America's mercantile elite as “title mad” was a constant theme in city-mysteries fiction. Ned Buntline's description in *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* of Montague Fitz Lawrence, a rich retired merchant, is typical: “Mr. Fitz Lawrence had always been known as ‘Monty Lawrence,’ until he became wealthy, when a man versed in heraldry suddenly discovered through a pair of golden spectacles, that Monty meant Montague, and that Fitz certainly belonged to the original name. Moreover this good friend found out that a coat of arms belonged to them, one with sabers, Turks heads, and dragons on it. This of course was engraved on the ‘family plate,’ and also placed on their coach panel.”³¹

While in the Gilded Age the pretension to European nobility of the American mercantile elite that was most often satirized was perhaps the proliferation of named

³⁰ John Moore, *Life in America; or, The Adventures of Tom Stapleton* (London: John Lofts, 18??), 14. This is a reference to the 1825 marriage of Eliza Astor, John Jacob Astor's favorite daughter, to Count Vincent von Rumpff, a Swiss nobleman who was acting as Minister for the Hanseatic Free Cities in Paris when Astor and his daughter visited there in 1824. Virginia Cowles, *The Astors* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 51.

³¹ Ned Buntline, *Mysteries and Miseries of New York: A Story of Real Life* (New York: Berford, 1848), 89.

country houses patterned on European estates (and often consisting of buildings transported from Europe and reassembled), it is telling that the most frequently mentioned practice in antebellum urban fiction is the painting of a family crest on the door of a coach. In the antebellum era, the compact, crowded, polyglot street—not the remote resort community—was still the preferred venue for the display of the markers of status.

The elite preoccupation with European aristocrats was mirrored by a belief that titled nobles, for reasons of either necessity or conscience, were living among the “respectable” working classes in America. For instance, an 1845 article in the Philadelphia *Spirit of the Times* titled “A ‘Royal’ Republican,” quoted the Baltimore *Sun* as reporting that “there is at the Mount Savage Iron Works, near Cumberland, employed as a common mechanic, a son of one of the English Royal Dukes, if not of the late King.... He was married to a very respectable lady of Allegany county, and has a large family.”³²

Faking Aristocracy

If American high society lionized the titled heads of Europe, then, at least according to city-mysteries novels, the greatest threat to the American urban elite was a flood of con men, mountebanks, and impostors posing as European aristocrats. In these

³² Philadelphia *Spirit of the Times* (Jan. 16, 1845), 3. In the same column is an item that reverses the fantasy, in much the way that Theodore Dreiser would do in *Jennie Gerhardt*. Entitled “A Factory Girl Exalted,” it reports that the “Presidentess of the Mexican Republic, the wife of General Herrera, now President, was once a factory girl at an establishment in Mexico, where the general saw and loved her. Her name is Irene Nichols, daughter of Mr. Nathaniel Nichols, of Monmouth, Kennebec County, Me.”

narratives few methods of deceiving American urban parvenus were as reliable as pasting on elaborate whiskers and assuming a noble title, the more incomprehensible the better.

Joseph Nunes, Jr., in his *Aristocracy*, describes the stir made in Philadelphia society by the “celebrated Baron Kreutzden,” an ugly, sneaky-looking German who is a common crook in disguise. Nunes offers a sort of upper-class nativism, telling his genteel readers that “this may be a lesson to some of our would-be aristocrats, who make deities of any strangers who come among us, and, with decent exteriors, sport outlandish names or foreign titles.”³³ Again, such stories may have had some basis in fact. According to Charles Sutton, the longtime warden of the Tombs prison in New York, in the early 1860s a man calling himself Eugene Mickiweez and claiming to be a Russian count lived in grand style at the Fifth Avenue Hotel before being found out. An 1849 item in the *Star Spangled Banner* entitled “A Yankee Count” claims that the “distinguished Russian General, Count Zinzerchoff, is a native of Meredith, N.H., and his real name is Thomas F. Williams.”³⁴ Fake nobles in city-mysteries come (allegedly) from France, Britain, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Hungary, and Poland. In George Thompson’s *Jack Harold*, a young American heiress is courted by a Count de Choufleur, a French banker, who is really a former barber (the most common trade of the fake aristocrat). Emeline hears the rumors about him, but does not believe them, and they

³³ Joseph Nunes, Jr., *Aristocracy; or Life in the City*, by a Member of the Philadelphia Bar (Philadelphia: S. G. Sherman, 1848), 41, 233.

³⁴ Charles Sutton, *The New York Tombs; Its Secrets and its Mysteries* (San Francisco: A. Roman & Co., 1874), 236; *Star Spangled Banner* (Boston), June 9, 1849. In at least one confirmed instance, Jeffrey Adler reports that a man calling himself Lucien DeBeaumont and claiming to be a French count was sentenced to six months in the St. Louis workhouse in 1858 when police judged that he was actually “‘undoubtedly a Dutch Jew and a mighty poor specimen at that.’” Jeffrey S. Adler, “Vagging the Demons and Scoundrels: Vagrancy and the Growth of St. Louis, 1830–1861,” *Journal of Urban History* 13:1 (November 1986), 11.

elope. When she finds out that the stories are true, she leaves him, is disowned by her father, and winds up a prostitute.

Most encounters with fake aristocrats in these novels do not end quite so badly. In John Moore's *Life in America*, the Hon. Arthur Fitzroy, summering at Rockaway, cons a pair of sisters (crockery heiresses) out of their silver plate with stories of his exploits, including the fact that his favorite poet is Pierce Egan, one of the earliest English practitioners of popular urban literature and an early boxing promoter. The lack of cultivation of the new urban elite made them easier to pluck. In *Silver and Pewter*, Silk Ned is able to masquerade as a German count at Saratoga even though he is using an Italian name and accent. An entire novel, *The Iron Tomb, or the Mock Count of New York*, revolves around the fake Count le Chandau's (late of the French penal system) pursuit of a New York heiress, and the subsequent pursuit of the count by a sailor whose mere presence causes the supposed nobleman to faint no less than four times.

George Thompson's narrator in the *Adventures of a Pickpocket* finds himself in a hotel, "In the midst of beauty—wealth—fashion! ... And why? Simply because it was whispered around, that the handsome, unassuming gentleman, at the corner of the table, was nothing else than a scion of English royalty—a branch of transatlantic aristocracy."³⁵ Joseph Scoville, along with Thompson, virtually offered lessons in how to humbug the codfish aristocracy with the imposture of European nobility. In *The Adventures of Clarence Bolton*, Scoville goes on a long diatribe against New York merchants who will not allow their most trusted clerks into their homes, but will dine

³⁵ Thompson, *Adventures of a Pickpocket*, 8.

with anyone claiming to be a baron or a count. Using the example of a French tailor who moved to New York and opened a fashionable café, Scoville recommends to all European arrivals in the United States to claim to be from the highest station they possibly can get away with when they arrive, and then just brazen it out.³⁶

Occasionally, urban con artists could get away with impersonating America's home-grown aristocrats, the Southern planters. These figures, invariably bearing the title "Major" or "Colonel," and with names like "Peyton Florence," are class impostors who are deployed to highlight the new-money elite's fascination with any figures possessed with privilege of longer standing than their own.³⁷ Regardless of their purported origin, these fake cotton princes were seen as both a threat to and a deserved comeuppance for the new urban elites on whom they so easily imposed.³⁸

³⁶ Joseph Scoville, *The Adventures of Clarence Bolton; or, Life in New York* (New York: Garrett & Co., 1853), 43–45. At one point, Clarence's patron constructs a practical joke about Clarence being descended from European nobility, which earns him many dinner invitations; he confirms the rumors by being incredibly rude, as instructed.

³⁷ See, for instance, A. J. H. Duganne's *The Daguerreotype Miniature; or, Life in the Empire City* (Philadelphia: G. B. Zieber & Co., 1846), 13. In *The Parricides; or, The Doom of the Assassins* (New York: Hilton & Co., 1865), Ned Buntline fuses the storylines of the fake European noble and the Southern aristocrat in his fictionalized version of the events leading up to Lincoln's assassination. At one point, "Count Orsini," a former Red Republican from Italy masquerading as a barber who is acting as if he is concert with John Wilkes Booth's Knights of the Golden Circle but is really working against them, is confronted by Booth, who says that he doesn't buy Orsini's claim to nobility: "'I believe in blood, I tell you. You know I am a born aristocrat! ... I have seen too many of that kind of Counts in this country. ... I was in Nashville, Tennessee, only three or four years ago, and there met a French Count who was all the rage in society for a few days.... He was recognized by an old steamboat captain as a fugitive Creole barber from New Orleans...'" (10). This combination of the fake noble con-man and the Southern fascination with aristocracy would be mined for laughs as well, as in the "Duke and the Dauphin" episode in *Huckleberry Finn*.

³⁸ Shelley Streeby, in an analysis of the depiction of villainous Mexican aristocrats in Mexican War fiction, argues that the "villainous foreign aristocrat serves as a scapegoat for class resentments that might otherwise be directed at the sons of U. S. elites." In city-mysteries, however, the foreign aristocrat—real or fake—is a vehicle for expressing class resentments, undermining the nationalistic project of much popular Mexican War literature. Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 130.

If, under this new model of class, money alone was coming to be enough to confer social status, it was also enough to conceal all sins, especially in an urban environment where everything was thought to be for sale. A mysterious Southern widow in Ned Buntline's *The Death Mystery* who had recently arrived in New York mused to herself, "here, in this vast metropolis, I can satisfy my wildest desires—can overshadow many a sunny spot.... And no law can reach me; for I will shield myself with gold and with mystery!"³⁹ The sense that great wealth was almost always accompanied by illicit desires, and that the combination of the two was productive of urban "mystery," was one of the central tenets of the city-mysteries genre. As a stranger tells Clarence in A. J. H. Duganne's *The Mysteries of Three Cities*, despite the common assumption that the lower classes are the "very dregs of the world ..., there's more wickedness done in a single day by the aristocracy of this same city, than would drown ten Gomorrahs, at the lowest possible calculation."⁴⁰ This assumption that the elites were the least moral, rather than the most moral part of society indicates the distance that some authors had traveled from the traditional, more deferential understanding of urban class.

To show how entirely the linkage of class with respectability had been undermined, men like Captain Forrest in *The Three Widows* are described as being "dangerous in the community, however respectable they may be in the public estimation. In fact, the more esteemed they are in society, the more dangerous they are."⁴¹ Instead of

³⁹ *The Death-Mystery: A Crimson Tale of Life in New-York*, serialized in the *New York Mercury*, spring and summer of 1861; issue of April 20, 1861.

⁴⁰ A. J. H. Duganne, *The Knights of the Seal, or the Mysteries of Three Cities, A Romance of Men's Hearts and Habits* (Philadelphia: G. B. Zieber & Co., 1848), 121.

⁴¹ *The Three Widows*, 64. Not only were respectable people thought to pose a greater danger to the community, but the crimes of the genteel were thought to be much worse: "The kennel has its orgies, and

being one of the markers of class status in a system that valued virtue, respectability has become one of the central veils of urban life that has to be pulled aside if the city's mysteries are to be fully understood. M. M. Huet entirely inverted the structure that connected morality and class status, claiming that, "the better the education and the higher the social position, the worse the man becomes...."⁴²

The power of money alone to confer social status and to conceal the vices of the rich even extended to smaller cities, such as Fitchburg, Massachusetts, where "the license which wealth, the customs, usages, and debasing influences of that pampered and imbecile aristocracy which is now endeavoring to establish itself in the American Republic, gives to vice, folly and extravagance ... is a vast evil, which is spreading far and wide, at an alarming rate."⁴³ In Charles Averill's *The Secrets of the Twin Cities*, class status goes beyond serving as a justification for vice or extravagance, and shields the actions of an entire urban criminal conspiracy, the Hell Gate Yacht Club, a gang of New York river pirates made up of "misguided youths of naturally correct habits and good family" who used their "apparently superior social position in the world to cloak their acts and avert suspicion...."⁴⁴ George Thompson argued that the only thing that kept the "lecherous lepers" of Fifth Avenue and Bond Street from being found out in their frequent disposals of unwanted children with the aid of a "famous abortionist" was their

the hovel, in which ignorance and squalor join in their uncouth debauch; but the orgies of the parlour, in which beauty, intellect, fashion, and refinement are mingled, far surpass, in unutterable vulgarity, the lowest orgies of the kennel." *The Startling Confessions of Eleanor Burton; a Thrilling Tragedy from Real Life. Exhibiting a Dark Page in the Manners, Customs, and Crimes of the "Upper Ten" of New York City...* (Philadelphia: E. E. Barclay, 1852), 26.

⁴² Huet, *Silver and Pewter*, 57.

⁴³ Philip Penchant, *The Mysteries of Fitchburg* (Fitchburg, MA: Charles Shepley, 1844), 20.

⁴⁴ Charles Averill, *The Secrets of the Twin Cities; or, The Great Metropolis Unmasked. A Startling Story of City Scenes in Boston and New York* (Boston: George Williams, 1849), 71–2.

wealth, which enabled them to “hide their lewd practices from the world, beneath the cloak of marble palaces....”⁴⁵

The Primacy of Money

The changing conception of urban class charted by city-mysteries novels indicates that, according to many observers, the amorality of the marketplace had triumphed over earlier models of respectability, and that sufficient wealth was enough to confer propriety. In John Hovey Robinson’s *The Lady’s Dream*, an old woman in Boston working as a fortune-teller, and her son Tom, a pickpocket, accumulate money for decades in order to retire from their trades and buy a house on Beacon Street, complete with servants and a carriage.⁴⁶ The fact that this ambition is entertained as plausible indicates the extent to which, in the popular imagination, money was thought to make all things possible. As John Hunt Strother concluded his 1854 poem *The Golden Calf; or, the Almighty Dollar*,

Your vice, a dazzling veil is hid behind,
The world to all except your gold is blind.
It is the magic that can all bewitch,
YOU’RE SURE TO BE RESPECTABLE IF RICH.⁴⁷

Money itself, according to some city-mysteries, was coming to be seen as constitutive of social status. Richard Hildreth observed in *Our First Men*, his guide to the rich men of Boston, that, “It is no derogation, then, to the Boston aristocracy, that it rests

⁴⁵ George Thompson, *The Mysteries of Bond-Street; or, The Seraglios of Upper Tendom* (New York: n.p., 1857), 46.

⁴⁶ John Hovey Robinson, *The Lady’s Dream; or, The Fortune Teller of Copp’s Hill. A Legend of Boston* (Boston: W. W. Page, 1846), 6.

⁴⁷ John Hunt Strother, *The Gold Calf; or, The Almighty Dollar. A Satire* (New York: Geo. E. Leefe, 1854), 32.

upon money. Money is something substantial. Every body knows that and feels it. Birth is a mere idea, which grows every day more intangible.”⁴⁸ George Lippard’s protests that the dollars of the *nouveau riche* “cannot efface the traces of corrupt habits, or supply the lack of honesty and education,” and that “believing in nothing but the Dollar, these Beggars in broadcloth can never conceal the puddle from which they sprung,” rang hollow in the face of an urban environment in which it seemed increasingly difficult to definitively draw the line between the puddle and the elite with any means other than money.⁴⁹ The derision with which Col. Vanderhoost, the patron in *The Adventures of Clarence Bolton*, describes Mr. Gould as a “cop,” meaning a man who has money but no “blood,” seemed as out of place as the Colonel’s Knickerbocker surname in a New York that, according to George Thompson, included even P. T. Barnum as one of the “Upper Ten.”⁵⁰

Increasingly, these novels indicate, the best way to achieve an upper-class identity was through consumption, or the public display of money. Joseph Holt Ingraham cautioned parents contemplating a professional career for their sons that, “one caste grades the respectability of another, not by trades or professions, but by wealth. This is a new modification of our subject, and shows that even a profession does not ensure

⁴⁸ [Richard Hildreth], “*Our First Men: A Calendar of Wealth, Fashion and Gentility, containing a list of those persons taxed in the city of Boston, credibly reported to be worth One Hundred Thousand Dollars; with Biographical Notices of the principal persons* (Boston: Published by all the booksellers, 1846), 5.

⁴⁹ *Quaker City Weekly*, Jan. 27, 1849.

⁵⁰ Scoville, *The Adventures of Clarence Bolton*, 38; George Thompson, *New-York Life; or, The Mysteries of Upper-Tendom Revealed* (New York: Charles S. Attwood, n.d), 75. In an extreme example of this trend, Eric Homburger writes that Madame Restell, antebellum New York’s most notorious abortionist, after being released from jail did business only with the elite merchants of the carriage trade in New York, spending over \$200,000 on her Fifth Avenue mansion and at one point cutting off her daughter when she married a man Restell thought was beneath their station. Homburger, *Scenes from the Life of a City: Corruption and Conscience in Old New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 117.

reception into certain castes, and that indigent members of these professions will be just as much shut out from those orders of society where wealth is the basis of regard, as if they were tradespeople.”⁵¹ However much the tenets of middle class respectability—temperance, modesty, evangelical piety—still served as markers of distinction within the broad virtuous middle, money, instead of virtue or heredity or refinement, had come to represent the primary marker of elite status. As Osgood Bradbury termed it, “money is at the bottom of aristocracy....”⁵²

City Mysteries and Class Politics

City-mysteries novels as a genre have long been considered part of the general populist upsurge in mass culture in antebellum America, along with such phenomena as the penny press and minstrelsy, that is associated with the class politics of Jacksonian democracy. In part, this view is the product of the prominence of George Lippard in any mention of the genre—his novels are essentially the only city-mysteries that have been available in print for the past thirty-five years, and his class politics were radical to a fault. Modern scholars looking for sympathetic or “oppositional” figures in antebellum culture have understandably been more drawn to figures whose views coincide with their own on such issues as slavery or labor; Ned Buntline’s nativism, or the racism of George

⁵¹ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *Charles Blackford, or the Adventures of a Student in Search of a Profession* (Boston: G. W. Redding, 1845), 23.

⁵² Osgood Bradbury, *Agnes the Beautiful; or, the Gamblers’ Conspiracy. A Vivid Picture of the Secret Transactions of New York Life* (Boston: George H. Williams, 1853), 30.

Foster and George Thompson, make them less plausible as culture heroes.⁵³ They are also problematic as working-class heroes since, while they all offered one brand or another of populist politics, they all aspired to financial security. But beyond offering readers a vision of how class worked in the urban environment, and suggesting possible strategies for negotiating social mobility, what were the class politics of the genre?

The intended audience for city-mysteries fiction cut across virtually all classes of society (at least all who could afford to buy the books). Even though many city-mysteries satirized the upper classes, authors addressed themselves to “the wealthy citizen[s] of New York,” to “the steady-going merchant who resides in the upper part of the city, ‘above Bleeker,’” as well as to “the laboring masses” and the “common people.”⁵⁴ Michael Denning argues for a reading of popular urban novels that excludes them from the “wide and inclusive ‘middle-class culture’” of mid-nineteenth-century America and instead specifically situates them with the culture of the “producing classes.” While Denning admits that these terms did not refer to specific, clearly demarcated groups, and instead invoked “alliances which had unstable rhetorical and actual experience,” as I have argued above, there was enough overlap between these

⁵³ Foster, a pro-slavery Whig, wrote in a letter to Rufus Griswold, “Damn the negroes! I hate them and their northern instigators as I do his Satanic majesty.” Quoted in Blumin, Introduction to George Foster, *New York by Gas-Light* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 30–31.

⁵⁴ Ned Buntline, *Three Years After; A Tale of Mysteries, Gambling, and City Crime* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, n.d.), 67; John Denison Vose, *Seven Nights in Gotham* (New York: Bunnell & Price, 1852), 7; John Chumasero, *Life in Rochester, or Sketches from Life; Being Scenes of Misery, Vice, Shame and Oppression, In the City of the Genesee*, by a Resident Citizen (Rochester: D. M. Dewey, 1848), 4; Frances Harriet Whipple, *The Mechanic* (Providence: Burnett & King, 1842), ix. Such appeals were not entirely facetious. As Ronald and Mary Zboray have noted in their study of the reading habits of an upwardly-mobile middle class Boston family (the father was the treasurer of a railroad), the Childs read Joseph Holt Ingraham’s *The Dancing Feather* (a city-mystery of New York river pirates) and *Harry Harefoot*, along with George Sand and Eugene Sue. They also read Hildreth’s *Our First Men*. See Ronald J. and Mary Saracino Zboray, “Reading and Everyday Life in Antebellum Boston: The Diary of Daniel F. and Mary D. Child,” *Libraries and Culture* 32:3 (Summer 1997), Appendix A.

groups, and enough disagreement about whether or not there was any real difference between them, that the distinction between them is somewhat artificial.⁵⁵

While reading city-mysteries may have provided a *cultural* distinction between different groups such as the clerks who spent their evenings at parlor entertainments and the Bowery B'hoys who enjoyed rowdy street culture, in some ways not many distinctions existed. Both groups worked for a living, and both occupied somewhat insecure positions in a changing economic environment (if anything, the B'hoys probably made more money). Whether the politics of a given author were Whig or Locofoco or Nativist, and whether they were driven by conviction or economic necessity, the general implied reading public for almost all city mysteries (except those that were more explicitly erotic) was shaped by some generally accepted standards of respectability.⁵⁶

The tendency to roughly equate class power and political power has led to an interpretation of the antebellum era, given the general Democratic ascendancy from 1828 until 1860, as a period of increased distribution of political power across the socioeconomic spectrum (assuming, of course, that the Democrats were in fact the party of the working-classes, an overly simplistic view), with ethnicity and/or religion briefly trumping class in the Nativist upsurge of the early 1850s.⁵⁷ In fact, things such as

⁵⁵ Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1987), 45. The use of the term "middle class" was quite rare until after the Civil War; in the antebellum period, "middling" or "respectable" were much more common.

⁵⁶ It is important to note, however, that many city-mysteries strongly advocated for specific issues that were aligned with particular parties, such as temperance, abolition, and bank reform (Whig), immigration restriction and increased citizenship requirements (Know-Nothing), and any number of positions, from pro-slavery to free soil, that coincided with the various factions of the Democratic party.

⁵⁷ The most powerful counter-argument is provided in Lee Benson's *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), where he argues that class or economic group interest had little bearing on political behavior; see esp. 142–180. The literature on antebellum party politics is huge, but some useful examples in this specific regard are: Marvin

ethnicity, religion, respectability, and culture were crucial constituent parts of the antebellum understanding of class, which was not a purely economic category. Since my focus here is not on antebellum electoral politics, I wish only to note a general agreement that seemed to exist among antebellum critics—namely, that the elites of urban society had largely withdrawn from urban politics, leaving the field to the professional politicians of the urban political machines, which were seen as being largely composed of immigrants.⁵⁸ While the desire on the part of the upper classes to exert political power may still have existed, the means of implementing social control along the lines of a political model founded in deference were disappearing.⁵⁹

As Edward Spann notes, however, the rich discovered a “consoling substitute” for the loss of electoral political power in “the form of a more subtle cultural and social power over the minds and imaginations of Americans,” even as urban government fell “under the control of the subterranean mass whose interests were in disorder, corruption,

Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960); Ronald J. Formisano, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties, Michigan, 1827–1861* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971); Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s–1840s*; Michael F. Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁵⁸ This was the case at a time when, as Mary Ryan notes, the rhetorical division between “aristocrats” and “common men” was almost constantly invoked; the most common accusation in antebellum political rhetoric was that the opposing party was in the thrall of “rich and powerful men.” Ryan, *Civic Wars*, 117.

⁵⁹ As Alexander Saxton notes, although most Whigs felt that only “responsible” men should govern, and that “responsibility” meant property ownership, they could not undo universal white male suffrage, and thus were placed in the position of “urging the mass of voters to choose candidates who believed voters ought to be controlled, for their own good, by men of the upper class”; Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990), 61–2. As several scholars have noted, wealthy men increasingly abandoned municipal politics and shifted their focus to the state and national levels.

and high taxes.”⁶⁰ City-mysteries novels narrated this shift. John Chumasero, in *The Mysteries of Rochester*, shows two drunk b’hoys walking down a street talking politics during election season, which is the only time of year that members of the elite will speak to them, in order to ask for their votes.⁶¹ While most city-mysteries displayed the general “white egalitarianism” that Alexander Saxton argues held the various antebellum political coalitions together, they were more interested in the cultural, social, and economic power of the urban elites than in questions of electoral dominance.

One of the main manifestations of this sort of social power, one that combined political, economic, and social supremacy, was the frequent use of legal chicanery in plots of class antagonism, especially in inheritance plots. The rich could not openly exert political power over their poor opponents, but they could work behind the scenes, using money and cultural capital to deprive poor city dwellers of what was rightfully theirs. In George Thompson’s *The House Breaker*, Henry Stuart eventually gets his childhood home back, which was stolen from him by a corrupt lawyer, but much more frequently in city-mysteries the poor are unable to cut through the web of legal deceit that has ensnared them. Screech-Owl, a thief in George Foster’s *Celio*, was “robbed of [his] just patrimony

⁶⁰ Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840–1857* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 216, 322.

⁶¹ Chumasero, *Mysteries of Rochester*, 118. Despite his own Democratic affiliation, Chumasero despises this class of urban street figure whose vote was for sale to the highest bidder. He concludes the scene, “the two worthies marched down the street, arm in arm—to talk politics, and—whip their wives!” (121) For more on this shift, see Dixon Ryan Fox, *The Decline of Aristocracy in the Politics of New York, 1801–1840* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Pessen, *Riches, Class, and Power Before the Civil War*; and Frank Otto Gattell, “Money and Power in Jacksonian America: A Quantitative Look at New York City’s Men of Quality,” *Political Science Quarterly* 81 (June 1967): 235–52.

by the connivance of a lawyer with the public administrator of [your] father's estate, and sent adrift without a penny and with a blackened reputation.”⁶²

The frequently stated message that legal subterfuge, instead of political or physical or economic domination, was the main weapon for the exercise of social power suggests that authors of city-mysteries saw the exercise of class antagonism becoming more covert. An analysis of who in the novels are victims and who are villains complicates the view that city-mysteries speak in primarily “mechanic accents.” Michael Denning’s suggestion that looking at “the way social cleavages are figured in a period when the very categories of social cleavage are changing” is a useful way of understanding how class operated in the period is entirely appropriate, but only if the examination of sources is comprehensive rather than selective.⁶³ In city-mysteries overall, it is true, there are a great many genteel seducers, avaricious merchants, and other villains from the upper classes. But there are just as many degraded, violent, lustful thugs from the slums, who prey on the respectable working people of the city as well as on the rich. In addition, almost every novel in the genre suggests that the entire structure of urban life is supported in some way by some form of individualized charity from the rich to the poor. Therefore, an analysis along class lines of who suffers and who inflicts suffering in the novels does not yield a clear picture (an analysis along gender lines would reflect a much clearer view, with women being constant victims of male depravity,

⁶² George Foster, *Celio; or, New York Above Ground & Under Ground* (New York: DeWitt & Davenport, 1850), 91.

⁶³ Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 79. Denning’s work selectively focuses on a very few texts that feature some form of working-class consciousness.

although it is important to note the extent to which seduction in the novels functions as a class crime).

Radical Accents

Admittedly, some city-mysteries contained exceptionally radical class messages, which come as no surprise given that urban culture produced the most radically egalitarian elements of the Jacksonian coalition.⁶⁴ John Chumasero, in *Life in Rochester*, railed that, “the great MILL OF SOCIETY is at work before our eyes, and between the upper mill stone of unfeeling CAPITAL and the nether mill stone of unyielding NECESSITY, are ground, not the bones of the dead, but the quivering flesh of living men, women and children....”⁶⁵ Less frequently given to statements of class resentment, George Thompson has Asmodeus, the all-seeing demon in *New-York Life*, explain his interpretation of the urban class system:

‘I tell you that wealth, the riches of your aristocracy, is the concentration and essence of all crime. It is made up of theft, for thousands are robbed to make one man rich. ... It is the result of tyranny and oppression.... The rich live, on the average, as long again as the poor, and all the difference is murder. The gold, the houses, the lands, the furniture and equipages of the rich, are covered all over with the blood of murder.’⁶⁶

These radical messages frequently took the form of accusing upper-class urbanites of being responsible for more crime than the lower-class citizens who filled the prisons.

Thompson, writing as “John McGinn,” claimed that there was “more real crime upon that

⁶⁴ See Saxton, *Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, 96. “More closely than any other segment of American culture in the 1830s and 1840s,” Saxton writes, “urban artisan culture remained linked to the radical republicanism of the Age of Reason” (103).

⁶⁵ Chumasero, *Life in Rochester*, 42.

⁶⁶ Thompson, *New-York Life*, 62. This articulation of class strife seems to be an effort to out-Marx Marx, although there is no evidence that Thompson had read his work, which was available in the U.S.

fashionable promenade [Broadway] than upon the ‘Five Points,’” although the rich, “by the potent aid of gold,” are able to stay out of jail, whether for drunkenness or whoring or more serious crimes.⁶⁷ Another more common radical accusation against the rich was that their very wealth, or the ways in which it was obtained, constituted criminal activity. Ned Buntline found the dishonest practices of New York employers to be responsible for most of the crime in the city, charging that, “not the girl’s own heart, but Wages Never Paid, made her a wanton! Not the youth’s vicious mind, but Wages Never Paid, made him a burglar and a thief!”⁶⁸

In some city-mysteries, the chosen criminal *modus operandi* of the lower classes reflected the behavior of the upper classes back onto them. In *Life in America*, Mary, who had been seduced by a rich man, now seduces men but refuses to sleep with them, and then takes their money and humiliates them. “Others would ruin me, if they could! I meet them on their own ground, and usually cause the bolt to rebound back on the sling that sent it! And is not all this fair?” she asks. She states that the first principle of her behavior is, “that having been deceived, I think I have a right to live by deception—that having suffered poverty through my beauty, I now feel justified in making it the medium of earning my daily bread!”⁶⁹ This desire to enjoy the class prerogatives of the rich took more basic forms in antebellum cities as well. Bradley Cumings, a young man living in Boston, wrote in his journal that a rash of robberies had occurred in the city where,

⁶⁷ John McGinn [George Thompson], *Ten Days in the Tombs: or, A Key to the Modern Bastille* (New York: P. F. Harris, 1855), 8. This novella is an account of Thompson’s own incarceration for public drunkenness.

⁶⁸ Ned Buntline, *The G’hals of New York: A Novel* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1850), 36.

⁶⁹ Tom Moore, *Life in America; or, The Adventures of Tom Stapleton* (London: John Lofts, 18??), 108.

instead of stealing goods, “the robbers have regaled themselves with wine and eatables, spreading tables, and enjoying themselves finely.”⁷⁰

Breaking into a rich man’s house and enjoying his food and wine was a short step from a more explicit class war of the European variety that so terrified American observers of all political persuasions. In his diary of Philadelphia life, Sidney George Fisher wrote that he feared that both Europe and America were “destined to be destroyed by the irruption of the dark masses of ignorance and brutality which lie beneath it, like the fires of a volcano....” Instead of “foreign barbarians,” however, Fisher feared that the “barbarians each country contains within itself, ferocious and brutal as Goth or Vandal, rapidly acquiring a knowledge of their power and tempted by the rich treasures of art and wealth around them,” would take over society either by violence or by political means.⁷¹

Some authors of city-mysteries came close to calling for just such a class war, while other writers, like the anonymous author of “Chief Allfudge’s Instructions to the New-York Police,” recommended that the police “Let rowdies by each other fall” and thus let the city cleanse itself of the criminal element.⁷² But the threat of class war was not only seen as coming from below. In a speech given in 1831 against the authors of the Magdalen Report, which outlined (and very likely exaggerated) the problem of prostitution in New York, George Devries described the wealthy evangelical supporters of the report as “the links of a chain whose ramifications extend all over the union” who sought, through tract and missionary societies, sabbatarian and temperance organizations,

⁷⁰ Journal of Bradley N. Cumings (Boston), entry for Sept. 24, 1834; Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁷¹ Sidney George Fisher, *A Philadelphia Perspective*, 169 (entry for May 26, 1844).

⁷² *Chief Allfudge’s Instructions to the New-York Police*, in Verse, By an Up-Town Democrat (New York: n.p., 1860), 11.

to “forge our chains in the dark,” constituting a conspiracy against the many that was based on both religion and class.⁷³

Edwin Chapin was aware that the new urban environment provided a special spur to the sort of class resentment that could turn violent. “The poor man [in the city] is conscious of nothing but privation and suffering,” Chapin wrote. “He gazes at the power and discipline and pomp of society all around him, not as an ally but as a captive, or as a savage foe. The whole wears the aspect of a besieging army, and the Ishmaelitish feeling predominates. In the midst of the City he becomes an Arab of the desert, a robber of the rock.”⁷⁴ In *The Fortunes of a Young Widow*, the author states that “the favored children of fortune, the idlers” were hardly aware of “that mass of ignorance and depravity, which lying below, threatens at any moment to upheave them,” but the corrupt broker Rufus Small, knowing “the materials of which a great city like this is composed,” is cognizant of the potential for violent urban class conflict.⁷⁵

Few writers forecast an outright class war, but many saw it being fought by other means. Chapin predicted a class war conducted via crime if the preternaturally vital and keen children of the urban “Dangerous Classes” were not educated.⁷⁶ George Thompson, in “The Lay of the Locomotive,” a song sung by a rampaging train in *The Demon of Gold*, saw the class war as being fought by the independently willful technological devices that were creating so much wealth in antebellum America (the locomotive likes

⁷³ Speech by George Devries, published in *Anti-Magdalen Report* (New York: Charles Baldwin, 1831), 7–8.

⁷⁴ Rev. Edwin Hubbell Chapin, *Humanity in the City* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1854), 189.

⁷⁵ *Fortunes of a Young Widow*, 75.

⁷⁶ Chapin, *Humanity in the City*, 196–7.

to crash, it sings, “for I hate the proud aristocrats who own the property...”).⁷⁷ Samuel Young opened his city-mystery of Pittsburgh with a prophecy from a mysterious stranger that since, “In the hurry to wealth, the poor will be neglected,” the city would be destroyed by fire (it was, in 1845).⁷⁸ In an article about the spread of cholera around the world, George Lippard described “this leveler, this Red Republican Cholera” as the new weapon of class war. After telling the aristocrats of Europe that, “I, even Cholera born and nourished in the poor man’s misery, make bold to write my name upon your doors, O Rich Man!”, the plague makes its way to New York. “There it smote the poor in their kennels, and from those kennels ascended to the mansions of the Rich, telling everywhere—in Wall street, and in the graveyard of Trinity Church—the same terrible truth—‘Unless you take care of the Poor, his diseases will take care of you!’”⁷⁹

Sensational Conservatism

Despite the radicalism of these messages, however, almost no city-mysteries novels actually advocated any form of social leveling, and the genre as a whole can be characterized by an ultimately conservative message that accepted and even promoted the existence of a privileged upper class, but argued that this class ought to deserve this status for reasons other than simple wealth. The aptly titled “*Our First Families*” is one of the most pro-aristocratic city-mysteries, attacking the “large and increasing class in American society” that had been “made tyrannical and licentious by the possession of

⁷⁷ George Thompson, *The Demon of Gold; or, The Miser’s Daughter* (Boston: William Berry, & Co., 1853), 70.

⁷⁸ Samuel Young, *The Smoky City: A Tale of Crime* (Pittsburgh: A. A. Anderson, 1845), vii.

⁷⁹ Lippard, *Quaker City Weekly*, May 26, 1849.

great wealth which she did not know how to use properly, and the ambition of gaining through its means a social rank to which she was, personally, in no way entitled.” Instead of blaming social ambition for the fractured class lines of urban America, the author blamed “the insolent equality insisted upon by our vulgar and ill-bred democracy” which tolerated only those “possessing no qualifications except wealth” that would elevate one “above its loud-talking, huge-pawed, tobacco-chewing level.”⁸⁰

George Foster relentlessly attacked the new urban mercantile elite as “pompous without dignity, gaudy without magnificence, lavish without taste, and aristocratic without good manners” and as lacking the polish of the “true, well-bred, and unpretending aristocracy” of the Knickerbockers. But what has been read in Foster’s work as a concern for the loss of community can be read in another way as striking social conservatism.⁸¹ In a novel set in Washington, Annie Grayson, an angelic young girl, proclaims, “‘Oh, I think poor people are so happy! they have no servants to vex them and make them scold like rich people do,’” a comment that only cements Annie’s status as one of the truly deserving rich, since she would never scold her family’s servants.⁸²

Such conservative sentiments, while seemingly pointed toward protecting the privileges of the embattled traditional elite, may in fact have served to clarify the status of those who saw themselves as incipiently “middle class”—that is, as no longer laboring for a living but still uncertain of their social position. If the “old” aristocrats still held

⁸⁰ “*Our First Families*,” *A Novel of Philadelphia Good Society* (Philadelphia: Whilt & Yost, 1855), 361–2.

⁸¹ Quoted in Blumin, Introduction to George Foster, *New York by Gas-Light*, 51.

⁸² Mrs. N. P. Lasselle, *Annie Grayson; or, Life in Washington* (New York: Bunce & Brother, 1853), 10. Naturally, the Grayson family’s washerwoman is a formerly rich woman whose husband drank himself to death.

sway, according to this line of thinking, then the new small shopkeepers and merchants would not aspire to become aristocrats based purely on their wealth, and thus would not suffer the accompanying anxiety of being thought “low” or poor or not respectable should they meet with economic setbacks. As Joseph Holt Ingraham’s hero in *Harry Harefoot* explained it, the “true gentleman—he, whose position by education, wealth and taste, is established, has none of that feeling of superiority with reference to trades’ people that is felt by ‘first classes,’ as we call them in ‘Augusta’ and such towns! It is only the ‘little respectabilities,’ those who feel their position not properly defined, and who tremble for it, that look so far above mechanics, lest if they be seen speaking to them they may be thought no higher than they.”⁸³

The desire for a meritocracy based on virtue and intelligence rather than an aristocracy based on money, or the belief in the existence of a “natural aristocracy,” is one of the most consistent class messages running through the city-mysteries genre. Instead of wanting to eliminate social distinction, authors of city-mysteries, from the radical George Lippard to the Whig Justin Jones, declared their preference for a class system in which social rank was deserved rather than purchased.⁸⁴ This desire for a class system based more in individual virtue and morality can be read as being in large part a response to a system in which class, if defined in economic terms, was such an unstable category. As “Joseph” wrote in *New York Aristocracy*, “I have about as little faith in the beneficial results of suddenly-acquired wealth, as in the efficacy of sudden conversions.

⁸³ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *Harry Harefoot; or, The Three Temptations* (Boston: H. L. Williams, 1845), 49.

⁸⁴ It should come as no surprise that authors, a group who are constantly aware of and aggrieved by the world’s lack of regard for their genius, would promote a meritocracy based on intellect, but the consistency of the message across the genre, while offering an interesting commentary on the status of authors in the period, leads me to conclude that it is born of something larger than personal interest.

In either case, as in the vegetable world, an undue growth must produce rankness.”⁸⁵ In a society where wealth could be just as suddenly lost as it was acquired, some more immutable qualities, such as morality or intelligence, were necessary to render the urban class structure somewhat legible.

Those who were rich were not excluded from membership in this “natural” aristocracy, as long as they acquired the appropriate humility and virtue and, especially through the dispensation of philanthropy, showed that they deserved their wealth. In John Chumaseo’s *Mysteries of Rochester*, a starving mother finds the body of her dead son frozen stiff in the street and drags the corpse to the mansion of Alanson Melville, a rich merchant who had rejected her plea for aid earlier in the day. When her knock at the door is answered, the frozen body topples into the hall, a macabre urban prank.⁸⁶ The radicalism of Chumaseo’s novel is somewhat undercut by the message that, if only Melville had given the poor woman money to keep her family alive, he might be a true aristocrat or, as John Todd put it, “it is possible even for the rich man to enter heaven—for with God all things are possible,” if only their wealth were devoted to charity.⁸⁷

For all the praise lavished in popular urban fiction on such stock Bowery figures as Mose and his gal Sal as representing new paradigms of the urban American, there was no question that they were not suitable as “natural aristocrats.” However blunt their honesty and well-intentioned their enthusiasm, they remained vernacular characters,

⁸⁵ *New York Aristocracy*, 92.

⁸⁶ Chumaseo, *Mysteries of Rochester*, 19.

⁸⁷ John Todd, *The Moral Influence, Dangers and Duties, Connected with Great Cities* (Northampton: J. H. Butler, 1841), 30.

lacking the polish and flexibility to cross boundaries and transcend class differences. City-mysteries novels may well have been read by many working-class readers, and they articulated a form of populist republicanism, but they spoke in more “middle class accents” than in radical ones. The frequent plea to the rich, to “ye who expend large charities to support missionaries in foreign climes” to “go and view such a scene as we have just now described—a scene enacted in the very heart of a populous city—and then say, if ye can, that there are not, in our own land, human beings who require a civilizing and Christianizing improvement” may speak *for* the poor, but it does not speak *from* the poor.⁸⁸ Most authors of city-mysteries were just as often squeamish about true urban squalor (depicting the destitute in bestial terms) and satirical toward the actual behavior of urban workers (showing them to be more concerned with drinking than working) as they were critical of the excesses of the urban rich. They spoke from the uncertain middle.⁸⁹

Certain city-mysteries, perhaps those of George Lippard, can be realistically said to have a message written with a working-class audience in mind. But in general, city-mysteries novels are no different from any other mass-produced cultural product, few examples of which have a truly radical class message.⁹⁰ To think otherwise is to romanticize both this particular moment in American culture and the working classes in

⁸⁸ George Thompson, *The Road to Ruin; or, The Felon's Doom* (Boston: William Berry & Co., 1851), 62.

⁸⁹ In *The Road to Ruin*, Thompson satirized workers, “free and independent citizens, whose rights and privileges ... must be respected,” who demanded time off from work to go see a hanging. These urban laborers, according to Thompson, would even bring their children to the execution, “if they are very good and keep their pinafores and noses clean, and don’t make fun of ‘pa’ when he comes home drunk, or tell about the strange gentleman’s kissing ‘ma’ in the bed-room...” (68).

⁹⁰ As Laura Kipnis observes, “there is no guarantee that counter-hegemonic or even specifically anti-bourgeois cultural forms are also going to be progressive.” Laura Kipnis, “(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust: Reading Hustler,” in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (London, 1992), 388.

general. It should come as no surprise that books that were thought to be the favorite reading of workers would be characterized by a form of middle-class populism, since ideologies of uplift and improvement cut across all classes in antebellum America.⁹¹ Some have argued that the exaggeration of urban polarization in popular urban literature, the denial of the presence of the broad respectable middle that both produced and consumed such books, was a requirement of the form.⁹² But the fact that the “respectable” classes were in fact present in a great deal of this fiction indicates the class flexibility of a genre that has previously been associated almost exclusively with the working classes.

In their ability to accommodate different class viewpoints, city-mysteries mirrored the radical class mobility that was thought to characterize the antebellum urban environment. “Bottom-up” city-mysteries showed the dangers posed by members of the lower classes masquerading as members of the elite, and “top-down” city-mysteries showed upper-class characters slumming and otherwise participating in life among the lowly. Some novels, like Lippard’s *Quaker City*, exposed both the high and the low; as the producer of the aborted theatrical staging of the play wrote, “it struck at governors,

⁹¹ As David Stewart has noted, even forms of print “closely identified with lower- and working-class interests also held this view of education as a way of promoting social advancement and improved living conditions.” David M. Stewart, “Cultural Work, City Crime, Reading, Pleasure,” *American Literary History* 9:4 (Winter 1997), 687. Bruce Laurie labeled as “revivalists” those members of the working classes who shared middle-class ambitions, lifestyles, and values.

⁹² Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 287. I find Brian Roberts’s explication of the cultural position of the middle classes much more compelling. Writing of the middle-class young men who poured into California during the Gold Rush, Roberts notes that these men would “remake the middle class ... in part as a myth, a fixed and unchanging repressed identity against which they could rebel. The result would be a class empowered with the ability to rebel against itself, daily, repeatedly, and, as long as its members defend the myth of bourgeois repression, seemingly without end”; Roberts, *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 15. Instead of imputing the elision of the middle classes in urban narratives to the demands of the form (or the audience), Roberts attributes it to the uncertain status of the intermediate classes themselves.

judges, members of Congress, editors, as well as thieves and murderers.”⁹³ The flexibility reflected by Lippard’s novel, the ability to articulate multiple class positions, was characteristic of the genre as a whole. Depending on the stance of the author, the same line of rhetoric—“Crime! there is more crime committed in a single day in those streets where men count thousands, than by all the outcasts from their holy ranks in years.”—could be used as a sincere attack on the perfidy of the upper classes or, as was the case in *Helen Howard*, to show how easily unjust class resentment could be used to dupe members of the lower classes.⁹⁴ City-mysteries novels exposed the corruption of the upper classes, but other city-mysteries defended the upper classes from the infiltration of parvenus. City-mysteries narratives took as their villains merchants and beggars, Quakers and Catholics, Jews, Irish, and native Americans. Michael Denning has written that “working-class culture [which for him includes city-mysteries novels] was different from and antagonistic to the culture of the dominant classes,” and he attributes this difference in part to “the boundaries drawn between Culture and non-Culture in the exercise of cultural power.”⁹⁵ But what is striking after a comprehensive examination of popular antebellum fiction is not the existence of a stark boundary between narratives espousing a working-class point of view and those promoting the interests of the “dominant classes,” but its absence—that is, the flexibility of what would be called “Culture” and “non-Culture.”

⁹³ Francis C. Wemyss, *Twenty-Six Years of the Life of an Actor and Manager*, 2 vol. (New York: Burgess, Stringer & Co., 1847), 1:398.

⁹⁴ Professor Ashby, *Helen Howard; or, the Bankrupt and Broker. A Mysterious Tale of Boston* (Boston: F. Gleason, 1845), 36.

⁹⁵ Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 58.

Donald Grant Mitchell, in his decidedly genteel two-volume collection of anecdotes of New York society, *The Lorgnette*, warned fellow writers on the urban scene, “Wo be to him, if he attempt to lift off from the carcass of the body social, those flimsy, patched-up coverlets of respectability and propriety, which keep down the smell of its corruption!”⁹⁶ George Lippard, meanwhile, in the preface to his much more radical *Quaker City*, asked, “Have you courage, to lift the cover from the Whited Sepulchre, and while the world is crying honor to its outward purity, to show the festering corruption that rankles in its depths?”⁹⁷ This is not, as Denning states, a case of “giving very different inflections to apparently similar stories.”⁹⁸ It is a case of the same inflection, or accent, being used to tell very different stories, at least in terms of class. The trope of the urban exposé, the city-mystery, was flexible enough to accommodate both points of view, which in part accounts for its tremendous popularity at a moment when Americans were struggling to find ways to tell stories of the changing experience of urban society.

⁹⁶ Donald Grant Mitchell (Ik Marvel), *The Lorgnette: or, Studies of the Town*, 2 vols. (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 2nd ed., 1850), I: 96.

⁹⁷ George Lippard, *Quaker City, or the Monks of Monk-Hall* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 4.

⁹⁸ Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 59.

Chapter Nine

The Seductive City: Eroticism and Exposure

Acres of girlhood, beauty reckoned by the square rod,—or miles long by measure! the young, the graceful, the gay,—the flowers gathered from a thousand hillsides and green valleys of New England, fair unveiled Nuns of Industry.

—John Greenleaf Whittier, “The Factory Girls of Lowell”

Whittier’s rhapsodic ode to the factory girls of Lowell indicates a common tendency in popular antebellum thought about cities: the urban environment was held to be a very female environment. Lowell in particular was renowned for its abundance of beautiful young women, given the unique nature of the factory system there, but so were less idiosyncratic cities. This view of cities as sexualized (and specifically female) spaces is borne out in the titles of many city-mystery novels. Of the roughly 260 novels I have examined for this study, over 100 have a woman’s name (or other specifically female descriptor, such as “daughter,” “wife,” “belle,” “coquette,” etc.) in the title, compared with only 55 having a man’s name.

The frequency of this title convention—Osgood Bradbury alone named novels after *Agnes the Beautiful*, *Clara Hopkins*, *Ellen Grant*, *Ellen Templeton*, *Emily Mansfield*, *Frances Carleton*, *Jane Clark*, *Julia Bicknell*, *Louise Martin*, and *The Empress of Beauty*—indicates a fascination, at least on the part of authors and likely on the part of readers as well, with how single young women lived in the changing American city. While much of this fascination had to do with the sheer concentration of young women in urban areas—Whittier’s “acres of girlhood”—popular urban fiction makes clear that

much of it also had to do with the expectation (or the fear, or the hope) that these women would not exactly remain “Nuns” of urban work. While many contemporary readers would have been horrified by depictions of young women forsaking the industrial convent for the perils of city life, other readers—and many authors—were energized and aroused by the suggestion of freedom, particularly sexual freedom, that urban life carried.

Describing the death by consumption of “a beautiful, intelligent, and interesting young girl, who had left a pleasant and comfortable home in the country, for the dangers and temptations of city life,” Harrison Gray Buchanan asked the question that preoccupied many antebellum writers, novelists and reformers alike: “When will girls, who have good homes in the country, learn to be content, and to shun the devouring maelstroms of a corrupt and corrupting city?”¹ The anxiety behind this question concerned not only the issue of “corrupting” urban sexual license, but also more fundamental aspects of the process of urbanization that were changing established gender roles and sexual practices. George Foster, writing of New York’s sewing girls, took the occasion “to solemnly warn young women in the country against indulging for an instant the fatal desire of coming to the City to seek their fortunes by labor,” virtually guaranteeing that any girls who did so would wind up prostitutes in “the boiling, seething cauldron of licentiousness that rages forever here.”²

Cities offered an outlet for what was felt to be a new desire among American women, the desire to make their own fortunes by their own labor. In the era that saw the

¹ Harrison Gray Buchanan, *Asmodeus; or, The Iniquities of New-York. A Complete Expose of the Crimes, Doings and Vices, both in High and Low Life, including the Life of a Model Artist* (n.p., n.d., but c. 1848), 24.

² George Foster, *New York in Slices: by an Experienced Carver* (New York: William H. Graham, 1849), 53.

early stirrings of the American women's movement, the prospect of daughters leaving home to make their own living and live by their own rules created a good deal of unease. Foster's discomfort with the notion that young women from the country were having their heads filled with crazy notions about urban excitement and independence prompted him to admonish his readers, "Stay calmly where you are, beneath your own pure skies, and amid the virtuous freshness of your home, no matter how humble it may be. Work, spin, dig, till the soil—do any thing virtuous that will earn you bread, and mere bread is not so very difficult to get in the country!"³

Many antebellum women, however, wanted more than "mere bread." They wanted excitement, variety, money, independence, the latest fashions, the friendship of other women, the companionship of men—in short, they wanted what cities had to offer, and they moved to cities in disproportionate numbers. According to Christine Stansell, a slight surplus of women in the total population of New York in the antebellum period disguised a significant surplus of young women (those in their late teens to early thirties). Until 1830, the ratio of young men and women in New York was about even, but by 1840 there were over 25 percent more young women than young men in the city.⁴ This development not only constituted a substantial shift in urban demographics, it also

³ Foster, *New York in Slices*, 53. This passage makes clear that Foster, writing for the middle-class New York *Tribune*, had a substantially rural readership in mind.

⁴ Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 83. The emergence of this imbalance during the 1830s may be in part attributable to the rise of significant Irish immigration. As Marilyn Wood Hill notes, by 1855 Irish immigrants made up almost 30% of New York's population, and these Irish immigrants were disproportionately female. Hill writes that Irish women outnumbered Irish men in New York by 30,000 in 1860. In general, this imbalance is likely due to men's greater mobility in seeking work—they could go West, for instance, more easily than women. Marilyn Wood Hill, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Prostitution in New York City, 1830–1870* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 52–54.

provided authors of sensational fiction about city life with a subject that was bound to interest readers of all kinds.

The presence of large numbers of independent young working women in America's cities stoked both the desire for knowledge about how they lived—the more “private” such knowledge could be, the better—and the fear that these women would be subject to male sexual predation, particularly through the twin demons of the antebellum moral landscape, seduction and its almost constant result, prostitution. The fear of urban prostitution predated the rise of city-mystery fiction in the U.S.—John MacDowall's famous *Magdalen Report*, which reported that New York was home to over ten thousand prostitutes, appeared in 1831—but city mysteries took it upon themselves to reveal a fuller picture to the eyes of a hungry public.⁵ Taking as a starting point the presence of women in the commercial culture of urban America, city-mysteries novels detailed both the dangers and the delights that this culture presented to young women. In depicting cities as spaces that were increasingly filled with the young and unattached of both sexes, and therefore charged with sexual possibility, city mysteries both titillated readers and charted the ways in which urbanization was helping to change antebellum thinking about gender.

⁵ While many city-mysteries dealt explicitly with prostitutes and prostitution—particularly some of the works of Ned Buntline and George Thompson—and almost all of them mention prostitution at some point, they were rarely sufficiently detailed to act as “guidebooks” to the sex trade. For this, the curious reader could often purchase pamphlet directories of a large city's brothels and assignation houses, which will be discussed at more length in the following chapter. Thomas P. Lowry, M.D., *The Civil War Bawdy Houses of Washington, D.C.* (Fredericksburg, VA: Sergeant Kirkland's, 1997), includes a reprint of a Washington brothel directory from 1864, along with a useful map showing that the vast majority of brothels at the time lay along a straight line between the White House and the Capitol.

Urban Womanhood

The author of *The Fortunes of a Young Widow* wrote that it was hard for men to fit in in antebellum New York, since a recent arrival from the country was so easily identifiable. “The women,” however, “are more impalpable; their natural grace and pliability make them almost immediately ‘unite’ with the city’s moral, (or immoral, shall we say?) atmosphere.”⁶ The notion that women were somehow naturally “urban” was in line with antebellum notions that women, like cities, were the repositories of manners, fashion, and artifice. In *The Countess*, George Thompson posits the existence of an all-powerful cabal of women known as the “Daughters of Venus” that, through sexual manipulation and criminal genius, has been responsible for much of the crime in New York and Boston. In describing their deeds, Thompson observes that they have been so successful because “woman’s pride and jealousy are omnipotent,” and their motto is “Union in Intrigue.” In this instance, the connection between female artifice and urban mystery is explicitly drawn.⁷

While Thompson suggests that the artificial qualities of cities brought out “innate” feminine traits in their female residents, other novels raise the notion that gender—or at the very least, urban gender—is less innate than it is flexible, that cities offer an environment in which different ways of being a man or a woman can be tried out. In the urban environment, “gender” did not just equal sexual difference, for there

⁶ *The Fortunes of a Young Widow, A Veritable Revelation of New York Life in the Nineteenth Century*, By an Old Inhabitant (Boston: Stearns & Co., 1851), iii.

⁷ George Thompson, *The Countess; or, Memoirs of Women of Leisure, Being a Series of Intrigues with the Bloods* (Boston: Berry & Co., 1849), 8–9, 38. Thompson goes into great detail describing the Order’s hideout in New York, particularly the drawing room, which is furnished with paintings of naked women in various sexual positions that “were so correct, that they must have been taken from the life” (38).

were manly women, such as the madams who kept brothels and “seduced” young women into their employ, and there were womanly men, such as the dandies who promenaded Broadway in the latest fashions. Whether suggesting that behaviors such as hysteric fits (thought to be the direct by-product of the female anatomy) were purely “fashionable” performances, or that there existed a class of men who sought out other men as sexual partners, authors of city mysteries raised the notion that the variety of the urban experience somehow blurred the fixed oppositions between male and female.

The most prominent level on which sexual difference was played out and played with in antebellum cities was visual. Cities brought bodies close together and put them on display, increasing the level of interaction between the sexes while changing its nature. Dr. Joel Ross wrote of girls brought up in the city that, “They seem to have been born for show!,” and the sexual display created by the densely-packed urban fabric—the “show”—is a constant theme of city-mysteries novels.⁸ Whatever else you may encounter in the city, these novels told their readers, you will see people, particularly attractive young people. At the same time, cities themselves are presented as having been built especially for display. Theater boxes, private church pews, and above all shop windows are described in popular fiction of the day as stages on which bodies (almost always female) were displayed. One author claimed that the “‘fast young men’ about town” had as one of their principal employments “watching the shop windows, and spying out every new face that makes its appearance behind the counter.”⁹

⁸ Joel Ross, M.D., *What I Saw in New-York; or, a Bird's Eye View of City Life* (Auburn, NY: Derby & Miller, 1852), 148.

⁹ “*First Families*,” *A Novel of Philadelphia Good Society*, by a Descendant of the ‘Pens’ (Philadelphia: Whilt & Yost, 1855), 155. The best-known example of shop windows serving to display the female body

While the shop-girl was a common character in many genres of antebellum fiction, the male store clerk made an appearance as well, showing that the urban retail store—particularly the dry-goods store, with its steady stream of female customers—could also serve as a venue for the commercial display of male sexuality. If city-mysteries authors are to be believed, the surest ticket to success in the dry-goods business was to have an exceptionally attractive clerk, just as Mary Rogers was the primary draw at John Anderson’s Broadway cigar store before her murder. Mr. Howard, the lover of Mrs. Moreton’s sister in Thompson’s *Adventures of a Pickpocket*, works as a clerk in his brother’s lace store in Washington Street in Boston. “The store of his brother was, perhaps, as much thronged by the ladies for the purpose of conversing with the engaging clerk as from the superior character of the goods he vended,” Thompson writes, and Howard’s brother realizes his importance, compensating him for the value of his physical appearance.¹⁰ Similarly, the narrator of *Shinning It*, an account of attempting to make the transition from tradesman to merchant, claims that his mentor in the dry-goods trade enjoyed success because of his good looks: “Ladies flocked to his counter, pleased

to passersby is that of Mary Rogers, a young girl who worked in a the window of a cigar shop on Broadway whose murder Poe analyzed in “The Murder of Marie Roget.” The same crime was invoked repeatedly in city-mysteries fiction, notably by Joseph Holt Ingraham, who wrote at least three novels based on the story. See also Amy Gilman Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-century New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). In his version of the Mary Rogers story, Ned Buntline’s Mary makes clear the linkage of the display of her body to the enterprise of urban commerce: “I must hurry away now. It is already time that I was in the shop. I must go and stand amid the filthy fumes of smoke—to hear coarse jests made upon my person—to be but a sign to attract coxcombs and dandies to my employer’s counter.” Ned Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York: A Story of Real Life* (New York: Berford, 1848), 102–3.

Elsewhere, Buntline makes the easily forgotten point that windows, of course, work both ways, when he describes street-walking prostitutes “pausing before the large-windowed hotels to show themselves to the cigar-smoking loungers who occupied the big arm-chairs within....” (*Mysteries and Miseries*, 10).

¹⁰ Thompson, *Adventures of a Pickpocket*, 25–6.

to pay their money for his beautiful goods and winning smiles.”¹¹ While not as explicitly sexual a transaction as that in prostitution, these examples indicate that men were capable of making a living off of their bodies, not just through physical labor, but through urban sexual display.

The presence of both young women and men working behind the counters of urban stores and serving customers of the opposite sex is only one indication of the increased level of interaction between the sexes that dense, crowded cities offered. While much historiography of the period reinforces notions of a “male” public sphere and a “female” private or domestic sphere, city-mysteries novels showed readers that they could expect to be thrown into contact with members of the opposite sex almost constantly, regardless of where they were.¹² In a collection of vignettes describing different urban occupations, an artificial flower maker describes the difficulty of working for a male boss, the frequency with which she was followed home in the streets by young men, and how she disliked living in a boarding house because of the constant presence of men. Despite the existence of many homosocial sub-cultures in the city, from the volunteer fire house to the sewing circle, everyday city life exposed women to men they did not know with more frequency than had ever been the case before in the U.S.¹³

This interaction took place most obviously in the urban street, which was the paradigmatic antebellum public space as well as the primary site for the display of female

¹¹ *Shinning It; A Tale of a Tape-Cutter; or, The Mechanic Turned Merchant*, by One Who Knows (New York: M. Y. Beach, Sun Office, 1844), 6.

¹² See Mary P. Ryan, “Gender and Public Access: Women’s Politics in Nineteenth-Century America,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 259–288.

¹³ William Burns, *Life in New York, In Doors and Out of Doors*, (New York: Bunce and Brother, 1853), unpaginated.

sartorial finery, male physical prowess, and the locus of the commercial sex trade. A constant trope in city-mysteries fiction is the virtuous girl walking alone in the street at night, subject to the looks and comments of male passersby, who often mistake her for a prostitute. As Frances is told by a policeman in George Thompson's *The Demon of Gold*, "If you are a wirtuous gal, as you say you are, wot are you doing among a gang of rowdies, at this hour of the night?"¹⁴ In a city-mystery set in Lowell, a visitor remarks to his sister that one of the great advantages of living in a place like Lowell was "the privilege of walking out, especially in the evening, with comparative safety.... The large proportion of females to males prevent ... in some degree, the idea of being stared and insulted at every step you take, as is the case in other places I could name."¹⁵

If urban space brought men and women into closer contact and rendered women more visible, city-mysteries novels often made the point that urban fashions did the same thing. The combination of urban proximity and the latest French designs is shown in urban fiction to further close the distance between the sexes. Extravagance in dress was a constant bugbear of antebellum reformers, and was thought to be a particularly urban affliction. The author of *Asmodeus in New York* even credits the desire for fine clothing for the declining birth rate, implying that women actually still become pregnant at the same rate as ever but that they frequently abort fetuses in order to have more money to

¹⁴ George Thompson, *The Demon of Gold; or, The Miser's Daughter. A Romance of Boston*, by Greenhorn (Boston: William Berry & Co., 1853), 24.

¹⁵ *Norton: or, The Lights and Shades of a Factory Village: Wherein are developed some of the Secret Incidents in the History of Lowell*, by "Argus" (Lowell: "Vox Populi" Office, 1849), 18. It is this liberty taken by men in public urban space, the "appropriation of the street with the intimacy and individuality of a private interior," that Robert Byer argues is central to the posture of the dandy in antebellum culture as a figure characterized by both ease at inter-sexual relationships and public display. Robert H. Byer, "Mysteries of the City: A Reading of Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd,'" in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 230.

spend on dresses.¹⁶ Clothing in city-mysteries novels acted both as an index to the character of the wearer and as a puzzle to be solved. Prostitutes were characterized by brightly-colored silks and a tendency to not wear hats, but several city-mystery authors complained that the difference in the clothing worn by “respectable” women and prostitutes was becoming distressingly small. Other authors, of course, did not complain at all, and took joy in describing the latest products of urban fashion:

She was dressed in a skirt of light shaded Italian silk, ornamented with variegated puffs set on each side in the front. We say dressed in a skirt, for it may be said that she had scarcely any body or waist to her dress; for, so low was it in the neck and scanty in all its dimensions, that it might almost as well have been omitted. To say that she exhibited an almost naked bust, of the most voluptuous and inviting charms, conveys but a very inadequate idea of the impression such a girl, so dressed, produced on the passionate sensualities of the opposite sex.¹⁷

The Embodied City

The above passage indicates what city-mysteries presented as the most exciting (or frightening) by-product of urban proximity: the frequent display of the human body. The constant mention of “ivory globes” and “snowy pillows” swelling above the necklines of décolleté dresses is an obvious measure of the erotic appeal of city-mysteries

¹⁶ *Asmodeus in New York* (New York: Longchamp & Co., 1868), 27. Making a related argument, the warden of the House of Refuge in the 1830s wrote that “love of dress was the most efficient cause of degradation and misery of the young females of the city,” claiming that young women in New York frequently resorted to prostitution in order to afford fancy clothes. Quoted in Stansell, *City of Women*, 187.

¹⁷ *Mysteries of Philadelphia, or: Scenes of Real Life in the Quaker City*, by an Old Amateur (Philadelphia: n.p., 1848), 24. This novel is filled with very specific descriptions of both dresses and what they fail to conceal. Many other novelists, however, described the extent to which clothing successfully concealed the physical truth of many city dwellers. The narrator of *Doesticks: What He Says* complains, after having fallen in love with a woman who turns out to wear both false teeth and a wig, that “in New York, perambulating bundles of dry goods pass current as women.” [Mortimer Thompson], *Doesticks: What He Says* (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1859), 117.

fiction, but it is also a compelling message to readers about what city life offered.¹⁸ Osgood Bradbury's description of Lowell, with its "thousand after thousand of female operatives, beautifully dressed, and with smiling faces ... thronging the sidewalks," offers a bird's-eye view of the fascinations of urban scenery, but other authors were much more specific in their descriptions of the female body.¹⁹ Depending upon the predilections of the author, street scenes in city-mysteries novels offered narrators ample chances to describe in great detail women's feet, teeth, hair, and, above all, women's breasts.²⁰ According to Henri Foster, one could walk down Broadway in mid-day and see a beautiful woman sitting in an open upstairs window, "A slight robe of silken drapery ... thrown about her, which had fallen from her shoulders, leaving her voluptuous form in all

¹⁸ As Mary Ryan astutely notes, as women's voices were excluded from the public sphere, women's bodies became ever more present: "Female symbols, like the goddess of liberty and Columbia, were favored emblems of civic virtue carried in procession by merchants, artisans, and students alike" (Ryan, "Gender and Public Access," 266). These figures—often only partially clothed—symbolized not only the virtues of republicanism but the *urban* political experience, as they were displayed in parades on crowded city streets.

¹⁹ Osgood Bradbury, *Mysteries of Lowell* (Boston: Edward P. Williams, 1844), 3. Bradbury's novel makes clear that the Lowell factories, in addition to being temples of industry, were also places for the display of women, since many of the visitors who flocked to the mills seemed to be as interested seeing the mill girls as they were the machinery. Bradbury describes these tours as "gazing visitations" (16).

²⁰ In one of the most bizarre volumes of cheap antebellum fiction I have encountered, Joseph Holt Ingraham's *Caroline Archer; or, The Miliner's Apprentice* [sic], a novella centered around themes of tooth fetishism and interracial tooth transplantation (!), is bound with "The Pretty Feet; or, The Way to Choose a Wife," in which Harry Lee, a wealthy young bachelor, walks the streets of New York looking for a wife with the perfect foot. When foot-fetishist Harry finally meets Ellen Leigh, whose feet are "harmonious in all their fascinating proportions and undulating outline, with a bewitching movement as she tripped along," he asks if he can tie her boot in the street and very nearly (in the euphemistic terms of nineteenth-century fiction) has an orgasm. Joseph Holt Ingraham, *Caroline Archer; or, The Miliner's Apprentice* (Boston: Edward P. Williams, n.d.), 26–27.

An anonymous satirical poem entitled "The Phantasmagoria of New-York" about the authors of the 1830 "Magdalen Report" implies that hair fetishism was not unknown, claiming that one member of the Magdalen Society (Hugh Maxwell is mentioned by name) "procured five hundred locks of hair/Hung round his rooms as trophies of his taste,/Some from the head, some from below the waist...." *The Phantasmagoria of New-York, a Poetical Burlesque upon a Certain Libellous Pamphlet, Written by a Committee of Notorious Fanatics, Entitled the Magdalen Report* (New York: printed for the publisher, 1830), 5.

its beauty, naked to the waist.”²¹ City-mysteries novels are, of course, filled with descriptions of the female form as glimpsed through windows, keyholes, and barely open doors, but it was the depiction of the city’s more overt bodily displays that would have spoken most clearly to readers about the difference between urban and rural life.

Readers living anywhere could imagine themselves spying forbidden sights through a keyhole, but only city dwellers (or those thinking of moving to cities) could encounter the human body (almost always female) in the many new ways described by authors of city-mysteries. In *The Mysteries of Bond Street*, George Thompson described the career of a young actress as being built on the portrayal of “any character in which a liberal allowance of legs could be made to advantage,” and later in the same novel tells a tale of an uptown matron who “allowed her four beautiful daughters (girls of education and talent) to play a game of billiards in a state of nudity in her aristocratic parlor, for the stipend of five dollars a sight, to numerous fast young men and wealthy valetudinarians.”²² Being even more specific, Thompson informed the readers of *Jack Harold* that, when visiting New York, a trip to Delmonico’s restaurant was in order, not least because Madame Delmonico’s tendency to wear low-cut dresses constituted one of the “chief attractions of the place.”²³

None of these opportunities for gazing at women—not to mention the chances afforded by closely-packed buildings with direct sightlines into the windows opposite—would have been available to people living in rural areas. The depiction of the

²¹ Henri Foster, *Ellen Grafton; or, The Den of Crime: A Romance of Secret Life in the Empire City* (Boston: Star Spangled Banner Office, 1850), 41.

²² George Thompson, *The Mysteries of Bond Street; or, The Seraglios of Upper Tendom* (New York: n.p., 1857), 50, 79.

²³ George Thompson, *Jack Harold; or, The Criminal’s Career* (Boston: Wm. Berry & Co., 1850), 146.

antebellum city as a specific geography of bodies on display rendered the crowded, dirty city exotic and titillating, just as the representation of the bodies of crime victims in the pages of the penny press added “both disgust and fascination” to the communication of news.²⁴ While urban display is not always presented in city-mysteries as simple voyeurism, lacking any consequences—beautiful girls are followed in the street and raped, and a scene in *The Fortunes of a Young Widow* in New York’s City Hall Park shows “old lechers” staring at children playing—the frequent description of urban spaces as spaces filled with human bodies that could be seen at close range constitutes one of the genre’s primary modes of talking about the urban environment.²⁵

In addition to describing the display of urban bodies, city-mysteries also present cities as places where established sexual and gender roles are called into question and ultimately shown to be flexible. In *Nancy Waterman*, an unjustly accused man on the run from the police takes refuge in New York with an old Irish hag, “whether male or female, it was hard to decide, for the garments belonged partly to one sex, and partly to the other.”²⁶ The vagaries of city life not only transformed how women (or men) dressed, according to these novels, but also how they worked, how they played, and how they loved.

²⁴ Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 55. Not surprisingly, as Lehuu notes, the bodies represented in these images were most often female.

²⁵ *The Fortunes of a Young Widow*, 78. The narrator implies that the children who play in the park during the day are available as sex partners at night.

²⁶ Charles F. Barrington, *Nancy Waterman; or, Woman’s Faith Triumphant* (New York: Samuel French, 1853), 30. This novel is identical to Osgood Bradbury’s *The Mutineer; or, Heaven’s Vengeance* (New York: R. M. DeWitt, 1857).

Changing Models of Femininity

Part of the sexual flexibility that is underlined in city-mysteries fiction is due to what is presented as a breakdown in defined gender roles. Much of this will be familiar to scholars of the antebellum period: men increasingly working outside the home, often in sedentary jobs that required mental skill instead of physical prowess; women taking primary responsibility for the domestic sphere, as well as new roles in the public sphere; and the rise of a sentimental style that “feminized” American culture. As Brian Roberts has written, the development of a nuclear family insulated from market forces and built upon clearly understood gender roles was one of the key elements in the formation of the nineteenth-century middle class, but city-mysteries novels depict this model as being under siege in the urban environment.²⁷ Family units in this fiction exist primarily to be broken, most often by the death or injury of the husband/father, thus forcing the women in the family into the market, frequently into the most basic realm of economic exchange—prostitution. Even in families that remain intact, women often have to work, or are “bought” and “sold” based on their physical appearance, blurring the supposedly clear line between “economic” men and “sentimental” women.

A genteel instruction book for young women from 1839, entitled *Realities of Life*, indicates an early awareness that antebellum women had more to learn than curtsying and needlework. The aspects of “real” life that are illustrated for readers via a series of short stories include: Intemperance, Gambling, Consumption, Broken Engagement, Failure,

²⁷ Brian Roberts, *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 25. Roberts and others correctly point out that there was no way for the antebellum home to be totally cut off from the market, since it was consumer goods that played a crucial role in making a house a “home.” In becoming primarily responsible for household consumption, women’s “insulation” from the market was far from complete.

Temper and Madness, Forgery, Sudden Death and Disappointment, Indolence, and Loss of Friends.²⁸ Clearly, the female readers of this book were attempting to prepare themselves for a world governed by economic and moral uncertainty, and were learning to address issues that previously would have been considered “male” areas of responsibility.²⁹ City-mysteries novels carried this line of thinking further, showing the ways in which the vagaries of urban life forced women increasingly to take on male roles.

Most often, striving for humor, city-mysteries novels showed urban women taking on male behaviors, particularly more assertive ones. Tom Shortfellow, in *The Mysteries of New York*, heartily endorses the appearance of a tall blonde smoking a cigar, a view with which George Thompson agreed even more heatedly. Describing Gallus Kate’s bedchamber, decorated with racy French prints and pictures of prize-fighters, Thompson wrote: “Strange as it may seem, it is nevertheless true, that a pretty woman never looks more charming than when smoking a cigar. When she daintily takes the delicate Havana roll in her taper fingers, and slowly suffers the fragrant smoke to escape from between her ruby lips, to curl in graceful, snow-white wreaths around her head—when she languidly half closes her melting eyes, and nearly falls asleep from an excess of pleasure—she forms a beautiful picture.”³⁰

²⁸ *Realities of Life: Sketches designed for the improvement of the head and heart*. By a Philanthropist. (New Haven: S. Babcock, 1839). Given this list of topics, the book should have been required reading for female characters in virtually every city-mystery novel ever written.

²⁹ Only thirty years later, the implications of this would be stated much more explicitly by Virginia Penny, in her 1869 “Think and Act: A Series of Articles Pertaining to Men and Women, Work and Wages”: “It is not an unusual sight to witness the daughter of affluence to-day, penniless to-morrow. . . . A lady should, therefore, be educated . . . [and] if necessary, earn a living by her acquirements.” Quoted in Amal Amireh, *The Factory Girl and the Seamstress: Imagining Gender and Class in Nineteenth Century American Fiction* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 123.

³⁰ Thompson, *Jack Harold*, 27. One suspects that, for Thompson, a cigar was almost never just a cigar. There is evidence that some antebellum women did publicly smoke cigars, along with engaging in other

The depiction of women wearing men’s clothes—whether “Bloomers” or regular pants—will be discussed later, but women in city-mysteries do more than dress the part. Big Lize, the “whore with a heart of gold” in Ned Buntline’s *Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, beats up numerous men in the novel, knocking out Gus Lorrimer, the villain, at least three times. An Irish policeman whom she has laid out, remarking on the proficiency of the beating he has received, mutters, “‘Sure, an’ I think it was a man in gals petticoats, I do!’”³¹ (This would prove to be an eerie example of life imitating art—Buntline himself was cowhided in broad daylight in Broadway on April 4, 1849 by a prostitute, Kate Hastings, whom he had insulted in his newspaper, *Ned Buntline’s Own*.³²) Of even more interest than women fighting like men were depictions of women having sex like men. George Thompson in particular created female characters (particularly the title characters in *Adolene Wellmont* and *The Countess*) who went on

typically male behavior. In an 1850 letter home from San Francisco, one Argonaut wrote: “I saw one [a woman] the other evening sitting quietly at the monte-table, dressed in white pants, blue coat, and cloth cap, curls dangling over her cheeks, cigar in her mouth and a glass of punch at her side. She handled a pile of doubloons with her kid glove hands, and bet most boldly.” Quoted in Roger Lotchin, *San Francisco, 1846–1856: From Hamlet to City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 303.

³¹ Buntline, *Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, 114.

³² See Peter G. Buckley, “The Case Against Ned Buntline: The ‘Words, Signs, and Gestures’ of Popular Authorship,” *Prospects* 13 (1988): 249–272, for the most thorough analysis of this event. Buntline (whose real name was Edward Judson) filed assault charges against Kate, who in her defense submitted a note she received from Judson dated the day after the beating, reading: “You are an infernal dirty bitch and if you ever attempt to do me a similar act you might consider yourself shot, take warning by this you dirty whore my paper is mine and I am responsible for any articles contained therein” (in Buckley, 265). She also submitted another note, which Buckley claims to be by Buntline, although in a disguised hand, accusing Kate of enticing “young females into your house & [making] them yield up their chastity—a heavy day is coming to you. You will probably spend a full year in Sing Sing for which everybody will rejoice—you corrupt young men by sending out your dirty filthy girls into the street and bringing these young men into your house—you cause rows at night and in fact you are nothing but a *damned whore*. You are *fucked* every night by sporting men & if Mr. Judson had done right he would have hit you till you could not see and then you could have done nothing” (266). Evidently in disagreement with Judson’s efforts to restore his wounded masculinity, the judge fined Kate 6 cents.

sexual sprees, having large numbers of sexual partners without commitment and avoiding marriage or any other entanglements at all costs.

Thompson's female characters were able to engage in "male" sexual behavior because they did not need a man for financial support, having become wealthy as mistresses of rich men. Other women in city-mysteries, however, were not so lucky (or so morally flexible), and had to work for a living, often articulating rising antebellum anxieties about work and industrialization. Women who worked outside the home, particularly in factories such as those in Lowell, frequently had their morality questioned, since such work was thought to be both "unfeminine" and "immoral," especially because of the uneasy relationship between female employees and male employers. While city-mysteries set in new industrial towns—such as Lowell, Manchester, and Nashua—make much of the sexualized nature of cities where a large majority of the residents were young female factory operatives, novels set in more typical cities depict the seamstress as the archetypal female urban worker.³³ In these novels, seamstresses are used to reveal both gender and class instability, often serving as the sole breadwinner for a family, and often working with the needle because they have been raised to a higher station and have not learned how to do any other kinds of work.³⁴

³³ Amireh observes that the seamstress may have been an easier trope for writers to use because she was not as controversial. Seamstresses were not connected to the debates about the effects of industrialization, and served instead as a "residual" figure of a wage-earning artisan who still was present in the domestic sphere. *Factory Girl and the Seamstress*, 54.

³⁴ Amal Amireh, in her excellent study of working women in antebellum fiction, notes that in genteel domestic fiction, no matter how desperate straits become, the heroines never work as seamstresses, whereas in cheap popular fiction designed to appeal to a wider audience, needlework or prostitution are presented as being the only two wage-earning opportunities open to urban women. Amireh, *Factory Girl and the Seamstress*, 116–17. Amireh's example of *Ruth Hall* is a perfect one, in which the heroine tries working as a seamstress, finds she cannot make a living at it, so moves on, eventually becoming a writer. Heroines in

Some authors, like John Beauchamp Jones, presented a fairly positive picture of the work prospects open to urban women. In his *The Spanglers and Tingles*, Julia Spangler supports her family doing illustrations for book engravings, for which she earns the highly unlikely rate of \$5 each.³⁵ Charles Burdett was more characteristic of the popular genre, however, when he confessed that his “sole object” in writing *The Elliott Family* was “to show to the public the utter inadequacy of the compensation paid for female labor, taking into consideration the nature of the work, and the time consumed....”³⁶

The most obvious female threat to male prerogatives in the period was, of course, the incipient women’s rights movement. Unsurprisingly, when city-mysteries authors invoked the specter of feminism, it was only for ridicule, or worse. John Beauchamp Jones (in *The Spanglers and the Tingles*) and Osgood Bradbury (in *The Modern Othello*) both constructed scenes around the hilarity caused by the appearance of women in Bloomers, or “the Turkish costume,” in the streets of Philadelphia and New York, respectively. Emily Spangler is spotted by a noble young secessionist congressman for whom she had set her cap, but Mr. Dudley is “overwhelmed with shame and mortification” at seeing a woman he had been courting in such manly attire.³⁷

Bradbury’s women in bloomers draw a crowd when they try to mount horses, causing

city-mysteries are no more successful in making a living with their needles, but their alternatives are more realistically shown to be more constrained.

³⁵ John Beauchamp Jones, *The Spanglers and Tingles; or, The Rival Belles* (Philadelphia: A. Hart, 1852). Such a high piece rate is highly unlikely for the period. Isabelle Lehuu, writing of the employment of women as colorists of the plates in *Godey’s Ladies Book*, points out the irony that “the emergence of a female identity in print was made possible by the use of cheap female labor at the protoindustrial level.” Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page*, 109.

³⁶ Charles Burdett, *The Elliott Family; or, The Trials of New-York Seamstresses* (New York: E. Winchester, New World Press, 1845), vii.

³⁷ Jones, *Spanglers and the Tingles*, 242–3.

speculation as to whether they are women or men. He later informs his readers that “those female philosophers who patronise Bloomerism and learn to swear at the Divine and salutary truths of Religion and the Christian Faith—Among them has grown up a frightful moral code which legalises the fullest indulgence of the carnal passions or ‘fancies’ and turns into ridicule all restraints imposed by the teachings of the sacred writings.”³⁸

The connection between feminism and sexual license was, of course, of great interest to writers in a sensational genre such as city-mysteries. Charles Wilkins Webber’s *Spiritual Vampirism: The History of Etherial Softdown* was a virulent anti-feminist attack on Mary Gove Nichols and her husband Thomas Low Nichols, himself a prominent figure in the New York sporting press and the author of several city-mysteries. Webber depicts “Etherial Softdown” as an almost superhuman feminist villainess who uses spiritualism and other reformist rhetoric to reduce men to a state of sexual slavery.³⁹ Surprisingly, George Thompson is one of the few writers to voice support of women as equal actors in society: “Is a woman here considered in the light due her position in which she stands toward society? Is ... her mind consulted, or the dictates of her reason followed beyond the threshold of the social circle? We think not; and, although we would not plead that the legislative franchise should, in the least, be vested in woman’s

³⁸ Osgood Bradbury, *The Modern Othello; or, The Guilty Wife, a Thrilling Romance of New York Fashionable Life* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 1855), 19, 33.

³⁹ Charles Wilkins Webber, *Yeager’s Cabinet. Spiritual Vampirism: The History of Etherial Softdown, and Her Friends of the “New Light”* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1853). To give a measure of his misogyny, the profoundly anti-Catholic Webber states that Ignatius Loyola was the only man in history who ever deserved to be a woman (82).

hands, still we feel that to her is due more respect in the outer walls of society than is generally given.”⁴⁰

Urban Masculinity

If antebellum popular writers were anxious about the increasing tendency of women to not act like “women” in urban society, they were equally anxious about changes in the way that masculinity could be displayed. The rise of non-manual forms of work removed many urban men from one of the primary venues in which their manhood had been enacted. Many authors were keenly attuned to the “feminizing” effects of this sort of work. The author of *Rosina Meadows, the Village Maid*, in a lengthy diatribe on how little working women (especially seamstresses) are paid, says that men are usurping women’s jobs, such as making hats, working as domestics, and working in dry-goods stores.⁴¹ In Mary Ashley Townsend’s *The Brother Clerks*, two brothers, Gulian and Arthur Pratt, move to New Orleans to work as clerks in order to support their family in New York. Gulian is presented as both the perfect clerk and as a typical woman: he faints in front of their boss; he has perfect, delicate white hands; he often sits on the lap of the head clerk and is clasped to his bosom; and, most tellingly, he will not leave the store to go look for his brother, “being ignorant of the streets....”⁴²

⁴⁰ Thompson, *The Countess*, 37. This passage comes from a novel that follows the history of a gifted, sexually voracious young woman who becomes “The Countess,” a famous courtesan and head of a secret society of women. Even here, the notion of women’s rights is inseparable from that of sexual activity—Thompson simply casts female promiscuity in a kinder light than most writers.

⁴¹ William B. English, *Rosina Meadows, the Village Maid; or, Temptations Unveiled. A Story of city scenes and every day life*. (Boston: Redding & Co., 1843), 13–16.

⁴² Mrs. Mary Ashley Townsend, *The Brother Clerks; A Tale of New-Orleans*, by Xariffa (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1857), 57. By the standards of antebellum popular fiction, geographical knowledge of a

These white-collar workers, especially store clerks, were often synonymous with another sexually ambiguous male figure, the dandy. Dandies were characterized by an avoidance of physical labor, a concern with their appearance, a penchant for brightly-colored waistcoats and tight pants, and an affected effeminate lisp (some are even depicted as wearing makeup).⁴³ As Timothy Gilfoyle writes, for the dandy, “Money and brawn were not the primary measures of man, but rather his leisure and sexual pleasures.”⁴⁴ Rev. E. H. Chapin, in a series of sermons published as *Humanity in the City*, derided dandies as “mere striplings, so dwarfed and dwindled by precocious dissipation that they look like feeble specimens of wax-work ... who are ashamed of manliness, and make a miserable farce of what they call ‘manliness’”⁴⁵

While dandies are often shown to be avid pursuers of sexual liaisons with women—George Thompson describes one as a “male coquette”—their sexual status is

city was a very “male” trait. Only a woman would not know how to find her way around the city where she lived.

⁴³ H. T. Sperry describes the descent of an urban-themed poet into dandihood as if he were following a girl’s fashion magazine:

His home-made garb is laid aside,
And he is completely transmogrified
Into a mincing New York clerk,
Learning to talk and smile and smirk
In the very genteelest fashion;
His work-brown’d hands are becoming white,
And his features are growing fair,
And he sports a glass to aid his sight,
And kids and boots decidedly tight,
With stylish things the young men wear...

He is only able to redeem his masculinity by going off to fight in the Civil War. H. T. Sperry, *Country Love vs. City Flirtation; or, Ten Chapters from the Story of a Life* (New York: Carleton: 1865), 21.

⁴⁴ Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), 105.

⁴⁵ Rev. Edwin Hubbell Chapin, *Humanity in the City* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1854), 178–79.

frequently called into question.⁴⁶ In a satirical novella about Boston, James Richmond describes a dandy walking into the Custom House alongside a sailor: "... the masculine gender seemed to be the birthright of his swarthy comrade, while the noun neuter left the beholders enveloped in doubt...."⁴⁷ The sexual indeterminacy of the dandy emerged especially clearly in criticism of Nathaniel Parker Willis, the sentimental poet and brother of Fanny Fern who was often viewed as the high priest of the urban dandies. A poem in the *Hartford Review* described Willis as "Not quite a woman, by no means a man," while William Snelling wrote: "When W-ll-s saw the light, 't is said his sex/Did for a month the neighborhood perplex./('T is doubtful now.)"⁴⁸

In an inversion of the typical Bloomer scene, a character in Frank St. Clair's *Six Days in the Metropolis* sees a group of Boston men wearing shawls and thinks that they are wearing women's clothes to protest for their rights, as the Bloomer women did: "He supposed that they enjoyed the largest liberties, and he was ... at a loss to assign a satisfactory cause for their wearing shawls. ... If they persist in wearing this article of ladies' apparel, there must be made such a distinction as 'male and female men'...."⁴⁹ These authors and others make clear that it is the urban environment, with the many occupational and leisure possibilities it offers, that casts the stability of the binary sexual system into doubt.

⁴⁶ George Thompson, *Catharine and Clara, or The Double Suicide: A True Tale of Disappointed Love* (Boston: Federhen & Co., 1854), 11.

⁴⁷ James Richmond, *Midsummer's Day-Dream: Libellfus: or, a little book of the vision of Shawmut*. By Admonish Crime (Anagramatically). (Boston: Jordan & Wiley, 1847), 12.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity*, 48, 49.

⁴⁹ Frank St. Clair, *Six Days in the Metropolis, or Phases of Life in Town* (Boston: Redding & Co., 1854), 20.

As a result, many urban men went to great lengths to construct for themselves a viable, independent masculine identity, through participation in volunteer fire companies, pugilism, organized sports, or general hell-raising, as well as institutions of self-improvement such as debating societies and mercantile libraries.⁵⁰ Many city-mysteries sought to offer instruction in creating such an identity in spite of the many feminizing aspects of city life. “Asmodeus,” in *Sharps and Flats*, explicitly recommends that men sow their wild oats when they are young, so that when they are older they will not be “led astray by the specious reasonings or the smiles and caresses of a deceitful wanton” but will instead retain their manly self-control.⁵¹ Many novelists, of course, preferred to focus on the sowing of the wild oats themselves. In George Thompson’s *Jack Harold*, Jack is initiated into urban masculinity at the age of ten, when Lopez takes him to a bar, the “Devil’s Den,” in Water Street, where Gallus Kate, a “fully developed” fifteen, kisses him and claims she can’t wait for him to be old enough to satisfy her.⁵² Elsewhere, in his “Autobiography,” Thompson offers his readers lengthy advice on how to drink without getting drunk, another useful bit of instruction in urban masculinity.⁵³

⁵⁰ This topic has been widely examined. See, for instance, Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon, 1978); Howard P. Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, eds., *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Paul Gilmore, *The Genuine Article: Race, Mass Culture, and American Literary Manhood* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); and Elliott Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

⁵¹ Asmodeus, *Sharps and Flats; or, The Perils of City Life. Being the Adventures of One who Lived by His Wits* (Boston: William Berry, 1850), 87.

⁵² Thompson, *Jack Harold*, 12.

⁵³ Among other things, he suggests eating before drinking and only drinking the best liquor. Thompson, *My Life: or the Adventures of Geo. Thompson, Being the Autobiography of an Author, written by Himself* (Boston: Federhen & Co., 1854), 13–14.

If the skills of drinking and fighting are useful bulwarks against encroaching urban feminization, however, it is sexual prowess—of the right kind—that is established as the main marker of a “manly” identity. In an attack on a New York politician who attempted to introduce a prostitute on the floor of the New York legislature, Thompson writes that, “I think the pretentious fellow is an irredeemable and unmitigated scamp, and that his affair with the fascinating Miss Fanny White is the ... only evidence of manliness about him.” Later in the same novel, Thompson speaks approvingly of a rich China merchant who hires a mistress for his fifteen-year-old son after he catches him with their chambermaid. The father wants his son to be safe, and brings him to the syphilis ward at Bellevue to show him what can happen when sexual energy is improperly channeled.⁵⁴ In one of the strangest scenes in his very strange oeuvre, in Thompson’s *Adventures of a Pickpocket* a husband is dissuaded from divorcing his wife after being informed, based on the examination of two doctors, that the man he thought his wife was having an affair with “is and always has been, physically incompetent to have sexual connexion with any woman!”⁵⁵ Since Edward Howard is not really a man, being “physically incompetent” (he is, unsurprisingly, a clerk in a lace store in Boston), no adultery can have occurred.

Sadly, Thompson does not go into any detail regarding the “irrefragable proofs” of Edward’s sexual incompetence, but it would not have been surprising if these physical changes had been attributed to urban life itself. In an era dominated by the belief that one’s physical environment determined one’s physical traits—e.g., people from hot

⁵⁴ George Thompson, *New-York Life; or, the Mysteries of Upper-Tendom Revealed* (New York: Charles S. Attwood, n.d.), 33, 66.

⁵⁵ George Thompson, *Adventures of a Pickpocket: or, Life at a Fashionable Watering Place* (Boston: Berry & Co., 1849), 81.

climates matured more quickly—many writers thought that the urban environment was creating physically distinct kinds of men and women. The sedentary nature of urban life, the bad air and water, the confinement bred by tight-fitting urban fashions (for both men and women), the heightened level of sensory and sexual stimulation offered by cities—all were thought to be working profound changes on the physical bodies of urban dwellers. Some felt that city life itself was responsible for making girls begin menstruating sooner, while others connected physical changes to various forms of urban work that people did. For instance, the stooped shoulders of thousands of urban women were attributed to their doing needle work for long hours in dim light.⁵⁶ As the forms of America's cities were changing, it seems, so were the forms of the people who lived in them.

Sex and the City Novel

One of the main reasons that city-mysteries novels were both read and condemned was their abundance of sexual references and their frequent depiction of sexual situations, in a style that can be best described as literary coitus interruptus, stopping just short of describing the sex act itself. As Harrison Gray Buchanan wrote, any attempt to portray all phases of life in an antebellum city required “a free and fearless pen.” As it did for many writers, for Buchanan this meant paying special attention to the “woes and wailings, the iniquities and infamy of women,” an effort that, although “it may shock the

⁵⁶ On menstruation, see Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 9–10; and Fred E. Schroeder, “Feminine Hygiene, Fashion and the Emancipation of American Women,” *American Studies* 17:2 (Fall 1976): 101–109. On needle work, see Emma Wellmont, *Substance and Shadow; or, Phases of Every-day Life* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1854), 24–29.

sensitive, will nevertheless command the attention of the wise and the good.”⁵⁷ Many of the “woes” and “iniquities” of urban life that were the focus of city-mystery novels—whether prostitution, adultery, seduction, or rape—had as their basis a physical sexual act, and authors were well aware that sex (or the presumption of its availability) was one reason among many that cities were exciting places to live in antebellum America. While it is impossible to quantify, the general sense that most city-mysteries would have imparted to readers is that antebellum cities offered more sex, in wider variety, than did small towns and rural areas. Most important (and most exciting), as with all the other “mysteries” of city life, was the imputation that this sex was taking place not only in the clearly delineated vice districts of America’s cities, but was rather happening all over the place: in a boat on the East River, in a doctor’s office, in the back room of a millinery shop, in closed carriages, in parks, in the boarding house next door, and in the apartment upstairs.

If the alleged existence of hidden conspiracies of crime and corruption rendered the antebellum city more exotic and terrifying, the sexualized nature of so much of the urban experience as reflected in these novels produced a city that was both threatening and erotically charged. The generic conventions of the city mystery were so well suited to the description of urban sex that at least one work of extremely explicit antebellum pornography, *The Life and Adventures of Cicily Martin*, adopts the standard city-mystery plot to a graphically sexual narrative.⁵⁸ The novel is essentially a basic city mystery—an

⁵⁷ Buchanan, *Asmodeus*, 7.

⁵⁸ *The Life and Adventures of Cicily Martin. Narrative of Fact*. Written by Herself (New York: Sinclair and Bagley, 1846).

orphaned girl from the Hudson Valley is persuaded by a friend to become a milliner's apprentice in New York—that simply continues on in describing sexual encounters of an increasingly baroque nature, where most other writers would coyly turn away and leave it up to the reader's imagination.

Chief among the assumptions about sex that antebellum Americans brought to their reading were an obsessive concern with female virginity and a suspicion of any form of sexual indulgence, based in thinking about physiology that posited what G. J. Barker-Benfield has called an “orgasmic economy.”⁵⁹ This view held that excessive sexual indulgence for men (particularly in the form of masturbation) would blunt the sex drive, while for women any expenditure of sexual energy would stimulate the libido beyond all natural bounds. There was, of course, a range of opinion on the matter, based on mitigating factors such as whether or not the sexual act was accompanied by romantic love, and on alleged differences between the sex drives of men and women, but in general the body of ideas informed by evangelical Christianity and what Helen Horowitz calls “reform physiology” were widely shared.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976). The literature on antebellum sexual thought is far too large to examine fully here. The most recent and thorough study is Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002). See also: Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*; Joanne Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Janet Farrell Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Stephen Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980); and Patricia Cline Cohen, “Ministerial Misdeeds: The Onderdonk Trial and Sexual Harassment in the 1840s,” *Journal of Women's History* 7:3 (1995): 34–57. For a slightly later period, see Lawrence Birken, *Consuming Desire: Sexual Science and the Emergence of a Culture of Abundance, 1871–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

⁶⁰ See Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, esp. Section 1. George Foster, for instance, distinguished between sex in the presence of love, which, “however tragical in its results, is ... a sin according to nature,” whereas

City-mysteries often expressed some version of the “orgasmic economy.” While most medical writers were concerned about the excessive sexual demands placed on women by “greedy” husbands, however, authors of sensational urban novels were more interested in situations where the roles were reversed, and the man was unable to meet the woman’s sexual demands. One of the *Twin Brothers* in George Thompson’s novel is exhausted by the amorous appetite of Norah Ryan, the Irish chambermaid. Thompson sympathized: “Ah! these voluptuous women, who literally feed upon Love, are terrible creatures when they conceive a mad and soul-absorbing passion for a poor devil, and make him the victim of their hot and exhausting embraces—killing him with kindness, and poisoning him with the sweets which they so plentifully shower upon him!”⁶¹ The large number of antebellum tracts warning young men against the “wasteful spending” of masturbation is another index of the depth of the belief that sexual energy was a resource to be husbanded, but authors of city-mysteries, again, were more interested in the distaff side of the equation.⁶²

As such, while many novels occasionally referred to male masturbation and its enervating consequences, female masturbation was of much more compelling interest. The eponymous heroine of *Julia King* describes in substantial detail her devotion to “the secret pleasure ... which charms the ennui of so many recluses, consoles so many

“fornication,” or sex without love, was “a sin against nature.” Foster went on to argue that sex done for money was *worse* than sex between animals, since copulating animals are usually at least mutually interested. Foster, *New York Naked* (New York: R. M. DeWitt, 185?), 156.

⁶¹ Thompson, *The Twin Brothers*, 20.

⁶² On the subject in general, see Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2003). Parson Weems’s tract *Onania* initiated a long American tradition of pamphlets and lectures warning young men about the dangers of “self-abuse.” Anybody who wrote a book of advice or lectures for young men was virtually obligated to insert a warning against the enervating effects of masturbation.

widows, relieves so many prudes and homely women,” but complains that in “its most exhilarated moments I failed to derive any satisfactory enjoyment.”⁶³ George Thompson, who elsewhere relished scenes of female auto-eroticism, complained in *New-York Life* that the “secret violation of the laws of chastity” was an epidemic in affluent circles in the city. These “virtuous maidens,” who “scorn and condemn those who gratify their desires in a natural way,” burn themselves out through frequent masturbation, which “utterly unfit[s] them for matrimonial enjoyment, besides deranging their whole nervous systems, and destroying their health.” As a result, Thompson argues, these women make passionless wives, who drive their husbands to look elsewhere for sexual pleasure. Thus, he implicates the female waste of orgasmic energy as being at least partly responsible for the evil of urban prostitution.⁶⁴

As these passages imply, and as is so often the case in sexually explicit materials, female sexual desire was an issue of primary importance in city-mysteries fiction.⁶⁵ These novels figure cities not simply as places where there are a lot of women to have sex with, but as places filled with women who desperately want to have sex. As Junius Henry Browne noted, the question of female chastity was so sensitive that the “mere mention of [female] sexual passion sounds the alarm for all the proprieties,” yet many

⁶³ *Julia King; or, The Follies of My Life*, by the Author (New York: William Berry, 1850), 18.

⁶⁴ Thompson, *New-York Life*, 78. This view indicates that some writers subscribed to a view of sex that held that the orgasm—not simply sperm—was the currency of the sexual economy.

⁶⁵ As Nina Baym has written, the question of female sexuality (and its control) was a primary concern of antebellum reviewers when they considered the “moral tendency” of novels. While suggesting that perhaps control of women in general was the real concern of these reviewers, Baym observes that “the ‘animal nature’ of woman was just one quality calling for regulation, receiving particular attention in novel reviews because it was so much in evidence in popular fiction.” Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 189.

authors of city-mysteries did far more than mention it.⁶⁶ Most authors would follow George Foster's lead, who simultaneously pointed to the assumed passionless nature of women and highlighted the titillating consequences of the exceptional cases where women gave themselves over to sensual pleasure: "The very absence of appetite itself, which is a pervading characteristic of a vast majority of women, enables them to play effectively upon the passions of men."⁶⁷

Women are often described in the genre as being naturally "warm-blooded" or "ardent," but many urban female characters were shown to be far more sexually assertive and voracious than such common assumptions of female susceptibility to romantic love would indicate. Foster speculated that virtue was the "natural and free life" of women, so much so that "female licentiousness is a species of insanity," a derangement most often awakened by seduction, betrayal, and desertion by a woman's true love. At this point, however, Foster's attention was aroused, as he describes how the scorned woman "takes the final plunge into open vice," becoming "a demon in her turn..."⁶⁸

If the majority of writers presented sexually active urban women as naturally virtuous victims whose honor had been sullied (and whose hearts had been broken) by seducers, most often in the country, other authors took a different view. For George Thompson, the city, instead of serving as a place of exile where ruined country girls go to give themselves over to vice, acts as a magnet attracting women who naturally possessed a strong "amative" nature. In *The G'hals of Boston*, he describes Jenny Barrett, a fun-

⁶⁶ Junius Henry Browne, *The Great Metropolis: A Mirror of New York* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1869), 434.

⁶⁷ Foster, *New York Naked*, 154.

⁶⁸ George Foster, *Celio; or, New York Above Ground & Under Ground* (New York: Dewitt & Davenport, 1850), 33; Foster, *New York Naked*, 153–4.

loving girl from Nova Scotia who runs away from her home because it is too boring. Finding work with a family in Lexington, Massachusetts, Jenny stays there for a year until she is able to find a job in Boston, “for her predilections were all in favor of city life with its noisy hum of industry and crowded thoroughfares.” This bias toward urban excitement is explicitly connected to her sexual appetite; when rumors start to spread that Jenny is a prostitute, she “determine[s] that she would no longer suffer the imputation without giving some cause of it,” and insists that her boyfriend spend the night.⁶⁹

While many writers expressed concern about the potential for the heightened pace and intensity of city life to awaken female sexuality (the same fear existed about the pace and rhythm of industrial work in places like Lowell), a debate clearly existed over the precise relationship—did the experience of city life heighten women’s sexual appetite, or were women who already possessed more amative natures somehow constitutionally suited to the urban environment? Whatever the causal sequence a particular author espoused, the connection between urban life and heightened female sexual appetite in these novels is pervasive. Whether the “raging and insatiable passions” of Dorothy, the servant girl in Thompson’s *The Ladies’ Garter*, were a pre-existing condition or one that was awakened by life in New York, the diversity and anonymity of city life afforded her many opportunities to consummate her passions, as well as to capitalize on them.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ George Thompson, *The G’hals of Boston; or, Pen and Pencil Sketches of Celebrated Courtezans*, by One of ‘Em (Boston: William Berry, 1850), 29.

⁷⁰ George Thompson, *The Ladies’ Garter; or, the Platonic Marriage*, by Greenhorn (New York: Howland & Co., 185?), 54. Dorothy alternates, in the span of a few minutes, between the embraces of the elderly general who employs her but is unable to satisfy her with his “fooleries” and the arms of the valet, Simpson, who, despite his unattractive face, “may have possessed qualities, not visible to a superficial observer, which especially recommended him to the favorable consideration of the ardent and not over fastidious lady’s maid...” (49).

Closely related to this question, and of special interest to writers in a genre that focused so insistently on narratives of ruin and redemption, was the issue of whether or not human character—and particularly female sexual character—was mutable or immutable. In general, women in city-mysteries novels tend toward one of two extremes, either wildly flexible or completely unalterable. Ned Buntline, in a paean to female virtue, described virginity as “a jewel which cannot be lent—can never be regained after being lost ... the gem which makes her more than man’s equal.”⁷¹ This hagiography of the hymen, where its rupture is linked to a complete transformation of a woman’s character, was echoed by a woman in George Thompson’s *Dashington*, who declares that, “The loss of my virtue ... changed my whole nature, and made me what I am—a wicked and desperate girl, capable of perpetrating any crime that my heart may suggest. I once shuddered at the very name of vice, but I now take a mad pleasure in its practice.”⁷²

The opposite view, that character is innate from the beginning, and is unaffected by the loss of virginity, is embodied by the character Rose in *Sharps and Flats*, who happily decides to get an abortion on her own initiative after her seducer abandons her, and becomes the mistress of a succession of men to whom she is only loosely attached emotionally.⁷³ In *New-York Life*, Thompson addresses the question of whether or not prostitution should be abolished, and finds that some people are innately suited to it. He argues that the largest number of New York’s prostitutes “are just fitted, morally and

⁷¹ Ned Buntline, *Ned Buntline’s Life-Yarn* (New York: Garrett & Co., 1849), 100. If contemporary reports are to be believed, Ned himself contributed to the eternal unhappiness of his fair share of women.

⁷² George Thompson, *Dashington; or, the Mysteries of a Private Mad House*, by Greenhorn (New York: Frederic A. Brady, n.d.), 21.

⁷³ Asmodeus, *Sharps and Flats*, 94–5.

physically, for the condition they occupy. They are born harlots, and their natures fit them for the lives they are leading. . . . Men are not forced to be rakes and debauchees—they are so naturally—and why not women?”⁷⁴

Thompson raises here one of the central questions of antebellum urban reform—can the genie of female sexuality somehow be forced back into the bottle? Some city-mysteries adhered to the view that a ruined woman could never be rehabilitated. Harry Harford, a young rake in *Ellen Merton, The Belle of Lowell*, declares that “one thing is certain, they never can recover, and once fallen nobody will exonerate them from the blame.”⁷⁵ Perhaps tellingly, this view was more prominently featured in city-mysteries set in smaller, more rural manufacturing cities. A novella set in Troy, New York, proclaims that, “For the wayward, the thoughtless, the indiscreet, there is hope—for the fallen, nothing! nothing! save the dreariness of utter contempt; a life of contamination, a future of unmitigated despair.”⁷⁶

Novels set in larger cities, however, where the social costs of sexual indiscretion were more easily avoided, reveal a much more liberal view of the consequences for women of pre-marital sex. Many city-mysteries complain of the hypocrisy of the view that not only should men not be punished for their youthful sexual indiscretions, but that, as Osgood Bradbury phrased it, “a reformed rake makes the best husband.” Bradbury

⁷⁴ Thompson, *New-York Life*, 57. The key antebellum work on prostitution in New York City, Dr. William Sanger’s 1858 report to the governors of the New York Alms-house, at least in part bears out Thompson’s argument. Based on interviews with almost 2000 New York prostitutes conducted in 1855, Sanger’s report provides perhaps the best source of information regarding the lives of urban prostitutes in the 1850s. As Christine Stansell writes, in answer to Sanger’s query about their reasons for taking up prostitution, over one-fourth cited “inclination,” almost as many as cited financial want. Stansell, *City of Women*, 177.

⁷⁵ *Ellen Merton, The Belle of Lowell: or, the Confessions of the “G.F.K.” Club* (Boston: Brainard & Co., 1844), 10.

⁷⁶ *Sketches of Trojan Life. Drawn with a Free Pencil. By an Amateur.* (Troy: Published and sold by L. Willard, 1847), 26.

asks, “But who ever heard that it is a maxim among men that a reformed woman makes the best wife?”⁷⁷ Bradbury’s heroine in this novel, Clara Hopkins, who is seduced early in the narrative, is ultimately married to an understanding country bumpkin, who she also sleeps with before they are married. Charles, her fiancé, simply tells her that he doesn’t want to know about her past, since men are not supposed to tell about theirs.

These instances of a fallen woman being reformed and eventually marrying certainly do not outnumber narratives that depict the fallen woman as irredeemable, but they are striking for what they say about antebellum metropolitan sexuality. Osgood Bradbury was especially forgiving of his straying heroines, although he often introduces a class element into the reformation of fallen women—women who have lost their virtue, invariably to an aristocratic seducer, are only appealing as marriage partners to either farmers or mechanics, never to other wealthy men.⁷⁸ The very title of *Anne Melbourne: or, The Return to Virtue* argues that the titular heroine’s virtue is not lost forever. After seeing Anne in the third tier of a Boston theater, Fred, a young clerk, vows to try to redeem her, since she is repentant about her sexual history (this, of course, does not stop Fred from “gazing fondly” upon her half-naked form as she sleeps, at which point he “could no longer restrain a rising inclination, produced by the temptation of her cherry

⁷⁷ Osgood Bradbury, *Clara Hopkins; or, A Mirror of City Life, A Tale of New York and Philadelphia* (New York: Samuel French, 1855), 47.

⁷⁸ In addition to *Clara Hopkins*, see Bradbury’s *Ellen Grant: or, Fashionable Life in New-York* (185?) and *The Rival Lovers; or, The Midnight Murder* (1857). In Bradbury’s *The Eastern Belle*, he shows a fallen woman at the far end of the curve. Elizabeth Walton’s mother was raised in Boston and seduced by a gentleman, following which she was sent to live in Maine, where Mr. Walton married her, fully aware of her condition (Elizabeth is not his daughter). Bradbury seems to show that a woman’s loss of virtue did not preclude her from living a full, happy married life; nor, however, does it mean that she necessarily learns anything, since Mrs. Walton is socially ambitious for Elizabeth and places her in the way of a man just like the one who seduced her. *The Eastern Belle: or, The Betrayed One! A Tale of Boston and Bangor* (Boston: H. L. Williams, 1845), 34.

lips,” and takes advantage of the situation).⁷⁹ Once they are married, “The ill devices sin had corrupted in her, now no longer irritated her bosom, but she slowly sank into a heavenly calmness and tranquility of mind that nought but the pure in heart can feel,” proving that female sexuality, once awakened, can be reined in.⁸⁰ While most city-mysteries show some women—prostitutes of the lower classes and depraved near-nymphomaniacs, for instance—to be beyond rehabilitation, many novels in the genre are surprisingly forgiving of those “souls only a little tainted and which might be washed clean.”⁸¹

Being male and being rich, however, were the best guarantors in city-mysteries novels of the ability to have sex without guilt or consequences. This confluence of class and gender in the shaping of urban sexual prerogatives underscores a theme that is constantly present in sensational urban fiction: regardless of the potential appeal of female sexual desire, cities remained sites where men exerted constant sexual dominance, and where male sexual freedom and privilege were near total.⁸² Frederick Appleton, the villain in Charles Averill’s *The Secrets of the Twin Cities*, expresses the view that undergirded all of the seduction and abandonment plots that helped define the genre: “The ruin!—pshaw!—what else are women made for, but to minister to man’s

⁷⁹ Augustus Franklin, *Anne Melbourne: or, The Return to Virtue. A Tale of Boston* (Boston: H. L. Williams, 1846), 27.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁸¹ *The Orphan Seamstress, a Narrative of Innocence, Guilt, Mystery and Crime*, by the Author of the “Milliner’s Apprentice” (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1850), 23.

⁸² For more on this view, see the sections on “sporting men” in Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, and Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*.

pleasure?”⁸³ The message conveyed by city-mysteries novels was that to be a rich man in an American city in the antebellum period was to enjoy virtually unlimited sexual privilege.

Ned Buntline’s villain Gus Livingston in *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* exerts all of his financial and political power just to pursue his seduction of Angelina, a sewing girl, preventing her from getting any employment with any of the city’s garment manufacturers. The nihilistic view presented in George Thompson’s *New-York Life*—that virtually all women, “married and single, respectable and abandoned,” are harlots because they exchange sexual access for financial support, whether through marriage or prostitution—would seem to leave men as the only free sexual actors on the urban scene.⁸⁴ The fact that the only way to attempt to moderate the sexual behavior of some readers was to point out to potential seducers that someone else might do the same to their relatives—a situation that would form the kernel of the plot of George Lippard’s *Quaker City*—indicates the level of sexual freedom which at least some antebellum men seem to have felt they possessed.

City-mysteries novels underscored the occasionally horrible implications of this freedom in scenes fusing sexuality and graphic violence. As has been mentioned previously, city-mysteries, like most sensational genres, offered as their main selling points the twin attractions of sex and violence. Some novels, however, went farther, offering shocking descriptions of violence as being inseparable from male sexuality. Cut-

⁸³ Charles Averill, *The Secrets of the Twin Cities; or, The Great Metropolis Unmasked* (Boston: George Williams, 1849), 73.

⁸⁴ Thompson, *New-York Life*, 36.

Throat, a monstrous villain in Henri Foster's *Ellen Grafton, or The Den of Crime*, muses that it is "'Sich a jolly business to be murderin' folks ... 'specially wimen, for they ollers has their bosoms so perticeler white and nice. That's what'll fix'em.'" Immediately thereafter, he murders a woman in front of her son, for no apparent reason: "She fell dead without a groan; the murderer knelt down and pulled the dagger from her bosom and the warm blood spirted full in his face." Following this gruesome "money shot," he stabs her half-naked body again and again.⁸⁵

Apart from murder, the frequency with which seductions verge into rape in the novels underscores the fact that many sexual encounters in antebellum cities were not entirely free of violence. But the novels also feature more straightforward cases of rape as well, often in quite off-handed fashion. In *Silver and Pewter, or The Contrasts of New-York Life*, a group of men sit around in Washington Hall drinking and being entertained by a story of "a revolting case of the violation of a young girl, which had just taken place in the upper part of Broadway," which is described as "a story which exactly suited the taste of Old Moriarty and his hearers...."⁸⁶

It was a short step from hearing about rape for entertainment to participating in one; as Christine Stansell notes, after 1830 gang rapes as a form of sexual recreation,

⁸⁵ Foster, *Ellen Grafton*, 52–4. The frequency with which breasts and knives are paired in city-mysteries fiction is at times quite disturbing. In the *History of Esther Livingstone*, for example, the narrator recounts how, on the morning following his wedding night, he woke up to find his beautiful young bride, Annie, murdered, her "small but prominent breasts" bare, with "blood between those breasts, and between them the hilt of a bowie knife...." *Startling Disclosures! Mysteries Solved! Or the History of Esther Livingstone, and dark career of Henry Baldwin*. (Philadelphia: E. Elmer Barclay, 1853), 43–44.

⁸⁶ M. M. Huet, *Silver and Pewter, or The Contrasts of New-York Life* (New York: H. Long and Brother, 1852), 59. This story of the rape of a young girl would not have been unusual. The age of consent in New York throughout much of the nineteenth century was ten, and according to Timothy Gilfoyle, one-third of the rape and attempted rape cases brought in New York City between 1810 and 1876 involved girls younger than twelve. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 69.

known as “getting our hide,” begin to appear in the criminal records of New York.⁸⁷ The threat of gang rape is often present in city-mysteries fiction, particularly when young sewing girls walking the streets at night by themselves are mistaken for prostitutes by groups of drunk rowdies. Even when women escaped the threat of male sexual license in urban public spaces, however, they were still not safe. In *The Fortunes of a Young Widow*, Mrs. Small, who has been disguised as a man, is revealed as a woman at a cockfight on upper Second Avenue in New York and is nearly gang-raped. She is conveyed to safety, only to find that her rescuer demands \$20 a week as well as sex as a reward for saving her.⁸⁸

Sex, Seduction, and Urban Exchange

As Mrs. Small’s experience makes clear, sex in city-mysteries fiction, as in the antebellum city itself, was often part of a commercial exchange, an informal economy that rendered sexual acts fungible, a commodity that was readily converted into cash. Timothy Gilfoyle’s *City of Eros* delineates the ways in which, by the 1840s, sexual activity and its related industries—prostitution, abortion, striptease and model artist shows, and pornography—was increasingly situated in a consumer world of entertainment goods and services. Sexualized commerce became increasingly apparent in the public spaces of America’s antebellum cities, both in the streets and in the pages of the public press.⁸⁹ City-mysteries novels, with their focus placed firmly on money and

⁸⁷ Stansell, *City of Women*, 96.

⁸⁸ *Fortunes of a Young Widow*, 63.

⁸⁹ See the Introduction to Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, in general for a more thorough discussion of the rising commodification of sex in antebellum New York. Harrison Gray Buchanan, in *Asmodeus; or, The*

sex, both reflected and participated in this process, themselves making sexual representations an item of commerce. In doing so, however, they went even farther, showing how not only sex became something to be advertised, sold, and turned to a profit, but how but sexual attributes, and ultimately gender itself, came to serve as a form of currency in the antebellum city. *The Spider and the Fly*, a post-bellum exposé of the sex trade, outlined the extent to which sexuality had become woven into the fabric of urban commerce: “Startling as is the assertion, it is nevertheless true, that the traffic in female virtue is as much of a regular business, systematically carried on for gain, in the city of New York, as is the trade of boots and shoes, dry goods and groceries.”⁹⁰

As scholars such as Christine Stansell, Marilyn Wood Hill, and Patricia Cline Cohen have noted, the sex trade was one of the few sectors of the antebellum economy where women exercised a substantial degree of autonomy, and often held “management” positions. Sensational urban fiction, however, goes beneath the level of the commercial sex trade itself, revealing the more fundamental ways in which women were commodities in the antebellum city. In city-mysteries fiction, two female attributes—beauty and virginity—are the central commodities underlying a majority of the narratives. The potential market value of these commodities, and the accompanying costs of holding onto each without converting them into capital, serve to drive many plots, often explicitly.

Iniquities of New-York, calculated the value of the sex trade in New York, estimating that prostitutes injected \$6 million a year into the city’s economy (apart from what they put in the bank), while men paid \$5 million a year for sex. (He does not explain how prostitutes spent \$1 million more than they were paid for sex.

⁹⁰ *The Spider and the Fly; or, Tricks, Traps, and Pitfalls of City Life*, by One Who Knows (New York: C. Miller & Co., 1873), 9. While this book was published in 1873, it consists mostly of a series of “case-studies” of particular individuals; almost all of these cases, from all over the country, are said to have taken place in the mid- to late-1850s.

One example is in Osgood Bradbury's *Louise Martin*, which begins with Louise, a beautiful small-town girl, looking into a mirror and realizing that "she was by no means destitute of personal charms, and these charms she was determined to bring to a good market."⁹¹ In another Bradbury novel, *The Rival Lovers*, an old man in a stagecoach warns a pretty girl who is on her way to Boston that "'you are carrying your beauty to a dangerous market. . . . Look out for the avarice of women, and the appetites of men,'" indicating that both sexes acted as "capitalists" in the urban sexual marketplace.⁹²

Women in city-mysteries novels are often compared to livestock, raw materials, consumer goods, or slaves, all being brought to an urban market where everything had its price. Many writers wrote of women, and in particular female beauty, as being a commodity like lumber that was "imported" to Boston and New York from rural New England (Osgood Bradbury was particularly concerned about the despoliation of Maine in this regard, and differentiated between "importers" and "purchasers").⁹³ George Thompson, in his description of love as "nothing more than a desire to realize a heavy per centage upon the amount of capital invested," even precisely calculated the market value of female virtue, stating that marrying a woman who was "virtuous, as well as rich and lovely" was like "getting a bale of goods ten per cent below cost."⁹⁴

⁹¹ Osgood Bradbury, *Louise Martin, the Village Maiden; or The Dangers of City Life* (Boston: George H. Williams, 1853), 8.

⁹² Osgood Bradbury, *The Rival Lovers; or, The Midnight Murder* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 1857), 11.

⁹³ See Osgood Bradbury, *The Empress of Beauty; Second Series of the Mysteries of Boston* (Boston: J. N. Bradley & Co., 1844), 30. Unlike lumber, however, women were often "used" or "consumed" in the big cities and then returned to where they came from.

⁹⁴ George Thompson, *Adventures of a Pickpocket: or, Life at a Fashionable Watering Place*, by Himself (Boston: Berry & Co., 1849), 18–19.

City-mysteries focus on a wide range of transactions in which sex (or beauty) is exchanged for money: prostitution, marriage to a wealthy spouse, acting as a rich man's mistress, and even certain forms of wage labor that involved the public display of workers (usually women).⁹⁵ While prostitution is the most obvious example of the commodification of sexuality, and will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter, most city-mysteries narratives revolve around a more fundamental transaction that was seen as a likely precursor to a career in prostitution—seduction.⁹⁶ Although seduction would not appear on its face to be a commercial transaction, George Lippard's *Quaker City*, the first American city-mystery novel, begins with a reminder that it could be. The event that sets the entire plot in motion is a wager between Gus Lorrimer and Byrnewood Arlington that Gus can seduce a daughter of Philadelphia's mercantile elite (who is, naturally, Arlington's sister). *The Spider and the Fly*, an 1873 pamphlet that described the sex trade as being structured along the lines of the emerging corporation, made a reference to the "Heberton affair," the seduction on which *The Quaker City* was based, in a discussion of "systematic seducers" in "great cities" that situates seduction in the "supply chain" of commercial sex.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ In city-mysteries set in Lowell, frequent references occur to the fact that the young women who worked in the textile mills there were both earning money through their labor and potentially through their beauty. Since Lowell was such a popular tourist attraction, the mill girls' personal attractions were on constant display. In some novels, the mill girls view this display as being the *real* career opportunity that Lowell offers, as they say that they hope to catch a husband out of the many groups of men who came to watch them work.

⁹⁶ It is perhaps telling that the 1831 Magdalen Report, the touchstone of urban reformers' concern with prostitution, outlined almost all of the various plots by which young girls, from both rich and poor families, were seduced and turned to lives of prostitution. The report thus served as a virtual how-to manual for city-mysteries authors. See *First Annual Report of the Executive Committee of the New-York Magdalen Society* (New York: Printed for the publishers, 1831), 7.

⁹⁷ *Spider and the Fly*, 5.

In city-mysteries fiction, seduction is most often figured as essentially another form of capitalist exploitation, with wealthy and aristocratic seducers consuming the “raw material” of poor women’s beauty and virtue. While seduction is often thus presented as a crime of class privilege, it is also shown to be an economic transaction as well, where men spend money in seducing (and then keeping) a girl in much the same way that other men paid prostitutes for sex.⁹⁸ As Patricia Cline Cohen has noted, antebellum courts agreed. As seduction suits became more prevalent throughout the period, substantial damages were awarded with a view to “compensating women and their families for loss of reputation, emotional damage, and lowered marriage chances,” factors that were assigned a particular pecuniary value.⁹⁹

Most seduction plots in city-mysteries fiction involve the seduction of a girl of lower socioeconomic status by a man of higher status, and the trope was so widely accepted that some authors compared its inevitability to the European tradition of aristocratic privilege, or *droit de seigneur*.¹⁰⁰ Many authors were extremely explicit in portraying seduction as a class crime. In Osgood Bradbury’s *Ellen Templeton*, Rebecca Jameson mourns the death of her seduced cousin Ellen by contemplating “how many young men there are in this city who do nothing scarcely but lay their plans for

⁹⁸ Indeed, *The Spider and the Fly* splits “offenses against female virtue” into two categories: “First, Seduction, or the debauching a woman under promise of marriage; and, Second, Making her a courtesan, or accomplishing her ruin for the purpose of inducing her to practice indiscriminate intercourse for the sake of gain.” The author goes on to assert, however, that both categories were part of the system of commercialized sex, since “*All the arts practiced in the first division of this subject are put in play to bring about the second...*” (50; emphasis mine).

⁹⁹ Cohen, *Murder of Helen Jewett*, 209–10. Between 1815 and 1830, Cohen writes, courts made awards in seduction cases in amounts as high as two thousand dollars. See Cohen’s Ch. 10, “Tracing Seduction,” for a good account of antebellum seduction and its class overtones.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Walter Whitmore, Esq., *Ella Winston; or the Adventures of an Orphan Girl, a Romance of Cincinnati* (Cincinnati: Lorenzo Stratton, 1850), 49 ff.

destroying the character of the girls who come here to seek a living by honest industry!” Rebecca notes that “a vast proportion of these young men are found among those who do not labor for the food they eat, and the clothes they wear. . . . If I had learning enough to write, and money enough to publish a book, I would . . . warn all the females who come here from the country for the purpose of laboring for a livelihood, to be on their guard against all young men, whose hands have not the marks of industry upon them, and whose brains are idle.”¹⁰¹ Jane Morrison, a “model artist” (an antebellum stripper) described in *Asmodeus; or, The Iniquities of New York*, was seduced by a rich married member of Calvary Church while working as a dressmaker, but she refuses to blame either her seducer or her own immorality for her state, instead attributing it entirely to economic conditions: “It was want—it was my dependent, desolate, suffering condition that was the cause of my departure from the path of right.”¹⁰²

Terry Eagleton has written of seduction/rape plots in English fiction that “sexuality, far from being some displacement of class conflict, is the very medium in which it is conducted.”¹⁰³ Indeed, as George Lippard explained in his introduction to *The Quaker City*, he began writing a seduction story—inspired, he stated, by the keenly felt imperative to protect his younger sister—but was led by this plot into his larger novel on the “corrupt social system.” Yet Lippard’s explanation of his plot indicates that, if seduction in popular urban novels was connected to a corrupt social and class system, it was also a sexual act, inextricably bound up with the sexual economy of American

¹⁰¹ Osgood Bradbury, *Ellen Templeton; or, The Spectral Cloud* (Boston: n.p., 1846), 67.

¹⁰² Buchanan, *Asmodeus*, 19.

¹⁰³ Terry Eagleton, quoted in Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 88.

cities.¹⁰⁴ Authors of city-mysteries fiction often figure seduction as an urban crime motivated by both lust and the compressed, sexually charged atmosphere of urban life. If women are subject to sexual degradation because they are poor, it is equally true that the sexual act of seduction sets about a chain of events that reduce a woman's class standing. In *The Double Suicide*, a young woman named Maria Williams is duped into a mock marriage in a "passably respectable" house in Bleecker Street. Only after she realizes the *sexual* wrong that has been done to her by her mock husband (who also forces her to sleep with his friend, who had acted as the "minister" at their "wedding") do her economic circumstances deteriorate, and she descends into drunkenness.¹⁰⁵

While seduction, and the attendant sexual disgrace it inflicted on women, was a crucial plot device of most sensational urban narratives, of far more interest to the predominantly male authors in the genre were female sexual predators, often referred to as "unnatural seducers." While seducers of women ran the gamut, from randy Methodist parsons to aristocratic rakes, female seducers were of particular fascination, perhaps because they removed from men some of the blame for the ruin of the belles of urban America. Women often aided in the seduction of other women in popular urban fiction,

¹⁰⁴ Amal Amireh, in *The Factory Girl and the Seamstress*, is especially perceptive in her discussion of antebellum seduction plots as both economic and sexual in nature. She argues that the seduction plot, long deployed in "articulating class and gender at times of economic instability," is applied in antebellum America to a seduced woman who is "a metaphor for the working-class woman in particular." Yet this analysis obscures the obvious issue: the working woman is seduced not primarily because she is poor, but because she is a woman. Poor *men* are not subject to seduction. Writing about Lippard's focus on the physical degradation of seamstresses in his 1848 "The Sisterhood of the Green Veil," she observes that, "By using a seduction narrative to tell this story, these sensational writers figure the worker's degradation in sexual terms" (Amireh, 67–69). This tie in seduction narratives between the political economy of class and the sexual economy—between money and sex—cannot be ignored, and it is one on which writers of city-mysteries fiction focused almost obsessively, as will be discussed below.

¹⁰⁵ *The Double Suicide. The True History of the Lives of the Twin Sisters Sarah and Maria Williams, containing an account of Maria's love, mock marriage, suffering and degradation...* (New York: H. H. Randall, 1855), 21.

most often in the form of an outwardly benevolent, middle-aged woman who aids a beautiful but bewildered young thing just arrived in the city and offers her a safe place to stay. The older woman, of course, is almost always a madam running a brothel, who imprisons the country maid and promises the right to her maidenhead to one of her steady customers.¹⁰⁶ Fortune-tellers and women who ran “intelligence offices,” or job-placement services, are also described as aiding in the seduction of women.¹⁰⁷ But it was the brothel madam that came in for special condemnation. Ned Buntline seized on this theme of women aiding in the ruin of women, asking,

Do men keep the brothels in our midst...? No.... Look at the den at 100 Church Street ... kept by a hag, who not only gave her body to pollution, but sold her kith and kin to degradation. Out of thousands of these dens, supported by the misery of ten thousand wretches and lost women—not five are kept by men!¹⁰⁸

Timothy Gilfoyle has written that, “between 1820 and 1850, women had greater control and influence over prostitution than in any other period,” a level of managerial

¹⁰⁶ In George Thompson’s *The Demon of Gold*, the madam, Mrs. Winstanley, sells the rights to one of her recent arrivals to one of her wealthiest customers, a Mr. Fitzclarenc, for \$1000, of which the girl’s cut was to be 20 percent. Julia Maxwell, an experienced whore who Mrs. Winstanley had also taken in, helps Frances escape from the house, voicing a common theme, that of female contempt for other fallen women: “Bad as I am, I entertain a profound reverence for virtue; but towards my sisters in vice I hold feelings of the utmost contempt and detestation, with which sentiments I also regard myself” (*Demon of Gold*, 35, 37). Timothy Gilfoyle notes the high market value of virginity. According to Gilfoyle, at times sex with a virgin could cost a man \$50, and even in poor neighborhoods the going rate was \$10, a tempting prospect at a time when teenage girls often could expect to make little more than \$50 a year. Gilfoyle also describes a more widespread culture of sexual fascination with young girls; as has been mentioned previously, one-third of all the rape and attempted rape cases prosecuted between 1810 and 1876 in New York City involved girls under twelve. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 69. The author of *Minnie Lawson; or, The Outlaws League* joked about the phenomenon, describing an abandoned girl of 14 who posed as a strawberry seller, he writes, “with the apparent purpose of selling her luscious fruit.” Charles Red Swan, *Minnie Lawson; or, The Outlaws League. A Romance of Gotham* (New York: n.p., 185?), 97.

¹⁰⁷ An attack on New York’s fortune-tellers, entitled *The Witches of New York*, quotes at length a pamphlet called “Trips and Traps of New-York,” which explains the connection between “yellow-covered novels” and the ways that female fortune-tellers helped seduce young girls. *The Witches of New York*, as encountered by Q. K. Philander Doesticks, P.B. (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1859), 397–98. This passage is not present in the one edition of “Tricks and Traps of New-York” that I have seen.

¹⁰⁸ Buntline, *The B’hoys of New York*, 86–87.

control over commercialized sex that was resented by many men, who often vented their feelings by trashing brothels.¹⁰⁹ The affluent madam who profits from the ruin of her stable of women is a figure of special horror in city-mysteries fiction. In *The Countess*, George Thompson describes a Mrs. Atwill and a Mrs. Stetson as presiding over two of the largest brothels in Boston: “These women have made an immensity of money from their profession, for nothing more nor less is it; and the lost virtue of the prostitute has been the corner-stone from which the fortune has been built.”¹¹⁰ While Gilfoyle writes of men who specialized in bringing young women in to the brothels, authors of city mysteries often wrote women into that role. In one novel set in Lowell, a young former mill girl states that her roommate in the mill-owned boarding house where she had lived was actually a procuress named Maria Hastings who was in the employ of a Boston brothel keeper. Maria led young girls into her confidence, arranged to have them seduced by one of the many rakes who (supposedly) were constantly hanging around Lowell, and then shipped them along to Boston.¹¹¹ Other novelists depicted housekeepers, boarding-school mistresses, and music or language teachers as being the prime movers of seduction.

¹⁰⁹ Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 84.

¹¹⁰ Thompson, *The Countess*, 20. Thompson may well have been describing real Boston brothel-keepers. An 1843 city directory lists an “Ann Atwell, widow,” as running a boarding house at 2 Central Court, while a “Sarah Stetson, milliner,” had a shop at 69 Hanover. Boarding houses and millinery shops were the two most common fronts for brothels in popular novels of the genre—Thompson may have been offering his readers a quite clear guidebook to Boston’s sexual demimonde, or he may have been attempting to blackmail these two women.

¹¹¹ Norton: *or, The Lights and Shades of a Factory Village*, 52. Several novelists mentioned the emergence of a class of “professional” seducers, who worked in league with brothel keepers. Timothy Gilfoyle writes of a group of men in antebellum New York known as either “pimps” or “cadets,” usually between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, who were responsible for “securing a steady supply of women” for the brothel that employed them. The men earned \$5 for a girl who was already ruined, and much more for a virgin; Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 175.

The Causes of Urban Seduction

These differing accounts in city-mystery novels of what led to the corruption of female sexual purity all addressed one of the central questions that preoccupied antebellum American reformers and moralists: Who is to blame for seduction? Are men to blame for their lack of ability to govern their sexual natures and their fecklessness in ruining girls, particularly those of lower classes, while they would challenge to a duel anyone who seduced their sisters? Or are women (and their weaker natures) to blame? If women were “true” women, according to some antebellum critics, they would have been immune to the blandishments of would-be seducers, and would never have put themselves in situations that might have carried even the appearance of impropriety. Or was it the fault of other women, who, whether out of jealousy or greed, sought the ruin of their competitors for the attentions of men? Or is it the fault of parents, who indulged their children’s material desires while failing to give them the moral guidance to make sense of the changing urban environment, and often were less than sterling models of sexual continence themselves?¹¹²

These questions were central to city-mysteries fiction as well. After all, the plot of Lippard’s *Quaker City* revolves entirely around a seduction plot that was based on a real-life Philadelphia seduction case, the Heberton Affair, which ended with the murder of the seducer. In his preface, Lippard claims that he “determined to write a book,

¹¹² The author of *Ellen Merton; the Belle of Lowell* offers a unique explanation for seduction. In this novel, Charles Howard uses his familiarity with Emerson, Orestes Brownson, and other transcendentalists to convince his beautiful neighbor, via philosophical argument, that she should sleep with him (18, 21).

founded upon the following idea: That the seduction of a poor and innocent girl, is a deed altogether as criminal as deliberate murder. . . . If the murderer deserves death by the gallows, then the assassin of chastity and maidenhood is worthy of death by the hands of any man, and in any place.”¹¹³ If the instance of sexual ruin lay at the core of almost all sensational urban narratives, assigning blame for that ruin became a central task of these novels’ authors, and the hidden conspiracies that they wrote into antebellum American urban life were often just as culpable for violated virginity as for violent crime sprees and elaborate financial scams.

The 1831 *Magdalen Report*, which shocked New York City with its extravagant claims about the number of prostitutes in the city, laid the blame for seduction at the feet of sexually active women:

Seductions of females among us are often attended with peculiar aggravations, and the abandoned of both sexes reciprocally the tempters of the virtuous. But it is clearly ascertained that bad women multiply the seduction of heedless youth more rapidly than bad men seduce modest women. A few of these courtesans suffice to corrupt whole cities, and there can be no doubt that some insinuating prostitutes have initiated more young men into these destructive ways, than the most abandoned rakes have debauched virgins during their whole lives.¹¹⁴

By this reasoning, a few corrupted women could effect the ruin of a great many men, who then go out and seduce more women. The sensationalist reformer Solon Robinson echoed this misogynist view of the urban economy of seduction, claiming, “It is no wonder that the first man fell, when ‘tempted of a woman.’ It is idle to talk of our power to withstand their seductive arts. . . . ‘I drag down,’ should be graven upon the

¹¹³ Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 1–2.

¹¹⁴ *Magdalen Report*, 8; quoted in Harrison Gray Buchanan, *Asmodeus; or, The Iniquities of New York*, 12.

brow of every one of her class.”¹¹⁵ The near-omnipotent power of the female “seductive arts,” and the voracity of awakened female sexuality, were for Robinson and many others the primary explanation for what appeared to many to be an epidemic of urban seduction.

While this tendency to blame women for seduction was prevalent among middle-class reformers, most authors of city-mysteries fiction, seeking to reach a broader audience, tended to place most of the blame on men. In *Catharine and Clara, or, The Double Suicide*, George Thompson defends two young New England mill workers who had been spurned by their lovers and committed suicide together by jumping into a canal. Thompson argues that they were justified in killing themselves, and blames their lovers for their deaths, since by seducing them they ruined the girls’ prospects in life.¹¹⁶ Osgood Bradbury, along with George Lippard, was consistent in placing the onus for the wave of urban seduction on men. Decrying the lack of a seduction law in Massachusetts in *The Mysteries of Boston*, Bradbury (somewhat unflatteringly) compared the penalties for

¹¹⁵ Solon Robinson, *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York Illustrated* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1854), 234.

¹¹⁶ George Thompson, *Catharine and Clara, or, The Double Suicide; a True Tale of Disappointed Love*; bound and paginated with NYPL copy of *Harry Glindon; or, The Man of Many Crimes* (New York: n.p. 1854). This story evidently had some basis in fact; a contemporaneous pamphlet by John L. Kelly entitled *Fact and Fiction! Disappointed Love* claims to be “A Story Drawn from Incidents in the Strange Lives of Miss Clara C. Cochran and Miss Catharine B. Cotton, who committed suicide, by drowning, in the canal at Manchester, N.H., August 14, 1853 (Manchester: From the Daily and Weekly Mirror Steam Printing Works, 1853). Kelly shared Thompson’s view, declaring that a seducer deserves a “dungeon deeper and a doom more appalling” than a thief, and took the occasion to argue for a state anti-seduction law (20). An editorial from the Lowell *Offering* in 1844 describes the suicide of a young woman in Lowell, who took her own life feeling overwhelmed by work and by rumors of her impurity. See Lowell *Offering*, 2nd ser., v. 4 (July 1844), 213. In general, in fictional tales of seduction, the *Offering* blamed the manipulative wiles of men rather than female frailty for the seductions. See, for instance, “An O’er True Tale,” 2nd ser., vol. 4 (September 1844), 249–51.

seducers to those for livestock thieves: “Let the suffering female have a strong hold upon her seducer, as the man has upon the thief who has stolen his horse.”¹¹⁷

Those who blamed men for seduction tended to view male sexuality as insatiable and very nearly uncontrollable; male seducers in these novels become so inflamed by lust at the glimpse of a “rounded bosom” or a “well-turned ankle” on a city sidewalk that they will go to any lengths to sate their desires. Authors writing in a more “racy” mode, however, tended to view both sexes as equally driven by amorous desire in cases of seduction. Thomas Low Nichols, a freethinking sex radical, opined that anti-seduction laws were pointless (and might even heighten the pleasure of some dedicated seducers), since people would just keep having sex anyway, and advocated wife-swapping along the lines of the ancients, who wisely “recognised and regulated what they well knew they could not prevent.”¹¹⁸

The most powerful analyses of the root causes of seduction, however, were those which combined women’s social vulnerability—particularly to the imputation of sexual impropriety—with their marginal economic status. In *Clara Hopkins*, also by Osgood Bradbury, Ben, a black servant, offers his explanation of the seduction epidemic: “‘O, massar, dis city be berry wicked. Great many bad men and women in it. But I pities de young white gals, especially, if dey be poor; for de men gib’em money and lead ‘em

¹¹⁷ Osgood Bradbury, *The Mysteries of Boston: or, Woman’s Temptation*, by a Member of the Suffolk Bar (Boston: J. N. Bradley & Co., Mail Publishing Establishment, 1844), 10.

¹¹⁸ Thomas Low Nichols, *The Lady in Black: A Story of New York Life, Morals, and Manners* (New York: n.p., 1844), 20-22; quoted at 21-22. Nichols presents his stance as a realistic one: “Since men will not be chaste, nor women virtuous—since, in so many cases, the observance of the bonds of marriage is the exception, and license the rule—since men and women in all ages have gratified their desires, regardless of present evil or future retribution—let us take human nature as it is—society as we find it, and make the best of what we are too ready to condemn—too slow to remedy” (21).

astray from de path ob virtue.”¹¹⁹ City-mysteries fiction shows the combination of female financial insecurity (most often of a formerly affluent woman in reduced circumstances) with male sexual license to be the most likely and common recipe for seduction in antebellum urban America. The author of *Sketches of Trojan Life*, about Troy, New York, was more radical than most, proclaiming of women that “It is want, keen want alone that compels her too often to sell herself for bread.”¹²⁰

Authors of urban sensational fiction also generally agreed that money insulated women from the threat of seduction (or allowed the fact of it to be hushed up). Indeed, the seduction that sets the plot machinery of *Quaker City* in motion is remarkable because it is a daughter of Philadelphia’s merchant elite that is seduced, not a millinery-shop girl or a maidservant. In a stirring defense of sewing-girls from the charge of immorality, William Burns attacks the “chivalry” of the antebellum city as “a chivalry that counts cost, that cuts close—a cute chivalry—the canting chivalry of civilization, that gathers up industriously the statistics of crime, and weeps; that will tell you just how many courtesans there are in the city, but which will not tell you what made them courtesans....”¹²¹

If sex was one of the main interests of authors of city-mysteries novels, and if they depicted most urban sex as being the result of seductions of innocent girls, these authors were equally concerned with its aftermath, which they took most often to mean

¹¹⁹ Bradbury, *Clara Hopkins*, 28.

¹²⁰ *Sketches of Trojan Life*, 4.

¹²¹ *Life in New York, In Doors and Out of Doors*, by the late William Burns (New York: Bunce and Brother, 1853). Book is unpaginated; quoted passage is from the section entitled “The Vest-Maker.” Burns is rather unusual in his staunch support for the independence of women; he argues that they are better off supporting themselves and living alone, with all the suspicion that this would have evoked in the period, than living with bad parents.

prostitution. The omnipresent nature of urban sexuality—whether in the close contact of members of the opposite sex in public places, or the sale of erotic prints, or attendance at model-artist shows—was most often reflected by authors of popular fiction in their descriptions of the urban sex trade. This confluence of sex and commerce, particularly in the figure of the “courtesan,” more firmly reinforced the linkage between sex and money in the urban context, and led to depictions not only of sex, but of the body, and even of gender itself, as the functional equivalents of money. Prostitution, along with some of its more transgressive implications, will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Ten

Sex and Money, Sex as Money

*The wages of Sin is not Death, but Life—life free from toil;
a home of luxury, soft carpets, rich mirrors, delicate
nourishment, rare viands, dress, beauty, admiration, a
round of fresh excitements, new pleasures, every hour.*

—Charles Gayler¹

In virtually all seduction narratives in antebellum urban sensational fiction, the surrender of a woman's virginity was followed by one of three developments: madness, suicide, or prostitution. Some authors, like Osgood Bradbury, were moral absolutists, strident in their defenses of seduced women but equally extreme in their condemnations of prostitutes. While still reserving some outrage for johns, Bradbury, describing a brothel, fulminated that, "There is no language in any vocabulary sufficiently powerful to express the guilt and pollution which rest upon the heads of these female panders who cater for the vile passions of men."² Most authors, however, were more sensitive in their portrayals of the limited options open to women who turned to lives of prostitution, expressing the awareness that, for many women, sex was the only way open to them of making a living in the antebellum city. Indeed, as Timothy Gilfoyle notes, in their frequent incorporation of "courtesans into their subterranean portraits of the nocturnal mysteries of the metropolis," often figures based on real-life characters who would have

¹ Charles Gayler, *Out of the Streets: A Story of New York Life* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 1869), 11.

² Osgood Bradbury, *The Mysteries of Boston: or, Woman's Temptation*, by a Member of the Suffolk Bar (Boston: J. N. Bradley & Co., Mail Publishing Establishment, 1844), 34.

been familiar to many readers, authors of sensational urban fiction participated in the “transformation of the prostitute into an urban celebrity.”³

As the figure who fused the twin fascinations of the city-mysteries genre—sex and money—prostitutes were central to many popular urban narratives, both as a cautionary example to women of where the road of seduction led, and as a warning to young men of the dangers posed by an insufficiently regulated life in the big city. As Patricia Cline Cohen has written regarding commercialized sex in nineteenth-century American cities, “male sexual temptation was omnipresent.”⁴ It was not only prostitutes—both brothel prostitutes and streetwalkers, in a wide variety of classes—that offered the prospect of sexual pleasure in exchange for money. “Model artist” shows, stripteasing, and masked balls were available to men with disposable income on their hands. Beyond this, antebellum cities were awash in print forms, including city-mysteries novels, that made either oblique or explicit reference to the sexual undercurrent of city life: ads for abortionists, contraceptives, and aphrodisiacs filled the pages of urban newspapers; directories of brothels were published, and some prostitutes advertised with personal cards; and both merely racy and downright pornographic newspapers, prints, and books were readily available from the stands of many newsdealers in most American cities as well as through the mail. As Gilfoyle has written, “This blatant commercialization transformed activities and behavior with little material ‘value’ into objects with exchange value. For the first time in American life, with the opportunity to

³ Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 143, 145.

⁴ Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 231.

resort to prostitutes on a massive scale, sex became an objective consumer commodity” and “a profit-making venture.”⁵

Authors of city-mysteries fiction charted the proliferation of commercialized sex not only on their moral maps of American cities, but on actual maps as well, as certain areas of particular cities—Ann Street in Boston, parts of Walnut Street in Philadelphia, and several streets in New York, especially Mercer and, of course, Broadway—became particularly associated with the sex trade.⁶ Increasingly, through both the unavoidable presence of sexually available women on urban sidewalks and the proliferation of brothels, assignation houses, and such prostitution-specific zones as the third tier in most theaters, commercial sex became a prominent physical element of the urban landscape.

⁵ Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 18, 20. Stuart Blumin has written that, for antebellum city dwellers, “there was no more fundamental failure” of the American city “than the package of violations that was prostitution—the surrender of chastity, the commercialization of sex (taking this darkest of domestic secrets into the marketplace that the home was supposed to exclude from its sacred premises), the implication of the husband-father in the sin most perilous to his own commitment to the hearth, and, perhaps most disturbingly of all, the apparent reversion to outmoded male assumptions of female lasciviousness and moral inferiority.” Blumin, Introduction to George Foster, *New York by Gas-Light* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 24. What I hope that this chapter will demonstrate is that Blumin’s categorical statement can only really be accurately applied to the urban genteel classes—church-going, affluent citizens and those aspiring to that status. Blumin is perhaps too heavily influenced by the example of George Foster, himself a moralizing middle-class reformer. When urban sexual culture is looked at from another angle—that offered by the more diverse genre of urban sensational fiction—prostitution takes on a slightly different appearance. While the loss of chastity and the stain on female virtue were widely decried, the assumptions that sex might be an object of commerce, that husbands and fathers might not be totally committed to the quiet life in the parlor, and that women possessed vibrant sexual natures are widespread throughout much of the city-mysteries genre. As Christine Stansell has written, this phenomenon very likely looked different from the perspective of working women as well: “... a commercial culture that depended on the exchange of money for amusement and pleasure at least had this effect: Its practices of heterosexual exchange implied a more contingent notion of men’s rights over women. Commercial culture promoted the assumption that women owed sexual favors in return for men’s generosity. From women’s perspective, this was hardly egalitarian, but it was an improvement on the view that women were legitimate targets for sexual coercion simply by virtue of their sex. Young women probably played an active part in promoting this sexual code.” Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 99.

⁶ Gilfoyle’s first several chapters are especially strong on charting this phenomenon in New York. As he notes, brothels were particularly drawn to the West Side below Canal street by the rise of a new urban development—the large hotel; Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 47.

Popular urban narratives rarely failed to keep pace with reformers (and often quoted them directly) in delineating the burgeoning presence of commercial sex in America's cities. In *Agnes the Beautiful*, Osgood Bradbury, immediately after having two of his male characters show how to pick up a street "hooker," claims, "There are thousands upon thousands in the city you have never seen. There's no end to them. As they die off others come in to take their places. They increase faster than any other class in the city."⁷ In offering tips to readers on how to navigate the world of commercial sex, often while mentioning specific addresses for brothels, city-mysteries narratives—regardless of their moral stance—participated in the same print culture that produced guidebooks and directories to the commercial sex offerings of a given city or, indeed, to the entire country. Such titles included A. Butt Ender's *Prostitution Exposed; or, A Moral Reform Directory* (New York, 1839); Charles de Kock's *Guide to the Harems; or, Directory to the Ladies of Fashion in New York and Various Other Cities* (New York, 1855); *A Guide to the Stranger, or Pocket Companion for the Fancy, Containing a List of the Gay Houses and Ladies of Pleasure in the City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection* (Philadelphia, 1849); H. D. Eastman's *Fast Man's Directory and Lover's Guide to the Ladies of Fashion and Houses of Pleasure in New York and Other Large Cities* (New York, 1853); and Free Lovyer's *Directory to the Seraglios in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and All the Principal Cities in the Union* (New York, 1859).

⁷ Osgood Bradbury, *Agnes the Beautiful; or, the Gamblers' Conspiracy. A Vivid Picture of the Secret Transactions of New York Life* (Boston: George H. Williams, 1853), 24. In this case, the two young men pass by a prostitute walking the street; she gives them a card for the house she works out of, and they follow her there at a discreet distance. This brothel, strictly for the "upper ten," is run by Madame Montrose, who simply purchases beautiful young girls outright from poor parents.

These directories, like city-mysteries novels, showed readers how to navigate the urban milieu—in this case, specifically the demimonde of commercial sex—without being taken for a greenhorn. Such books are occasionally mentioned in city-mysteries fiction. In Charles Paul de Kock’s *Mary Ann Temple*, the title character arrives in New York and finds what she thinks is a boarding house for young women but is actually a brothel. Discovered there by her cousin, she wonders that he was able to find her, “for New York is a large city.” He replies, “But I got a list of these houses by going to the right place to look for it.”⁸ Once one knew where to get the guidebook, it seems, another side of the city’s life was opened up

The *Guide to the Stranger*, a directory to antebellum Philadelphia’s sexual life, offered “the stranger and gay city bucks alike” a way to avoid “being involuntarily induced to visit a low pest house,” singling out “those low dens of infamy and disease with which this city abounds.” The directory marks with a bold “X” brothels and houses of assignation where visitors stood a good chance of catching a venereal disease.⁹ As is the case with most elements of the urban scene—clothing, shopping, housing—city-mysteries novels were preoccupied not just with describing phenomena but with *classifying* them, giving readers the ability to tell the difference between a “first-rate” oyster cellar and a dive, a real gold watch and a “pinchbeck” fake, an authentically “aristocratic” townhouse and an *arriviste* one, and commercial sex was no exception. The *Guide to the Stranger* claims to offer “a true and authentic description of the grade of

⁸ Charles Paul de Kock, *Mary Ann Temple. Being an Authentic and Romantic History of an Amorous and Lively Girl; of Rare Beauty, and Strong Natural Love of Pleasure* (New York: n.p., n.d., 34).

⁹ *A Guide to the Stranger, or Pocket Companion for the Fancy, Containing a List of the Gay Houses and Ladies of Pleasure in the City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1849), 8.

each house,” clearly indicating that in prostitution, as in all other forms of urban consumption, the offerings covered a spectrum from the bestial to the genteel.¹⁰

Solon Robinson made the connection between prostitution and mercantile trade explicit in his sensational reform text *Hot Corn*, writing of the elite brothels that, “It is a great object—great as it is with the merchants to get new goods—with all this class of houses to get new girls; those fresh from the country are objects of great importance....”¹¹ While some brothels—the most expensive, according to city-mysteries fiction—specialized in young virgins and girls “fresh from the country,” offered in luxurious surroundings, others catered to both more recherché and more down-market tastes, such as oral sex, interracial sex, flagellation, sex with women from the South, from various European countries, and sex that was simply incredibly cheap. George Thompson, in *The Mysteries of Bond Street*, charted one courtesan’s descent of “the ladder of infamy, from the gilded saloons of Lispenard and Mercer street, where fornication rustles in silks and satins, and drinks lascivious toasts in sparkling champagne, to the last filthy tenement of Cow-Bay, where bloated bawds fester, like the plagues of Egypt, diseased apprentice boys, drunken sailors, and green countrymen, for the uniform price of half-a-dollar....”¹²

¹⁰ *Guide to the Stranger*, 8.

¹¹ Solon Robinson, *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York Illustrated* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1854), 293.

¹² George Thompson, *The Mysteries of Bond Street; or, The Seraglios of Upper Tendom* (New York: n.p., 1857), 25. As this quote indicates, the various classes of prostitution, like houses or restaurants, were divided by neighborhood. As Junius Henry Browne describes it in *The Great Metropolis*, “Prostitution like everything else, has its degrees, its upper, and lower, and middle class,” with the best being met in Broadway or City Hall Park during the day; the next best renting rooms in Greene or Mercer Streets; the lower class walking Broadway at night and living in poor streets off the main thoroughfare; and an even worse group found in Water and Cherry Streets. Browne, *The Great Metropolis: A Mirror of New York* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1869), 438.

These dives are in sharp contrast to the alleged highest-class brothel in Philadelphia described in *Mysteries of Philadelphia*, which, according to the author, is run by a French woman and houses only six prostitutes, a number that is abetted for large parties by women from Philadelphia's "highest society, some married, none over 25" who work for "their own pleasure and gratification," in addition to the \$30–50 per night that Mrs. Anna pays them.¹³ City-mysteries delineated these differences with remarkable precision. The author of *Sharps and Flats*, describing Kate Brinley's course on the downward spiral of prostitution in Boston after her first job in an elite brothel came to an end, describes her as "a sort of semi Ann street nymph, not making its purlieus her abode, yet at the same time passing much of her time there." In what seems to be an effort toward filling an even more specific market niche, on the night in question Kate is dressed like a man.¹⁴

The Traffic in Sex

As in all occupations, the distinction between elite prostitutes and their more proletarian sisters did not fully obscure the fact that they were all in the same line of business, and that this business was in important ways *work*. Even if it was not a full-time occupation, for most prostitutes in sensational urban fiction, sex was how they made a living. Some reformers, such as Charles Loring Brace, clearly grasped this fact. Brace wrote that, "Preaching sermons to the prostitute, who has to choose between starvation

¹³ *Mysteries of Philadelphia, or: Scenes of Real Life in the Quaker City*, by an Old Amateur (Philadelphia: n.p., 1848), 20.

¹⁴ Asmodeus, *Sharps and Flats; or, The Perils of City Life. Being the Adventures of One who Lived by His Wits* (Boston: William Berry, 1850), 70.

and the brothel, is of very little use.”¹⁵ Clearly, whatever pleasure women experienced while participating in commercial sex—either sexual or from the degree of control it gave them over their own lives—the primary reason that these women were having sex was for the money.

Both popular antebellum fiction and contemporaneous reform literature agree that it was in fact economic desire that pushed many young women towards prostitution, a desire that was made visible in the common trope of the servant girl (almost always Irish) who makes no money yet “every Sunday, arrayed in finery mysteriously procured,” walked the streets of the city.¹⁶ George Thompson even provides a figure, stating in *Jack Harold* that most servant girls made five dollars a night from their after-hours employment.¹⁷ Elsewhere, and more fancifully, Thompson writes of a young prostitute named Amelia McVickar, originally from Philadelphia but working in a brothel in New York run by Sarah Tuthill, who (he claims) made \$800 for eight hours of wild sex with a 70-year-old man.¹⁸ On the other end of the spectrum was the experience of Richard Henry Dana, Jr., who, while visiting New York in 1843 to give a lecture, decided to perform one of the obligatory rites of antebellum urban tourism and stroll through the Five Points. Encountering some women sitting on the steps, one of them invited him in—he says he followed her just for “adventure”—and they proceeded to the rear bedroom. “I said, ‘What do you ask?’ She hesitated a moment, & then answered

¹⁵ Quoted in Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 140.

¹⁶ George Thompson, *The Twin Brothers; or, the Fatal Resemblance*, by Greenhorn (New York: Perry & Co., 185?), 18.

¹⁷ George Thompson, *Jack Harold; or, The Criminal's Career* (Boston: Wm. Berry & Co., 1850), 18.

¹⁸ George Thompson, *The Countess; or, Memoirs of Women of Leisure, Being a Series of Intrigues with the Bloods* (Boston: Berry & Co., 1849), 47.

hesitatingly, & evidently ready to lower her price if necessary, ‘half a dollar?’” Dana claimed to just be curious, but paid her anyway before leaving.¹⁹

Such accounts clearly illustrate that, within the discourses of both popular fiction and some reform literature, the suggestion that sex was a form of work performed for financial gain was far from outlandish. In *Life in America*, an older Irish woman excoriates a beautiful young woman for not taking advantage of her primary commercial asset, her beauty:

... you are too beautiful to be honest. Why, now, look you, child—what could you do without money in your pocket! Stitch women’s ware in a garret! Wash dishes in a kitchen! Dandle brats in a nursery! Open school! Do as you may—and with such a face and form as those (unless you anticipate hell by turning married woman) you’ll find yourself like a stag at bay, fifty times in every twenty-four hours.²⁰

Having already been ruined, Mary takes Mrs. Gallanan’s advice and, after reading a borrowed copy of *Adventures of a Lady of Quality*, decides to make use of what resources she has and embark on a career as a courtesan, reasoning, “Had I not fallen I might have struggled on; but having thrown away the jewel, it would be an absurdity to set too much value on the empty casket.”²¹ Such a choice does not seem to have been an exceptional one. Christine Stansell writes of the casual, everyday nature of commercial sexual exchange in antebellum New York, where the worlds of work and play blended

¹⁹ Quoted in Eric Homberger, *Scenes from the Life of a City: Corruption and Conscience in Old New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 48.

²⁰ John Moore, *Life in America; or, The Adventures of Tom Stapleton* (London: John Lofts, 18??), 9. This passage clearly indicates the level of sexual menace that city streets held for women, particularly attractive ones, in an age when male sexual prerogatives posed little barrier to unwelcome advances. Also notable is the way in which this line of argument about how to make a living parallels the plot of Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall*, with the difference that Mary turns to prostitution instead of authorship after contemplating her other options.

²¹ Moore, *Life in America*, 9.

into the realm of urban entertainment, where “courtship was one part of a system of barter between the sexes, in which a woman traded sexual favors for a man’s promise to marry.”²²

At a time when women working in the needle trades earned between 75 cents and \$1.50 a week (those doing fine work, especially late in the antebellum period, could make over \$3 a week), while domestic servants often worked only for room and board, the supplementary income offered by occasional prostitution was for many a compelling prospect. Indeed, as early as 1833 the New York *Sun* claimed that the “unjust arrangement of remuneration for services performed increases the temptation to licentiousness.”²³ In his landmark 1855 survey of approximately 2000 prostitutes in New York, Dr. William Sanger asked his subjects why they had chosen to take up prostitution. Over a quarter cited “destitution,” but almost as many cited “inclination,” or desire, not necessarily sexual in nature, but for the freedom and access to fine things that the income from prostitution offered.²⁴ The warden of the New York House of Refuge during the 1830s claimed that “love of dress was the most efficient cause of degradation and misery of the young females of the city.”²⁵ Sex was exchanged indirectly, therefore, for the trappings of a lifestyle which young women saw all about them but could not afford.

²² Stansell, *City of Women*, 87.

²³ Quoted in Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 59.

²⁴ Sanger’s work was published as William W. Sanger, M.D., *The History of Prostitution: its extent, causes, and effects throughout the world (Being an official report to the Board of alms-house governors of the city of New York)* (New York: Harpers, 1858). Quoted in Stansell, *City of Women*, 177.

²⁵ Quoted in Stansell, *City of Women*, 187. Stansell aptly notes, as did many authors of city-mysteries, like George Thompson, that wearing fancy clothes was often itself taken as evidence that a woman was a prostitute: “. . . fancy dress signified a rejection of proper feminine behavior and duties. For the girls who donned fine clothes, dress was an emblem of an estimable erotic maturity. . . . Virtuous girls, who gave over their wages to their families, had no money to spare for such frivolities. . . .” (187).

Thus, prostitution came to be seen by some popular authors as an almost inevitable consequence of city life and the covetousness that its proximity inspired. Many antebellum reformers viewed a young girl's move to the city, and particularly taking up certain types of work—factory labor, domestic service, or millinery—as a virtual guarantee that she would become a prostitute.²⁶ Indeed, this was the presumption underlying the 1831 *Magdalen Report*, one of the touchstones of the antebellum obsession with urban prostitution. Its estimate that there were over ten thousand streetwalkers in the city, and at least as many “private prostitutes,” or kept women, can only be ascribed to an ideology that saw New York as somehow possessing the power to magically transform virtuous women into whores.

The potentially explosive sexual danger of urban life was seemingly impossible for women to avoid. As a journalist wrote of San Francisco during this era, “It is difficult for any woman, however pure, to preserve an unblemished reputation . . . where there is so great a majority of men, and where so many are unprincipled in mind and debauchees by inclination.”²⁷ As Peter Buckley has noted regarding Big Lize, the prostitute heroine in Ned Buntline's New York novels, not only is the prostitute the inevitable product of urban life, she is the only character who is able to participate in every plot—because she

²⁶ It is likely no coincidence that these trades paid most poorly, but other forces were at work as well. For instance, older milliners who owned their own shops and employed large numbers of young women were frequently depicted as really working as madams, while domestic servants were shown as being open to sexual advances from their employers, with little ability to resist. As Thomas Bender notes, a newspaper editor was “roundly rebuked” in 1839 for suggesting that many of the girls who moved to Lowell to work in the mills eventually turned to prostitution, but ten years later, when a local judge spoke words to the same effect, “his statement was welcomed as an important contribution to the campaign to establish a state reformatory for girls” (Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision*, 108). What had happened in the intervening decade, among many other things, was that Lowell had come to be seen not as a unique workshop-in-the-wilderness, but as a city.

²⁷ Frank Soulé, John H. Gihon, and James Nisbet, *The Annals of San Francisco* (New York: D. Appleton, 1855), 503.

is fallen, she can navigate the social depths of the city, yet she is also able to recognize the deceptions of the urban elite.²⁸

Many authors of city-mysteries fiction, defending poor working girls from the accusation of prostitution, turned the tables and pointed their fingers at the wealthy classes of urban America, accusing them of engaging in the same practice, simply under a different name—the “unchastity of discordant wedlock,” resulting from women having married for money.²⁹ The centrality of a potential husband’s wealth to a novel’s plot is a device that would have been abundantly familiar to readers in the period. And it is important to keep in mind that, in an era that offered women very few options for earning a living on their own, and virtually none that would have enabled a woman to support a family, finances were a critical consideration in any potential marriage match, especially for widows. Even if we grant these premises, however, city-mysteries narratives are striking in their depiction of marriage as a commercial transaction (for both parties), and in their comparison of marriage to prostitution. In so doing, they broadened the discourse that fused money and sex in the urban context out from reformers’ traditional denunciation of prostitution, outlining an environment in which sex and bodies, in almost every possible context, were seen as possessing some form of exchange value.

Timothy Shay Arthur, a paragon of middle-class respectability, decried the phenomenon of marriage for money in *Love in High Life: A Story of the “Upper Ten.”* Kate Harrison, his heroine, is a bright but unattractive girl whose father pushes her

²⁸ Peter G. Buckley, “The Case Against Ned Buntline: The ‘Words, Signs, and Gestures’ of Popular Authorship,” *Prospects* 13 (1988): 260.

²⁹ Browne, *Great Metropolis*, 435. Browne claimed that such marriages “have more sins of impurity to answer for than the World dares name,” and described women who marry wealthy men they do not love as socially respectable prostitutes.

toward a financially advantageous marriage: “A union, spiritual and eternal in its nature and results, was to be formed upon a mere natural, selfish, and money basis,” Arthur wrote. “Gold and rank were to form the bond of union.”³⁰ Authors from across the spectrum of antebellum gentility pointed up the same tendencies. George Thompson made the most explicit case for the comparison of a financially motivated elite marriage to prostitution in *New-York Life*: “That a woman who sleeps with one man, for money, the year round, is any better than she, who, with the same motive, sleeps with fifty different men in the same space of time, is difficult to see; since the lack of love is the essence of adultery.”³¹

But writers of popular urban fiction went beyond equating a high-society woman marrying for money with a poor woman having sex for money. In these novels, relations between the sexes are abstracted from the physical act of sex and are frequently conceptualized purely in the terms of urban commerce, both by men and women. Rufus Small, in *Fortunes of a Young Widow*, never suspects that his wife could be capable of infidelity, since she “was a part of his household—he had bought her, as she has

³⁰ Timothy Shay Arthur, *Love in High Life: A Story of the “Upper Ten”* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1849), 11.

³¹ Thompson, *New-York Life; or, the Mysteries of Upper-Tendom Revealed* (New York: Charles S. Attwood, n.d.), 84. The one advantage that the marriage of a young woman to a wealthy old man possessed for writers like Thompson was that it afforded women an excuse (they thought) for rampantly cuckolding their husbands. A lawyer in Newton Mallory Curtis’s *The Matricide’s Daughter* encourages his daughter, Emily, to permit the advances of a rich elderly man by telling her, “No class of females in this city, enjoy so great a freedom from restraint, as the young wives of old husbands.” Curtis, *The Matricide’s Daughter. A Tale of Life in the Great Metropolis* (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1850), 9. This clear-eyed view of marriage was promoted as an alternative to the sentimental excesses of much of the period’s literature for women. An 1841 story in the Lowell *Offering* describes Laura, a pretty factory girl, who is seen in church on a visit to her home town by Mr. Smith, a cranky, very old bachelor, who is taken with her and abruptly proposes and is accepted. The writer is unapologetic about not showing a “true love” heroine, adding that the couple are glad that they were able to marry without going through all the usual torture of “love”: “He was rich, and she was poor; she was dependent, and he could make her independent. Shall we blame her because she said Yes? ... Laura does not regret the decision she so hastily made.” “The Wedding Dress,” Lowell *Offering*, 2nd ser., 1:1 (1841): 39.

compelled him to buy, the expensive furniture....”³² T. S. Arthur also described marriage in the non-sexualized language of business. Kate Harrison’s cousin, describing two of their acquaintances, says that, “They were bargained for like cattle in the market places, and disposed of to the highest bidder.” Upon Kate’s marriage to an up-and-coming young man, who was clearly interested in her money, Mary tells her: “You have been bargained for and sold; and Percy Edwards is base enough to take you with a money value added, to give something intrinsic in his eyes to the article of merchandize.”³³

In *The Mysteries of Nashua* (1844), a Mr. Dennis approaches marriage “with all the formality of a business transaction,” and openly describes his wife as an employee in his “establishment,” whose primary concern was “the hope of maintenance.”³⁴ Men are not the only ones, however, to take this abstractly commercial view of marriage. The plot of *The Three Widows; or, The Various Aspects of Gotham Life* (1849) surrounds the frantic pursuit of marriage by a group of widows, whose “cunning ... is proverbial; she is full of expedients when she has a daughter to dispose of, or to make a marriage contract for herself.”³⁵ Perhaps even more mercenary is the title character of Osgood Bradbury’s *Jane Clark*. When asked by a friend if she is thinking of marrying, Jane is remarkably forthright about the nature of her interest, saying, “I frankly tell you I do indulge in such a speculation.”³⁶

³² *Fortunes of a Young Widow*, 33.

³³ Arthur, *Love in High Life*, 20, 29.

³⁴ *The Mysteries of Nashua: or, Revenge Punished and Constancy Rewarded* (Nashua, NH: C. T. Gill, 1844), 25.

³⁵ *The Three Widows: or, The Various Aspects of Gotham Life*, By a Member of the New York Bar (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1849), 44.

³⁶ Osgood Bradbury, *Jane Clark: or, Scenes in Metropolitan Life. A Tale Descriptive of New York Scenes* (Boston: George H. Williams, 1855), 32-3.

If both prostitution and marriage were presented in this literature as transactions that involved the exchange of the female body (and soul) for money, this exchange reached its zenith in fictional depictions of a much more common form of commercial exchange—wage labor. If prostitutes rented themselves out, and wives negotiated the terms of their lease, then women working for wages, according to much antebellum popular fiction, simply sold themselves. As such, wage labor was seen as the fundamental commercial transaction of city life—of humanity for money—that spurred women into either unhappy marriages or the brothel. Many writers of antebellum popular fiction were extremely specific about how much working women, and particularly seamstresses, earned per day. Charles Burdett, in his 1845 novel *The Elliott Family; or, The Trials of New-York Seamstresses*, goes to great lengths to calculate the earnings of two girls and their mother who have been forced to turn to their needles to support themselves, concluding that, over the course of the week, the three women have averaged 2.75 cents an hour.³⁷

A South Carolinian who wrote of his visit to New York in the early 1850s was staunch in his defense of the sewing girls, proclaiming that all of the working girls' problems were "[s]imply because [she] is a woman, and man can impose upon her." He went on to outline the ways in which young working girls were "imposed on and

³⁷ Charles Burdett, *The Elliott Family; or, The Trials of New York Seamstresses* (New York: E. Winchester, New World Press, 1845), 75. This novel was published in something called "The Wrongs of American Women" series. While, in his preface, Burdett states that he was ambivalent about writing such a book—"I approached the task with diffidence, for I felt that I was out of my proper sphere."—he is far more aware than most writers of the financial realities of working-women's lives, and went to great lengths to present the specifics. In *The Elliott Family*, one daughter makes 25 cents a day sewing coarse pants; the other does fine dressmaking, but is stiffed by her wealthy clients; and the mother sews shirts for 10 cents apiece. Elsewhere, Burdett describes the business practices of ready-made clothing wholesalers, such as a cap-maker making girls work for free while they "learn the trade"; the girls work for a month, giving him a huge stock of caps, then he lets them all go, without paying any of them.

maltreated,” lifting narratives straight out of city-mysteries novels, and proclaiming, “No girl can make a living at the wages paid by shirt venders and manufacturers of ready-made clothing, hats, caps, shoes, bonnets....”³⁸

It was the poverty of working women—their having sold their labor for inadequate wages—that was seen as one of the main causes of prostitution, just as it made them easy targets for seduction. Writers from George Foster to George Lippard to George Thompson agreed that the low wages paid to sewing women pushed them toward sexual ruin. As Lippard wrote in *The Midnight Queen*, “Unroof New-York, and in her darkest haunts you will find a thousand women fit by nature to fulfill the highest duties of woman’s life, but who, by the wages-system of this great Christian city, have been consigned to that death of the soul which is a thousand fold more horrible than the death which lays the body in the coffin and the grave.”³⁹ Frank St. Clair, the author of *Six Days in the Metropolis*, was somewhat more cavalier, but came to the same conclusion:

Girls must live—of course they must—they must pay for their board—and virtuous girls don’t board for nothing. Girls must dress, and they can’t buy delains

³⁸ *Glimpses of New-York City*, by a South Carolinian (who had nothing else to do) (Charleston: J. J. McCarter, 1852), 111, 112. Amal Amireh’s *The Factory Girl and the Seamstress* offers a particularly helpful take on the work and cultural representation of sewing girls. The same economic forces that reshaped nineteenth-century American life and “transformed country girls into factory workers also transformed home sewers into wage laborers,” particularly the emergence of a ready-made clothing business and the concomitant rise of a wholesale trade in clothes (43). In that the outworker brought wage labor into the domestic sphere, she is a symbol of anxieties about the changing economic structure of the nation in ways that the factory girl off in the New England mill town could not be. As she notes, a shift in the focus on sewing girls and their plight took place over the antebellum period, becoming gradually more urban and more moral; the worthy widow as exploited seamstress is replaced by the young woman of embattled virtue. “In other words,” Amireh writes, “the economic problems of the seamstress are rewritten as moral problems,” and her presumptive sexual availability is linked inextricably to her role as a wage worker (53). As Nancy Armstrong has written, the divide between domesticity and wage labor was so broad in the antebellum period that “the figure of the prostitute could be freely invoked to describe any woman who dared to labor for money” (quoted in Amireh, 111). See Amal Amireh, *The Factory Girl and the Seamstress: Imagining Gender and Class in Nineteenth Century American Fiction* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), esp. Chapter 2.

³⁹ Lippard, *The Midnight Queen*, 71.

and silks for nothing. Girls must have other little knick-knacks which are among the essentials to human happiness, because they are human—that brings us to the ‘how.’ Girls are not half so much to blame as the avaricious, close-fisted old misers who employ them and pay as compensation that which everybody knows is not half enough to procure the necessaries of life. ... They promised to pay a certain remuneration, and they have paid it, but they dictated their own terms, and they have urged or compelled their employees to resort to other and damnable expedients to obtain what they could not acquire as the fruit of honest labor.⁴⁰

From this view of wage labor as forcing women into prostitution, it is only a short step to the millinery shop of Madame Chevreuse described by Ned Buntline in *The B’hoys of New York*, where the milliner (who is also a procuress) hires beautiful girls as laborers, but then sells them to rich men. Wage labor and prostitution, money and the female body as mediums of exchange, become indistinguishable.⁴¹

Men in the Sexual Marketplace

If the fungibility of femininity, whether through wage labor or sex, into money was a frequent focus of city-mysteries narratives, men were also figured into the equation of urban sexuality. Men are shown to convert their masculinity into money in many of the same ways that women do: through wage labor, through marriage for money, and through the sale of male sexuality in the urban marketplace. For some authors, men are the ones who are under real sexual threat in the urban environment. In *Clara Hopkins*, Osgood Bradbury cautioned his readers: “Enough has been recorded to unfold to the reader how artful a woman can be, and how destructive her power when under no restraint nor governed by any moral principle. ... Sufficient has already been shown to

⁴⁰ Frank St. Clair, *Six Days in the Metropolis; or Phases of Life in Town* (Boston: Redding & Co., 1854), 82.

⁴¹ Ned Buntline, *The B’hoys of New York* (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1850).

admonish the young and inexperienced to be cautious how they receive the attention and caresses of beautiful, accomplished, yet meretricious women who throng all our large cities.” While many male readers may have taken this as an advertisement for city life rather than as a warning against it, Bradbury underlined his point several lines later: “It is often heard that a woman has been seduced, but seldom that a man has been.”⁴² Other writers agreed that the city posed a danger to male sexual virtue. The author of *Luke Lovell*, also writing of his title character’s “seduction,” wrote, “The reader will pardon that term, or rather the application of it. To talk of a woman’s seducing a man may seem rather paradoxical, but such crimes have been committed and may be again.”⁴³

Bradbury was particularly preoccupied with the female seducer figure (unfortunately, we know too little of Bradbury’s life to understand why). In *The Empress of Beauty*, Henrietta Lambert is an expert female seducer, a rival to any accomplished rake in the genre: “During the last five or six years of her life she had studied the hearts of men most thoroughly, and become well acquainted with many of the first bloods of our large cities.” She meets Henry Gourland in New York, and persuades him to follow her to Boston, even though he knows she is a wanton, since “she had the power to throw around him the silken cords of love, which bound him to her.”⁴⁴

⁴² Osgood Bradbury, *Clara Hopkins; or, A Mirror of City Life, A Tale of New York and Philadelphia* (New York: Samuel French, 1855), 36.

⁴³ *Luke Lovell, the Widow’s Son; or, the Adventures of a Young Gentleman from the State of Maine, Who Went to Seek His Fortune in Boston* (Boston: for sale by H. B. Skinner, 1848), 17.

⁴⁴ Osgood Bradbury, *The Empress of Beauty; Second Series of the Mysteries of Boston* (Boston: J. N. Bradley & Co., 1844), 13. In another novel, Bradbury describes a prostitute who allows herself to be “seduced” by a young man and persuades him to keep her, when in fact, since she was no longer a virgin, she seduced him. This particularly seems to raise Bradbury’s ire, and he declares that, “A more wicked, deceitful, cunning creature in the shape of a woman did not live within the precincts of the city.” Bradbury, *Emily Mansfield*, by the Author of the “Mysteries of Boston,” “Distiller’s Daughter,” etc. (Boston: “Yankee” Office, 1845), 11.

Yet female seducers were not the only danger men faced. Many novels depict a form of male seduction, where unsuspecting business clerks are “seduced” into lives of immorality and dissipation by their male co-workers. Charles Averill’s *Secrets of the Twin Cities* is one example, where Frederick Appleton, a scion of Boston society, attempts the seduction of a naïve bank clerk, so that he will be able to convince him to embezzle funds: “Let me chaperone you! I can give you an entrée to the best society in the city; for to tell you plainly, my dear boy, I consider you a young fellow of spirit, and take a decided interest in you.” The clerk resists, at first, causing Appleton to muse: “He has resisted the first temptation ... but what of that? Even inexperienced beauty does not yield to the first assault; and I, who have triumphed over innocence and loveliness so often, will not be foiled by a first obstacle in working the ruin of an ignorant boy....”⁴⁵ Appleton’s skills as a seducer of women are the same ones he calls upon in his seduction of another man—yet another danger the city presented to inexperienced youths from the country.

Popular urban novels show ways other than wage labor in which masculinity can be converted into money, including via marriage. In “The Life of a Man of the World,” a novella bound with George Lippard’s *The Midnight Queen*, a handsome young man named Frank is faced with a dilemma. He has fallen in love with a young woman who herself has married a rich merchant to help her family, while Frank’s father wants him to marry a fat, ugly, rich widow—Mrs. DeWolf—in order to replenish the family coffers. Mrs. DeWolf objectifies Frank’s looks in the same way that rich old men usually do to

⁴⁵ Charles E. Averill, *The Secrets of the Twin Cities; or The Great Metropolis Unmasked. A Startling Story of City Scenes in Boston and New York* (Boston: George Williams, 1849), 12-13.

young women in these novels. After she catches him helping the young woman he really loves, Mrs. DeWolf tries to poison Frank's coffee, whereupon he states his condition clearly: "Miserable woman! Worn out by long years of sensual excess, you purchased me in marriage, so that I might be the instrument of your appetites, or the cloak of your numerous amours."⁴⁶ According to the authors of these novels, men were just as capable of compromising themselves for a financially advantageous marriage as were women.

The "sale" of the female body for commercial purposes—whether in shop windows, at striptease shows, or by street-walking prostitutes—was a commonplace of antebellum urban life. What may be more surprising is that many authors of popular fiction from the period also discuss the display and sale of the male body for similar reasons. Evidently, masculine beauty could be turned to a profit as well. One practitioner of such a trade was the "Fancy Man," who is described by George Thompson as the chosen lover of a prostitute, to whom she gives sex for free and who she actually loves. She takes pride in his appearance, and gives him money for clothes. Thompson then goes on to discuss how this phenomenon has its parallel in high society, writing of a man who uses sex to get money out of rich married women and then threatens to blackmail them: "The Fancy Man has pursued a career of male prostitution, the most extraordinary, perhaps, that was ever known in so called respectable society."⁴⁷ In Ned Buntline's *The G'vals of New York*, one character enjoys a variation on this lifestyle.

⁴⁶ "The Life of a Man of the World," bound with Lippard, *The Midnight Queen*, 41. It is important to note that here, where it is an older, wealthier woman buying a younger, more attractive man, it is her voracious sexual appetite—and not her impotence—that makes the match offensive. (The narrative hints that Mrs. DeWolf is actually the mother of her quadroon servant, having been impregnated by another black servant—the height of sexual depravity in antebellum America.)

⁴⁷ Thompson, *New-York Life*, 17, 18.

Having passed out from hunger on the doorstep of a fine residence, Ralph is taken in by the two pretty girls who live there, who swoon over his good looks, and actually fight with knives over who has rights to him. Ralph stays in the house, having sex regularly with both women and letting them dress him up in fine clothes to highlight his beauty.⁴⁸

Sexual Currency

The exchange value of sex in the urban environment is displayed more explicitly in novels where sex itself, outside of the context of prostitution, becomes a medium of exchange, a logical development in works where everything in city life is depicted as being primarily about either sex or money. City-mysteries novels depicted sex as a commodity that, when money was lacking, could be substituted just as well, and was exchanged in the urban market like any other fungible asset—indeed, as a young rake says in *Agnes the Beautiful*, the first question to be asked about a pretty girl in the city was, “‘Is she in the market?’”⁴⁹ Ellen, a young widow in Tom Shortfellow’s *The Mysteries of New York* who is a stranger in the city, runs out of rent money, but is offered the chance to exchange sex for lodging by her landlord. As he “was neither young nor handsome,” she is eventually forced to use sex to pay her rent, but she does so indirectly, sleeping with a “pretty youth” who then pays her landlord, using a middleman to convert

⁴⁸ Ned Buntline, *The G'als of New York* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1850), 88.

⁴⁹ Osgood Bradbury, *Agnes the Beautiful*, 24. Sadly, she is not, as she is pregnant by one of their friends. The presence of a child removed a woman from the urban sexual marketplace, as is evidenced by the testimony of a Mary Applegate, who gave birth to a baby in the house of Madame Restell, antebellum New York’s premier abortionist. She testified that Restell told her that there were many men in the city who would be happy to keep her as a mistress, if only she gave up the baby, which she did (the baby was likely sold, in a practice that was known as “baby farming”). See Eric Homberger, *Scenes from the Life of a City*, 106.

sex into money.⁵⁰ Similarly, Arabella, the evil female genius in *The Gambler's League*, rages at being forced to “flatter, kiss, and toy with a couple of brainless vagabonds, for the sake of a mere shelter for my head....”⁵¹

While sex was constantly shown to be something that was available for purchase in city-mysteries fiction, it is the exchange of sex for things *other* than money that reveals its status as functional, if not quite legal, tender. In George Thompson's *The Mysteries of Bond-Street*, a narrative based on an actual murder of a New York dentist, Emma Winstead matter-of-factly exchanges sex for an abortion, refusing to “acknowledge to her own heart that she had been a loser [sic] in the traffic.”⁵² In another Thompson novel, *The Outlaw*, Isabella Rich, the daughter of the governor of New York, having been impregnated by her minister, goes to visit an old Jewish fortune-teller and physiognomist. After telling her fortune, “the Jew” tells her, “Lady, I crave not money from so sweet a creature as yourself; there is another way to requite my services-----.” Isabella is repulsed by the offer, until the fortune-teller removes his disguise, revealing himself to be an attractive young man, and she completes the transaction not only with “a perfect

⁵⁰ Tom Shortfellow, pseud., *The Mysteries of New York* (London: William Walker, Otley, 1847), 127. An identical rent-for-sex offer is made to the title character's mother in Joseph Scoville's *The Adventures of Clarence Bolton; or, Life in New York*.

⁵¹ In this same passage, Arabella also offers one of the more strikingly violent reveries in the genre, as she fantasizes about murdering the man she is living off of: “O, how I thirst for his blood! Blood! blood! blood! could I but tear out his windpipe with this right hand.... How I would rejoice to wash my hands, over and over again, in his hot steaming blood as it comes google, google, google from the throbbing arteries!” While this is the moralizing Bradbury's attempt to portray a woman who would use sex as a medium of exchange as monstrous and unnatural, it verges into the surreal, making her a more compelling figure than the author perhaps intended. Osgood Bradbury, *The Gambler's League; or, The Trials of a Country Maid* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 1857), 16-17.

⁵² George Thompson, *The Mysteries of Bond-Street, or, The Seraglios of Upper-Tendom* (New York: n.p., 1857), 23.

willingness, but a wild impatience.”⁵³ In George Lippard’s *Quaker City*, the beautiful anti-heroine, Dora Livingstone, consistently uses the promise of sex as “payment” to get what she wants, clearly demonstrating the value of sex as currency. When she attempts to renege on a deal she had made with Devil-Bug, the monstrous keeper of Monk-Hall, he reminds her of their bargain: “The goold, good lady, the *goold!* ... Yo’ sold yourself – black eyes, poutin’ lips and all, for the ring. D’ye think I’m sich a fool as to be cheated out of my wages in this here way!”⁵⁴

The value of sex as a medium of exchange is highlighted even further by cases where the relationship is inverted. In George Thompson’s *Adolene Wellmont*, the title character goes insane with grief after her lover, Charles, is murdered by a rival jealous of Adolene’s place in his affections. In her agitated state, Adolene goes on a sexual bender, walking the streets with her breasts bared. A young man sees her in the street and remarks, “See! there goes Adolene, the star courtesan of New York! ... She does not *sell* her favors like a common Cyprian, but bestows them, and money too, upon any handsome fellow who may happen to take her fancy.”⁵⁵ Precisely because she is insane, Adolene inverts the usual relationship between money and sex. Instead of sex being something that is exchanged, for Adolene it becomes a gift that is given without regard to what she might get in return. Thompson underscores how contrary this is to the usual course of urban life by having Adolene give away not just sex, but money as well.

⁵³ Thompson, *The Outlaw*, 16, 18.

⁵⁴ Lippard, *Quaker City*, 358–59.

⁵⁵ George Thompson, *Adolene Wellmont, or the Female Adventurer: Being the Confession of a Girl of Spirit, Who was driven into a most extraordinary and wonderful career by the heartless desertion of her lover. The whole forming a true and thrilling picture of the Mysteries of City Life*, Written by Herself (New York: George W. Hill, 1853), 52; italics in original.

Ultimately, city-mysteries novels show *gender* itself, and not simply the sex act, as becoming a type of commodity. Femininity and masculinity are depicted as fungible, readily converted into money under the right circumstances. Whether it is an entire body or only a part, whether it is the tangible physical presence of a member of the opposite sex or something more abstract, everything appears to be sucked into the vortex of the commercial sex trade. In several of Osgood Bradbury's novels, female brothel owners "buy" beautiful young girls, and then charge men "admission" just to talk to them, in order to lay the groundwork for a future seduction.⁵⁶ In the 1852 novella *Jack Waid, the Burglar*, a Madame Ewerton runs a fashionable brothel in Mercer Street in New York. Yet business is slow, so she spends \$500 on a painting of one of the new girls in her stable: "'Dear advertising,' she muses, 'but goods won't sell readily now-a-days, without advertising.'" Ewerton holds an auction to sell the girl, and actually manages to sell her twice, charging one customer \$1500 and another \$5000. In *The Orphan Seamstress*, the title character's father contemplates selling his daughter to a Mr. Knight, a transaction that is compared to selling a horse (again, \$5,000 is the price).⁵⁷ *Sketches of Trojan Life* offers a novel twist on the theme. A man, convinced that his wife has already been unfaithful to him, bets her virtue in a card game and loses; she is spying on the scene, and

⁵⁶ See, for example, *Agnes the Beautiful* and *Clara Hopkins*. It is ironic that Bradbury, who was perhaps more preoccupied with the status of women as objects of sale than any other writer considered in this study, tended to give his books titles that were also women's names. As a reformer manqué, Bradbury was tremendously concerned about the ability of urban rakes to "buy" Jane Clark or Louise Martin or Emily Mansfield; yet at the same time, as a writer, he desperately wanted these same rakes to buy *Jane Clark* or *Louise Martin* or *Emily Mansfield*.

⁵⁷ *The Orphan Seamstress; a Narrative of Innocence, Guilt, Mystery and Crime*, by the Author of the "Milliner's Apprentice" (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1850), 56.

flees town with her seducer. The narrator notes that, had the husband done nothing when his wife left him, the world would have forgotten about it:

But that one act—that dollar and cent sale!—that fair trade for contraband goods!—that price set upon a wife! ... Cattle are sold at the shambles and purchasers pay a fair market price.—Slaves fresh from the coast of Africa are offered in our southern market, and men purchase human flesh at a fair market value!—So, we wonder not that human flesh, though it be white, be fairly paid for ... she is the goods, the chattels, the parcel, thus manfully consigned to another, with a bill of sale.⁵⁸

In extreme cases, this fungibility of gender extended to the sale or consumption of parts of bodies (almost always female). One bizarre case is Joseph Holt Ingraham's novella *Caroline Archer*. Emily Wharton, a rich young woman in Philadelphia, is tremendously vain of her teeth, and is heartbroken when she has four of them knocked out in a fall from a horse. Her dentist tells her that he can replace the teeth only by "extracting teeth from another's jaw and placing them with the nerve still warm in the cavities of your own"; he claims to have done the operation three times before, and that he always uses teeth from black women, who are thought to have the finest teeth. But Emily and her husband find the concept of her having part of a black woman inside her revolting, so they advertise in the paper for real teeth from a white woman. Luckily for them, the title character's family is behind on their rent, and she sells her teeth for five guineas apiece.⁵⁹ It is not only women's bodies, but particular parts of their bodies, that are convertible into ready money in the antebellum city.

⁵⁸ *Sketches of Trojan Life; Drawn with a Free Pencil*. By an Amateur. (Troy: Published and sold by L. Willard, 1847), 32, 33.

⁵⁹ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *Caroline Archer; or, The Miliner's Apprentice* (Boston: Edward P. Williams, n.d.), 9, 10.

Urban Counterfeits

While this state of affairs was of great concern to clergymen and other reformers, not to mention to parents of daughters who wanted to move to the city, it was not entirely unproblematic for those who participated in it. The cloud that loomed over all commercial transactions in antebellum America, whether they involved specie or paper money, was the threat of counterfeiting. The antebellum monetary system relied on over five thousand different note issues, from banks all over the country, and at varying levels of solvency.⁶⁰ The danger of receiving counterfeit money was especially great in cities, with their heterogeneous mixture of people from different parts of the country, all carrying different sorts of money issued by different banks. As David Henkin notes, “the banknote and its counterfeit evil twin evoked the dangers of the big city and the treacherous instability of an urban society rife with confidence men and swindlers.”⁶¹ Reflecting this fear, many city-mysteries narratives revolve around gangs of counterfeiters and detail the ways in which spurious money was passed. Indeed, Mrs. Ewerton, the above-mentioned New York madam who auctions off one of her girls, is the victim of just such a criminal. The man who bids \$5,000 for the girl pays half the money in counterfeit bills, and Mrs. Ewerton is caught passing them the very next day in A. T. Stewart’s department store.

⁶⁰ David Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 141. Such banknotes, as Henkin describes them, were uniquely unreliable forms of text: “Banknotes elevated the stakes of the dependence on impersonal print authority that the new metropolitan press cultivated and accentuated, and introduced slippery and destabilizing questions of confidence in that authority into everyday life” (138). For an excellent and thorough discussion of the subject, see Stephen Mihm, “Making Money: Counterfeiters and Counterfeiting in Antebellum America,” Ph.D. Diss. (New York University, 2003). For an incredibly specific antebellum narrative of counterfeiting, based on a real case, see *The Life and Adventures of the Accomplished Forger and Swindler Col. Monroe Edwards* (New York: H. Long & Brother), 1848.

⁶¹ Henkin, *City Reading*, 142.

As we have seen, gender itself in these novels becomes a form of commodity—or even a form of money. But money, as any antebellum city merchant could tell you, wasn't always what it seemed. In a similar way, gender, it was feared, could also be faked, or “counterfeited.” If antebellum American cities were suffused with the fear of fake money, according to city-mysteries fiction, they were equally afflicted by the fear of fake sexuality.⁶² Writers raised concerns about the danger posed to “femininity” by the promoters of the incipient women's movement, who, they claimed, were compromising womanhood by turning women into “counterfeit” men. Even more alarming, particularly for novelists writing in a genre that appealed particularly to male readers, was the danger that masculinity was being threatened, whether through figures such as dandies, Bloomer-clad women, or through the emasculating economic crises of the antebellum period that rendered so many men unable to support their families.

Urban “counterfeits,” of course, were a constant theme—the fake beggar, the pinchbeck watch, the outwardly respectable clergyman—and the word *counterfeit* was often used by authors to describe the many illusory aspects of city life. But of special fascination to authors of sensational urban narratives were “counterfeit” men and women: that is, people who appeared in public dressed and acting like a member of the opposite sex. Authors of both fictional narratives and non-fiction advice books frequently alerted their readers that they should be on their guard to be sure that the men (or women) they were dealing with were actually what they seemed. The cover of *Nick Bigelow and the*

⁶² David Henkin writes that, “More significant, both culturally and economically, than the extent of actual counterfeiting (which by its nature is hard to determine) was the extent of the suspicion.” His survey of the counterfeit detectors published in 1856 gives a list of 1,409 banks, of which only 463 were *not* cited as known targets of counterfeiting. By 1862, the *New York Times* claimed that eighty percent of the banknotes in circulation were fake. Henkin, *City Reading*, 145.

Female Burglar features an illustration of a woman named Bess Bradshaw, dressed in men's clothes and with her hair cut short. She is the lover of Nick Bigelow, himself a counterfeiter, and is arrested for passing fake bills. Her hair is cut in prison, and she refuses to let it grow back, explaining that, upon her discharge from prison, she was seized by the "strange notion ... to dress myself in men's clothes."⁶³ Falling in with a gang of young men in New York, and going by the name of "Seabird Tim," she is only found out when she is caught in a burglary and is hauled into court in the presence of Old Hays, the legendary New York police detective. He has the "special eye," which can be used to detect both counterfeit money and counterfeit gender. Keeping his eye on her through the arraignment, he proclaims: "that's a woman in man's clothes—she's just out of the state's prison."⁶⁴ Embodying the linkage between anxieties about fake money and fake gender, Bess Bradshaw taps into yet another strong current of fascination within the city-mysteries genre.

"The Devil Among the Petticoats"

Few strictures of Mosaic law were violated as often or as gleefully in antebellum American fiction as the Biblical prohibition against cross-dressing, found in Deuteronomy 22:5: "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment...." Beginning early in the nineteenth century with such works as *The Female Marine*, about a woman dressed as a man who served as

⁶³ *Nick Bigelow: and the Female Burglar: And other Leaves from a Lawyer's Diary*. By a Member of the New York Bar (New York: Burgess, Stringer & Co., 1846), 84.

⁶⁴ *Nick Bigelow*, 85.

a sailor in the War of 1812, antebellum novels saw their characters cross-dress at an alarming rate, and for a near-infinite number of reasons: escape, revenge, confidence games, or just plain fun.⁶⁵ The frequency with which the device is used, and the seemingly everyday quality of cross-dressing, can be seen as normalizing what is viewed by contemporary theorists of gender as a fundamentally “transgressive” act. Yet it cannot be denied that something is being destabilized in these instances of gender counterfeiting in city-mysteries fiction.

Marjorie Garber has written that the “apparently spontaneous” appearance of cross-dressed characters in texts that are not primarily concerned with gender difference point to a crisis somewhere else in the culture that is simply being played out through the representation of gender.⁶⁶ I would argue that cross-dressing, in particular in the context of urban fiction, points not so much to a crisis in the category of gender (although in some cases it certainly does) as to a crisis of epistemology, a crisis not of male and female but of the signs by which those things are known, which was part of the much

⁶⁵ For background on cross-dressing in general, and in nineteenth-century American fiction in particular, see: Daniel Cohen, ed., *The Female Marine and Related Works: Narratives of Cross-Dressing and Urban Vice in America's Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Kathleen De Grave, *Swindler, Spy, Rebel: The Confidence Woman in Nineteenth-Century America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995); Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, eds., *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Elaine Ginsberg, ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996). For an especially perceptive analysis of the cultural work performed by cross-dressing and gender ambiguity on the Civil War-era stage and in celebrity culture, see Renée M. Sentilles, *Performing Menken: Adah Isaacs Menken and the Birth of American Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

For my purposes here, I will be considering as “cross-dressing” any narrative instances of characters wearing the clothes of the other gender from which some plot incident results. This may confuse cross-dressing, as modern theorists often use the term, with simple acts of disguise, but I am interested more in the interactions of cross-dressed characters with other urbanites in the novels, and the uncertainty that results, than in the act itself.

⁶⁶ In her words, cross-dressing is indicative of what Garber calls a “category crisis” in the culture, a “failure of definitional distinction ... that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another.” Garber, *Vested Interests*, 16-17.

larger, more pervasive anxiety in a rapidly urbanizing nation about how to make sense of urban life of which city-mysteries novels are a symptom.

The anxiety reflected is not so much that surrounding manly women or effeminate men, but rather a questioning of what it meant to be masculine or feminine and how those categories would be made known. Unlike the case of counterfeit money, which served to call into question the reliability of both printed material and the nation's financial system and often had very real destabilizing effects, such as provoking runs on banks, incidents of cross-dressing, or sexual counterfeiting, in city-mysteries most often work to reify the categories of gender, not destabilize them. In most cases, men who dress as women are rendered more "masculine" by the experience, and women who dress as men become more stereotypically "feminine" when their disguise is removed.⁶⁷

It comes as no surprise that cross-dressing would appeal to the authors of city-mystery novels, whose controlling metaphor is that of "removing the veil," and who were concerned with the increasingly fragmentary and anonymous nature of urban life. Almost all of the daily contacts of city life required some level of trust that those you dealt with were who they said they were.⁶⁸ Just as the racial masquerade was the most dangerous threat to the epistemic order of the antebellum South, in urban centers the possibility that men might really be women, and women might really be men, further

⁶⁷ This is not so much to disagree with Garber as to complicate her reading of the cultural work done by narratives of cross-dressing. Without question, this reification of the "stable" categories of gender may have been a response to a perceived crisis in gender categories. What I wish to argue is that cross-dressing in narrative does not *automatically* destabilize gender roles, is not in itself transgressive, and can in fact carry a reactionary message.

⁶⁸ Countless innovations during this period, from Arthur Tappan's formation of the nation's first credit-reporting agency (later to become Dun & Bradstreet) in the wake of the Panic of 1837, to the invention of photography, to the popularity of spiritualism and phrenology, can be read as attempts to address the problem of how to fix identity, particularly in the urban context.

intensified the anxieties generated by the unknowability of cities. The metaphor of the veil was linked particularly powerfully to ideas about sex, for perhaps obvious reasons; as Walt Whitman wrote in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*:

Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts....
Voices veiled, and I remove the veil....⁶⁹

While the veil of urban anonymity concealed many things, for authors (and readers) of city-mysteries fiction the “sexes and lusts” were perhaps the most compelling things hidden behind it.

While city-mysteries novelists frequently drew on events and personages of the day for their work, little historical evidence exists of an epidemic of urban transvestism, although it is telling that one confirmed account of antebellum urban cross-dressing I have found does appear in a city-mystery.⁷⁰ Ample historical evidence does exist, however, of women’s increasing presence in the public spaces of American cities, often acting in “unwomanly” ways. From the extreme examples of the Bloomer costume and the women’s rights movement to the more mundane, but much more significant, increase

⁶⁹ Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 50; from “Song of Myself.”

⁷⁰ This is the story of Peter Sewalley, an African-American New Yorker, who was arrested for larceny in 1836 wearing women’s clothing. Sewalley, who often went by the name “Mary Jones,” worked as a cook in a brothel, and said that he wore women’s clothing “because he looked so much better in them” (quoted in Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*). A lengthy aside in George Thompson’s (writing under the pseudonym John McGinn) quasi-reformist novelette *Ten Days in the Tombs: or, A Key to the Modern Bastille* (1855), which features Thompson as the “fat philosopher,” imprisoned in the Tombs for public drunkenness, tells the story of “The Man Monster.” According to this account, as well as those from 1836, Sewalley would often pose as a prostitute and steal men’s money, but the implication is clear that he also had sex with the men he robbed. Thompson describes Sewalley as “an accomplished scoundrel, playing his assumed part to perfection, and artfully imitating the voice, manners, &c., of a female,” and implies that at least one of his customers committed suicide after the circumstances of his liaison with Sewalley were revealed (57). Thompson concludes his account by warning his readers that Sewalley still lives in New York, dressed as a woman, calling into question the reliability of gender referents his readers saw every day: “Repeated trips to Blackwell’s Island did not induce him to mend his ways; and the ‘Man Monster’ is still supposed to be plying his infernal vocation in the very midst of an unsuspecting community” (57).

in women performing wage labor outside the home, antebellum cities were rife with challenges to received notions of appropriate gender behavior.⁷¹

Similar contestation was going on during this period over what constituted masculinity—the male artisans in the processions described by Ryan were engaged in just such an activity. The frequent depictions of “dandies” and other “womanly men” in popular cultural products of the period, along with their inverse, the hyper-masculine Bowery B’hoy, can be seen as having their roots in real historical shifts, including diminished male authority at home and the rise of sedentary, indoor, “feminine” occupations for men.⁷² Yet it would be difficult to support the claim that the privileges associated with maleness were in any meaningful sense eroded during the antebellum period, or that any real debate over the inherent qualities of biological maleness took place.⁷³ I would argue that there was far less confusion about the stability of the

⁷¹ Authors were not immune from this anxiety. Caroline Howard Gilman wrote that she cried all night when her first poem was published under her own name, when she was 16, saying, it was “as if I had been detected in man’s apparel.” Quoted in Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 180.

⁷² Part of this working-out of the meaning of masculinity was connected with the fact that so many men living in cities were young, and were living away from their families, particularly their mothers and sisters, for the first time. Writing of the theatricals that were popular diversions in the nineteenth century for groups of young men, E. Anthony Rotundo observes that, “The thing that some veterans of these productions recalled most vividly in later years was the spectacle of young men pretending to be women. Indeed, these theatrical amateurs wrote plays which required them to act as females. Thus, at a time in life when men were living without maternal nurture and had to supply each other with some form of substitute, they chose to play-act together as women and men. At a point in the life cycle when males were most separate from female company, they chose to invent it together playfully; and at a moment in their emotional lives when they were coping nervously with romantic intimacy, they used the stage to practice on each other.” Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 67. In a similar vein, Brian Roberts writes that the young men traveling to California for the Gold Rush had dances on board their ships, complete with counterfeit “ladies.” The men who dressed as women for these evenings spent hours preparing their outfits, and even going so far as to wear fake breasts. See Roberts, *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 103–4.

⁷³ Even the effeminate Broadway dandies were noted for the extreme tightness of their clothing, especially their trousers, which accentuated the male form, and were as devoted to the demonstration of masculinity through heterosexual conquest as any figures in antebellum fiction. See John Denison Vose, *Fresh Leaves*

categories of “male” or “female” than there was about what these categories meant and how that meaning was to be communicated—to be literary-critical, the conflict was about the signs rather than the signified.

Osgood Bradbury’s *The Modern Othello; or, the Guilty Wife* (1855) utilizes Bloomerism as a type of cross-dressing in its thinly veiled retelling of the divorce proceedings of the actor Edwin Forrest. “Mrs. Forrster,” the wife of the actor “Irving Forrster,” is a large, oversexed woman with a head full of fashionable modern ideas. Lord Fortescue, a suitably underdeveloped and effeminate Englishman, is astonished one morning on a call at the Forrster home to see “three nondescripts enter. Nature intended them for women; but diseased appetites and distempered imaginations converted them into bodies attired after the fashion of the rougher sex. ‘The Bloomer costume, by H---s!’ ejaculated the Englishman....”⁷⁴ A near riot ensues in the street when the three women in their Bloomers mount their horses. An indignant Vermonter spies the scene and inquires, “‘Is thim women; thim with the pants an’ jackets, astride on the horses; or what are they anyhow?’” to which a bystander’s rather equivocal reply is, “‘Them’s Bloomers; they ain’t anything else.’”⁷⁵ A German baker speculates on the physical dangers of being married to a sexually insatiable wife who is “‘no satisfied vid von–two–dree husbands; but she must have as many as she dam bleezes.’”

from the Diary of a Broadway Dandy (New York: n.p., 1852). The rise in popularity of prizefighting can be seen as another example of the increasingly public offering of the male body for visual consumption; see Elliott Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

⁷⁴ Osgood Bradbury, *The Modern Othello; or, The Guilty Wife, a Thrilling Romance of New York Fashionable Life* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 1855), 19.

⁷⁵ Bradbury, *Modern Othello*, 20. This notion of women in Bloomers as somehow constituting another species or a third sex is unique to descriptions of women in the Bloomer costume; women cross-dressed as men are always and unavoidably female.

Bradbury's description of Mrs. Forrster as "an unmentionable human creature with all the fashion but without the sexual attributes of manhood" might appear to support the view of such women as a "third sex," but this "unmentionable human creature" is so precisely because she lacks the biological attributes of manhood and thus, according to antebellum theory, possessed the attributes of womanhood.⁷⁶ It is this unavoidable reality of biological femininity that determines Mrs. Forrster's course for the rest of the novel. Her sexual appetites lead to the breakup of her marriage, in a fashion specific to mid-nineteenth century understandings of female physiology; once they are awakened and indulged, they become impossible to satisfy. It is Mrs. Forrster's female body, and her inability to govern its demands, that overwhelms her. The biological category of sex remains immutable in its implications, but what cannot be relied on are the outward signs of that category—the Bloomers instead of dresses and petticoats.

A more typical episode of cross-dressing comes from George Thompson's "Autobiography." In the novel, Thompson is reunited with his old friend Mrs. Raymond, who has just been jilted by her husband, Mr. Livingston, and has found him to be both a thief and a bigamist. Thompson agrees to go to Pittsburgh with her to help her kill Livingston, and for some rather murky reason they dress Mrs. Raymond as a boy for the trip from Philadelphia. En route, a German farm girl falls in love with "him." "He" says that he's too young to know about love, but the farm girl reassures him that she is a proficient instructor. Thompson writes, "I must keep dark and watch the movements.

⁷⁶ Bradbury, *Modern Othello*, 20, 19.

The idea of a woman falling in love with one of her own sex, is rather rich!”⁷⁷ Playing cross-dressing for these kinds of laughs goes back centuries, of course, but the joke never tires for Thompson. In the end, they escape from the farm, Mrs. Raymond’s young male virtue unsullied, and continue on to Pittsburgh to kill her husband. While this may not appear to be terribly “womanly” behavior, again, Mrs. Raymond’s actions are the direct product of female physiology—her sexuality has been aroused and, when thwarted, its excessive demands can easily become violent. If her outward appearance is “counterfeit,” she still possesses all the real qualities (and the sexual exchange value) of womanhood. It is worth noting that, after her cross-dressing affair, Mrs. Raymond, like Mrs. Forrster, becomes an actress, as the stage was perhaps the only venue in peacetime American life where female-to-male cross-dressing was acceptable.⁷⁸ Mrs. Raymond’s career and life are over when her female body itself loses its exchange value: she is horribly burned by an exploding lamp and commits suicide because her beauty is gone.

Thompson also offers readers examples of cross-dressing in the opposite direction, notably in *The Outlaw; or, The Felon’s Fortunes*, one of Thompson’s popular “Jack Harold” novels. Jack, a career criminal, escapes from solitary confinement

⁷⁷ George Thompson, *My Life: or the Adventures of Geo. Thompson, Being the Auto-Biography of an Author*, written by Himself (Boston: Federhen & Co., 1854), 57. Writing of popular fiction from the Mexican War, Shelley Streeby notes that these novels play with homoerotic desire by having male soldiers frequently be attracted to women dressed up as soldiers: “... this may suggest that despite the cross-dresser’s almost flawless performance of masculinity, ‘natural’ gender differences cannot entirely be hidden. Indeed, the fact that all of these soldiers are erotically compelled by the cross-dresser may fortify the belief that men are inevitably attracted to women...” Elsewhere, Streeby notes that these cross-dressed wartime heroines usually return to more stereotypically feminine roles. This reading meshes with my contention that cross-dressing in city-mysteries fiction serves to confirm, not destabilize, received notions about gender. Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 120, 84.

⁷⁸ See Sentilles, *Performing Menken*, Chapter 4. The rules for cross-dressing changed in wartime, as is borne out by the large number of narratives of cross-dressed women fighting in various American conflicts.

wearing only a shirt, but manages to break into a neighboring house and steal a dress of women's clothes (and in the process watches through a window as a young woman cuckolds her husband with her doctor). Out in the street, Jack is seized by a gang of street toughs, who take him for a woman and nearly rape him before he fights his way out. Still dressed as a young woman, Jack is taken in by a "buxom" young widow of 35, who encourages Jack/Jill to "think of her as a mother."⁷⁹ The widow is more affectionate than a merely maternal role might seem to warrant, which arouses Jack. To get around this problem, Jack tells Mrs. Smith that he/she is a girl running away from a repulsive marriage to an older man in Washington, and suggests that she dress him/her in male clothes so that he/she can escape to New York. Thus, at this point Jack is a man masquerading as a woman who is masquerading as a man. Luckily, Mrs. Smith has a nephew just Jack's size, whose room is decorated with erotic prints, which only heighten Jack's agitation.

Once in male clothes, Jack comes on to Mrs. Smith, but she still thinks he's a woman. Jack tells her, "I could almost wish, dear madam, that my sex corresponded with my present garb, so that I might enjoy the luxury of loving you with that passionate ardor which your beauty is so well calculated to excite in the male breast." Jack's compliments produce the desired blushes and sighs, and "The beautiful widow, bewildered, and excited by feelings which she could not exactly define, but which she acknowledged to herself were strangely delightful, abandoned herself without restraint ... to the kisses, caresses, and audacious familiarities of her mysterious companion, who

⁷⁹ George Thompson, *The Outlaw; or, The Felon's Fortunes*, by Greenhorn (New York: Frederic A. Brady, n.d.), 46.

[only] now commenced throwing off the false character which he had assumed.”⁸⁰ The subversion of gender in this episode is meant to be humorous and titillating, but once again the “performativity” of gender is unable to conquer biology. Jack’s erection makes it necessary for him to change back into male clothes, so that his body can be given that which it demands—sex with a buxom young widow. Even with Jack’s “audacious familiarities,” Mrs. Smith does not know that he’s a man until he tells her, but once the confusion of the signs is resolved, the underlying biological reality is given the freedom to satisfy its desires.

In *The Criminal*, one of the predecessors to *The Outlaw*, Jack and his girlfriend, Gallus Kate, check in to a boarding house in Washington, claiming to be the son and daughter in law of the governor of New York. Once in their room, Jack takes off his fake beard and exclaims, “‘Confound it!’ ... as he rubbed his chin, which was as smooth and destitute of beard as a girl’s—‘why will not nature be generous and supply me with the genuine article, instead of forcing me to the trouble of wearing artificial emblems of manhood?’” Kate reassures him that, “‘if nature has in some respects been niggardly towards you, she has in others made up for all deficiencies.’”⁸¹ Again, the “artificial

⁸⁰ Thompson, *The Outlaw*, 55-6.

⁸¹ George Thompson, *The Criminal; or, The Adventures of Jack Harold*, by Greenhorn (New York: Frederic A. Brady, n.d.), 11. A few pages later, Jack has trouble with his disguise again, as he keeps losing his false whiskers while he is having sex with his landlady. She reassures him, however, that “he certain need not wear a false moustache and imperial to convince her of the justice of his claims to a place in the proud ranks of manhood” (22). In the first novel in the series, *Jack Harold*, it is Kate, not Jack, who is the more accomplished cross-dresser. Thompson writes that Kate had an extensive wardrobe of men’s clothes, which she would don as a disguise before going out into the city in search of adventure. A favorite activity of hers when dressed as a man was to flirt with women, arrange assignations with them, and then stand them up. Later in the novel, Kate (while dressed as a man) tries to pick the pocket of a congressman in Delmonico’s restaurant. He catches her, and she explains that she is a woman in men’s clothes. To convince the unbelieving legislator, “Kate, with an air of apparent timidity and embarrassment that rendered her inexpressibly charming, opened the laced shirt-front that covered her bosom, and exposed the

emblems” of gender are no match for Jack’s evidently impressive bodily proof of biological sex.

Few male characters in the city-mysteries genre make as convincing a woman as Jack Harold, yet he also fornicates with an avidity that is striking even for a George Thompson character. In some ways, it is his ability to cross-dress that makes him so sexually attractive to women, as is the case in Eliza’s famous cross-dressing episode in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; after she dresses herself in men’s clothes to make her escape from the South, George Harris tells her, “I never saw you look so pretty.”

In this way, cross-dressing may be seen to work in these novels to reinforce, rather than subvert, traditional notions of gender—Jack’s overactive masculinity is highlighted by his ability to don women’s clothes. George Thompson’s frequent use of cross-dressing bears out the notion that, while clothes do make the role, they do not make the person. When the real sex of a cross-dressed character is revealed, they no longer “act” womanly or manly, they are what they are. As Karen Halttunen argues, all antebellum women may have been acting all the time, but that does not mean that the writers and readers of these novels did not feel that there was some “real” gender identity beneath the act.⁸² In Thompson’s *The Gay Girls of New York*, Hannah Sherwood, a beautiful young prostitute, goes out for a night on the town with her lover, Frank Rattleton. She sees a country merchant, whom she had robbed earlier in the evening,

fair and beautiful globes, so voluptuously swelling, that proclaimed her true sex more palpably than words could have done.” Thompson, *Jack Harold, or, the Criminal’s Career*, by Greenhorn (Boston: Wm. Barry * Co., 1850), 149–50.

⁸² See Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

passed out on the sidewalk and exchanges clothes with him as a lark.⁸³ Once Hannah has changed clothes and “carefully tucked up her long hair under the broad-brimmed beaver,” she looks every inch the “comely young gentleman,” and she and Frank hit the town.⁸⁴

The two spend the night going to oyster cellars and saloons, engaging in all the practices of sociable antebellum masculinity—standing treat for drinks, slapping backs, shaking hands, and slumming with prostitutes. As a nightcap, they head off to the Five Points, where Hannah has never been. A fortune-teller detects that Hannah is a woman, and knocks off her hat, causing her hair to spill out. Once her male identity is gone, so is her male resolve, and the physiological burdens of femininity immediately assert themselves: she grows faint, and Frank has to take her by the arm to help her up the stairs, saying, ““you are not well. The foul atmosphere of this den has overpowered you. Come, let us go forth, and the fresh morning air will soon revive you.””⁸⁵ The instant the gay young blade’s tresses are exposed, he/she becomes “dear Hannah,” and one page later she is a “frail, beautiful woman” capable of responding to a question from Frank only with a “deep sigh.”

Even in novels with less traditionally “feminine” heroines, the biological nature of femininity, especially that of aroused female sexuality, continually trumps the male clothing that conceals it. In Thompson’s *Adolene Wellmont*, the heroine runs away from home to follow her lover, a poor painter, to New York, where, dressed as a man, she murders a rival for his affections, and later a policeman who tries to arrest her. When the

⁸³ George Thompson, *The Gay Girls of New York: or, Life on Broadway* (New York: n.p., 1858), 26.

⁸⁴ Thompson, *Gay Girls*, 26.

⁸⁵ Thompson, *Gay Girls*, 34.

manager of her hotel accuses the still cross-dressed Adolene of being a woman, she attempts to talk her way out, saying, ““My good friend, if you are so fortunate as to have either a handsome wife or a pretty daughter, let me disinterestedly advise you to keep them away from me, for I am the very devil among the petticoats. ... A *woman*, indeed!””⁸⁶ She takes on a life as a fashionable young rake about town, but she falls in love, with one of her drinking companions, and is baffled as to how to reveal herself to him as a woman. Her physiology almost gives her away when her lover, Charles Clavering, suggests they swim together; she excuses herself, but says that she “derived much satisfaction from witnessing the manly form of my friend....”⁸⁷ Her passion having become “so violent and intense” that she can wait no longer, she gradually reveals her true identity to the surprised but delighted Charles. Once divested of her male clothes, the fearless, dashing Adolene instantly becomes a model of femininity, albeit a highly-sexed one, as she states: “Was it not passing strange that I, who was usually so courageous when threatened with danger, could only upon the present occasion sigh deeply, and softly murmur remonstrations...?”⁸⁸

Characters in city-mysteries novels cross-dress for all manner of reasons, but they share one common fate: their real gender is invariably revealed.⁸⁹ The prevalence of

⁸⁶ Thompson, *Adolene Wellmont*, 23.

⁸⁷ Thompson, *Adolene Wellmont*, 32.

⁸⁸ Thompson, *Adolene Wellmont*, 38.

⁸⁹ In cases of women cross-dressed as men, they are almost always revealed to be women through the exposure of either their hair (the case of Hannah Sherwood) or their breasts—no other physiological evidence, such as fair skin or a slight figure or a high voice, seems to be reliable enough. Buntline’s Madame Dumesle, who successfully masquerades as at least four different men—Colonel Munroe, a Southern planter; a hick from New Jersey; an old Wall Street merchant; and the head of a band of thieves—is described, when in the Colonel Munroe outfit, as appearing, “in voice and gait ... ten times more manly than half the fops who sun themselves on Broadway.” Yet, despite her impenetrable disguise, once her wig is removed, “her own beautiful hair ... fell in a mass on her shoulders [and] it revealed the sex

cross-dressing, and of characters that are not cross-dressed but simply look as if they belong to the opposite sex, clearly indicates some anxiety concerning gender on the part of these writers, to say the least. Yet more interesting is not that the anxiety existed, but what the writers tried to do about it, and to a man what they did was insist on the immutability, the stability, of sexual distinction. However sexy and exciting it was to read about a woman dressed as a man carrying a gun, readers were always reassured in some way that the character was, in fact, a woman, and that that femaleness stood for something stable. This insistence on the reality of sexual difference through the display of counterfeit gender signifiers captures the larger contradiction at the heart of these novels: Cities are mysterious, inexplicable places—now let me explain them for you.

Moments of cross-dressing present the body, simultaneously knowable and unknowable, on display and invisible, crowded next to you in the omnibus but hidden under layers of clothing. The increasing frequency and anonymity of interaction between men and women in public urban spaces raised questions about gender models that had been based on a very different set of assumptions about how men and women would interact. These novels render the city, and the body, unstable and illegible, while simultaneously reflecting the desire for some underlying legibility.

Yet, through their frequent use of narratives of gender counterfeiting, city-mysteries novels reinforced their core message: in the city, things are not as they seem, and you must constantly be aware, seeking to pull the veil aside, in order to avoid being

her dress and assumed voice so well had concealed” (Buntline, *The Death Mystery*). As in contemporary films that are centrally concerned with cross-dressing, such as “M. Butterfly,” “The Crying Game,” and “Boys Don’t Cry,” gender is rarely revealed in these narratives through sexual interaction, but through other moments of exposure.

taken for a rube. City mysteries seemingly imply that cross-dressing is going on all the time, all around you, that it is not confined to a certain time or place, and is therefore simply part of everyday life in the city. Again, Walt Whitman gestured toward the potentially omnipresent nature of urban deception, writing in his “Song of the Open Road”:

Another self, a duplicate of every one...
Under the broadcloth and gloves, under the ribbons and artificial flowers,
Keeping fair with the customs, speaking not a syllable of itself.

Even the most basic facts of existence, including sexual identity, were frequently obscured or counterfeited in the urban environment. As the example of Peter Sewalley makes clear, there were at least some actual cases of cross-dressing in antebellum cities.⁹⁰ Prostitutes were often thought to dress in men’s clothes, either to look for customers or for purposes of confidence scams. The 1834 report of the New York Female Benevolent Society tells of the previous life one of the group’s beneficiaries, who has been reclaimed from vice at the asylum: “Frequently, according to her own account, has she been arrayed in man’s apparel, and prowled about this city at midnight, in company with a noted gang

⁹⁰ A related issue, which is beyond the scope of this work, is the differentiation of children’s clothes by sex. Photographs from the late 1850s of boys around the age of five show them to be dressed in a very feminine manner, with long hair and often in dresses (as these children were photographed, they were from genteel families—we know very little about how children from less affluent families dressed). Further work remains to be done on elucidating when, and at what age, boys and girls began to be dressed in different clothing.

An anti-Protestant city-mystery novel written by a Catholic priest depicts a Baptist father whipping his son for reading sensational novels hidden inside his schoolbooks: then, “To punish him more, I put his sister’s clothes on him, and tied him to the bed-post. He felt that more than he did the cowhide, I believe.” Rev. John T. Roddan, *John O’Brien; or, The Orphan of Boston. A Tale of Real Life* (Boston: Patrick Donahoe, 1850), 33. An 1874 reminiscence by the famous criminal John Mahony, who was known as the “American Jack Sheppard,” tells of his having been punished for frequently running away from his Long Island boarding school by being deprived of his pants and “permitted to wear nothing but a long apron, resembling the dress of a young girl.” Charles Sutton, *The New York Tombs; Its Secrets and its Mysteries* (San Francisco: A. Roman & Co., 1874), 171-2. Such clues indicate that, at some point—perhaps around the age of eight or nine?—clothing came to be fixed to gender identity in a way that it was not for children at an earlier age.

of thieves.”⁹¹ George Thompson, writing of Gallus Kate, observes that Kate “delighted to attire herself in male attire, and go forth in search of exciting adventures,” which he then claims is “a practice somewhat prevalent among certain ladies at the present day.”⁹² The title character of *The Fortunes of a Young Widow* is one of these “certain ladies,” as she has a suit of male clothes made so that she can make nocturnal excursions through the city, such as a trip to a midnight cockfight far uptown on Second Avenue.⁹³

Yet such events were not purely the stuff of late-night revels in saloons, according to these texts, but were part of everyday life. John Denison Vose, in *Fresh Leaves from the Diary of a Broadway Dandy*, gives part of one day’s entry thus: “At about four o’clock this afternoon, saw a lady dressed in gentleman’s clothes, as I was in Broadway, opposite Astor Place. Recognised her quickly as being one of Alderman -----’s daughters. She looked fine and genteel, fashionable and dashing...”⁹⁴ That the dandy is able to quickly recognize this man as being, in fact, a woman indicates his status as a member of the urban cognoscenti, but it also implies that any of the men on Broadway at four in the afternoon might be women, and that the reader may just be too stupid to

⁹¹ *First Annual Report of the Female Benevolent Society of the City of New-York* (New York: West & Trow, 1834), 13. In *The New York Tombs*, Charles Sutton contributes to the Helen Jewett myth, saying that Helen took to dressing in men’s clothes and following Richard Robinson when he began seeing other women, at one point following him into a house in Broome Street, seeing him with a woman she hated, and beating up her rival. Sutton, *New York Tombs*, 104.

⁹² George Thompson, *Jack Harold, or, The Criminal’s Career*, by Greenhorn (Boston: Wm. Berry & Co., 1850), 84.

⁹³ *Fortunes of a Young Widow*, 62-3. The author of this work, in a footnote, underscored the message that such things happened all the time in the city, so you had to be on your guard: “It is not uncommon for women to attend in male attire, these exhibitions, but with the exceptions we have mentioned, in this note and the narration, they are not of a reputable class.” The evening ends on a disconcerting note, however, when, leaning over the pit for a better view, the woman’s cap falls off, revealing her long hair and sparking a riot in which, the author implies clearly, she would have been gang-raped (63).

⁹⁴ John Denison Vose, Esq., *Fresh Leaves from the Diary of a Broadway Dandy* (New York: Bunnell & Price, 1852), 30.

notice. When such things *were* noticed, they caused a stir. A diary kept by Bradley N. Cumings, a young man from Boston, features such a scene. An entry from June of 1832 states that, “A mob of about two thousand persons collected this morning in a house in Water Street, to see, as they supposed, a woman in male attire....” While it is unlikely that all two thousand people were actually *in* a house in Water Street, the frisson of the news is undeniable. (The denouement is something of a letdown. As Cumings put it, “the person has a very feminine appearance, and the Transcript says it is his misfortune, but he is of respectable connexions, and is here on a visit.”)⁹⁵

Cumings’ mention of “respectable connexions” highlights one of the main anxieties surrounding urban cross-dressing—it was often associated with the spurious crossing of class boundaries as well, using the markers of an assumed class and gender identity for, presumably, criminal ends.⁹⁶ Prostitutes who cross-dress in city-mysteries fiction invariably dress like a wealthy young scion of the urban aristocracy, not like an artisan. Similarly, men tend to try to climb the social ladder as well with their cross-dressing, or at least stay level.⁹⁷ In one of the most bizarre novels in the genre, Joseph Ingraham’s *Will Terril!*, the title character, a runaway boy of fourteen living in Boston, is on a nocturnal hunt for cats, which he plans to sell for ten cents a head to a French

⁹⁵ Bradley N. Cumings, Journal, June 29, 1832. In the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁹⁶ It is not likely that many cities had laws specifically against cross-dressing, although San Francisco appears to have been an exception. If someone assumed a false gender identity in order to engage in a financial transaction, however, they would likely have been liable to prosecution for fraud. In late nineteenth-century Paris, women were prohibited from wearing trousers in public, unless they had a special dispensation from the chief of police (transvestitism was illegal).

⁹⁷ Exceptions to this rule are African Americans who cross-dress in these novels. When they do so, they do not also try to fake their racial identity, thus remaining in their same (low) position on the social ladder, as in the real-life case of Peter Sewalley. In one unique instance, in Ned Buntline’s *G’hals of New York*, the surprise at the conclusion is that Creel, the black servant of Barton, the novel’s criminal mastermind, is in fact Constance, a white woman who has been both cross-dressing and in blackface throughout the entire novel.

butcher, Monsieur Cunnyprau, who uses them to make sausage. Will's pants get torn climbing up a roof, so he sneaks through a window into a girls room and puts on a dress. Surveying his appearance in a mirror, Will exclaims, "'Would my mother know me though! I'm a re'glar school gal out an' outer and no mistake. I ony wants pantaylets; but p'raps them is'nt in fashion, and so as I don't want to be unfashionable, I'll do without 'em. Here's a bonnet and a veil on to it a hanging up, and if I dn't put it on may I be shot!'"⁹⁸

Having fully accessorized himself with a shawl and silk parasol, Will muses, "'Vell I vonder if this is me or some young leddy? Wouldn't I like to walk Vashington Street and go a shoppin' of a sunny arternoon!—Vot a nice genteel young ooman I is, tho!'"⁹⁹ The novel proceeds to take turns too strange to describe. A young man comes to elope with a Sophia Brownstout, whose dress Will is wearing; Will plays along, being carried to a carriage by the young actor, who for some reason does not notice that his beloved is carrying a sack full of eight noisy cats; Will sneaks out of the carriage, putting his outfit on the corpse of a young black boy who has been dug up by resurrectionists and sending the corpse dressed as Sophia off with the actor. As a direct result of his class and gender masquerade, however, Will actually achieves the class status that he was pretending to possess while dressed as Sophia. Within three years, he has gone into partnership with Monsieur Cunnyprau, but after a disagreement regarding the amount of

⁹⁸ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *Will Terril! Or, The Adventures of a Young Gentleman Born in a Cellar* (Boston: Published at the "Yankee" Office, 1850), 31.

⁹⁹ Ingraham, *Will Terril!*, 31. The one thing wanting to make him complete is shoes, as he sees his "naked, black, stumpy-toed" feet sticking out from beneath the dress. For Ingraham, who wrote a foot-fetishist novella, this failure in the sexual masquerade is inexcusable.

kittens to put in their “sassadors,” Will strikes off on his own, and is soon able to shop on Washington Street whenever he likes.

Cross-dressing as a path to class advancement worked for women as well; indeed, as some scholars have noted, economic advantage was the primary reason that nineteenth-century women chose to dress as men.¹⁰⁰ In *Anne Melbourne*, Frederick Morse, a young clerk in a dry goods store in Boston, falls in love with a woman he sees at the theater, Anne Melbourne, a reformed prostitute. Fred wants to marry her but fears for his reputation, so he hits on the solution of getting married in New York, then returning back to Boston with Anne dressed like a man. When Anne asks what she will do in Boston living as a man by the name of Franklin Constance, Fred suggests that she hold a clerkship in his store. When she protests that they cannot continue that way indefinitely, Fred remarks, “True; but the products of our two salaries—and I mean that yours shall not be much less than mine—will enable us to accumulate sufficient capital to retire into some part of the country where we shall not need a disguise.”¹⁰¹ Under Fred’s supervision, “Franklin” learns the business, and works in the store undetected for a full two years, until they have saved enough money to start a business in Cincinnati (Fred eventually becomes the richest merchant in the city).

¹⁰⁰ Lucy Ann Lobdell, in an 1855 autobiography, explained her decision to pass as a man as one of class mobility: “I made up my mind to dress in men’s attire to seek labor, as I was used to men’s work and only got a dollar per week, and I was capable of doing men’s work and getting men’s wages. I resolved to get work away, among strangers.” Quoted in the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, “‘She Even Chewed Tobacco’: A Pictorial Narrative of Passing Women in America,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay & Lesbian Past*, eds. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, & George Chauncey (New York: Meridian, 1990), 184–85; 188. This essay offers numerous examples of nineteenth-century women who cross-dressed as men, often for years, some of them not being discovered until their post-mortem examinations.

¹⁰¹ Augustus Franklin, *Anne Melbourne; or, The Return to Virtue. A Tale of Boston* (Boston: H. L. Williams, 1846), 39.

Cross-Dressing and Sexual Transgression

Anne's extended cross-dressing episode as a mercantile clerk allows her to, as the title says, "return to virtue," and in the process ascend the social ladder from common prostitute to rich merchant's wife, but it also hints at the truly transgressive sexuality that some authors hinted flowed beneath the surface currents of urban life. Although it would not be until the end of the nineteenth century that the medical profession began to associate cross-dressing with "sexual inversion," narratives of cross-dressing in popular fiction offered authors ample opportunities to make jokes about homosexuality.

In *Anne Melbourne*, however, the homoerotic undertones of cross-dressing are deployed for more than just salacious humor. For both characters, Frederick's assisting Anne in her conversion to "Franklin" serves as a form of sexual play. Anne tells him, "'You may assist me, Frederick, in dressing, if it would not be asking too much,' she said, casting a half-modest, half-cunning look from beneath her eye-brows...." Fred is notably enthusiastic about helping transform his wife into a man: "'Ha ha! I did not dare to ask, but I would like to witness your gradual transformation.'"¹⁰² Once they have settled into their routine of workaday life in Boston, they find that spending all day around each other, with Anne dressed as "Franklin," is even more of a turn-on, and the "partially restrained" nature of their public interactions is "more than doubly repaid in their hours of retirement and private intercourse."¹⁰³

¹⁰² Franklin, *Anne Melbourne*, 40.

¹⁰³ Franklin, *Anne Melbourne*, 42.

A similar dynamic is at work in *The Rivals Revenge*, in which Catharine Middleton, a Quaker girl from Philadelphia who has run off with a gambler, goes out one night in Richmond dressed in “the character of a gay lieutenant off duty” in search of her lover. Kate finds Elmer in a gambling house, plays against him, and beats him at cards, at which point he finally recognizes her. Returning home, Kate insists, when she is cross-dressed, that Elmer not call her Kate but “Harold,” the name of her deceased fiancé. Instead of recoiling, Elmer dives right in to the homoerotic charade: “Harold, then, it shall be! So, Harold, I hope this is not to be your only appearance in this character, for you are charming in it!”¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the attraction of cross-dressed women for men seems to have been a commonplace in antebellum America. When the beautiful and oversexed Josephine Franklin complains about dressing up as a midshipman for a masquerade ball in George Thompson’s *City Crimes*, her mother reassures her: “Silly girl ... don’t you know that the men will all run distracted after a pretty woman in male attire?”¹⁰⁵

While they play with the notion of men being sexually attracted to other men, these narratives of urban cross-dressing also continually raise the lesbian implications of a woman dressed as a man being attractive to other women. Indeed, on Anne Melbourne’s first public appearance in male attire, in New York, the narrator writes of Anne/Franklin: “He is exceedingly handsome. How the ladies, as they pass, turn to take a second, third, aye, a fourth look, while others actually stop in their walk and gaze at

¹⁰⁴ William D. Ritner, *The Rivals Revenge! Or, The Lovely Quakeress Catherine Middleton* (Philadelphia: M. L. Barclay, 1854), 28–9.

¹⁰⁵ George Thompson, *City Crimes; or, Life in New York and Boston*, in *Venus in Boston*, ed. David S. Reynolds and Kimberly Gladman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 159.

him until he has turned the corner of the street and hid himself from view.”¹⁰⁶ The author is virtually obsessed with the idea that women would find another woman, albeit one dressed as a man, sexually irresistible.

At a ball one evening in Boston, a beautiful young belle, Augusta Hanscom, falls violently in love with Anne/Franklin, and Anne asks her husband how she should deal with the “exceedingly awkward predicament” caused by Augusta’s advances. Instead of advising restraint, Fred counsels her: “You cannot otherwise conduct, Anne, in courtesy to her, and honor to yourself, than by giving her encouragement. This perhaps may avert a too eager watchfulness, and many a remark from the fact that we are continually together.”¹⁰⁷ In other words, in order to deflect rumors about a potential gay relationship between himself and “Franklin,” Frederick tells his wife to encourage what is, in effect, an incipient lesbian relationship. The situation is complicated further by Augusta’s exceedingly strong libido; Franklin’s evasions of her physical advances lead her to have erotic dreams about “him,” and eventually her thwarted sexual energies turn inward, making her physically sick. At the end, when Augusta is on her deathbed, “Franklin” goes to visit her and reveals that, not only is he married, but he is actually a she.

A fabricated crime narrative from 1857 entitled *The Startling Confessions of the Terrible Deeds of Henry Madison*, however, reveals an unease with the specter of same-sex attraction, and is more put off by its transgressive nature.¹⁰⁸ In the novel an

¹⁰⁶ Franklin, *Augustus Melbourne*, 40.

¹⁰⁷ Franklin, *Augustus Melbourne*, 44.

¹⁰⁸ The most extreme literary example of this phenomenon from the period is Theodore Winston’s posthumously published novel *Cecil Dreeme* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861), which has been described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as being primarily a novel of “homosexual panic” (and said to have been patterned on the friendship of Thomas Wentworth Higginson and William Henry Hurlbut). In this novel,

accomplished criminal named Ellen Stevens, realizing that she has been recognized in St. Louis, suggests to her lover, Fenton, that they should take the overland route to the California gold fields, with her dressed as a man. The highly suggestible Fenton agrees, and they make their way to San Francisco, where, however, “affairs took a change. Whether the appearance of Ellen, in her male attire, was too masculine, or whether it was from some other cause, yet, it is certain, that the affection of Fenton for his paramour, began to decline. Subsequently, he fell in with what, in common parlance, is called a ‘flashy piece,’ from New Orleans.”¹⁰⁹ Evidently, a night on the town with one’s girlfriend dressed as a man might offer a frisson of sexual excitement, but a transcontinental mule trip under the same conditions tended to have the opposite effect.

While narratives of cross-dressing often hinted at or played with the transgressive potential of homosexuality, some sensational urban narratives went much farther, straightforwardly depicting homosexual relationships, gay and lesbian, from a variety of

the narrator, Robert Byng, is pulled between the poles of two men: Densdeth, a Wall Street financier in the criminal mastermind mold, who is of an indeterminate (perhaps Jewish) ethnicity and is obviously homosexual, and Cecil Dreeme, a wispy, ethereal artist who lives in an all-male apartment building in Manhattan reminiscent of something out of Melville’s *Pierre*. Byng is drawn to Cecil’s pale, youthful beauty, and feels for him “a love passing the love of women” (275). The novel is preoccupied with this illicit desire of one man for another, which it then clumsily resolves in the closing pages by revealing that Cecil is not a man but is in fact Clara Denman, once betrothed to Densdeth. Instead of living happily ever after as man and wife, however, Byng, in Michael Millner’s words, “feels his love betrayed, soiled by the love of a woman,” and instead they live together, somewhat uneasily, as brother and sister, thus hastily defusing any homoerotic tension. Nevertheless, the fact cannot be ignored that all of the action of the novel has been based on the assumption that Cecil is in fact male, and that Byng fell in love with a man. See Michael Millner, “The Fear Passing the Love of Women: Sodomy and Male Sentimental Citizenship in the Antebellum City,” *Arizona Quarterly* 58:2 (Summer 2002): 19–51, for a perceptive analysis of this novel and its implications. Despite its strangeness, Winthrop’s novel was quite popular, and the prestigious house of Ticknor and Fields published five volumes of his work in the early 1860s, in multiple editions.

¹⁰⁹ Rev. P. Sheldon Drury, *Startling Confessions of the Terrible Deeds of Henry Madison, and his Associate and Accomplice Miss Ellen Stevens, Who was Executed by the Vigilance Committee of San Francisco, on the 29th September last* (Cincinnati: Barclay & Co., 1857), 36. The cover of the novel features an illustration of Ellen’s arrest, with her in men’s clothes.

perspectives.¹¹⁰ While these relationships are virtually always presented as being deviant, authors were much more comfortable (relatively speaking) describing homosexual relationships than they were with interracial sexual relationships, which are only hinted at and, on the rare occasions when they are described explicitly, are always presented as monstrous and bestial.¹¹¹ Whatever the actual incidence of homosexual relationships in antebellum cities—a topic about which we know very little—city-mysteries novels led readers to think that not only might some of the men one met in the city actually be women, and vice versa, but also that some of them might be interested in same-sex relationships.¹¹² In addition, as Graham Robb has written, novelists, taking

¹¹⁰ While I use the terms “homosexual,” “gay,” and “lesbian” here, I am fully aware that these terms are anachronistic for the period in question. I do so in part because the terms used in the period are either too inconsistent or rankly pejorative (“Sodomite”). While many scholars, most notably Michel Foucault, have argued that homosexuality as it is thought of today was a product of medical and psychological discourse in the late nineteenth century, it is important to examine the antebellum period with an eye to this concept’s roots. The process of urbanization gave rise to what we have come to think of as gay culture. As Robert Martin has written, the fluidity of gender categories in this period allowed for a range of possibility that would be lost in the later absolute distinction between hetero- and homosexual, and he locates part of the public dimension of this fluidity in popular literature: “In popular novels with readerships hundreds, even thousands, of times those of Whitman, in letters and in diaries, American men at mid-century loved each other, sought verbal and physical forms for the expression of that love, located it in a tradition, and worried about its place in a social order.” See Robert K. Martin, “Knights Errant and Gothic Seducers: The Representation of Male Friendship in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay & Lesbian Past*, eds. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey (New York: Meridian, 1990), 170.

¹¹¹ George Thompson’s *City Crimes* is the only city mystery I have read written in English in the U.S. that describes interracial sex in any detail. Julia Fairfield’s affair with her black servant Nero is shown—by medical examination, no less—to be the inevitable result of Julia’s insatiable sex drive, yet is still described as “a monstrous or unnatural intrigue,” a “disgraceful liaison.” Thompson, *City Crimes*, 149.

¹¹² The standard work on urban homosexuality is George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994). Chauncey’s study begins in the late nineteenth century, and lacks any discussion of the antebellum period, although he does note that by the 1870s the Bowery had been transformed from the *locus classicus* of rowdy urban masculinity to New York’s primary gay entertainment and cruising neighborhood. Graham Robb includes anecdotal evidence of some instances of urban homosexual behavior from the antebellum period, including one case from 1846 where a New York policeman, Edward McCosker, was accused of touching another man’s private parts, an offense for which he lost his job; see Robb, *Strangers*, 107. For limited commentary on the earlier period, see: Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 135–38; Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985); Katz, *Love Stories: Sex Between Men before Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Bruce Burgett,

notice of the larger numbers of people engaging in homosexual activity as cities grew, “presented this demographic trend not as a reflection of practical arrangements but as dramatic evidence that cities breed sexual perverts.”¹¹³

Perhaps predictably in a genre that is so often described today as little more than soft-core pornography, lesbian sex was viewed much more positively than male homosexual activity.¹¹⁴ In George Thompson’s frequent cross-dressing narratives, the prospect of lesbian sex is presented as humorous and titillating, while the specter of male homosexual sex in these narratives is always underscored by either violence or humiliation. In contrast, lesbian sex is practiced in these novels almost exclusively by the young, beautiful, and artless. In Osgood Bradbury’s *Mysteries of Boston*, a beautiful young woman named Emily, having been deserted by her lover, transfers her affections

Sentimental Bodies: Sex, Gender, and Citizenship in the Early Republic (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998); Duberman, Vicinus, and Chauncey, eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay & Lesbian Past*, esp. 153–194; and Graham Robb, *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Picador, 2003). For more on antebellum literature and homosexuality, see, for instance, John W. M. Hallock, *The American Byron: Homosexuality and the Fall of Fitz-Greene Halleck* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000); John W. Crowley, “Howells, Stoddard, and Male Homosocial Attachment in Victorian America,” in *The Making of Masculinities*, ed. Harry Brod (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987); Michael Millner, “The Fear Passing the Love of Women”; and any number of books on Walt Whitman, most notably: Gary Schmidgall, *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* (New York: Dutton, 1997); David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996); and Betsy Erkkila, “Whitman and the Homosexual Republic,” in *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994). A wealth of new work has appeared in recent years on the sentimental culture of male friendship in the nineteenth century which in many respects deals with issues related to homosexuality (or its absence) in the period; see, for instance, Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler, eds., *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Caleb Crain, *American Sympathy: Men, Friendship, and Literature in the New Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); and Julie Ellison, *Cato’s Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). For a helpful caution regarding reading instances of male friendship from the period as something more, see Robb, *Strangers*, 107–9.

¹¹³ Robb, *Strangers*, 8. Robb notes that mentions of homosexuality in the nineteenth-century press were far more common than we may realize, as they were couched in euphemisms and symbols that become “almost prehistorically obscure” (9).

¹¹⁴ This view extends beyond literature to the wider culture as well. As Graham Robb notes, laws against lesbianism were much less common than laws against sodomy, and where they existed they were less frequently enforced. Robb, *Strangers*, 18.

to Alice Jane. Bradbury muses, “Can woman transfer her love and endorse it over to another of a different sex? Is this precious article negotiable? Will she love a second time sooner for having loved a first? She did love that scoundrel with all her heart, but now she loved one of her own sex quite as ardently.”¹¹⁵ Similarly, in *The Green Family*, a scene of a beautiful young wife waiting up late with a female friend for her husband to return home and deciding to undress and “keep her [the friend] company” in bed is presented as relatively innocent, if with an implied wink to the reader.¹¹⁶ The implicit appeal of these scenes to male readers is made clear in a description in *The Belle of Central Park* of two “matchless” sixteen-year-old girls lying in bed together, a “picture upon which no male eye could long have gazed with impunity.”¹¹⁷

Even in much more explicit works, scenes of sexual activity between women are presented as both relatively harmless and as created with the male gaze in mind. In *The Mysteries of New Orleans*, one of the most notable German-American city-mysteries novels, Ludwig von Reitzenstein prominently and matter-of-factly features a lesbian relationship between his only two truly positive characters, Claudine and Orleana. Claudine, having left her husband, visits her friend Orleana and proclaims, “men are all raw in matters of love.”¹¹⁸ From there, the women declare their love for each other,

¹¹⁵ Bradbury, *The Mysteries of Boston*, 39.

¹¹⁶ J. Henry Smith, *The Green Family*, 15.

¹¹⁷ Henry Edwards, *The Belle of Central Park: A Story of New York Life* (New York: Advance Publishing, 186?), 17.

¹¹⁸ Baron Ludwig von Reitzenstein, *The Mysteries of New Orleans*, trans. by Steven Rowan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 144. Rowan translates the title of the chapter in which this incident occurs (Book 2, Ch. 7) as “Lesbian Love.” Reitzenstein claims that a large number of original Lesbians (from Lesbos), having been enslaved by the Romans, were then dispersed by the Germanic conquest of Rome, and eventually some of them arrived with the German immigrants in New Orleans. Later in the novel, he describes a communal lesbian settlement, explaining that, for some reason, lesbians must always live near water, and therefore that such colonies are scattered along the Gulf Coast. Orleana is a lesbian in

gradually undress one another, and make their way to the bedroom. Although he celebrates the relationship—“There is rejoicing in all the spheres, the fanfares of the universe resound, wherever love celebrates its triumph”—Reitzenstein is clearly aware of the passage’s potential effect on his male readers. He writes,

Bedchambers where a man seldom or only briefly appears—bedchambers that are not touched even by male servants ... bedchambers whose beds, sofas, and hangings only the satin of a woman’s robe whispers by: such bedchambers are a hell of torments and pains for a man.... Drunk in his senses, he thinks of the satin robe that rustles at his knee; he presses his hand on his hot brow, and his senses collapse as his fantasy contemplates what the heavy satin rustles against.¹¹⁹

Even when described in such breathless tones, lesbian sex is depicted in sensational urban fiction as salacious but not monstrous. Clearly, the idea that some of the beautiful women one saw on Broadway or Canal Street might be going home to have sex with other beautiful women was not one that authors anticipated would terrify their readers.¹²⁰

The case was very different, however, with homosexual relationships between men. If lesbian relationships served in city-mysteries novels as yet another lascivious delight of urban life that was hidden behind parlor curtains, gay sex was a species of urban threat, similar to crime, disease, and poverty. In *City of Eros*, Timothy Gilfoyle discusses the attacks against homosexuals printed in New York’s sporting press in the

the modern sense of the term, having never found men attractive. This remarkable novel features another quasi-lesbian subplot, between the German sisters Jenny and Frida, as well as a number of scenes of interracial sex. Attacks on its immorality, however, prompted Reitzenstein to withdraw it from circulation and destroy the remaining copies (xxiii).

¹¹⁹ Reitzenstein, *Mysteries of New Orleans*, 151, 148.

¹²⁰ The lone exception to this rule that I have found comes in a description not of a beautiful young lesbian but of a “butch,” masculine woman. In *The Mysteries of New York*, a street mob attacks a “Gigantic woman, with heavy and massive features, broad shoulders, and masculine breadth of chest” who was accused of seducing a young girl (whether for her own use or for a man’s is unclear). The mob “fell back when she appeared, as if struck with horror at the sight of a monster.” Her masculinity, combined with the fact that she is not shown actually in a situation with another woman, renders this example unique. Tom Shortfellow (pseud.), *The Mysteries of New York* (London: William Walker, Otley, 1847), 68.

early 1840s. Papers such as the *Whip* and the *Rake* reviled “brutal sodomites,” “abominable sinners,” and victims of “morbid appetite.”¹²¹ As Gilfoyle has discovered, these papers described “sodomites” as either would-be blackmailers of respectable men or as foreign corrupters of American masculinity. Authors of city-mysteries—some of whom, such as George Thompson and Thomas Low Nichols, were also writers for the sporting press—followed suit. In all cases, homosexual men in the city are depicted as deviant, monstrous, and threatening, the polar opposite of the innocently curious, amorous lesbian.

The authors of *The Green Family*, in referring to gay men “cruising” along the banks of the Housatonic River in Hartford, may have been attempting to blackmail (or simply humiliate) some prominent Hartford figures. James Green, having been picked up by an older man, is taken to a saloon catering to such trade, where, according to the novel, he sees I. W. Stuart (a judge); Joseph Trumbull (president of the Hartford & Providence Railroad); and the son of D. F. Robinson (the president of the Hartford Bank).¹²² Later in the novel, James’s younger brother Walter is taken in by a “sodomite” singing teacher—naturally, a foreigner—who began groping him during his singing lessons. James and his friends leave him to the teacher’s clutches, as they are in search of prostitutes (one of whom turns out to be Mary Green).

¹²¹ Quoted in Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 136. For examples, see the New York *Whip*, Jan. 29, Feb. 12, Feb. 26, and March 5, 1842. While it is not explicitly stated in these passages from the sporting press, these figures could well have been prostitutes soliciting business.

¹²² Smith, *The Green Family*, 46. The names are given in the novel, and can be found in city directories from the period.

George Thompson was even more xenophobic in his depiction of the dangers of foreign homosexuals.¹²³ In *City Crimes*, Josephine Franklin, dressed as a sailor at a masquerade ball, is accosted in the conservatory by the Spanish ambassador to the U.S., Don Jose Velasquez. He wonders if she is actually a woman, but as a prank she insists that she is really a boy, claiming that she padded her bosom that evening to get people to think that she was actually a girl in disguise. Velasquez replies, “Were you a lady, you would be beautiful, but as a boy you are doubly charming. Be not surprised when I assure you that you please me ten times—aye, ten thousand times more, as a boy, than as a woman.” When he tries to kiss her, Josephine protests, but he is persistent, claiming, ‘you may pronounce my passion strange, unaccountable, and absurd, if you will—but ‘tis none the less violent or sincere. I am a native of Spain, a country whose ardent souls confine not their affections to the fairest portion of the human race alone....’ Then he whispers a few words in Josephine’s ear that cause her to recoil “in horror and disgust” and proclaim that what he has proposed is “an iniquity in the human character, the existence of which I have heard before, but never fully believed until today.”¹²⁴ Josephine then reveals herself to be a woman, and declares that she will expose the ambassador before the entire party, causing him to flee.

¹²³ The charge that gay men in America’s antebellum cities were disproportionately foreign may have had some basis in fact. Many European cities had more developed homosexual subcultures, and it is not inconceivable that men from those cities may have sought out a similar life in America. In his study of the homosexual poet Fitz-Greene Halleck, John Hallock writes that, in the 1820s and 30s, following the death of the man to whom he was most powerfully attracted, Halleck engaged in “a series of erratic romances with foreign men....” Hallock, *American Byron*, 6. Graham Robb writes that Australia (of all places) “had the largest gay districts in the world in the 19th century,” noting that in some Australian settlements, “heterosexuality was the exception,” as early as the 1840s; Robb, *Strangers*, 159. Given the large numbers of Australians who emigrated to San Francisco during the Gold Rush, it is reasonable to assume that some of them may have been homosexual, adding another coastal dimension to the impression that American cities were besieged by gay foreigners.

¹²⁴ Thompson, *City Crimes*, 169, 170.

Later in the novel, Velasquez, now disguised, attempts to seduce a twelve-year-old boy on a steamer in Long Island Sound. Thompson's outraged digression bears quoting at length:

This man was a foreigner—one of those beasts in human shape whose perverted appetites prompts them to the commission of a crime against nature. ... It is an extremely delicate task for a writer to touch on a subject so revolting; yet the crime actually exists, beyond the shadow of a doubt, and therefore we are compelled to give it a place in our list of crimes. We are about to record a startling fact—in New York, there are boys who *prostitute* themselves from motives of gain; and they are liberally patronized by the tribe of genteel foreign vagabonds who infest the city. It was well known that the principal promenade for such cattle was in the Park, where they might be seen nightly; and the circumstance has more than once been commented upon by the newspapers. ... There was formerly a house of prostitution for that very purpose, kept by a foreigner, and splendidly furnished; here lads were taken as apprentices, and regularly trained for the business;—they were mostly boys who had been taken from the lowest classes of society, and were invariably of comely appearance. They were expensively dressed in a peculiar kind of costume; half masculine and half feminine; and were taught a certain style of speech and behaviour calculated to attract the beastly wretches who patronize them.¹²⁵

The Spaniard invites the boy to his cabin, only to have him flee, terrified, half an hour later. The boy tells an officer what has happened, and the “miserable sodomite” is immediately put ashore with his baggage.

In imputing urban homosexuality to foreigners, writers like Thompson were rhetorically protecting American masculinity while simultaneously acknowledging that at least some American men were interested in gay sex, since the foreigners were not sleeping exclusively with each other. In this way, homosexuality is presented as yet another threat posed by the city, but one that is easily avoided: stay away from foreign men, and you'll be safe. Even more unnatural, more “monstrous,” were the very few black homosexual men described in sensational urban fiction. The example of Peter

¹²⁵ Thompson, *City Crimes*, 246.

Sewalley, the black man who cross-dressed and worked as a prostitute for several years, has already been mentioned. George Thompson, in his discussion of Sewalley, labeled him the “Man Monster,” and writes that the public exposure of a liaison with Sewalley was sufficiently humiliating to cause a respectable mason to commit suicide.¹²⁶ In *The Mysteries of New York*, a black man attacks a sickly “slender mulatto” clad in pastel colors by calling him a “Sodom.” Their altercation spreads, and sparks a general race riot in the city.¹²⁷

Through their focus on the commodification of sex in American cities, writers of sensational urban narratives showed their readers how sex could function as a form of currency. But, like the currency that people handled every day, this sexual “currency” was also in danger of being counterfeited. The idea that the men and women one saw in the urban street might not actually be who they appeared to be was clearly exciting in certain ways, yet is also carried an implication that was more disturbing: that one might be sexually attracted to, and potentially inveigled into a sexual relationship with, someone of the same sex. The less frequently discussed presence of homosexuality in city life constitutes a form of urban diversity with which authors (and readers) were clearly uncomfortable. It was understood that cities brought together all kinds of people, but not, it was hoped, *that* kind of people. In the episode from the *Mysteries of New York* mentioned above, is telling that the public presence of a gay mixed-race man—representing in every way the sexual nightmares of antebellum America—is

¹²⁶ [Thompson], *Ten Days in the Tombs*, 57.

¹²⁷ Shortfellow, *The Mysteries of New York*, 64. The fact that the mulatto is described as a “traveling corpse,” coughing up “gouts of blood from his lungs,” lends credence to the theory that male homosexuality was viewed as something akin to a disease in these novels, unlike lesbianism, which is associated with blooming female health.

responsible in this narrative for sparking an urban race riot. Fusing the dangers of urban sex and violence, the episode also highlights the tempestuous multiracial quality of antebellum urban life, to which we will turn in the next chapter.

Chapter Eleven

The Urban Borderland

*In short, we have all bipeds here,
The bookmen ever named;
Some quite unique and queer,
And some that ne'er were tamed.*

– “Machine Rhymes for Sipsville Loafers”¹

The antebellum city was described in popular fictional narratives as the locus of a great many phenomena: economic opportunity, entertainment, class conflict, and sexual possibility, to name only a few. The one characteristic that made all these other forms of urban excitement possible, however, was cities’ heterogeneity. According to authors of city-mysteries novels, cities were so diverse, so full of strange creatures needing either domestication or scientific classification, that they were more like wildernesses than centers of civilization.

Parts of New York were described as “those unknown mazes and partially explored regions of the city proper,” while Moyamensing in Philadelphia was called the “Barbarian District,” and the denizens of such neighborhoods were often described as “savages,” “Indians,” or “Bushmen.”² Authors wrote about cities as though they were wildernesses both in actual terms—the city was physically “wild” and untamed—and in the terms of the symbolic construct of “wilderness,” meaning any place where people can

¹ From a poem entitled “Machine Rhymes for Sipsville Loafers, obtained from Mr. Chime’s Steam Rhyming Machine,” at end of Theodore Bang, *The Mysteries of Papermill Village* (Papermill Village, NH: Walter Tufts, Jr., 1845), 31.

² Joseph Holt Ingraham, *La Bonita Cigarera; or, The Beautiful Cigar-Vender! A Tale of New York* (Boston: “Yankee” Office, 1844), 1; George Lippard, *The Killers, A Narrative of Real Life in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Hankinson and Bartholomew, 1850), 35.

feel lost or perplexed, the antipode of paradise, a place of struggle.³ Yet while this notion of cities as “wild” may have frightened some readers, it would have attracted others, who were familiar with hair-raising tales of the American frontier. Far from serving as another lens through which to view urban misery, then, this rhetoric in city-mysteries fiction would have further cemented the idea of the city as a place of excitement and possibility.

In many of its qualities, the city in this era—the age of Western exploration and Manifest Destiny—was presented as being “wilder” than the American frontier that is so often looked to by scholars of the antebellum period as the primary site of the nation’s confrontation with nature as well as with different races and cultures. Authors of sensational urban narratives continually deployed imagery of nature and savagery to posit the city as a frontier, analogous to the wild environment of the West that many of them were writing novels about at the same time. Given the tremendous popularity in this period of adventure fiction set on the frontier—from James Fenimore Cooper and Francis Parkman to William Gilmore Simms and John Neal—readers would have been familiar with such imagery, and these referents would have called up a widely shared set of

³ See Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973). Nash is part of a long tradition of historiography concerned with the relationship of urban America to the frontier. Appearing in the wake of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, these works focused on whether the frontier was independent of the social order of urban America, or whether it was somehow shaped or controlled by it. The most important works include: Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City, 1878–1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1933); Richard Wade, *The Urban Frontier; The Rise of Western Cities, 1790–1830* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959); William H. Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (New York: Knopf, 1966); and Sam Bass Warner, *The Urban Wilderness: A History of the American City* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). The crucial role of the city in Western expansion was foreshadowed as early as 1830, in Andrew Jackson’s inaugural address, when he asked, “What good man would prefer a country covered with forests ... to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and farms...?” For Jackson, the guiding spirit of Manifest Destiny, then, the city would appear to have been the defining feature of successful expansion.

ideas.⁴ At the same time, descriptions of the city as a site of thrilling adventures and potential violence would have perhaps more accurately reflected the experiences of many readers who had moved to large cities from the countryside and found them simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying.

In writing of the city in terms of the wilderness, the primary effect that these writers strove for was excitement. Ray Billington, in his study of the depiction of the American frontier in both fiction and nonfiction from a wide range of European cultures, has found that the one constant element in the fictionalized image of the frontier has been violence, often of a savage nature.⁵ As Dana Brand has written, if the purpose of a work of literature was to produce excitement, then a brutal murder constituted a legitimate subject, and “as it was coming to be understood in the first half of the nineteenth century, the metropolis, like other enigmatic and terrifying environments . . . offered constant exposure to ‘exciting effects.’”⁶ Whether one contemplated murders, riots, fires, or simply the clamor of daily life, cities did not lack in excitement, and authors of city-mysteries continually alerted (or warned) their readers to the exoticism of their surroundings.

If, behind the curtains of any urban home, bizarre or illicit things could be going on, then any person on the street could be a “savage,” as George Lippard warned. “It is a

⁴ The secondary literature on such fiction is too extensive to cite fully, but of particular importance are Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), and Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973) and *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985).

⁵ See Ray Allen Billington, *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Norton, 1981).

⁶ Dana Brand, *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 93.

great mistake to suppose that there are no savages but those who go naked and paint their faces, and eat their slain,” Lippard wrote. “Broadcloth drapes many a savage, fiercer and more completely infernal than any that ever sat down to a cannibal feast in the wilds of Van Dieman’s Land. The externals of a gentleman ... may mask the real nature of such a savage ... more remorseless—more completely defiant of all the ties which bind man to man and humanity to God than his tattooed brother of the war-club and jungle.”⁷

Reformers were even more insistent than novelists in calling attention to the “savagery” of the urban milieu, as the redemption of the “thousands of girls and boys ... growing up in New York, who are as ignorant of God, Law and Virtue, as the Bushmen in their jungles” was a growth industry.⁸ The Rev. Edwin Hubbell Chapin wrote that “no one needs to be told that there are savages in New York, as well as in the islands of the sea,” but he went ahead and told his parishioners anyway, regaling them with tales of “savages, not in gloomy forests, but under the strength of gas-light, and the eyes of policemen; with war-whoops and clubs very much the same, and garments as fantastic, and souls as brutal, as any of their kindred at the antipodes.”⁹

⁷ George Lippard, “Margaret Dunbar,” bound with *The Midnight Queen; or, Leaves from New-York Life* (New York: Garrett & Co., 1853), 102.

⁸ *The Fortunes of a Young Widow, A Veritable Revelation of New York Life in the Nineteenth Century*, By an Old Inhabitant (Boston: Stearns & Co., 1851), vii.

⁹ Rev. Edwin Hubbell Chapin, *Humanity in the City* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1854), 18-19. The invocation of Native American imagery—“war-whoops and clubs”—was particularly common in descriptions of urban “savagery,” even across the Atlantic. According to Eugene Sue, members of the criminal underworld in 1840s Paris were referred to as “Apaches.”

As a counterpoint, George Lippard’s unfinished novel *The Nazarene* is exceptional within the genre for featuring a Native American main character. Yonawaga, an Indian who has come to Washington to look for his abducted sister, represents the opposite pole of descriptions of Native Americans from this period, that of the noble child of the forest. He (quite improbably) visits the Hermitage to ask Andrew Jackson for his help in finding his sister and in creating a homeland for his people in the West, based on his father’s having fought alongside Jackson in New Orleans. Even more improbably, Jackson agrees, and sends Yonawaga to Washington to talk to Martin Van Buren. Later, Yonawaga explicitly compares Philadelphia to the frontier, saying: “I have searched over the wild western woods for six years. My sister

But if the wildness of the urban environment carried the threat of violence and savagery, it also implied excitement and wonder. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote that, “the wild life of the streets has perhaps as unforgettable a charm, to those who have once thoroughly imbibed in it, as the life of the forest or the prairie,” and writers encouraged their readers to explore the city as they would the frontier.¹⁰ In *Big Abel and the Little Manhattan*, a novel that is centrally concerned with New York’s status as Indian land, or “wilderness,” the characters enter the “wild and wonderful region of East Bowery.... People who live in the West and the South have strange notions, I am told, of all this vicinage, and have more than once made it over in fee to the Little Manhattan as a land of Savages.” Mathews writes that, “from time to time, some wild, adventurous Broadway gentleman takes a cab, and allows himself to be carried by a most desperate driver” to this uncharted part of the city, arriving back with “hair on end” and tales that terrify his friends.¹¹ John Denison Vose was even more strident in his exhortations to his readers, assuring them that, “There are strange sights to be seen everywhere—on the hill top of the East—in the huge old forest of the wild wood West...” Nevertheless, wrote Vose, “There is in Gotham, around Gotham, and under Gotham sights which the ancient City of Babylon never possessed. ... Dwellers in Gotham! Wake up, get up and explore; and at

is not there. If she lives at all, she lives in one of your large cities,” thus positioning himself as an Indian scout in the urban wilderness. George Lippard, *The Nazarene* (Philadelphia: George Lippard & Co., 1846), 97, 118.

¹⁰ Quoted in Michael H. Cowan, *City of the West: Emerson, America, and Urban Metaphor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 216.

¹¹ Cornelius Mathews, *Big Abel and the Little Manhattan* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845), 73. The novel is essentially a walk around New York with Big Abel, the great-grandson of Henry Hudson, and Little Manhattan, the great grandson of the Indian chief who ruled the island, with the two negotiating over who has the rights to what part of the city.

once materials are profuse, for there is an *El Dorado of marvels* well worth the attentive, close scrutiny of mankind in general.”¹²

Writing the City and the Frontier

If urbanites partook of both worlds—the dense, “civilized” urban settlement and the wild, “savage” frontier—it was in large part because the two were not only described in the same words, but in words written by the same authors. Janis Stout notes that, “the same writers who sensationalized the city ... impartially produced thrills from sea adventures, Wild West stories, robber gang tales, and wild romances in foreign lands,” a fact that becomes particularly apparent when one sees the story papers in whose pages many city-mysteries were serialized, where they ran cheek by jowl with Westerns and sea tales.¹³ Virtually all authors of city-mysteries who achieved any substantial output also wrote frontier tales of some sort. Joseph Holt Ingraham wrote Indian tales and sea narratives, Justin Jones wrote a variety of frontier stories, and George Lippard serialized his Mexican War novels alongside his New York novels in his *Quaker City Weekly*. Perhaps most notably, Ned Buntline, famous as an urban novelist and rabble-rouser, would gain much greater fame as a writer of Westerns through his introduction of Buffalo Bill to a national audience. Advance reviews of Emerson Bennett’s *The Forged Will* made note of the fact that he was best known as “a western writer, who has gained considerable popularity in that section of the country, by his tales of border life and

¹² John Denison Vose, Esq., *Seven Nights in Gotham* (New York: Bunnell & Price, 1852), 7.

¹³ Janis Stout, *Sodom's in Eden: The City in American Fiction Before 1860*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1976), 42.

adventure,” but stressed that, although this novel was not set “among the fiery, impulsive, and hot-blooded inhabitants of the southwest,” Bennett was equal to a setting “in the city of New York, where is enacted a drama as thrilling as any tragedy of border life or Indian warfare.”¹⁴

In fusing representations of the city with the rhetoric of the frontier and westward expansion, authors of city-mysteries engaged in what Shelley Streeby has called the “double axis of city and empire.”¹⁵ Henry Boernstein’s *The Mysteries of St. Louis* is a particularly notable case of the fusion of the city-mystery and Western genres, as would make sense for a novel about the city that was the primary jumping-off place for voyages to the West. Its setting allows for the incorporation of frontier elements—the first character seen is a trapper with a buffalo robe and a bowie knife—and a trip to California forms a central part of the novel’s plot.¹⁶

But even writers in cities farther east were aware of the connection between urban America and the frontier—whether that frontier was in the West or at sea—and they did not hesitate to compare the two. Writing in the wake of the race riots that form the core of George Lippard’s novel *The Killers*, one Philadelphia newspaper wrote that “we flatter ourselves when we regret the lawless condition of California and the wild borders of

¹⁴ From the Boston *Liberator* (Oct. 14, 1853) and the Boston *Yankee Blade* (October 15, 1853); printed in an advertisement for *The Forged Will* in Emma Wellmont, *Substance and Shadows; or, Phases of Everyday Life* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1854). Bennett’s previous works included a novel on the Ohio River boatman Mike Fink.

¹⁵ Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 5.

¹⁶ Steven Rowan notes in his introduction to the modern reprint edition of the novel that Boernstein had originally wanted to call the novel “Die Raben des Westens” [“The Ravens of the West”], and that he envisioned it more as a “prototype of the German Western in the Karl May tradition” than as a city novel (the title was changed by his publisher, who was trying to scoop a competitor’s novel with the same title). Rowan, introduction to Henry Boernstein, *The Mysteries of St. Louis, A Novel* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Co., 1990), ix-x.

Texas and Arkansas. Let us open our eyes to the fact that, with all the supposed lawlessness of these frontier regions, the natural abodes of desperadoes and refugees from justice, life and property are quite as safe—if not indeed more so, than they are, at this moment, in Philadelphia.”¹⁷ The comparison between the city and the Western frontier, and especially the project of Westward expansion, is heightened in this instance by the fact that the newspaper (and Lippard) blamed the riot on two Philadelphia gangs called the Killers and the Stingers. These criminal gangs were largely made up of returned veterans of the Mexican-American War, who had come back to Philadelphia to diminished employment prospects, bringing frontier attitudes towards violence to an environment that was all too well-suited to them.

The equation of the city with the Western frontier is further cemented in these popular urban narratives by the use of literary conventions that were specific to Western literature. One convention that was frequently used to disrupt the putative divide between the frontier and the metropolis was Southwestern humor, resulting in brief outbursts of Davy Crockett-esque hyperbole in tales of city life. One character in *The Mysteries of Springfield*, delighted with himself at having received a *billet-doux* from a woman, proclaims himself “the irresistible Mr. Gillett, the beautiful Mr. Gillett, the greatest living curiosity, just from Brazil, brought over in the great ship Siam, through

¹⁷ *North American and United States Gazette*, Philadelphia, October 13, 1849, 2. The riots in question took place on election night in Philadelphia, and were supposedly led by the Killers, who were allied with the Irish branch of the Moyamensing Hose Company. Allegedly acting in response to rumors of a black man having married a white woman, the Killers dragged a wagon load of burning tar barrels through Moyamensing, a black neighborhood, setting fire to numerous buildings including the California House, a black social club.

Petersburg in Virginia, measures sixteen feet from tip to tip, and when he spreads his wings, oh demme, don't he do execution?"¹⁸

In an even more far-fetched example of regional ventriloquism, a Nantucketer brought into court for brawling in *The Mysteries of Rochester* suddenly begins channeling Daniel Boone, informing the judge that he is

“a regular ring-tailed roarer, half horse, half alligator, with jest a leetle touch of the snapping turtle; all brimstone except my head and ears, and that's aquafortis—can whip my weight in wildcats, and you may throw in a painter or two, by way of diversion—can jump higher, scream louder, see further, and fight longer than any other man in York State, by jiminy!”¹⁹

The fact that these two urban types—the rake and the Yankee—suddenly lapse into Southwestern vernacular humor would have underscored for readers in the period the comparison that authors were making between the city—even cities as small as Springfield and Rochester—and the excitement of the frontier.

Another device authors used to “frontier-ize” the city was to write about the urban landscape in the terms of the wilderness. In this period, when American cities were expanding rapidly from their compact early cores, the encounter between the city and the countryside, if not actual wilderness, was always apparent. In the 1840s, the northern half of Manhattan was still farms and forests, and much of present-day Boston was still under water. Yet authors went beyond comparisons of urban and rural, using language that was specific to the Western wilderness to describe the urban landscape.

George Lippard was particularly fond of this device, describing Philadelphia in *The Nazarene* as “the wilderness of roofs which formed the distant city,” and New York

¹⁸ J. Wimpleton Wilkes, *The Mysteries of Springfield: A Tale of the Times* (Springfield, MA: William B. Brockett, 1844), 33.

¹⁹ John Chumasero, *The Mysteries of Rochester* (Rochester: W. H. Beach, 1845), 40.

in *The Empire City* as “this wilderness of stone and brick and mortar, dissected by streets, and encircled by forests of masts ... this desert of walls, with Broadway shining like a path of fire.”²⁰ In his *Mysteries of the Pulpit*, a young man being pursued through Philadelphia finds refuge on the roof of the unfinished building of Girard College, on what was then the northern edge of the city. Lippard engages in a lengthy reverie on the vision of the city asleep under a blanket of fresh snow; “The Great City, a wilderness of roofs” strikes Ralph as sublime in the same way that the wonders of nineteenth-century exploration did their discoverers. Lippard rhapsodizes, “Oh, you may talk of the savage grandeur of the desert, untrodden by the foot of man, of the awful solitude which invests the traveler, who looks upon the world from the topmost peak of Chimborazo; but here, beneath your feet, is a desert, a solitude, whose desolation and whose loneliness are made up—not of rocks and stones—but of the misery of human hearts....”²¹ Although on the frontier the straight lines of gridded streets marked the difference between town and country, in the city those rectilinear streets were inscribed with the language of the wilderness.

This equation of the city with a wilderness, with forests of buildings and streets for woodpaths, provided urban readers with a familiar language for talking about their surroundings, and gave rural readers a measure of comparison when reading about cities. As Lippard wrote, if the city was a wilderness because of its solitude and loneliness, then it was an ideal place to hide. Writing in 1869, Junius Henry Browne wrote, “If Wilkes

²⁰ Lippard, *The Nazarene*, 32; Lippard, *The Empire City; or, New York by Night and Day* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson & Brothers, 1864), 42.

²¹ George Lippard, *Mysteries of the Pulpit; a Revelation of the Church and the Home* (Philadelphia: E. E. Barclay, 1851), 122.

Booth had only changed his name and taken an office anywhere between Spruce and Liberty streets, he would have been forever safe. What is the State of Virginia to Nassau street as a hiding place!”²² Sams, a character in Joseph Ingraham’s *The Miseries of New York*, escaping from Blackwell’s Island, headed for Manhattan instead of the hills, proclaiming, “I shan’t feel safe till I am a mile deep in the old city.”²³

As Sams indicates, the deeper into the city one went, the easier it was to get lost. The title character of *The Orphan Seamstress* is advised by a fellow sewing girl to hide in the most crowded part of the city: “When you get into Broadway, hide in some doorway, or under some stoop, until daylight....”²⁴ It is the densest part of the largest city in the country, not the far off hills of the West, that can hide the girl most completely. By depicting the city as a wilderness, authors both combined genres and created a fictional atmosphere that allowed them to shape the expectations of their readers regarding the most signal aspects of the urban experience: its diversity and its strangeness.

The City as Borderland Region

In the process of endowing cities with some of the physical and moral traits of the wilderness, authors of urban sensational fiction also depicted cities as sites of cultural encounter and contestation, or borderlands. Adrienne Siegel has noted that through the 1860s—the primary period of Western expansion—three times as many novels were

²² Junius Henry Browne, *The Great Metropolis: A Mirror of New York* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1869), 383.

²³ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *The Miseries of New York* (Boston: “Yankee” Office, 1844), 9.

²⁴ *The Orphan Seamstress, a Narrative of Innocence, Guilt, Mystery and Crime*, by the Author of the “Milliner’s Apprentice” (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1850), 22.

written about cities in America than were written about the trans-Appalachian West.²⁵

These novels about city life, along with reform tracts, travel narratives, and newspapers, conditioned people about what to expect when they visited cities, and above all else what they told people they would encounter was large numbers of people significantly different from themselves. In this way, cities constituted what I would argue were the true borderlands of nineteenth-century America, where encounters with those of different races or ethnicities, with different cultural values, were essentially guaranteed.

Scholars working in the field of borderlands studies have conceptualized borderlands as areas of cultural confrontation, negotiation, and contestation, as more than the physical locations of boundaries between nations or cultures. Yet, too often, scholars of borderlands limit themselves to these physical spaces in what is thought of in Anglo-American terms as the frontier, focusing on confrontations of cultures that are most often simple binaries, setting Anglo and Hispanic culture against each other, occasionally inserting Native American or African American culture into the mix.²⁶ Yet if, as Gloria

²⁵ See Adrienne Siegel, *The Image of the American City in Popular Literature, 1820-1870* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1981). Writing elsewhere, Siegel links the sense of urban excitement to the expansionism of the antebellum period: "As the nation became absorbed with relentless expansion, the city conjured up a cherished image of growth. . . . In fact, to contemporary witnesses, the bursting sense of life which characterized the American nation of the mid-19th century found its sharpest focus in the tumultuous, expanding cities of the Union." Siegel, "When Cities Were Fun: The Image of the American City in Popular Books, 1840-1870," in *Journal of Popular Culture* 9:3 (Winter 1975): 576.

²⁶ For instance, Patricia Nelson Limerick describes a borderland quite literally, as a site where "two nations confront each other and compete for control of the local resources and routes to opportunity." Viewing borderlands in this way, almost exclusively as the product of imperial expansion and in the terms of the nation-state, greatly limits the power of the concept to describe sites of *cultural* confrontation. Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1988), 228. Oscar Martinez takes a broader view, writing that borderlands are characterized by: location on the periphery of two nation-states; pronounced transnational interdependence; acute internationality; extreme ethnic, cultural, and linguistic mixture; and a sense of otherness and separateness. I would argue that, apart from being geographically peripheral, antebellum cities possessed these qualities to a greater extent than did frontier areas that are traditionally considered "borderlands." For instance, the level of internationality, transnational interdependence, and ethnic, cultural, and linguistic mixture in antebellum Philadelphia (or St.

Anzaldua writes, borderlands occur “wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy,” then cities, with their extreme heterogeneity and spatial compression, constitute the true borderlands regions of the period.²⁷ They represent the location not of the “bipolar model of opposing cultures,” but rather a place where, as George Sanchez writes, the notion that “individuals have occupied one undifferentiated cultural position” can be abandoned in favor of “the possibility of multiple identities and contradictory positions.”²⁸

The complex dynamics of urban antebellum life, which saw immigrants become “Americans,” change their religious and political affiliations, and often employ people of other ethnicities (or races) to clean their homes and raise their children, seem to capture the possibility that Sanchez describes. In addition, the process of acculturation—the transfer of cultural traits from one ethnic group to another, also taken to be a key characteristic of borderlands—is both accelerated and magnified in the urban environment: new languages are formed that incorporate words from many tongues, styles of dress are imitated, intermarriage occurs, etc. It is in the confrontations of cultures that borderlands consist, and it was this encounter that authors of city-mysteries sought to capture.

Louis, or San Francisco) exceeds by a dramatic margin that in a more traditionally conceived “borderland” area such as the Pacific Northwest or the desert Southwest. Oscar Martinez, “A World Apart,” in *U.S.–Mexico Borderlands: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Oscar Martinez (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1996), 227. I am greatly indebted to Megan Kate Nelson for guiding me through the wilds of borderlands studies.

²⁷ Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2nd ed., 1999), from author’s preface.

²⁸ George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 7, 8.

Much as migrants to the American West had a preconceived image in their mind of what the West would be like, shaped by artists, poets, explorers, and scientists, so migrants to America's cities were conditioned to expect certain things, and were prepared to act accordingly. Above all else, readers of popular urban narratives would have been conditioned to expect a much higher level of cultural diversity and contestation—in short, a borderland—than they had been used to. With all of the ethnic and racial complexity of the nation compressed into urban space, cities offered more than the binary confrontations of whites and blacks in the South, or whites and Indians on the Plains, or whites and Mexicans in California. Rather, they offered the “foreign-within-the-domestic,” which confronted city dwellers with all possible ethnic and racial interactions at once.²⁹ As the title page of the 1864 edition of George Lippard's *The Empire City, or New York by Night and Day* proclaims, “In [New York's] streets will be discovered representatives of all the classes and races which have an existence on the American Continent, mingled with many others from the Old World.”³⁰

Indeed, it was this diversity that made cities compelling subjects for fictional narratives. E. Porter Belden, the builder of a scale model of New York, wrote, “Of all places on the American continent, the metropolis presents the greatest diversity. . . . New-York [he might just as well have said San Francisco] is pre-eminently the point to which foreigners direct their course. All races . . . may find their representatives in this comprehensive emporium.”³¹ City-mysteries novels instructed their readers to assume

²⁹ Streeby, *American Sensations*, 88.

³⁰ George Lippard, *The Empire City*, i (publisher's note).

³¹ E. Porter Belden, *New York: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Prall, Lewis & Co., 1851), 44.

that the people they met in the city (not just in New York) could be from anywhere. In Osgood Bradbury's *Clara Hopkins*, a young beggar woman is stopped by a man who goes by the name of "Wild Ned" in the street, who asks her, "'Are you French, English, Irish, or Scotch or American?'"³² Wild Ned, an experienced urbanite, is familiar enough with the city not to assume that a person he meets will be able to understand him. But readers of city-mysteries were encouraged not to be overwhelmed by the vast diversity of the "modern Babel"; because they were conditioned to think of the city as a cultural borderland, they were not shocked by its heterogeneity. "To our borders . . . come people from all quarters of the earth," begins *The Fortunes of a Young Widow*. Yet, "However strange their features or attire, their appearance in the more crowded streets is saluted by only a momentary attention. The China-man, the Indian, the Russian minister—none of these can 'draw' more than a fleeting minute's notice; at least in Broadway."³³

Clearly, according to authors of popular urban narratives, city dwellers were completely inured to the idea of the city as a repository of all the world's cultures. Characters in the novels reflect this conditioning as well. In Bradbury's *The Rival Lovers*, a girl visiting Boston is lured into a brothel masquerading as a boarding house. Upon meeting the madam, the girl muses that, "I thought the name was an odd one, but I expected to hear many odd names pronounced in so large a city, and the fact did not much surprise me at the time."³⁴ Even though it got her into trouble, this girl had clearly been reading her city-mysteries.

³² Osgood Bradbury, *Clara Hopkins; or, A Mirror of City Life, A Tale of New York and Philadelphia* (New York: Samuel French, 1855), 18.

³³ *Fortunes of a Young Widow*, iii.

³⁴ Osgood Bradbury, *The Rival Lovers; or, The Midnight Murder* (New York: Robert DeWitt, 1857), 28.

If cities were borderlands of the world, they also functioned as “internal borderlands” in much the same way as the West did, bringing together people from all over the United States through waves of internal migration. José Saldivar suggests that borderlands studies urge an understanding of American culture in terms of migrations, not simply immigration, and cities, as the focal points of tremendous internal migrations from the countryside, reflected this cultural encounter.³⁵ Authors of novels about New York frequently wrote of the rivalry between the “scattered remains of the old Knickerbocker race” and the “cunning vagabonds from Connecticut and her sister states,” the wave of enterprising Yankees who in the antebellum period had come to substantially dominate the city’s commercial life, but the migration of New Englanders to New York and Boston was not the only product of internal cultural mixing in the period.³⁶

Tradesmen, farmers, sailors, and tourists from all over the country visited the nation’s Eastern urban centers, and merchants, Western migrants, adventurers, fur trappers, wagoners, and river boatmen filled Cincinnati, St. Louis, New Orleans, and San Francisco. A factory girl writing in the Lowell *Offering* wrote that one of the “Pleasures of Factory Life” was becoming “acquainted with some person or persons that reside in almost every part of the country.”³⁷ While Lowell was likely not populated by operatives from as far afield as Florida or Illinois, the role of the city in promoting a form of internal cultural encounter is clear. A large city was, in the words of one author, “a symbol, an intensification of the country,” serving to bring distinct regional types together just as

³⁵ José David Saldivar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 8.

³⁶ Belden, *New York: Past, Present, and Future*, 44; *A Week in Wall Street*, By One Who Knows (New York: Published for all the booksellers, 1841), 3.

³⁷ “Pleasures of Factory Life,” Lowell *Offering* 1:2 (December 1840): 25.

effectively as did the Mexican-American War or the Gold Rush.³⁸ He went on, “Take your stand there, and Maine, and Louisiana, the Carolinas, and California, Boston, and Chicago pass before you.”³⁹

In attempting to comprehensibly represent the diversity that they told readers to expect in the city, authors both reinforced and invented stereotypes—regional, ethnic, and racial—to help make sense of urban chaos. While some of these stereotypes were reprehensible, not all of them were born of prejudice, but rather a need to render the overwhelming confusion of the city legible. “As the telegraphic expression of complex clusters of value,” Jane Tompkins writes, “stereotyped characters are essential to popularly successful narrative,” and the popularly successful authors of city-mysteries relied upon them heavily.⁴⁰ Whether it was the thrifty Yankee, the stolid German, the convivial and pugnacious Irishman, the passionate and vengeful Italian, the suave and duplicitous Frenchman, the miserly Scotsman, the wild and woolly backwoodsman, or the cowardly and gullible African-American, stereotypes of different groups were the

³⁸ In many ways, city-mysteries novels serve to cement the connections between the city and the frontier experience, often eliding any intermediate steps in smaller towns or rural areas. As Shelley Streeby has written, “The sensational literature of this period responds . . . to a double vision of Northeastern cities divided by battles over class, race, national origin, and religion, on the one hand, and on the other by scenes of U.S. nation- and empire-building in Mexico, Cuba, and throughout the Americas.” Streeby, *American Sensations*, 5. In many city-mysteries, characters suddenly leave the city for the Western frontier, or for the California gold fields, or for filibustering expeditions to Havana. Highlighting the imbrication of city narratives with narratives of empire not only further supports my contention that we can profit from viewing cities in this period through the lens of borderland studies, it also underscores the similarity of both the city and the frontier as places populated almost exclusively by people from somewhere else, who had had their image of both places shaped for them in advance. As Alexander Saxton notes, “Underlying the sociological congruency between city and frontier was a psychological similarity between traveling to the city and traveling west. Each was a difficult journey involving a traumatic break with a previous life,” a break with both a rural past and, Saxton argues, childhood. Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990), 173-74.

³⁹ Browne, *The Great Metropolis*, 28–29.

⁴⁰ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), xvi.

currency of popular urban fiction, and contributed to the expectations of city life that were shaped by reading such narratives.⁴¹ In *Life in Rochester*, Swindlem Skinflint, a grocer, explains to his apprentice that “the knack of the business” is “to tell which is which.” The same could be said of the “knack” of city life. He tells the apprentice that, out in the country, “if a foreigner came along, you couldn’t tell by his looks whether he was an Irishman, or an Englishman, or a Dutchman. But there ain’t a boy your age, brought up in the city, but what could tell at first sight.”⁴² The ability to accurately read the mosaic of different ethnicities, even if such a reading relied on myths and preconceptions, was a crucial skill in urban life, one which authors of city-mysteries tried to impart to their readers.

The International City

An 1839 guide to urban travel called *The Family Tourist* remarked of New York City that one-third of the city’s residents were “either natives of New England, or descendants of those who have emigrated from the northern States. Not more than a third of the population is, strictly speaking, native to this State....” Who accounted for the rest of the inhabitants of the nation’s largest city? The author filled his readers in: “the proportion of Europeans of various nations is probably larger than any other city in the

⁴¹ Whether these authors invented the stereotypes or were simply recirculating the received wisdom of the day is immaterial. What is important is that such images contributed to the store of information that readers, both in cities and in the country, used to build their expectations of city life. If these expectations influenced how people lived their lives in urban areas, then the validity of the expectations is beside the point.

⁴² John Chumasero, *Life in Rochester, or Sketches from Life: Being Scenes of Misery, Vice, Shame and Oppression, in the City of the Genessee*, by a Resident Citizen (Rochester: D. M. Dewey, 1848), 44.

Union.”⁴³ Thirteen years later, in another narrative about a visit to New York, the mixture of “Europeans of various nations” had become so baffling that Dr. Joel Ross, writing of a visit to Five Points, remarked that he was met by “not an Anglo-Saxon, or Anglo-American, and whether he were Anglo-Danish or Anglo-Something else, I could not well ascertain....”⁴⁴ What had taken place in the years between these two narratives was twofold: a wave of immigration to the U.S., and primarily to urban areas, from all corners of Europe; and a reconceptualization of what ethnic difference meant. Both processes were charted in the pages of popular urban fiction.

The overwhelming demographic fact of urban life in antebellum America was the dramatic increase in foreign immigration. In the years from 1820 to 1860, the number of people living in cities in the U.S. increased by eight hundred percent, and the proportion of the nation’s population living in cities increased from six to twenty percent.⁴⁵ In 1835, over a thousand ships entered New York’s harbor, from over 150 foreign ports; by 1849, the number of ships had more than tripled.⁴⁶ If, as was claimed by the author of *New York Aristocracy*, immigrants “at one gulp of a ship show themselves in nice little batches of five or six hundred,” the numbers implied by this tally of ships is impressive, even if not all of them carried immigrants.⁴⁷ While reformers like Charles Loring Brace proclaimed the importance of encouraging foreign immigrants not to stay in the cities

⁴³ Charles A. Goodrich, *The Family Tourist; or A Visit to the Principal Cities of the Western Continent* (Hartford: Philemon Canfield, 1839), 182.

⁴⁴ Joel Ross, M.D., *What I Saw in New-York; or a Bird’s Eye View of City Life* (Auburn, NY: Derby & Miller, 1852), 83.

⁴⁵ Along with this increase came tremendous growth in the size and number of cities. In 1820, the U.S. contained twelve cities with populations over 10,000; in 1860, it had 101.

⁴⁶ Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840–1857* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 2.

⁴⁷ *New York Aristocracy; or, Gems of Japonica-dom* (New York: Charles B. Norton, 1851), 90–91.

where they arrived, but to move on to small towns and rural areas so as to avoid the creation of a permanent urban immigrant working class that replicated social patterns brought over from the Old World, many immigrants did not heed this advice. This was particularly the case in New York, which saw its per capita wealth decline from \$806 in 1840 to \$555 in 1850, largely due to an influx of poor immigrants.⁴⁸

Until 1840, the arrival of people from rural areas in American cities was the primary cause of urban growth, a process that constituted one of the most drastic population shifts in American history.⁴⁹ Beginning in the late 1830s, however, American cities also began experiencing their first great wave of foreign immigration, primarily from Germany and Ireland, a phenomenon of which urbanites were immediately aware. Writing in 1837, Asa Green observed in *A Glance at New York* that, “the ‘fathers according to the flesh’ of our numerous population are to be looked for beyond the bounds of New York; nay, beyond the bounds of the United States.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Spann, *New Metropolis*, 439, n. 30. Spann notes that during the same period, Boston got much richer on a per capita basis (an increase from \$961 to \$1267), while it also became much less diverse. The influx of immigrants and poor laborers was making New York poorer, but they were drawn there by New York’s supremacy both as a port of entry and as a city in which to make a life.

⁴⁹ Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 9.

⁵⁰ Asa Greene, *A Glance at New York: Embracing the City Government, Theatres, Hotels, Churches, Mobs, Monopolies, Learned Professions, Newspapers, Rogues, Dandies, Fires and Firemen, Waters and Other Liquids, &c. &c.* (New York: A. Greene, 1837), 11. The literature on foreign immigration to the United States is too vast to contend with here, with every ethnic group and city receiving its own book-length study. Works of particular importance include: Oscar Handlin, *Boston’s Immigrants, 1790–1880: A Study in Acculturation*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1991, c. 1941); Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Joseph P. Ferrie, *Yankees Now: Immigrants in the Antebellum United States, 1840–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Edward Laxton, *The Famine Ships: The Irish Exodus to America, 1846–1851* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996); Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825–1863* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994); Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York: Perennial, 2002); Thomas Muller, *Immigrants and the American City* (New York: NYU Press, 1993); and Ellis Cose, *A Nation of Strangers: Prejudice, Politics, and the Populating of America* (New York: Morrow, 1992).

The trend would only accelerate. In the 1840s, over eighty percent of New York's population increase was due to net migration. In a city where writers lamented the usurpation of Knickerbocker supremacy by *arrivistes* from New England, by 1855—a year in which 400,000 immigrants arrived in the U.S.—more New Yorkers had been born in France than in Massachusetts, and a majority of the city's residents had been born in another country.⁵¹ New York became, both in fact and in the national imagination, the primary locus of foreign immigration. In the wake of the upheaval of the European revolutions of the late 1840s, New York became even more polyglot. By 1860, only Berlin and Vienna had more native German speakers than New York, and the Irish, spurred by famine and drawn by opportunity, far outnumbered the Germans.⁵² The public health reformer Dr. John Griscom published a study in 1865 that included an analysis of a single block in New York's Fourth Ward: "Fifty nine miserable buildings, occupied by 382 families, in which are 812 Irish, 218 Germans, 186 Italians, 189 Polanders, 39 Negroes, and 10 Americans. Total, 1,520."⁵³

While New York was extreme in its ethnic diversity, it was simply a leading indicator of a trend that applied to cities across the country. From the late 1830s to 1850, the foreign-born portion of Philadelphia's male work force rose from 10 percent to over 40 percent; of this group, two-thirds were Irish, and one-fifth were German.⁵⁴ Port cities, naturally, retained the largest numbers of immigrants (a curious exception was Boston,

⁵¹ David Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 30.

⁵² Henkin, *City Reading*, 57. Henkin gives the number of native German speakers in the city in 1860 as 119,000, or over ten percent of the city's population.

⁵³ Dr. John Griscom, "The Metropolitan Health Bill," the *New York Times* (April 21, 1865); quoted in Homberger, *Scenes from the Life of a City*, 21.

⁵⁴ Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia*, 29; Streeby, *American Sensations*, 11.

which in contrast to New York was found to be exceptional for its ethnic homogeneity).⁵⁵ In the West, St. Louis, with its founding mixture of French, Spanish, and Anglo populations, had been a polyglot city from the start, and along with Cincinnati it rapidly became a magnet for large numbers of German immigrants. By 1860, sixty-one percent of the city's population was foreign-born. St. Louis, Cincinnati, and New Orleans all produced city-mysteries novels written and published in German during the period (fragments of a German-language city-mystery set in Philadelphia survive as well).

Southern cities were just as diverse, despite the lingering image of Southern Anglo-Saxon homogeneity. During the 1840s, 188,000 immigrants came through the port of New Orleans, and by 1850 over forty percent of its residents had been born abroad.⁵⁶ During the late antebellum period the larger cities (over 20,000) of the South featured larger proportions of foreign-language immigrant groups than did Northern cities, and larger percentages of Lutherans and Jews, to go along with a significantly higher percentage of interregional migrants (Northern-born people living in the South). Dennis Rousey claims that "Northern cities tended more often to have a foreign population numerically dominated by a single group (the Irish), while Southern cities tended to have a somewhat more balanced assortment."⁵⁷ When one takes into account the fact that Southern cities also had substantially larger black populations, both slave and free (almost all free blacks in the South lived in cities), Southern cities may have been

⁵⁵ Goodrich, *Family Tourist*, 180.

⁵⁶ Mary Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 22.

⁵⁷ Dennis C. Rousey, "Aliens in the WASP Nest: Ethnocultural Diversity in the Antebellum Urban South," *Journal of American History* 79:1 (June 1992): 154, 161, 157.

even more ethnically diverse than their Northern counterparts.⁵⁸ Charles Goodrich captured this diversity in his chapter on New Orleans, describing the city's population as being "of the most motley description, and of every complexion, from the shades of brown and yellow to jet black. Americans of every State, from Maine to Georgia, form about three eighths of the city.... Heterogeneous as the population is, in manners, languages and principles, they all agree in one point.... Americans, English, French, Germans, Spaniards, all come hither to make money...."⁵⁹

San Francisco, the "instant metropolis" of the Pacific, was portrayed, even more than New York, as the pinnacle of ethnic diversity. Just three years after the discovery of gold in California, over half of the exploding population of the city had been born outside the United States. Indeed, in many respects it was the city's extreme diversity that earned it the status of "city," a status it richly deserved, since, by 1854, California was the most urbanized state west of the Appalachians. In *The Mysteries of St. Louis*, an inserted San Francisco plot featured the characteristic claim, "One could not, ... in any city of the new or old world, have met with such a singularly mixed society as was here assembled.... All nations, all stations, all fashions were here represented, all languages spoken, and a noise and confusion prevailed like whilom at the building of the Babylonian tower."⁶⁰ News of the discovery of gold in California had spread around the globe, and the promise of instant riches attracted men not only from the East Coast and Europe, but also from Asia, South America, Australia, and Oceania. *The Mysteries and Miseries of San*

⁵⁸ Rousey writes that in 1850 the mean black population in Southern cities was 22.74 percent, compared to 3.13 percent in the North. By 1860, due to additions to urban populations from both at home and abroad, the figures had declined to 15 and 2, respectively. "Aliens in the WASP Nest," 155.

⁵⁹ Goodrich, *Family Tourist*, 359.

⁶⁰ Boernstein, *Mysteries of St. Louis*, 236.

Francisco continually returns to the theme of the city's heterogeneity. At a dance hall in Pacific Street "may be seen the Lascar, the Mulatto, the Chilian, the Brazilian negro, the Nantucket whaleman, the escaped convict from Botany Bay, the red-faced Englishman, the native of the soil [Indian], the Mexican; and every other class and nation...."⁶¹

Africans, Chinese, and Kanakas (Hawaiian islanders) joined the ethnic mix of antebellum San Francisco to make up a city that was many things, but it wasn't "American," at least to most popular authors.⁶²

The ethnic, linguistic, and sartorial diversity of San Francisco as described in popular fiction may, if anything, have fallen short of capturing the reality. The two Vigilance Committees of San Francisco (1851 and 1856)—grass-roots organizations of local men who took control of the city government—arose in response to perceived waves of crime and political corruption, respectively, both of which were thought to have been caused by large groups of foreigners, namely the "Sydney Ducks," transported convicts (mostly Irish) who had left Australia for the Gold Rush. As a result, many scholars have interpreted the Vigilance Committees, and particularly the 1856 manifestation, as instances of organized anti-immigrant prejudice. An analysis of the membership applications to the 1856 Committee, however, reveals both the stunning ethnic diversity of San Francisco and the fact that the Committee was far from being based in anti-immigrant nativism.

⁶¹ *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco*, by a Californian (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1853), 20.

⁶² The authors of *The Annals of San Francisco* describe a scene on election day in 1850, when a Kanaka, "almost as dark as an African," attempted to vote. His reply to every question—Where were you born? Where did you come from last? Where was your father born? In what street did you live?—was "New York," the only American place-name he knew (his vote was rejected). Frank Soulé, John H. Gihon, and James Nisbet, *The Annals of San Francisco* (New York: D. Appleton, 1855), 265.

A count of applications only for the letters A and B reveals applicants from twenty-two different states, from Alabama to Wisconsin, Louisiana to Maine, along with one application listing a birthplace of “Cherokee Nation, U.S.” More remarkably, the same batch of applications includes men born in at least seventeen different countries (if Prussia and Germany are counted as different), including all of Northern Europe and the British Isles, France, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, Russia, Poland, Canada, and one whose birthplace is simply given as “Atlantic Ocean.”⁶³ What these documents reveal is not simply the tremendous diversity of a polyglot city, but the emergence of a new concept: ethnicity. Based in national identification but not identical to it, ethnicity was deployed in the antebellum city, and in the texts it produced, not so much to answer the question, “Where were you born?” as “Who are you?”

Ethnicity had been a factor of minimal interest in much of the country before the era of substantial foreign immigration, and would have been of little concern to most immigrants, who were likely arriving from places that were quite homogeneous ethnically. In this diverse urban stew, however, it took on tremendous significance,

⁶³ San Francisco Committee of Vigilance Papers, Unclassified Papers, 1853-56, Applications for Membership, Box 4, Folders 1 & 2; in the collection of the Henry E. Huntington Library. What was most striking from a sample of applications under random letters—A, B, M, R, and V—was that, out of a total of 687 applications examined, only eleven were from Irishmen (most with English surnames and from Northern Ireland), and only two were from Mexicans. Clearly, then, the Vigilance Committee was not anti-immigrant in any meaningful way, but it was seen as being the province of white men who weren’t Irish Catholics. The literature on the Vigilantes and their legacy is vast; the best recent work is Philip Ethington, *The Public City: The Political Construction of Urban Life in San Francisco, 1850-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). As George Sanchez has written, ethnicity is not a fixed set of customs that survived from life in the mother country, “but rather a collective identity that emerged from daily experience in the United States ... through dialogue and debate with the larger cultural world...”; *Becoming Mexican American*, 11–12.

becoming the city's "single most discordant social reality."⁶⁴ Of the many potential axes of differentiation in the antebellum city, as cities "came to present themselves not in the singular but the plural," ethnicity "was a particularly powerful and inventive component of the polyglot civic exhibition" of urban life.⁶⁵

Popular urban narratives both charted and promoted this emergence of ethnicity as a category of identity, using ethnic stereotypes, dialect, and other cultural clues, such as names and drinking preferences, to sort the urban populations they described into legible ethnic categories, often defined in opposition to each other. In this way, city-mysteries novels promoted what Etienne Balibar has called the "immigrant complex," in which "immigration" comes to stand for the category of race, which, as Shelley Streeby notes, means that biological categories of race are "supplemented by 'culturalist' definitions of race which suggest that the differences between national cultures are natural and insurmountable but also perpetually endangered by the transnational movements and mixings of populations."⁶⁶

With citizens increasingly identifying themselves as members of ethnic groups, ethnic diversity came to be woven into the urban fabric as specific ethnic neighborhoods emerged, often organized around trades dominated by one particular group. Certain

⁶⁴ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Religion and the Rise of the American City: The New York City Mission Movement, 1812-1870* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 173.

⁶⁵ Ryan, *Civic Wars*, 60. Stuart Blumin, in *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, argues that "the social identity of middling folk in antebellum American cities was in fact shaped more decisively by class than by ethnicity," since most of them were native born. This is only true, however, given Blumin's excessively narrow delineation of "middling." If one includes proprietors of small businesses and master craftsmen in the "middling sort," the group suddenly looks very different, and it is likely that within a group so defined ethnic identity would prove to be far more important than Blumin admits. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 251. See his Chapter 7 for a discussion of how class and ethnic identities were interrelated.

⁶⁶ See Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (New York: Verso, 1991); Streeby, *American Sensations*, 257.

neighborhoods—Banker Street and West Broadway in New York, Moyamensing in Philadelphia, Ann Street in Boston—were delineated as black neighborhoods, a long-standing form of residential segregation. But particular neighborhoods came to be associated with specific ethnic groups as well, even in New York, whose residential patterns were less fixed due to the arcane tradition by which almost everybody in the city moved every year, all on May 1. The Irish dominated the city's Sixth Ward, Germans gathered in neighborhoods on what was then the upper east side of Manhattan, Jews were associated with Chatham Street, and Italians were already in the 1850s clustering in Mulberry Street in what came to be Little Italy. Other cities, particularly Boston, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and St. Louis featured similar patterns of ethnic aggregation.

These particular ethnic locales were frequent subjects of comment in narratives that concerned themselves with the makeup of cities, and the trades associated with specific ethnic groups were remarked upon as well, especially those that were visible in the city streets. In the pages of city-mysteries, Italians were shown to be organ grinders and dealers of plaster busts; Germans were bakers and brewers; Frenchmen were tailors, jewelers, and music instructors; Jews were bankers, pawnshop owners, and used-clothes dealers; and Irish were laborers, weavers, domestic servants, and, increasingly, policemen. The concentration of ethnic groups in specific trades and neighborhoods, while likely at first simply a way of surviving in a new, bewildering country, became a constitutive element of ethnicity as an emerging axis of identity.

An Unmelted Pot

As ethnicity emerged as a category of difference and often came to be associated with a particular physical space within the city, it became a point of conflict as different ethnic groups jockeyed for power and influence in urban culture and politics, a conflict in which authors of city-mysteries were often enthusiastic participants. Some conflicts between ethnic groups were holdovers from Old World prejudices, such as the opposition between German radicals and Jesuits, long-standing resentments on the part of the Scottish and Irish against the English, and even, according to *Minny Lawson; or, the Outlaws League*, residual tension from the Napoleonic era between the Dutch and the French.⁶⁷ Yet the vast majority of ethnic conflict in antebellum urban America, and in the popular fiction it spawned, was driven by nativism, pitting native-born Americans against immigrant groups, most often Catholics, and usually Irish.

Nativism was, of course, a powerful movement in antebellum social and political life, giving rise to its own political party, the Know-Nothings, who enjoyed a brief moment of national power and occasional resurgences of municipal power in various cities during the 1840s and 50s.⁶⁸ Ned Buntline, one of the most prominent authors of

⁶⁷ See, in particular, Boernstein, *Mysteries of St. Louis*, for radical German anti-clericalism; Charles Red Swan, *Minny Lawson; or, the Outlaws League. A Romance of Gotham* (New York: n.p., 185?), 94–5.

⁶⁸ The first historical work focused on American nativism, Ray Allen Billington's *The Protestant Crusade, 1800–1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964 [1938]), as its title indicates, was interested almost exclusively in the class and religious roots of the nativist movement. The next, more general, history of American nativism, John Higham's *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955), while a pioneering work, does not examine the antebellum years because, he argues, nativism in the period was local, sporadic, and did not result in any policy changes (he ignores the fact that it inspired the creation of a national political party). In spite of this failing, it did offer a crucial corrective to the Progressive presumption that class was the basis of nativist conflict, instead contending that it had its basis in ideology, religion, and ethnicity. While he distinguishes between racial (or ethnic) nativism and anti-Catholic nativism, in the antebellum period they were substantially coterminous. For more on antebellum nativism, see: Noel

urban sensational fiction, was also one of the period's most prominent Nativists, being instrumental in the formation of the Know-Nothing Party and playing a crucial role in the 1849 Astor Place Riot in New York, an expression of Native American opposition to a British Shakespearean actor that ended up with the militia being called out, resulting in thirty-one deaths.⁶⁹ Likewise, George Thompson had strong nativist leanings, and dedicated one of his novels to George Law, a Know-Nothing candidate for president.

Of the many possible political orientations in antebellum America, nativism was the one that most frequently made its way into sensational urban fiction, often in the form of anti-Catholicism. In a genre obsessed with secret conspiracies and alliances of wealth and power, one of the favorite conspiracies of many authors was the Roman Catholic Church, a strange, foreign-seeming, wealthy, powerful, and secretive organization that even had its own language (Latin) and to which many of the new immigrants arriving in the United States professed allegiance. City-mysteries retailed stories of lecherous and sybaritic priests, benighted Irish Catholic immigrants, and religiously-motivated violence of all kinds, even offering retellings of the burning of the Ursuline convent in

Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850's* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Dale T. Knobel, *America for the Americans: The Nativist Movement in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996); Ira Leonard and Robert Parmet, *American Nativism, 1830–1860* (Huntington, NY: R. E. Krieger, 1979); Robert Francis Hueston, *The Catholic Press and Nativism, 1840–1860* (New York: Arno Press, 1976); Streeby, *American Sensations*; Saxton, *Rise and Fall of the White Republic*; Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967); and Robert Dunne, *Antebellum Irish Immigration and Emerging Ideologies of "America": A Protestant Backlash* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002).

⁶⁹ For an examination of Buntline's role in fomenting the riot, see Peter G. Buckley, "To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820–1860), Ph.D. Diss. (SUNY Stony Brook, 1984); and Buckley, "The Case Against Ned Buntline: The 'Words, Signs, and Gestures' of Popular Authorship," *Prospects* 13 (1988): 249–72.

Charlestown, MA in 1834, a touchstone of American anti-Catholicism.⁷⁰ The most common conspiracy narrative, however, concerned the fear that the Church, and particularly the Jesuits, were plotting a takeover of the U.S. in order to turn it into a Catholic state.⁷¹

This narrative took many forms, from the grand to the mundane. An instance of the former is the plot at the core of George Lippard's New York novels on the part of Jesuits to seize California and use its gold to finance a takeover of the New World (the Jesuits themselves promote anti-Catholic riots in order to generate sympathy for their cause). One example of the latter is Ned Buntline's *The G'hals of New York*, where a masked Jesuit asks Barton, the villain, to help him drive a wedge between a wealthy old Catholic man and his Baptist granddaughter, so that he will leave his money to the Church instead of her.⁷²

⁷⁰ In his novel about the convent burning, Justin Jones offers a unique explanation for the incident. A Protestant mob had gathered at the convent to protest what they felt to be Catholic detention of women against their will, but were not disposed to violence. Jack, a sailor originally from Boston who has found a home in Istanbul and has converted to Islam, is trying to rescue his sister Cecile, who is about to become a nun. He disperses his crewmen among the mob, instructing them to incite them to violence; they do so, the convent is burned, and Cecile escapes. Thus the burning of the convent was not the fault of enraged Protestants, but of Muslim sailors from Turkey. Harry Hazel [Justin Jones], *The Nun of St. Ursula: or, The Burning of the Convent* (Boston: F. Gleason, 1845), 37.

⁷¹ This notion was not confined to authors of popular novels. Many Americans opposed both the Catholic Church and ethnic organizations such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians as fronts for secret conspiracies to take over the United States. An 1854 letter from a Philadelphia correspondent to a New York nativist newspaper, *The Mystery*, described "certain *underground tracks*, connecting the three Romish strongholds in 18th street. . . . The Catholics have, indeed, secured for themselves a strong fort for the *tug of war*, when it does at last arrive." The writer went on to say that Philadelphia Catholics were accumulating artillery pieces in these tunnels connecting their churches, so that they would be ready to take over the city when the next wave of rioting began. The subterranean nature of the activity, and the title of the newspaper—*The Mystery*—indicate the extent to which Roman Catholicism was seen as being an archetypal urban mystery. *The Mystery, Published No Where—Sold Everywhere—Edited by Nobody—And 'Knows Nothing,'* New York, 9 December 1854, 2.

⁷² Ned Buntline, *The G'hals of New York: A Novel* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1850), 50, 123. Not all depictions of Catholics in city-mysteries were negative. George Lippard in particular made sport of nativists, showing them to be hypocritical opportunists even as he also exposed Jesuit plots to take over the nation. In *The Nazarene*, the arch-villain, Calvin Wolfe, plays a key role in the "G.O.O.L.P.O.," a secret

A target of special nativist obloquy was John Hughes, the Catholic bishop of the New York diocese, who took a particularly public role in the 1840s in defending the prerogatives of his Irish parishioners, particularly in the public schools. Eliza Ann Dupuy in *The Mysterious Marriage* directly named Hughes as the head of an Irish Catholic conspiracy to murder Protestants, and fulminated against a rally of “‘citizens,’ the majority of whom spent their last Christmas in Connaught or Tipperary.” Her Hibernian plotters are organized, keeping a book in which they place the names of Protestants targeted for death and moving their meeting place every two weeks, with news of the new location passed along by Hughes’s priests in the confessionals.⁷³ As the public face of urban Roman Catholicism, Hughes was portrayed in city-mysteries as telling Irish Catholics how to vote and enriching himself off of their donations to their parish churches.⁷⁴

Other authors, however, were not as concerned with the religious status of new arrivals to the United States, and instead focused on their ethnic difference. While almost all city-mysteries novels depicted Irish characters using dialect and ethnic stereotypes, some went beyond these relatively harmless practices and were much more explicit (and vicious) in their nativism. Many writers, particularly Buntline and Thompson, were

society devoted to fighting Catholicism, and is the head of the Holy Protestant League, a gathering of nativist clergy who seek to form a political alliance against “these paupers of Europe in the hands of the Democratic Party, [who] have ruled the elections in all our large cities”; Lippard, *Nazarene*, 127. Even though Lippard did not subscribe to the nativist cause, however, the fact that he wrote nativists in to all of his city novels indicates the movement’s prominence, and would have sent the message to readers that there must be some powerful immigrant force at work in the urban environment if nativists were such a constant presence.

⁷³ Eliza Ann Dupuy, *The Mysterious Marriage. A True Romance of New York Life* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson & Brothers, 1858), 98, 29.

⁷⁴ The fear of the urban effect of state government, and especially the fear of block voting by immigrants, prompted the movement in the nineteenth century of many state capitals to smaller towns from larger cities—from Philadelphia to Harrisburg, for instance.

especially incensed by Irishmen who they saw assuming positions of authority that they felt should be reserved for native-born Americans, particularly in the arenas of law enforcement and culture. James Gordon Bennett, the Scottish-born publisher of the New York *Herald*, the favored paper of many of the city's immigrants, was a constant target of ridicule, both for his accent and his alleged practice of slandering native Americans and not hiring them as writers.⁷⁵

In *The Brazen Star*, Thompson offered a savage portrait of an Irish policeman in New York, Dennis Finnigan, that is a perfect companion piece to Thomas Nast's cartoons of simian Irishmen. Thompson describes Finnigan as barely able to make an "X" for his signature, yet he reflects the embattled nativist sense that native-born Americans were losing control of their cities. Finnigan "was valorous in arresting people—especially Americans—who had committed no offence whatever. ... He was sanguine in his anticipations of the happy time when an Irish President should rule over the United States. ... He never arrested a brother Irishman, if he could possibly avoid it."⁷⁶ Irish gluttony was a particular bugbear of Thompson's (which is strange, given his own substantial girth). "Half starved in his own country, where he was compelled to subsist mainly upon buttermilk and potatoes," Thompson writes of Finnigan, "... a surfeit of American beef had inflated this wretched Greek with importance and self-conceit until he had swelled up like the fabled frog.... His eyes looked like two decayed oysters, and his mouth seemed to have been constructed with especial reference to the consumption of

⁷⁵ See Ned Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New Orleans* (New York: Akarman and Ormsby, 1851), 18, for an attack on both foreign journalists and policemen.

⁷⁶ George Thompson, *The Brazen Star: or, the Adventures of a New-York M.P.* (New York: George W. Hill, 1853), 22–3.

codfish on Fridays. His figure might be likened unto that of an ourang-outang, after that animal has become somewhat corpulent in consequence of high feeding.”⁷⁷ His gruesome murder by a gang of counterfeiters—they hang him so that he slowly strangles, and the scene includes every last detail, down to “his blood-red face, protruding eye-balls, and blackened tongue projecting from his mouth”—represents Thompson’s fantasy of nativist revenge against the immigrant hordes that, so the logic went, were keeping native Americans down.

While Germans, and their various Protestant affiliations, were less often targets of nativist prejudice in city-mysteries fiction, other ethnic and religious groups were not as lucky. The religious diversity of America in the wake of the Second Great Awakening was especially noticeable in urban areas. As one correspondent to the *Lowell Offering* wrote, her boarding house in Lowell of thirteen workers featured the following assortment: “we have one Calvinist Baptist, two Universalists, one Unitarian, one Congregationalist, one Catholic, one Episcopalian, two Methodists, three Christian Baptists, and one Mormonite....”⁷⁸ Charles Wilkins Webber ridiculed as a “caravanserie of all the most rabid wild animals on the Continent” a Grahamite house that featured “Reformers and New-light People, Come-outers, Vegetarians, Abolitionists, Amalgamationists, &c&c,” and George Thompson mocked a group of religious utopians called “Edenites” as simply a group of horny nudists.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Thompson, *The Brazen Star*, 22–3.

⁷⁸ “Our Household,” *Lowell Offering* 2nd ser., 1:1 (1841): 365. The correspondent claimed that, as a result of her house’s Mormon resident, the house possessed Lowell’s only copy of the “MORMON BIBLE” (365).

⁷⁹ Charles Wilkins Webber, *Yieger’s Cabinet*, 29; George Thompson, *Jack Harold, or, The Criminal’s Career: A Story with a Moral*, by Greenhorn (Boston: Wm. Berry & Co., 1850), 162. Both authors were

Even more than Roman Catholics and Mormons, however, Jews, however, were singled out as a target of religio-ethnic prejudice in city-mysteries, even in a period when very few Jews lived in the U.S. Webber referred to a Jewish doctor's "whole bowed bearing and cat-like gait ... an inexplicably strange and foreign look, which, alike in all countries, characterizes that fated race which is yet an outcast among the nations."⁸⁰ Popular urban narratives featured all the standard libels against Jews: they refuse to assimilate, they have no loyalty to any nation, they "trade upon the productions of others (they never create or produce anything), and cheat the Christians with their own wares," and they care only for money.⁸¹ In *The City Merchant, or, The Mysterious Failure*, John Beauchamp Jones describes a street urchin, Billy, who falls in love with Rachel Ulmar, the daughter of a Jewish smuggler. Mr. Ulmar tells Billy that, "If you would go to te synagogue vith Rachel, and learn our vays, and do as ve do, I would make you my son," warning him to "Pe discreed." Billy, never having received any religious training, has no objection, but his efforts at conversion are unsuccessful. He does marry Rachel in the end, however, once he discovers that his own father is really Jewish. While this may seem like a happy ending, Billy's discovery is accompanied by his learning that he is also part black; for a writer as deeply racist as Jones, marrying a black man to a Jewish

remarkably specific about where these various religious sects could be found: Webber gave the address of the Graham house as 63 Barclay Street, and Thompson's nudists cavorted at 36 Howard Street. As a measure of the flexibility of the city-mysteries genre, other novels dedicated themselves to mocking Quakers, Methodists, and Episcopalians.

⁸⁰ Webber, *Yieger's Cabinet*, 89.

⁸¹ Luke Shortfield [John Beauchamp Jones], *The Western Merchant* (Philadelphia: Grigg, Elliott, & Co., 1849), 133.

woman was not a plot resolution but rather a crude joke.⁸² It is to this confluence of ethnicity and race in the antebellum city, and the challenges that representing it posed, that we will turn in the next chapter.

⁸² John Beauchamp Jones, *The City Merchant, or, The Mysterious Failure* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1851), 219.

Chapter Twelve

Representing Race and Ethnicity

*The blood of the old aborigines, the European,
the Asiatic, and the African, flows in the veins of
our citizens.*

—Joseph Scoville¹

Regardless of an individual author's feelings about a particular ethnic or racial or religious group, all authors of city-mysteries portrayed cities as sites of extreme heterogeneity—in fact, this diversity is shown to be a crucial part of what qualifies places as cities, and of what made them exciting.² In addition to *telling* readers that cities were diverse places filled with strange people from all over the world, authors of popular texts strove to *show* them as well. Writers used dialect and vernacular, often inventing the rules as they went along, in an attempt to capture in print what the city actually sounded like, both in its day-to-day noise and in the variety of spoken language that could be heard.³

This sound of the city was something that merely reading books about cities could not prepare one for, but authors of popular urban novels did their best. Jack Murrell, an old sailor in *The Knights of the Seal, or the Mysteries of Three Cities*, says of New

¹ Joseph Scoville, *Clarence Bolton; or, Life in New York* (New York: Garrett & Co., 1853), 4.

² In “Ralph Rural’s” *The Mountain Village; or, Mysteries of the Coal Region*, a small Pennsylvania mining village is shown to be “mysterious,” and therefore urban, because of its high level of diversity. The town contains English, Welsh, Scotch, Irish, German, and Jewish immigrants, along with black minstrels and genuine Bowery B’hoys. See Ralph Rural, *The Mountain Village; or, Mysteries of the Coal Region; A Romance Founded on Fact, Illustrating Life, Mystery and Crime, in the Coal Region* (Pottsville, PA: G. L. Vliet, Printer, 1849), 33.

³ For an attempt at aural history, see Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

Orleans: “There was the French Market . . . right ahead, with all the lingoers under heaven rattling away at once. I got upon my pins, and leaned against the wall, listening to the noise, and looking at the blacks, and whites, and Frenchmen, and Portuguese, and all the other natives, there, till I grew dizzy with the sight.”⁴ Yet it is clear that it is just as much the *sound* of the market—the “lingoes . . . rattling away at once”—as it is the sight of the market that makes him swoon.

One of the aspects of city life that people commented on most frequently was what it sounded like, not simply the tremendous noise generated by iron-bound hooves and wheels on cobbled streets, but the diversity of languages and accents. Charles Goodrich wrote that in the streets of late-1830s New York “you will hear English, French, Dutch, and German, and all the various brogues spoken by the numerous inhabitants when imperfectly acquainted with the English tongue,” and Joel Ross wrote that in Five Points he met with an array of Europeans, “and others who could neither understand me, nor could I understand them any more than if the parties had said ching, ching—chong, chong. . . .”⁵

Although by the 1840s standard rules had arisen for orthographically reflecting Irish and black dialect, the remaining “various brogues” of idiosyncratically pronounced English were often not even attempted.⁶ For instance, in William Taylor’s *Seven Years*’

⁴ A. J. H. Duganne, *The Knights of the Seal, or the Mysteries of Three Cities, A Romance of Men’s Hearts and Habits* (Philadelphia: G. B. Zieber and Co., 1848), 85.

⁵ Charles A. Goodrich, *The Family Tourist: or A Visit to the Principal Cities of the Western Continent* (Hartford: Philemon Canfield, 1839), 182; Dr. Joel Ross, *What I Saw in New York; or a Bird’s Eye View of City Life* (Auburn, NY: Derby & Miller, 1852), 83.

⁶ As John Kuo Wei Tchen notes, this was the same period that, with the rise of visual culture, saw “racialized stereotypes [take] on a life of their own as part of the standard vocabulary of a visual culture.” Both trends, then, can be seen as print culture’s response to foreign immigration. John Kuo Wei Tchen,

Street Preaching in San Francisco, he features many men speaking in standard Irish dialect, but a Swedish sailor's words are written in perfect English, as if he had no accent at all.⁷ George Lippard was one of the first novelists of the era to actually convey the diversity of the city through the different dialects heard there (a process that, admittedly, presumes a normative voice on the part of the reader). *The Quaker City* (1844) features a wide range of urban argots, denoting for the reader the strangeness of urban life. Gabriel Von Gelt, the Jewish banker/forgery, speaks a bizarrely accented English: "I've comsh bekos I wanted to comsh—.... Meanviles te poleesh ranschack Monks-halls, andt fint me, hit away among tiefs and roppers."⁸ Along with large amounts of black and Irish dialect, Lippard featured the memorable argot of Devil-Bug, the monstrous keeper of Monk-Hall. Devil-Bug uses his own faux-domestic vocabulary, with numerous neologisms, to describe the activities at Monk-Hall, speaking of his quiet life in "the comfortable retiriacy o' domestic fellicity" where he often sends bodies hurtling down through trap-doors to wind up in mangled heaps.⁹ Devil-Bug's ethnic background is shadowy, but his favorite cry, uttered whenever he commits an act of special depravity—"Vonders how that'll vork!"—seems to be equal parts German dialect and Bowery slang.¹⁰

New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776–1882 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 129.

⁷ See William Taylor, *Seven Years' Street Preaching in San Francisco, California* (New York: Carlton Porter, 1856).

⁸ George Lippard, *The Quaker City, or, The Monks of Monk-Hall* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 175-6.

⁹ Lippard, *Quaker City*, 221.

¹⁰ As David Reynolds has noted, the deployment of dialect in these novels constitutes "a carefully managed vernacular voice that enforces linguistically the subversiveness of the characters and events described." David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 455.

Those who followed Lippard's lead in the city-mysteries genre imitated his use of dialect as well, featuring French, Italian, Spanish, and Russian-accented English. Some authors were more competent at dialect than others; Ned Buntline specialized in Irish and German dialect, Osgood Bradbury was seemingly proficient at mimicking all ethnic vernaculars, while George Thompson rarely employed the practice.¹¹ Samuel Young, in *The Smoky City*, his first novel, gamely attempted to reflect German, Irish, and black dialect, even wandering into the rarely-ventured terrain of a Scottish brogue: "'Y need na glower in that frightsome way, wi yer mou' as wide as a bogle's stride, and yer e'es, for a' the world like twa holes in a cheese....'"¹² Young was in a bit over his head, however, as his stock Irishman, Barney, stopped speaking with an Irish accent whenever he was in disguise, even when talking to himself, and, in a dialogue between Nick, a slave, and the Irishman, the dialects become almost hopelessly confused.¹³

At times, the vernacular in the pages of city-mysteries was virtually incomprehensible, which was perhaps an accurate reflection of the sound of the city. In *The Mountain Village*, Solomon Wiseacre, in response to a man who demands his roulette winnings, cryptically replies, "'I got, bet Got not som monish.'"¹⁴ While this may simply have been an instance of authorial incompetence, other writers displayed a keen sensitivity to sound as an index of identity, and attempted to convey it. The author

¹¹ In the manuscript of a play by Buntline, entitled "The Man in the White Coat; or, The Widder Hunt," held in the Theatre Collection at Harvard University, lines for German and Irish characters are actually written in dialect, rather than leaving the accent up to the actors.

¹² Samuel Young, *The Smoky City: A Tale of Crime* (Pittsburgh: Printed by A. A. Anderson, 1845), 42.

¹³ Young, *The Smoky City*, 90-91.

¹⁴ Ralph Rural, *The Mountain Village; or Mysteries of the Coal Region. A Romance Founded on Fact, Illustrating Life, Mystery and Crime, in the Coal Region* (Pottsville, PA: G. L. Vliet, Printer, 1849), 43. This may translate to, "I have it, but I do not have that much."

of *Dark Shades of City Life* quoted Aaron, an old Jewish fence, saying, “‘I hopes sho,’ answered the Jew, for such his dialect proved him to be,” thus instructing his readers in how to identify Jews in the diverse city.¹⁵

Justin Jones, in *Big Dick, the King of the Negroes*, demonstrated his awareness that readers of city-mysteries fiction expected characters in the books to talk the way they sounded in the streets. Writing of his hero, Jones wrote, “we will say to those of our readers, who have made objections because we have not caused him to speak in the dialect peculiar to most of the descendants of Ham, that by so doing we should have fallen into a great error, as many who knew him well can to this day testify.”¹⁶ Jones does not write Big Dick’s voice in black dialect because, as he notes, not all black people “sound black” (also, Dick is actually a “Chilian”). Likewise, the black servant Nero in George Thompson’s *City Crimes*, being “educated and intelligent,” speaks in uninflected English.¹⁷ Regardless, it is clear that authors of these narratives were self-conscious about the polyvocal nature of their novels, and that they were trying to achieve a level of orthographic verisimilitude, either out of nativist satire or out of a genuine desire to write how people sounded.

¹⁵ *Dark Shades of City Life. A Sequel to “River Pirates”* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson & Bros., 185?), 54.

¹⁶ Harry Hazel [Justin Jones], *Big Dick, the King of the Negroes; or, Virtue and Vice Contrasted. A Romance of High and Low Life in Boston* (Boston: Star Spangled Banner Office, 1846), 100.

¹⁷ George Thompson, *City Crimes; or, Life in New York and Boston. A Volume for Everybody: Being a Mirror of Fashion, a Picture of Poverty, and a Startling Revelation of the Secret Crimes of Great Cities* (1849), in *Venus in Boston*, eds. David S. Reynolds and Kimberly R. Gladman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 150.

City-Speak

In addition to reflecting ethnic and racial vernaculars, popular urban narratives attempted to convey other unusual dialects unique to particular groups that one was likely to encounter in the city. A Quaker in “*First Families, A Novel of Philadelphia Good Society*” speaks in “thees” and “thous” throughout the novel, yet, when excited, “the intensesness of his feeling actually made him forget the conventional jargon of his life and sect, and for once resort to grammatical language.”¹⁸ Osgood Bradbury, in *The Modern Othello*, even attempted to reflect a Vermont accent, with the explanatory caveat, “The above is a phonetic note of the instructions given to and taken down in short hand by the attorney’s clerk.”¹⁹ In Joseph Holt Ingraham’s *Jemmy Daily*, Dr. Wellington Smoot, a manufacturer of patent medicines, is also from Vermont, but his dialect—“It is hall right—button my straps!—perwectly corwect, doctor” —may mark him more as a drunkard than a Green Mountaineer.

Of all the urban populations whose vernacular was reflected in city-mysteries novels, however, the most notable are the dandy and the b’hoi, each with their own singularly urban mode of speech. Mr. Lines, a dandy in *The Orphan Seamstress*, calls attention to his affected accent, saying, “When I am exthited, I always lispt. Ma thays that she had notithed that from my boyhood.”²⁰ Justin Jones was even more extravagant in depicting dandified dialect. A fop in *Big Dick*, letting a girl down easy, proclaims,

¹⁸ “*First Families, A Novel of Philadelphia Good Society*, by a Descendant of the “Penns” (Philadelphia: Whilt & Yost, 1855), 147.

¹⁹ Osgood Bradbury, *The Modern Othello; or, The Guilty Wife* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 1855), 74.

²⁰ *The Orphan Seamstress: A Narrative of Innocence, Guilt, Mystery and Crime* (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1850), 39.

“You not morwal nor wirtuous! ... the sweetest, the wichest, the most chawming lady in the metwopolis. ... the stwuggle’s over—I cannot be cwewel; ... you shall have pwoof of my generwosity.”²¹ The lisping speech of the dandy corresponded with his mincing steps and exquisite clothes to make him instantly identifiable, even to someone who had never visited a large city but had only read books about them.

Even more identifiable, and more quintessentially “urban,” was the b’hoi, a character whose dialect was first popularized and codified in a popular play entitled “A Glance at New York” by the actor who played Mose, Frank Chanfrau.²² Ned Buntline was one of the progenitors of the b’hoi dialect, and he deployed it to full effect in all of his city novels. In *The B’hoys of New York*, along with heaps of b’hoi dialect—“Ya’as, he can lam him out of his boots, from the word go!”—Buntline provided hints to readers that would have helped them place the dialect and its markings in the physical city, saying that the distinctive speech, along with the “wide shirt-shirt collar, thrown back so as to exhibit the red flannel beneath it, savored of Christie-street.”²³ In general, the b’hoi dialect is characterized by elongations of words, the switching of w’s to v’s, and the use of particular slang terms. George Thompson, in *City Crimes*, went Buntline one better, attempting to reflect the speech of Stuttering Tom, a Boston b’hoi with a speech impediment: “You see, I ha-ha-happened to be l-loafing down Wa-Wa-Washington street, this evening, quite pro-miscus like, ven I seed two vim-vimmen, as vos gallus ha-

²¹ Hazel, *Big Dick*, 71.

²² Mose is allegedly based on a real-life figure, Moses Humphrey, a New York printer and volunteer fireman famous for his size, appetite, and physical prowess. He was thrashed in a fight by Henry Chanfrau, the older brother of the actor who became famous (and wealthy) playing Mose.

²³ Ned Buntline, *The B’hoys of New York. A Sequel to The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1850), 39.

handsome, and dr-dressed to kill, a valking along, vich puts me in m-m-mind of the F-F-Franklin vimmen, as you hired me to f-f-find out.”²⁴ Even though Stuttering Tom lived in Boston, he still would have been characterized as a Bowery B’hoy. City-mysteries novels show the presence of b’hoy dialect and dress to be one of the measures of a place’s urban status—the presence of b’hoys, along with crime and mystery, went a good distance toward qualifying someplace as a “city.” Even the relatively small settlement of Troy, New York, when described in the right words—“Val, I swow, tis a darned good place, good scenery up there, ‘de majestic ‘udson, an’ dis great city””—took on a veneer of urbanity.²⁵

The many urban ethnic dialects reflected in these novels, along with the particularly urban accents of the dandy and the b’hoy, create the impression that antebellum cities almost had their own language. At a subterranean bacchanal in *The Secrets of the Twin Cities*, the hero is unable to understand what the gathered ruffians are saying, as “much of their language was couched in the slang dialect, familiar only to the villains of the metropolis.”²⁶ The concept of an argot particular to thieves has a long history, but it takes on special relevance in these novels, where the defining characteristic of city life is “mystery,” linked to crime; thus, criminals are in many ways the ultimate urban residents, and their language is the language of the city.

In an appendix to Part Three of *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, Ned Buntline responded to a “complaint” about the amount of slang used by the thieves in the

²⁴ Thompson, *City Crimes*, 296.

²⁵ Frank Hazelton, *The Mysteries of Troy: Founded Upon Incidents Which Have Taken Place in the City* (Troy, NY: Troy Publishing Co., 1847), 9.

²⁶ Charles Averill, *The Secrets of the Twin Cities; or, The Great Metropolis Unmasked. A Startling Story of City Scenes in Boston and New York* (Boston: George Williams, 1849), 108.

novels. Buntline replied, “We will put such language into the mouths of our characters as their originals really use—a thief speaks in the thief tongue, and he scarcely knows any other. We pride ourself not so much on making this a pretty or an interesting *novel*, as we do in giving *true* pictures of our characters.”²⁷ Likewise, responding to an objection to the “large amount of slang conversation . . . spread over the following pages” of *Life in Rochester*, John Chumasero explained that the reason for its presence is “that the expressions were all taken as they fell from the lips of those who are called *gentlemen*, and pass current as such.”²⁸ By accurately reflecting the sounds of urban speech, then, these books transcend the status of fiction, or mere “novel,” and make a broader claim about the truthfulness of their depiction of urban life.²⁹

Yet by showing that the slang of the thieves has spread to also be the argot of people passing current as “gentlemen,” these novels underscore the notion that city life had a language of its own. But the accurate orthographical depiction of actual speech, whether of blacks or Irishmen or b’hoys or dandies or drunks, also served to undermine the stability of language in the novels. The collision of different types of speech, of different voices, leads to what Mikhail Bakhtin has called dialogism, a phenomenon that he views as actually creating new languages.³⁰ Horace Bushnell, in his 1849 “Dissertation

²⁷ Buntline, Appendix to Part 3 of *Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, 123.

²⁸ John Chumasero, *Life in Rochester; or, Sketches from Life. Being Scenes of Misery, Vice, Shame, and Oppression in the City of the Genesee* (Rochester: D. M. Dewey, 1848), 4.

²⁹ The one notable way in which city-mysteries novels did not attempt to accurately reflect actual speech was in the general absence of cursing. Virtually all writers in the genre shied away from writing foul language in their novels, most often resorting to the antebellum convention of dashes, thus: “d—n you to h—l!” The only texts that reproduced expletives or explicit sexual slang were explicitly pornographic books (such as *The Life and Adventures of Cicily Martin*) and newspapers (like *Venus’ Miscellany*).

³⁰ Bakhtin writes that the dialogic quality of language is revealed in the utterance, a “contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language, . . . of unification and disunification.” This collision takes place particularly through the heteroglossia of urban life, where

on Language,” wrote that, since words are “inexact representations of thought, it follows that language will be ever trying to mend its own deficiencies, by multiplying its forms of representation.”³¹ In multiplying the forms of representation of urban speech by attempting to reflect its sounds accurately, the linguistic proliferation practiced by authors of city-mysteries novels can thus be seen as a generative and restorative process, an attempt to get closer to meaning while simultaneously acknowledging language’s contingent nature.

Writing Race in City-Mysteries Fiction

While the linguistic diversity of antebellum urban life that authors strove to capture wandered all over the map, the racial diversity of antebellum cities was much more circumscribed. While certain unique cities, such as San Francisco, were home to substantial Hispanic, Asian, Native American, Chinese, and Pacific Islander populations, in general antebellum cities, and the novels that described them, were divided primarily between black and white. The vast majority of the Northern black population lived in cities, and as a result black characters appear with great frequency in city-mysteries fiction. While often simply racist caricatures inserted to provide dialect humor, such as Gumbo, the hypochondriac servant in Charles Averill’s *The Cholera-Fiend*, these

languages collide, meaning is destabilized, and new languages are produced. As Bakhtin writes, “A deeply involved participation in alien cultures and languages (one is impossible without the other) inevitably leads to an awareness of the disassociation between language and intentions, language and thought, language and expression. . . . A language is revealed in all its distinctiveness only when it is brought into relationship with other languages, entering with them into one single heteroglot unity of societal becoming.” The city, and particularly the city novel, is the site of the generation of this “single heteroglot unity.” M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 272, 369, 411.

³¹ Quoted in Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 445.

depictions would have served to shape readers' expectations about what city life was like.³² In addition, they contributed to shaping popular attitudes about race, in much the same way as did their competitors for the mass audience's entertainment dollar, minstrel shows.

The most significant aspect of the representation of African-Americans in sensational urban narratives is simply their presence. Instead of being relegated to the roles of domestic help, as they were in much of the genteel fiction of the day, popular texts about city life show blacks to be fully integrated into city life, vital members of the urban scene with whom one interacted, if not precisely on a footing of equality, then certainly not as a master related to a servant. A genre of children's books popular in the antebellum period was the collection of urban types, much like a primer. With titles like *City Characters* or *City Cries*, these books delineated the different sorts of tradesmen and street figures one was likely to encounter in a city. *City Cries*, an 1850 book about the various street merchants of Philadelphia and their distinctive shouts, contains illustrations of twenty-four urban types or occupations. Eight of them are African-American. The white-wash man, the ice-cream man, the sea-bass vendor (named Pompey), the wood-splitter (named Sambo)—all of them, children learned, would have been encountered in the streets every day, in one's own neighborhood. While the names smack of racist

³² The dynamic in this novel between Gumbo and Frank Clinton, his employer, and Frank's friend Mark, is an early version of the dynamic between Huck and Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*. Mark and Frank play practical jokes on Gumbo, particularly playing on his fears of illness by pointing out stories in the newspaper about a Boston man with a forty-foot-long tapeworm and giving him fake medicines, yet there is also an undercurrent of affection between the men.

stereotypes, the commercial interactions described imply a level of familiarity and frequency of interaction across racial lines.³³

While some city-mysteries described visits of the urban-tourism variety made famous by Charles Dickens to black or racially mixed neighborhoods such as Five Points in New York or the “Black Sea” in Boston’s North End, many more followed the lead of the children’s books mentioned above and simply depicted black citizens going about their business in the heterogeneous city.³⁴ The greenhorn protagonist of Thomas Low Nichols’ *Ellen Ramsay*, just arrived in New York, is astonished by “the number of negroes, and especially of well dressed mulatto girls....”³⁵ In *Big Dick, the King of the Negroes*, perhaps the only city-mystery with a black hero, the main character, a Navy veteran, ran a boxing school in Boston before becoming a policeman. Blacks in other novels are barbers, servants, carpenters, waiters, prison guards, resurrectionists, and tailors—in short, if not free to become bankers or lawyers, they make up a prominent cross-section of the urban populace, particularly as represented in novels that are fascinated with the extremes of high and low life. While the novels show that cities tended to be segregated residentially (except for the poorest neighborhoods), the streets were fully integrated, both the fashionable promenades and the filthy alleys of the slums.

³³ *City Cries; or, A Peep at Scenes in Town*, By an Observer (Philadelphia: G. S. Appleton, 1850). In the 1851 *City Characters*, out of twenty-three images, five are of African-Americans.

³⁴ Even though readers had been conditioned to expect it, however, the level of diversity could still come as a surprise. David Clapp, a printer from Boston, wrote in his journal in the mid-1830s of a trip he took to New York. “One circumstance only struck me very forcibly in returning to our hotel,” Clapp wrote, “and that was, that of the people we met in Broadway more than half of them seemed to be Blacks.” Clapp went on to add that this was the biggest difference between a public promenade in New York and one in Boston, where everybody was one color. *Travel Journals of David Clapp*, Boston printer, 1831-43, vol. 3, 8-9. In the Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Archives, Winterthur Museum.

³⁵ Thomas Low Nichols, *Ellen Ramsay; or The Adventures of a Greenhorn in Town and Country* (New York: n.p., 1843), 26.

Authors of city-mysteries novels claimed that race mixing of this sort was unique to cities, and pointed out that it took forms that would have been impossible in rural areas or in the South, with interactions being carried out on something approaching what they considered to be equality. Perhaps running contrary to the historical reality, urbanites to be on more intimate terms with their black domestic help in these popular urban narratives than are Southerners in other novels of the period, and the help are often shown as having lives of their own apart from their domestic service.³⁶ In other novels, blacks participated in criminal gangs on an equal footing with white members, as in the case of Nick Brinse, a runaway slave in Samuel Young's Pittsburgh novel *The Smoky City*. In virtually all urban texts, fictional and non-fictional alike, racial residential integration was shown to be common at the bottom of the economic scale. A description of the Five Points in *Will He Find Her?* is typical, describing apartment buildings with black-and-tan dance halls on the ground floor, "while the upper portions were the abiding places of at least eight thousand wretched beings, male and female, of every shade and complexion between the pure Caucasian and the full blooded, flat nosed, kidney footed African negro."³⁷ While the general message was that the very poor were sufficiently degraded to not care if they lived next to black people, the fact remains that these neighborhoods, at least in New York, were not totally segregated along racial lines.

³⁶ Black cooks in particular could become prominent figures of urban society. Philip Hone, the prominent New York Whig businessman and future mayor, noted in his diary in 1829 the death of "Simon, the celebrated cook. He was a respectable colored man, who has for many years been the fashionable cook in New York, and his loss will be felt on all occasions of large dinner and evening parties...." *The Diary of Philip Hone, 1828-1851*, 2 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1927), 1:11.

³⁷ Winter Summerton, *Will He Find Her? A Romance of New York and New Orleans* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1860), 147. This novel is likely by a Southerner, as the way that race is talked about—the Louisiana slaves are happy, loyal, and loving—is very different from the rhetoric used by Northern writers.

The site of race mixing that was of most interest to antebellum chroniclers of the urban scene, novelist and reformer alike, was the “black-and-tan,” the mixed-race saloon or dance hall. In his *American Notes*, Charles Dickens wrote of an 1842 visit to a saloon in New York run by Pete Williams, a black entrepreneur. This description was so famous that Williams’s saloon came to be referred to as “Dickens’ Place,” and it was a measure of the fascination that such places held for white observers. While there are some indications that white presence in black-run saloons and dance halls was a function of white urbanites’ privilege to simply go wherever they wanted, in general city-mysteries novels indicate that whites and blacks socialized together in these environments by choice.³⁸ Every day spent racing trotters on the Bloomingdale Road required a stop at Cato’s for refreshments, and no nocturnal excursion, whether for Ned Buntline’s b’hoys or John Denison Vose’s Broadway dandies, was complete without a visit to either Pete Williams’s or its rival, the Diving Bell, a black-run saloon that was in Water Street, sixty feet underground.

While some authors often huffily described the clientele of these mixed-race saloons as consisting of the “lowest scum of the population of the city,” the “vilest of the

³⁸ In a George Lippard novella about the Philadelphia “Killers,” for instance, Black Hercules forcibly removes a white man from his bar with the words, “Dis aint no place for you dam white trash.” This expulsion leads to a race riot, which seems to give the message that whites could go wherever they wanted in the city, and when they were told “No,” trouble ensued, while the range of places that black urbanites could visit freely was far more circumscribed. George Lippard, *Life and Adventures of Charles Anderson Chester, the Notorious Leader of the Philadelphia “Killers”* (Philadelphia: Printed for the publisher, 1849), 26. A similar dynamic is at work in Buntline’s *Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, where Butcher Bill visits a black-and-tan saloon and announces, “I’ve come here to whip a nigger.” When nobody will fight him, he kicks a large ex-convict, Zack Reed, in the shins, but Reed still avoids confrontation: “Jist you go’way from me white man! I isn’t adoin o’ nuthin to you, and I don’t want to.” Reed is forced to defend himself, however, and a general brawl ensues (83). This is one of many puzzling references in the genre to what appears to have been a widespread belief in antebellum America regarding the vulnerability of black men’s shins. According to many popular urban narratives, African-Americans could absorb an incredible amount of punishment, but could be quickly felled via an assault on their shins.

vile,” it nevertheless remains that they often knew where they were (and were able to give accurate directions), and that their protagonists often danced the night away, “indifferent as to the color of [their] partners.”³⁹ Other authors, however, were more sanguine about the race mixing that went on in these dance halls. In *Dashington*, George Thompson sends his hero, Jack Montgomery, to a mixed-race dance hall, where “the rapidly moving throng, composed of every shade of color, from pure white to ebony black, reminded one of an immense Kaleidoscope.”⁴⁰ In *Seven Nights in Gotham*, the nocturnal adventurers, including a dandy, a judge, and a policeman, go visit the Diving Bell, and the narrator says that he hears the best music of his life, particularly “Old Zip Coon” and “Cooney in de Hollor.” A scene set at Pete Williams’s saloon in *Silver and Pewter, or The Contrasts of New-York Life* reflects the fascination that such sites of mixed-race entertainment held for many antebellum urbanites:

The room was full, and such a contrast of colors as it exhibited could not have been exceeded by the variety of tongues at the tower of Babel. There was the negro female, whose dark beauty was of the blackness of ebony, combined with its shining polish; the mulatto, whose complexion was the shade of the olive, with a faint bloom of peach struggling through the dark tints of the cheek; and there was the pale lily of the white maiden, who in the depths of her degradation mingled with the black courtesan of Africa and her half-breed sister of a lighter hue. As for the men who thronged the apartment, it is only necessary to say that they were from the lowest denizens of the Five Points, who came there to carouse and gamble, up to the highest circles of New York society, who came there ... to have a lark, for the sake of variety....⁴¹

³⁹ *The Orphan Seamstress*, 65; M. M. Huet, *Silver and Pewter, or the Contrasts of New-York Life* (New York: H. Long and Brother, 1852), 37; *Orphan Seamstress*, 66.

⁴⁰ George Thompson, *Dashington; or the Mysteries of a Private Mad House*, by Greenhorn (New York: Frederic A. Brady, n.d.), 14. Thompson, never noted for his racial tolerance, uses the scene as an opportunity to make a series of jokes about interracial sex, particularly when Jack dances with a sweaty three-hundred-pound black woman.

⁴¹ Huet, *Silver and Pewter*, 37. Interestingly, in this scene the black women speak in stereotypical black dialect, while the mulatto women speak in Bowery slang, as though they were g’hals in a Ned Buntline novel. This uncertainty of how to place mixed-race people in the urban racial and class typology is common in the genre; they are often shown as being half in one group, and half in another, with no fixed racial identity of their own.

Crossing the Color Line

The minute delineation of the physical attributes of the women in the dance hall, and particularly their skin color, points to the greatest fear that such scenes of race-mixing inspired: interracial sex. Nothing was more horrifying to many antebellum city writers than the notion that some of those black women and white men (or, worse, white women and black men) who danced together at the Diving Bell or California Hall might have sex later in the evening, and might even live with each other all the time. In a fictionalized crime narrative from 1853, a white man traveling through South Carolina sees a black coachman start to rape a young white woman in his carriage, exclaiming, “‘You and your fader come from de Nort’, Missus.... Now, de folks in the Nort’ like de niggas Ise told. An,-yah, hah! Cato like you missus.’”⁴² This scene, suggesting that black men have learned—possibly through tales of the frequency of race-mixing in Northern cities—that Northern white women are potentially willing sex partners, embodies the nightmare scenario for antebellum writers of any political stripe.⁴³

Shelley Streeby argues that Ned Buntline criticized “spaces in which working-class blacks and whites mingled” in “order to condemn urbanization,” a notion that is impossible to square with Buntline’s career as a professional urbanite (Streeby, *American Sensations*, 149). It would make as much sense to argue that Buntline opposed Western expansion because he wrote novels that featured the danger of Indian–white race-mixing. For a much more perceptive and nuanced analysis of the overwhelming fascination with scenes of working-class race-mixing in antebellum city writing, see Wyn Kelley, *Melville’s City: Literary and Urban Form in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 104–7.

⁴² *Starling Disclosures! Mysteries Solved! Or the History of Esther Livingstone, and Dark Career of Henry Baldwin* (Philadelphia: E. Elmer Barclay, 1853), 40.

⁴³ The case was somewhat different for immigrant women. Solon Robinson, no racial progressive, offered no negative comments about a couple he met living together in Five Points, consisting of “a real good looking, young, healthy German woman, with her husband, a great burly negro, as black as Africa’s own son....”; Solon Robinson, *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York Illustrated* (New York: Dewitt and Davenport, 1854), 212. A Southern visitor to New York concurred that it was primarily Germans who

It is clear from brothel guides that interracial sex was certainly available to men who were looking for it in the antebellum city; the author of one such guide to Philadelphia shrugged and wrote, “There is no accounting for taste, however, and we have no objection to a white man hugging a negro wench to his bosom....”⁴⁴ City-mysteries frequently made reference to interracial sex, most often as a subject of either humor or horror. *The Green Family*, which is full of scurrilous references to actual Hartford residents, refers to both a “Landlord C----,” who impregnated a black woman and took her to Canada to give birth, and a “Miss Libby C----,” who (the authors claim) became pregnant by Sam Freeman, a black waiter.⁴⁵ George Thompson, meanwhile, depicted interracial sex as vile and bestial. In *City Crimes*, the narrator is given a tour of the subterranean city, including a cave “crammed with human beings. Men and women, boys and girls, young children, negroes, and hogs were laying indiscriminately upon the ground, in a compact mass. ... and horrible to relate! negroes were lying with young white girls, and several, unmindful of the presence of others, were perpetrating the most dreadful enormities.”⁴⁶ Situating interracial sex in an underground twilight world where citizens live off feces and dead animals washed underground by the city’s sewers

mixed with blacks in New York. See *Glimpses of New York City*, by a South Carolinian (who had nothing else to do) (Charleston: J. J. McCarter, 1852), 126.

⁴⁴ *A Guide to the Stranger, or Pocket Companion for the Fancy, Containing a List of the Gay Houses and Ladies of Pleasure in the City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1849), 17. While the author had no objection to a white man sleeping with a black woman, his feelings were stronger when the races were reversed. Writing of a brothel kept by Sal Boyer, alias Dutch Sal, the author described her house as “a perfect loafer hole ... it is worse than hell itself,” and offered as a measure of its depravity the fact that, “this woman, it is said, has had connection with the lowest negro, for the small remuneration of potatoes and flour to support her boarders!” (14).

⁴⁵ J. Henry Smith, *The Green Family; or, The Veil Removed* (Springfield, MA: Smith & Jones, 1849), 85. While it is impossible to know if these rumors have any basis in fact, or if they were used as attempts at blackmail, the presence of the charges and the nature of the rumored encounters indicates the extent to which the possibility of interracial sex was seen to permeate urban life.

⁴⁶ Thompson, *City Crimes*, 133.

highlights it as monstrous, but other city-mysteries were more tolerant. Two texts from the genre—*Wilfred Montessor: or, The Secret Order of the Seven*, and a crime narrative about the forger Monroe Edwards—even feature illustrations of white men with black women, in the latter case in an obviously post-coital reverie.⁴⁷

While it is presented as “natural” in some way for white men to sleep with black women, whether out of convenience or because of their exotic beauty, for native-born white women to choose to sleep with black men was the height of depravity. In Thompson’s *City Crimes*, this depravity is embodied in Julia Fairfield, the beautiful fiancée of Frank Sydney who is carrying on an affair with her black servant, Nero. The attention that Thompson lavishes on scenes of the two lovers together—“Yes, that black fellow covers her exquisite neck and shoulders with lustful kisses! His hands revel amid the glories of her divine and voluptuous bosom; and his lips wander from her rosy mouth, to the luxurious beauties of her finely developed bust.”—underscores both its repulsive and fascinating qualities. Nero is described as “intensely dark, yet his features were good and regular, and his figure tall and well formed,” and he is educated, not speaking in black dialect. Julia, on the other hand, is as much an extreme of female beauty as Nero is of masculine, and it is this fact—that a white woman who could have any man would pursue her black servant—that Thompson focuses on so intently.

Despite its “disgusting” nature, Thompson finds that her “singular” preference is easily explained: “pampered with luxury, and surrounded by all the appliances of a

⁴⁷ *Wilfred Montessor: or, The Secret Order of the Seven* (New York: Charles G. Graham & Co., 1844), 117; *The Life and Adventures of the Accomplished Forger and Swindler Col. Monroe Edwards* (New York: H. Long and Brother, 1848), 47.

voluptuous leisure, a morbid craving for unnatural indulgences had commingled with her passions—a raging desire, and mad appetite for a monstrous or unnatural intrigue—and hence her disgraceful liaison with the black.”⁴⁸ Female sexuality, if fully indulged by luxury and given free rein, and if highly enough developed, will, Thompson seems to argue, naturally result in a craving for such “disgraceful liaisons.”

Given the fact that race mixing in saloons and dance halls was seen as leading to interracial sex, and given the horror with which such couplings were viewed, it is not surprising to find that many authors of city mysteries respond to the scenes of urban race mixing they describe with virulent racism. John Beauchamp Jones, a staunch defender of slavery and a volunteer for the Confederate cause in the Civil War, wrote numerous novels about Philadelphia life in which he hammered on the theme that “impudent” Northern urban blacks who “presume to assert the ‘equality’ the vagabond lecturers seek to instill in his mind”—an equality that is clearly understood to imply making sexual advances on white women—should be exterminated by an alliance of the “Saxon and the Celt.”⁴⁹

When a race riot is sparked in Philadelphia by the abduction of two white sisters by a pair of mulatto barbers, a gang of Irishmen, volunteer firemen, and Southern medical

⁴⁸ Thompson, *City Crimes*, 125, 149. In *The Iron Tomb, or the Mock Count of New York*, a landlady, Mrs. Selgin, is described as loving “big black masculine cats,” and while she is hiding Bubo, a large black man, from the police in her cellar, she has a dream about “gigantic cats, beer bottles, faded night-caps, and amorous lovers crawling through a big hole in a rear window.” It is not an excessively Freudian reading to find that the passage seems to imply that she is fantasizing about anal intercourse with a black man. Charley Bowline, *The Iron Tomb, or the Mock Count of New York* (Boston: George H. Williams, Uncle Sam office, 1852), 64.

⁴⁹ John Beauchamp Jones, *The City Merchant, or, the Mysterious Failure* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1851), 195.

students bands together to find them and burn the city's entire black neighborhood, fulfilling Jones's claim that Philadelphia's black population is

hated by all the white laborers and menials in the city, and all of them will combine on some occasion to exterminate them. Yes, here, in the north, the time may come, perhaps must come, when the blood of enfranchised Africans will flow through the streets. At this moment, a single bold leader, upon some sudden provocation, could rally a host sufficiently strong to extirpate them.⁵⁰

Until such a day when the white working classes rise up and, in the word of an Irish rioter, "suppress the ---- negroes," Jones suggests that the best solution is that taken by the aptly-named merchant Edward Saxon, who buys a coach specifically so that his nieces will not have to walk on the same sidewalks as black men.⁵¹ The only way to resolve the problems of urban race mixing is to resort to a "forcible solution," Jones writes, of segregating African-Americans in separate neighborhoods, where they "may find an asylum and not be molested," so as not to provoke the justifiable prejudice of whites that "existed, still exists, and must ever exist."⁵²

Such explicit and adamant statements about the pernicious nature of race mixing in antebellum cities were most often the product of writers who, like Jones, were either from the South or espoused specifically pro-slavery views. Some writers, such as "Winter Summerton," the author of *Will He Find Her?*, were sufficiently political as to have a character (in this case a Frenchman, Mr. Bremont, who is visiting New York)

⁵⁰ Jones, *City Merchant*, 164. The riot, which follows a large abolitionist rally in Philadelphia, is based on a real anti-abolition riot, in which Pennsylvania Hall was burned by a mob during a rally in May, 1838. Jones is critical of the fire department for putting out the fire in Moyamensing, and of the military for helping to evacuate the black population (190). Elsewhere in his novel, Jones has a mixed-race woman who had been a slave in Virginia offer her own defense of blacks' subordinate position: "Free us, educate us, it is the same thing; we are still an inferior race. And we have no more right to curse the anglo-Saxon for making us slaves than our God for making us black" (162).

⁵¹ Jones, *City Merchant*, 191.

⁵² Jones, *City Merchant*, 195-6.

recite the Constitutional bases for slavery, even quoting the reserve clause.⁵³ In an authorial aside, the writer reveals that he was born and raised in New York but has since moved to the South, and has always found it “wonderful” how educated white men and women “could so far . . . disregard the ordinations of nature as to labor for the degradation of their race to an equality with the highly flavored Hottentot and their ebony skinned cousins.”⁵⁴ A narrative written about a visit to New York by a South Carolinian responds in a markedly different way to the race mixing in Pete Williams’s saloon. Instead of finding humor in the scene, or making racist remarks on the smell or sexual appetites of the black dancers, the author cannot contain himself. “The music commences, and out sally two or three cotillions of this piebald party, and away they whirl in a most disgusting and revolting manner. The negroes seem to attract the most attention. What a commentary upon the authorities of the city. This is certainly the most --- ----- . Bah! Let us get out, my senses refuse to behold longer such scenes.”⁵⁵ Elsewhere, grounding his critique of urban race mixing in his pro-slavery views, the author estimates that three-fifths of the black residents of New York “are fugitives or the children of fugitives,” and plays a prank on a large black man by grabbing him and calling him a “runaway scoundrel,” at which the man flees.⁵⁶

⁵³ Summerton, *Will He Find Her?*, 194.

⁵⁴ Summerton, *Will He Find Her?*, 266-7.

⁵⁵ *Glimpses of New-York City*, 96-7.

⁵⁶ *Glimpses of New-York City*, 125.

More than Black and White

Systematic statements of racism such as these, based in explicitly pro-slavery views, are less common in the genre. While the casual, everyday racism of Northern life is much more often reflected in city-mysteries fiction, particularly by writers like Ned Buntline and George Thompson (who was particularly outraged at the authority assumed by black prison guards in his *Ten Days in the Tombs*), some of the novels make surprisingly explicit arguments for racial tolerance. As has been mentioned previously, Justin Jones's *Big Dick, the King of the Negroes* is exceptional in the city-mysteries genre in featuring a black (albeit "Chilian") hero. Throughout the novel, Dick does things that would have been unthinkable for a Southern African-American: he strikes white men, he picks up a corrupt white policeman and carries him under his arm to court, and at the end of the novel he is an invited guest to the wedding of the novel's white love interests. As Jones notes, "Our Southern friends may marvel, perhaps, than a negro could be an honored guest; but let them remember that our hero was a Chilian by birth; that he had as good an education as the great mass of mankind; and that he was as hospitable, as magnanimous, as brave, and as 'chivalrous' as the most gallant son of the South could desire."⁵⁷ Elsewhere in the novel, in a scene in a black-and-tan dance hall, Jones writes of "Black Pete—the Prince of colored fiddlers and the prince of happy fellows," that his "fame would have eclipsed all the Vieuxtemps, the Ole Bulls and the Camillo Sivoris

⁵⁷ Jones, *Big Dick*, 99.

who ever drew horse-hair across rosined catgut, had his complexion been of a lighter hue. But, alas! Genius never meets its reward under a sable skin!”⁵⁸

Jones’s defense of the dignity and talent of his black characters—even if Dick is not truly an African-American—undermines prevalent antebellum theories of biological racism and puts a very different spin on anxieties about urban race mixing. If the black men readers met on the street were like Dick or Black Pete, instead of like George Thompson’s lusty Nero, the radical diversity of the urban environment might be rendered less frightening. In *Doesticks: What He Says*, a collection of playful sketches of urban life, the narrator describes a visit to the “Church street colored Theatre” to see several black productions of Shakespeare, noting that in “Othello,” the title character is played by a white man “who makes fierce love to Desdemona, who is the molasses-colored child of a respectable darkey whitewasher.” Instead of finding this racial inversion threatening or humiliating, the narrator takes it in stride as one of the enjoyable by-products of a racially mixed city, describing it as “an unlimited amount of fun for a little money” and seeing it as a fitting turnabout for the way that white productions represent black people.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Jones, *Big Dick*, 13.

⁵⁹ [Mortimer Thompson], *Doesticks: What He Says*, by Q. K. Philander Doesticks P. B. (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1859), 315. In the mid-1990s, scholars began focusing their attention on how racial encounters of the sort generated by the mixing of groups in antebellum cities generated not only ideas about blackness, but generated an incipient white identity as well. A brief but intense vogue for studies of whiteness took place, often taking as source material popular narratives such as city-mysteries and dime novel Westerns. While this fashion seems to have passed, the field of “whiteness studies” did offer a valuable corrective that “blanchitude,” in Sylvia Wynter’s inimitable phrase, was just as constructed and fictive as other racial identities (Sylvia Wynter, “Sambos and Minstrels,” *Social Text* 1 (Winter 1979): 150). There is no question that authors such as George Lippard, John Beauchamp Jones and Ned Buntline, among others, participated in the creation of a white identity in opposition to blackness, one that for some authors (not for the nativist Buntline) included the Irish under the white umbrella. Since city-mysteries novels have been invoked in this scholarship previously, however, it is not necessary to go into the subject in great detail here. For a brief introduction to the mid-90s vogue for whiteness studies, see *American Quarterly* 47: 3 (September 1995), which features an essay by George Lipsitz entitled “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the ‘White’ Problem in American Studies,” and an extensive

While most depictions in city-mysteries fiction of the diversity of America's cities focused on the mixing of Europeans of varying nationalities and African-Americans of varying hues, some novels in the genre—particularly those with action set in San Francisco—feature Hispanic and Chinese urbanites as well. These characters figured less frequently in the novels in general simply because there were very few of them in most antebellum cities about which city-mysteries were written (for example, I have never found a narrative of this type written about a city in Texas). Another reason for their exclusion may be that, in the cities where they did live in any substantial numbers, they were more likely to live in self-contained communities, communities that would have conducted all of their business in a language other than English, thus making them more difficult for writers to reproduce. Nevertheless, writers often commented on the presence of these non-white yet non-black urbanites, particularly focusing on Chinese city dwellers as an index of the incredible diversity of city life.

The author of *Glimpses of New-York City* (1852) wrote, “New-York city may be considered a congress of nations—the native Chinaman, the Choctaw, the whisky-

set of comments and responses; see in particular Shelley Fisher Fishkin's survey of the literature on whiteness, “Interrogating ‘Whiteness,’ Complicating ‘Blackness’: Remapping American Culture,” in the same issue. For additional texts, particularly those that incorporate the study of popular fiction's role in the creation of whiteness, see Streeby, *American Sensations*; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Lott, “White Like Me: Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness,” in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*; Saxton, *Rise and Fall of the White Republic*; David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991); Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1994); Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, vol. 1 (London: Verso, 1994); Matthew Frye Jacobsen, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Michelle Fine, Lois Weis, Linda C. Powell, and L. Mun Wong, eds., *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Mike Hill, ed., *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (New York: NYU Press, 1996); and Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, eds., *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (New York: Routledge, 1996). For an especially perceptive post-mortem to the trend, see Robyn Wiegman, “Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity,” *Boundary 2* 26:3 (Fall 1999): 115-50.

drinking Celt, the bully Dutchman, the Jew, the frisky Frenchman, and ‘niggers,’ like the children of Israel—all, all are here....”⁶⁰ The inclusion of the “Chinaman” in this catalog may be surprising, yet many writers included the Chinese in their catalogs of the crowds on Broadway. The arrival of the Chinese junk *Keying* in New York harbor in 1847 caused a sensation, one that Brewster Maverick, a New Yorker in his early teens, reflected in his pocket diary.⁶¹ His entry for May 24, 1847, reads in part: “Seen Booth in Hamlet. Took home Mrs. Beaumont’s cards. Seen a Chinaman.” On July 15, Maverick’s day included a visit to the Battery, where he “seen Chinese Junk through the spy glass.” Finally, two days later, came the culmination: “Shook hands with Chinese” (Maverick was an inveterate shaker of hands).⁶² But even before 1847, John Tchen writes, “Chinese New Yorkers were already part of a lower Manhattan international port culture – a mixing and shifting amalgam of individuals and groups from many places, staying, leaving, and always on the move.” Some Chinese chose to stay, however—a minister found seventy Chinese living in New York in 1854 in the course of his search for a dispersed Cantonese opera troupe that had ended up on Ward’s Island.⁶³

The number of Chinese in Eastern cities was so small that it hardly constituted a community. As a result, there was no “Chinatown” in this period, and, as Tchen notes,

⁶⁰ *Glimpses of New-York City*, by a South Carolinian (who had nothing else to do), (Charleston: J. J. McCarter, 1852), 137.

⁶¹ For a wonderful analysis of this event, see John Rogers Haddad, “*The American Marco Polo*”: *Excursions to a Virtual China in U.S. Popular Culture, 1784–1912* (New York: Columbia University Press, Gutenberg-e project, forthcoming).

⁶² Brewster Maverick, pocket diary, 1847. In collection of the New-York Historical Society.

⁶³ John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 71, 72.

Chinese immigrants mixed primarily with the Irish, often intermarrying.⁶⁴ George Thompson, in *Grace Willard*, writes of Baxter Street in lower Manhattan that it was a mixture of ramshackle wooden buildings, “low brothels,” Jewish used clothes peddlers, and “Chinese cigar merchants.”⁶⁵ The implication seems to be that, since cities were diverse places, of course one would expect to see Chinese people, but there weren’t enough of them to really be noticeable.

If Chinese immigrants simply mixed into the lumpen districts of New York, however, in San Francisco they constituted a more substantial—and less easily absorbed—presence. The early chroniclers of San Francisco’s history estimated that in 1850, out of a population of 50,000 people, there were about 3000 Chinese inhabitants.⁶⁶ All popular antebellum narratives about San Francisco stressed its extreme diversity, including Mexicans, Hawaiian Islanders, and Indians in their descriptions, yet Chinese figures in the city remained—pardon the term—inscrutable. Their linguistic and cultural difference rendered them so foreign as to be more curiosities than either potential neighbors or enemies, as was the case with black urbanites. They are shown participating in all the aspects of public life in San Francisco—gambling and dancing in Pacific Street saloons, crowding the streets, looting burning buildings—but they are too different to gain much more than a mention. The author of *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* offered the most detailed description of Chinese urbanites, describing thieves who rush into the streets to steal the goods that are being rescued from burning buildings

⁶⁴ Ibid, 72-3.

⁶⁵ George Thompson, *Grace Willard; or, The High and the Low*, by Greenhorn (New York: Frederic A. Brady, n.d.), 12.

⁶⁶ Frank Soulé; John H. Gihon; and James Nisbet, *The Annals of San Francisco* (New York: D. Appleton, 1855), 446.

during a fire. Two Chinese men try to obstruct the protagonist, who is trying to stop the robbery. The hero punches one, twirls the other around by his cue, leaving the “two disastered Fee-fo-fums sitting upright in the middle of the street, uttering the most doleful lamentations.”⁶⁷ The fact that the author makes no attempt to capture their “doleful lamentations,” and that they are described not even with an ethnic slur but rather with a name—“Fee-fo-fums”—derived from folklore shows the extent to which, even though the *presence* of Chinese immigrants indicated the diversity of a city, they remained on some level indescribable.⁶⁸

A New Urban Race

In grappling with the never before seen level of diversity, both ethnic and racial, that the antebellum urban borderland presented, authors of city-mysteries both enacted and shaped popular antebellum attitudes about racial and ethnic identity and about the consequences for white Americans of living in heterogeneous, polyglot urban centers. In the process of charting this diversity, some authors came to the conclusion that city dwellers were becoming their own “race,” distinct from other Americans. In *Doesticks: What He Says*, the narrator writes of joining a New York shooting company for recreation. “Its cognomen was ‘The Lager-Bier American Volunteers, and Native Empire City Shillelagh Guards,’” he writes, “being composed of Irish, Dutch, Spaniards, and Sandwich Islanders—the only Americans in the company being the colored target-

⁶⁷ *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco*, by a Californian (New York: Garrett & Co., 1853), 12.

⁶⁸ “Fee-fo-fum” is a variation on the familiar “Fee fie fo fum” from “Jack and the Beanstalk,” but the phrase has a long history in the folklore of the British Isles, and is almost always associated with giants, or other mythical creatures. The term has been in use at least since the time of Shakespeare, since *King Lear* contains the line: “Fie, foh, and fum! I smell the blood of a British man” (Act III, sc. 4).

bearers, and the undersigned.”⁶⁹ The narrator’s satire points towards what others perceived as an emerging reality: as people of different ethnicities and races mixed in urban centers, their differences would be blended away, and they would become “new men.” This prospect was what motivated both the positive views of urban diversity and the virulent attacks on race mixing by writers like John Beauchamp Jones.

In the everyday practice of urban life, through events that “privileged the organized display of a multiplicity of differences,” urbanites “created their own distinct language of public life,” a language that corresponded to a type of person as surely as did an Irish brogue or a plantation patois.⁷⁰ George Foster and Charles Loring Brace, writing of New York’s b’hoys and its street Arabs, respectively, both theorized that these new urban types represented a new “race,” characteristic of and adapted to the environment of the large city.⁷¹ As George Lippard wrote, “We are no Anglo-Saxon People. No! All Europe sent its exiles to our shores. From all the nations of Northern Europe, we were formed. Germany and Sweden and Ireland and Scotland and Wales and England, aye and glorious France, all sent their oppressed to us, and we grew into a new race.”⁷² What

⁶⁹ *Doesticks: What He Says*, 80-81.

⁷⁰ Mary Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 93.

⁷¹ Foster wrote, “one cannot be said to really know New York—to understand in what way its human nature is different from other human nature—without studying the character and habits of the B’hoys.” Foster, *New York in Slices: by an Experienced Carver* (New York: William H. Graham, 1849), 43; see Charles Loring Brace, *The Best Method of Disposing of our Pauper and Vagrant Children* (New York: Wynkoop, Hallenbeck, and Thomas, 1859); and *The Dangerous Classes of New York, & Twenty Years’ Work Among Them* (New York: Wynkoop and Hallenbeck, 1872).

⁷² George Lippard, *Quaker City Weekly*, March 17, 1849; from “Legends of Mexico.” Lippard’s racial taxonomy was not unique. In *The Adventures of Clarence Bolton*, Joseph Scoville was even more inclusive when he wrote of New York, “All races and nations are represented here. The blood of the old aborigines, the European, the Asiatic, and the African, flows in the veins of our citizens. The European and the African predominates. The latter is easily classed into black and yellow. The European is from the Dutch, English, French, German, Spanish, Irish, Welsh, Scotch, and every other kind....” Joseph Scoville, *The Adventures of Clarence Bolton; or, Life in New York* (New York: Garrett & Co., 1853), 4. The notion of

Lippard did not explicitly mention, but would have been obvious to readers familiar with his oeuvre, was that this race took form in the one place where all these groups were thrown into contact: America's cities.

The prospect that urban diversity could generate a new race of men was appealing to some authors, while it terrified others, but regardless of one's view, the confrontation of races and cultures in the urban borderland was seen to have the same effect. The mixture of races and ethnicities in borderlands, Gloria Anzaldua writes, "provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool," and this "racial, ideological, cultural, and biological cross-pollenization" produces a new consciousness.⁷³ Yet, over time, the urban diversity that produced this borderlands encounter came to be overwhelming, unmanageable. Authors of all ideological orientations concurred that the mixing of disparate sorts of people was one of the hallmarks of the urban. For George Foster, in *New York in Slices*, whatever villainies Broadway sheltered, "there is a large credit for thee, for thou has shown us the great bearded Turk, John Chinaman, the Choctaw in his blanket, prophets, long-haired reformers, and whatever else strange and

"hybrid vigor," or that "mingling among nations" has produced an "effect [that] is highly advantageous, if not indispensable to some specific races," was one that would have been familiar to many antebellum readers. Cephas Broadluck [Allen W. Gazlay], *Races of Mankind; with Travels in Grubland* (Cincinnati: Longley Brothers, 1856), 21.

⁷³ Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 99. W. A. Scott, in *Trade and Letters*, celebrated this new consciousness. In a wonderful example of the commercial sublime, he wrote that the urban diversity generated by trade brought "the poetry, the dreaming enthusiasm of the East . . . in living contact with the eternal activity and courage of the descendants of the followers of the Odin religion, converted to Christianity," which resulted in a "liberalizing of our views. Just in the proportion that we are well acquainted with other nations, will our prejudices and dogged notions be removed." W. A. Scott, *Trade and Letters: Their Journeyings Round the World* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1856), 122-23.

wonderful in character the world could furnish.”⁷⁴ In novels written about smaller settlements that aspired to the title of “city,” such as Pottsville, Pennsylvania, or Papermill Village and Manchester, New Hampshire, a catalog of the many ethnic types found in the town served as a demonstration of the fact that the place in fact deserved to be considered urban.

More than simply containing many different sorts of people, cities enforced mixing. Avoiding contact with people of different ethnicities and races was well nigh impossible, especially in a city as populous as New York that, even when it neared the one million mark in population, was still extraordinarily compact geographically. As one antebellum visitor to New Orleans wrote of the city’s streets on a Sunday, “no manners, no customs, no fixed habits: all is unsettled, the elements of society, as parti-colored as the rainbow but waiting the passage of years to blend them into one harmonious whole.”⁷⁵ Yet the creation of this “harmonious whole” was not a foregone conclusion. In arguing for the idea of American urbanites as a hybrid race, George Lippard pointedly claimed that this new race was the product of the nations of “Northern Europe.” As immigration by Europeans who did not fit this mold—Jews, Russians, Italians, Eastern Europeans—increased in the decades after the Civil War, along with increasing numbers of non-European immigrants, the diversity of the urban environment became harder to comprehend, and more difficult to embrace. This trend was already apparent in some antebellum writings.

⁷⁴ George Foster, *New York in Slices, by an Experienced Carver* (New York: William H. Graham, 1849), 10.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Ryan, *Civic Wars*, 54–55.

The heterogeneity of America's cities did not seem to show any signs of slowing down, resulting in a sense that, as Victor Hugo wrote of a Paris slum in *Notre-Dame*, "the boundaries of race and species seemed to be effaced ... as in a pandemonium...."⁷⁶ As Richard Lehan notes, "Diversity is a key to urban beginnings and continuities, and diversity is also the snake in the urban garden, challenging systems of order and encouraging disorder and chaos."⁷⁷ To the extent that city-mysteries novelists posited the existence of concealed conspiracies of power, vice, and crime behind the apparent formlessness and anonymity of urban life, they argued for the presence of some system of urban order, however corrupt (and Boss Tweed's Tammany Hall would soon appear as New York's beacon to all other cities in this regard). Chaotic diversity threatened not only the legitimate structures of authority—the church, the state, the market—but also the hidden networks of power that, according to these narratives, structured much of America's urban experience.

If the volatile and diverse urban crowd made city life exciting, it also made it unpredictable, not only for individual citizens, but for criminal masterminds and urban supermen. Amory Dwight Mayo argued in 1859 that "every influence that unites the several interests and classes of society is a preventive of crime. ... Every class in this republic thrust outside the common privilege of freedom, will finally become a criminal class."⁷⁸ Ironically, according to many city-mysteries, it was in fact criminal conspiracies

⁷⁶ Quoted in Richard Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 31.

⁷⁷ Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 8.

⁷⁸ Amory Dwight Mayo, *Symbols of the Capital; or, Civilization in New York* (New York: Thatcher & Hutchinson, 1859), 264.

that united the “several interests and classes of society,” bringing together rich and poor, high and low, white and black in the chambers of Monk-Hall and its progeny. By drawing attention to diversity as one of the constitutive elements of the urban experience, authors of popular urban texts that sought to tie the city together via comprehensive narrative devices sowed the seeds of the genre’s demise. As the diversity of the city became increasingly overwhelming, and as urban America’s “mosaic population” largely failed to assimilate itself into a “substantial, harmonious, and vigorous unity,” the conceit of a fictional narrative that claimed to tie all the disparate aspects of city life together, as city-mysteries did, became increasingly untenable.

Epilogue

“From Golden California to the Empire City, huge cities reared their heads, swarming with countless souls. An empire no less bewildering in the suddenness of its growth than in the god-like glory—or yet the awful gloom—of its Future.”

—George Lippard, *Adonai, or the Pilgrim of Eternity*

In the preface to a cheap 1881 paperback collection of urban vignettes published by the *Police Gazette*, entitled *The Mysteries of New York*, the author noted that:

There are, at least, three works in the romantic literature of the present century which bear a somewhat similar title to this one: ‘The Mysteries of Paris,’ by Eugene Sue; ‘The Mysteries of London,’ by G.W.M. Reynolds, and the ‘Mysteries of the Quaker City,’ by George Lippard. Each of these is a strong story, replete with romantic and sensational interest, bristling with stirring scenes and powerful word pictures. Yet to-day they are forgotten. Why is this?¹

Although the writer underestimated the number of similar works from the previous half-century by several hundred, the answer to the question he posed is far from obvious, since the phenomenon to which city-mysteries were a response—rapid urbanization—had not gone away. While the explosive rate of urban growth that characterized the antebellum era would not again be achieved, cities in the Midwest like Chicago and St. Louis mushroomed in the decades following the Civil War.² Cities on the East Coast, while their growth in percentage terms slowed, expanded in physical scope throughout the mid-nineteenth century, with Boston rapidly expanding to cover the

¹ *The Mysteries of New York*, a Sequel to *Glimpses of Gotham and New York by Day and Night*, New York: Richard K. Fox, Proprietor Police Gazette, 1881, p. 7.

² St. Louis increased in size from just over 160,000 in 1850 to 575,000 in 1900. Spurred by its importance as a hub for rail transportation, Chicago’s growth in the second half of the nineteenth century was meteoric, going from 109,000 in 1860 to just under 1.7 million in 1900.

newly filled in Back Bay, and New York reaching ever northward to surround the new Central Park.

City-mysteries novels appeared along with the first wave of substantial urbanization in the early 1840s, with roots in a wide range of emerging forms of print culture, including urban guidebooks, travel narratives, and reform tracts, combining elements from these sources into fictional narratives set in the dense urban settlement. The distinguishing marks of the genre are a focus on an urban setting and, more importantly, the use of the trope of “mysteries,” the idea that extensive networks of money and power lay just below the surface of city life, connecting the high and the low. Instead of offering disconnected episodic sketches, city-mysteries novels offer a narrative strand (however tenuous) that connects the various phases and levels of urban life. The success of the early examples of these fictional narratives of urban exposure spurred the production of several hundred imitations, helping make the genre a staple of antebellum popular fiction. Yet even though immigrants from both the hinterlands and overseas continued to pour into America’s cities in the post-bellum era, the genre of city-mysteries fiction as such essentially disappeared after 1860. Of the texts fitting the conventions of the genre that I have found, slightly over two hundred were published in the twenty-five years before 1860, while only around twenty appeared after this date.³

This is not to say that literature about the city and its ills disappeared, but rather that it took a different form. Many forms of popular fiction after the Civil War were set

³ In her survey of nineteenth-century urban fiction, Adrienne Siegel found that between 1840–1870, more than three times as many books were published about life in the city (340) as were published about conditions beyond the Appalachians. Adrienne Siegel, *The Image of the American City in Popular Literature, 1820–1870* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1981), 6.

in cities and associated with them, from Horatio Alger's tales of uplift among the street boys of New York to the flood of dime novels from publishers such as Beadle and Adams and George Munro. Particularly after 1880, dime novels focused less on the Western frontier and more intently on urban subjects, particularly crime, from pickpocketing to bank robbing. Instead of trappers or Texas Rangers, these later dime novels featured urban policemen or private detectives as their heroes, and often focused on specific events drawn from the news.⁴ Since these dime novels were issued in series, their focus was much more on the continuing central character—whether a newspaper reporter, police detective, or private eye—than on a particular city or set of urban conditions.

The post-bellum books that carried what readers would have recognized as characteristic city-mystery titles—James Buel's 1883 *Mysteries and Miseries of America's Great Cities*, James Dabney McCabe's 1872 *Lights and Shadows of New York Life*, and Frederic Crofoot's 1887 *Detroit Unveiled*, to name a few—are all collections of journalistic vignettes of urban scenes or types by newspapermen rather than fictional narratives. As such, they are much more in the vein of George Foster's antebellum works such as *New York in Slices* than George Lippard's *New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million*.⁵ The writer of the 1881 *The Mysteries of New York* attributed the disappearance

⁴ Sample titles (all published by Beadle & Adams) include Albert Aiken's *The Double Detective; or, The Midnight Mystery. A Romance of the Southland, of the Mysteries of New Orleans, and of the Many Men and Many Women of Many Lands who Dwell in the Crescent City* (1882); Howard Holmes's *Captain Coldgrip, the City Sleuth; or, The Coolest Woman in New York. A Romance of the Traps, Trails and Mysteries of a Great City* (1887); William G. Patten's *Double-Voice Dan, the Always-on-Deck Detective; or, The female Jeekyll and Hyde. A Weird Mystery of the Great Metropolis* (1892); and A. K. Sims' *Chicago Charlie, the Columbian Detective; or, the Hawks of the Lakeside League. A Story of the World's Fair* (1893).

⁵ Foster was well aware of the difference between his chosen métier of the journalistic sketch and the fictional narrative of urban exposure, since he also tried his hand at urban fiction, writing shorter pieces as well as one bona-fide city-mysteries novel, *Celio, or, New York Above-ground and Under-ground* (1850).

of city mysteries to both changing tastes in fiction and the fact that the earlier books were *fiction*, lacking the gravitas of hard, solid fact.

The most compelling reason given for the novels' decline, however, was the genre's inability to reflect urban change. As the author of *The Mysteries of New York* put it, "The scenes these supplanted veterans describe belong to the past. The present generation recognizes no resemblance between them and the life that goes on about it."⁶ As this writer would have it, the primary virtue that authors of city-mysteries claimed for their narratives—that they prepared readers for city life, since their accounts of the ways in which the disparate strands of city life were connected were "founded in fact"—no longer held true. The city (at least New York) had simply changed too much by 1881 for a single novel to claim to comprehensively present its "mysteries and miseries."

Even in the years just before the Civil War, at least one author expressed the sense that the era of the city-mysteries novel as it had been known was passing. In *The Mysteries of Bond Street*, George Thompson—after offering a long catalog of recent crimes in New York City (one of which, the Burdell murder, formed the basis for his novel)—called on spiritualists to summon the genre's American progenitor. "Will not some of the rappers call up the shade of George Lippard," he wondered, "to write a new woe unto Sodom?"⁷ Thompson's comment indicates—at least in his view—both that the

⁶ *Mysteries of New York*, 7.

⁷ George Thompson, *The Mysteries of Bond-Street; or, The Seraglios of Upper Tendom* (New York: n.p., 1857), 79. In Lippard's 1844 novel *The Quaker City; or, the Monks of Monk-Hall*, the words "Wo Unto Sodom" appear written in fire in the skies over Philadelphia during a character's dream about the destruction of the city in 1950. Lippard's spirit was summoned by spiritualists, in fact, but not to write more city-mysteries. The introduction to Olive G. Pettis's *Historical Life of Jesus of Nazareth and Extracts from the Apostolic Age* (Providence: A. Crawford Greene, 1871) was, according to Pettis, dictated through a spiritualist medium by George Lippard, who had died in 1854.

city was becoming increasingly wicked and that the literary scene lacked authors capable of creating narratives that offered a cohesive explanation of life in the American city.

In many respects, the anonymous author of 1881 was correct, although perhaps only in part. Changes in the urban environment—particularly the drastic expansion in its scope—rendered the city-mystery an obsolete fictional approach to the city in the years after the Civil War, although it was not change itself that passed the genre by, but rather its scale. City-mystery novels were documents dedicated to charting urban change. For instance, reading city-mystery novels set in New York in chronological order is to see the city grow before your eyes: rich characters move farther uptown, the fashionable hotels and casinos and saloons change, and numbered streets start to come into play. So it is not the case that city-mysteries were unable to address changes in the city, as the author of the 1881 *Mysteries of New York* claimed, but that the primary American cities had changed in ways that made such a fictional approach no longer convincing (or, perhaps more important, saleable).

The challenge of presenting the entirety of a city in one work of art was not one that confronted only authors in this period. The rise of photography challenged the conceit of the urban bird's-eye view, which was rendered from an imagined viewpoint in the air that allowed the artist to show all of a city in one image.⁸ A series of articles in

⁸ As Nina Baym has noted, the rise of the photograph had the effect of encouraging in consumers “the certainty that there was a real world out there sitting for its portrait.” Increasingly throughout the nineteenth century, the daguerreotype/photograph became the primary measure of “reality” in culture. Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 156. A bird's-eye view was a view taken at a 60-degree angle, allowing the artist to show both the sides and the tops of buildings in one image. As Peter Hales has noted, the main virtues of “the bird's-eye view lay in its capacity to enclose and to order.” The claim to represent, and by so doing to “enclose,” the entire life of a city was central to city-mysteries fiction as well. Peter Hales, *Silver Cities:*

Putnam's Monthly Magazine on the architectural evolution of New York City began with a piece entitled "New York Daguerreotyped," clearly implying the standard of realism that was the writer's aim.⁹ While bird's-eye views enjoyed a tremendous vogue in the late nineteenth century in smaller cities in the Midwest and West, they had begun to decline in use as a means of visually representing the largest cities in the United States.

As Peter Hales has noted, the iconography of urban imagery changed as cities grew. When cities became too large to be captured in one image, photographers chose pieces of the urban fabric to stand in for the whole: a street scene, a building, the skyline.¹⁰ Authors writing about cities felt the same tension between trying to show the whole city in one narrative through an artistic device (such as the extremely complicated plot of George Lippard's 1853 novel *New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million*) and dissecting the city into more easily represented segments (as is embodied in the title of George Foster's 1849 collection *New York in Slices*). Foster pioneered the writing of the urban journalistic sketch, and it is this genre, the collection of urban vignettes, that co-opted many of the conventions of city-mysteries after the Civil War. Numerous writers of this sort—generally more middle-class and more mainstream reformist than most city-mystery writers—exhibited this impulse to segment the city, as Solon Robinson wrote in his exposé of New York: "Although all my scenes are connected, . . . yet they are not

The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839–1915 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 29.

⁹ *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* 1:2 (Feb. 1853).

¹⁰ In his work on mid-nineteenth-century photographers and urbanization, Hales describes photographers in terms that would have applied just as precisely to popular urban novelists: "Offering not simply facts but information, they were cultural messengers, and their messages both reflected and defined how Americans saw their cities. More important, they assisted in the process by which American culture adjusted to its urbanization." Hales, *Silver Cities*, 3.

continuous. Like the Panorama of Niagara, we must go back, cross over, look up, look down, first from this point of view, then from that....”¹¹

Robinson’s invocation of the “panorama” as a metaphor is telling but inapt, since this popular visual art form of the antebellum period was precisely characterized by its “continuous” nature: an image painted on a long roll of canvas was gradually unrolled to offer a connected, sequential view of the subject. The need to offer a fragmented, discontinuous image, “first from this view, then from that” represented a shift in thinking about how to best represent the urban environment. This change of the city’s image in the American imagination from a manageable site that could be captured in one view to a boundless metropolis that needed to be viewed in smaller pieces bore consequences for both writers and visual artists. As Peter Hales has written of an 1856 comprehensive photographic panorama of San Francisco, the book “built up a layering of symbols and gave an illusion not just of context, but of *completeness* that was nearly irresistible.”¹² Authors of city-mysteries attempted to build up a similar illusion of completeness in their multilinear plots that wove all parts of the city together. But as cities grew so large that the number of plot lines (or individual photographs) required in order to create the illusion of unity became impossible to create in one work, then the claim to show *all* of a city, so crucial to both city-mysteries, became impossible to sustain.

The tendency to focus only on one part of the city—a particular neighborhood, a single class, a specific crime, a heroic individual—began to characterize urban fiction in

¹¹ Solon Robinson, *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York Illustrated* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1854), 190.

¹² Hales, *Silver Cities*, 54. The work in question is George Fardon’s *San Francisco Album* (1856), a collection of thirty-three views of the city that intentionally excluded people.

the years following the Civil War, just as it characterized visual representations of the city. The urban dime novels that proliferated in the late nineteenth century have already been mentioned. Since these books focused on a particular hero, who addressed a particular crime (and since the conventions of the genre limited their length), they did not actually purport to offer readers a glimpse of all of the aspects of life in Chicago, or New York, or San Francisco. Likewise, the popular urban narratives churned out by Horatio Alger, while offering readers some of the same things that city-mysteries did—a great deal of urban specificity, the latest in urban slang, and a focus on the “lower million”—only depict a very limited portion of the city (most often New York).

Alger’s novels also offer no conceit that all the aspects of urban life are connected, beyond the most random form of coincidence. In Alger’s first popular success, *Ragged Dick; or, Street Life in New York* (1867), the first half of the novel is essentially a guidebook to New York City, as Dick Hunter, an orphaned bootblack, catches the attention of a visiting businessman, Mr. Whitney, and offers to show his nephew, Frank, around the city.¹³ With the opportune gift of a good suit of clothes and a five-dollar gold piece (which he puts in the bank), Dick is able to put his native intelligence and drive to use in elevating his status. The rest of the novel covers the

¹³ Alger was born in Massachusetts, outside Boston, and attended Harvard, after which he made various desultory efforts at writing for a living. He took up professional authorship in earnest after being forced to leave the pulpit of the First Unitarian Church in Brewster, MA, when it was revealed that he had molested two adolescent boys whose families were members of the congregation. He moved to New York, where he became involved with the Children’s Aid Society, headed by Charles Loring Brace, which was dedicated to improving conditions for the hordes of orphaned and abandoned children who lived on their own on the streets of the city, working as newsboys and bootblacks. Alger based many of his characters on boys he met through the Newsboys’ Lodging House, which Brace conceived as a way to provide the “street Arabs” with a safe place to sleep for a nickel a night. The first scholarly biography of Alger is Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales’ *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). For another account of his career see Stefan Kanfer, “Horatio Alger: The Moral of the Story,” *City Journal* 10:4 (Autumn 2000).

process of Dick's education, with the help of his friend Fosdick, another orphan, and his ultimate ascension from the street to a clerkship for a wealthy merchant. Apart from his walking tour with Frank Whitney, Dick only ventures above Canal Street once, to attend Sunday School with the kindly Mr. Greyson, yet another wealthy merchant he has chanced to meet.

In *Ragged Dick* and other urban novels that followed a similar trajectory (characteristic titles include *Paul the Peddler; or, The Triumphs of a Young Merchant* [1871], or *Shifting for Himself; or, Gilbert Greyson's Fortunes* [1876]), Alger explains to his readers how the thousands of children living on their own in the streets of New York manage to stay alive, sleeping in wagons, wearing cast-off clothes, and often going hungry. Likewise, he exposes some of the common urban confidence games of the period, such as the "pigeon drop," or schemes involving passing bills on unknown banks. Beyond these phenomena—which most of his readers would have heard of, even if they didn't fully understand them—there are no "mysteries" that are exposed in the novels, no hidden connections underneath the veneer of urban life.¹⁴ In fact, appearances are

¹⁴ Tellingly, one of Alger's first published works, a long poem called *Nothing To Do: A Tilt at Our Best Society* (1857), adopted much of the rhetoric of city-mysteries fiction that would be absent from Alger's later work. The poem tells the story of Augustus Fitz-Herbert, "the heir of two millions and nothing to do," and his career as a man of fashion on Fifth Avenue (6). But, as Alger reveals, the Fitz-Herbert fortune is not as "fashionable" as Augustus claimed, since his "respected progenitor" made his money as a pawnbroker (11). Alger writes:

In this model republic, this land of the free—
So our orators call it, and why should not we?—
'Tis refreshing to know that without pedigree
A man may still climb to the top of the tree;
That questions of family, rank, and high birth,
All bow to the query, How much is he worth?
That John Smith, plebeian, who forty years since
Walked Broadway barefooted, now rides as a prince;
Having managed, though not overburdened with wit,

notably trustworthy in Alger's fiction. Mr. Whitney, when entrusting his young nephew to the care of an unkempt bootblack who he has known for all of five minutes, concludes, "Still, he looks honest. He has an open face, and I think he can be depended upon." Later, when Dick and Frank are accused of stealing a woman's purse on an omnibus, the conductor declares, "I don't believe either of the boys is in fault. They don't look to me as if they would steal."¹⁵ Of course, Dick *is* honest, and he wouldn't steal, but this ability to safely read and rely on urban appearances (except for the greenest of greenhorns, such as the farm boy whose money is stolen in *Ragged Dick*) is one important way in which Alger's fiction departs from the model of the city-mysteries.

Another important difference between the genres is the universal fairness and broad-mindedness of the wealthy citizens of New York; there is no hidden corruption to unveil. In *Paul the Peddler*, Mr. Barclay and Mr. Tiffany (of jewelry fame), two of New York's most prominent merchants, stand up for the shabbily-dressed Paul, and in *Ragged Dick*, all of the wealthy men—Mr. Whitney, Mr. Greyson, and Mr. Rockwell—are generous to a fault, willing to take a chance on a young man who has shown himself to be

But rather by chance and a fortunate hit,
To take a high place on Society's rounds;
His claim, based on pence, shillings, and pounds (7-9).

Alger's focus here on the sham aspects of class mobility is in stark contrast to the unequivocal embrace of wealth sprung from humble beginnings that would characterize his later novels. The satire on rich men "not overburdened with wit," and the seeming nostalgia for a day when qualities other than money determined how much respect one received in urban society, are also absent from his more famous fiction. The most notable element that this poem shares with city-mysteries fiction, however, is its tone of exposé—it is a "tilt" at elite society—and its contention that all aspects of the city are connected through the phenomenon of extreme class mobility. Horatio Alger, Jr., *Nothing to Do: A Tilt at Our Best Society* (Boston: James French & Co., 1857).

¹⁵ Horatio Alger, Jr., *Ragged Dick, or, Street Life in New York* (Boston: A. K. Loring, 1868), 37, 99.

either trustworthy or brave but about whom they know nothing else.¹⁶ The only urban types who are shown to be consistently snobbish and seeking to take advantage of the poor are not the wealthy, but those who (it would seem) had followed all of Alger's advice. Store clerks in the novels, who had gone to school and wore clean shirts, are depicted as looking to take advantage of their poor customers, and are frequently upbraided by their bosses for being insufficiently polite to patrons, no matter how shabbily dressed.

The most striking difference, however, is in the very different view of urbanization that Alger presents. If city-mysteries novels were nominally preoccupied with showing the dangers of the city, they spent a great deal of time describing its pleasures, both licit and illicit, *showing* readers how much fun cities were while allegedly *telling* them to stay at home. Alger's novels, however, while they idealize the energy and native intelligence of the boys of the New York streets, are deeply invested in the rejection of urban pleasure. While Dick is showing Frank Whitney the town, he tells him his life story, and explains, "I needn't have been Ragged Dick so long if I hadn't spent my money in goin' to the theatre, and treatin' boys to oyster-stews, and bettin' money on cards, and such like." Later, Dick admits that he could be more financially secure, "only I spend my money foolish."¹⁷ Clearly, for Alger, "foolish" equals "urban." Spending money on the theater, oyster cellars, and street gambling are city activities, and the

¹⁶ In another significant difference, the police are both effective and trustworthy. Of the crimes that take place in the novels, most are relatively harmless, without a hint of potential violence or sexual ruin. In *Paul the Peddler*, a confidence man chloroforms Paul to steal his diamond ring, but when he is ultimately arrested in Tiffany's store, he is a gentleman about the entire affair. Later in his career, Alger would inject more violence and sensational material into his novels, in order to compete with the increasingly lurid dime novels of the later 1880s and early 1890s, but these books were not as successful as his earlier works.

¹⁷ Alger, *Ragged Dick*, 70, 127.

pleasures they offered—fleeting, varied, convivial—are urban pleasures, which must be done without if one is to rise in life.

While Alger and his compatriot Charles Loring Brace proclaimed the evolutionary superiority of the street Arabs of New York, they also made every effort to get them to leave the city, to forsake the conditions that had made them. Johnny Nolan, a less motivated colleague of Ragged Dick in the bootblack trade, was sent away from his alcoholic father to live on a farm in upstate New York. But he ran away and returned to the city, explaining his objections: “It was on a farm, and I had to get up at five to take care of the cows. I like New York best. . . . I felt lonely.” Dick, having found out that Johnny both had regular meals and a good bed on the farm, responds, “Then you’d better have stayed.”¹⁸ Brace worked for years to set up the Newsboys’ Lodging Houses, but his primary project was to relocate street children on farms outside the city, primarily in the Midwest, sending out train cars full of children to uncertain fates in the hinterlands in the conviction that the most important thing he could do for them was get them away from the city.¹⁹

The seeming conclusion was that urban problems could best be solved by in effect abolishing the city, distributing population more evenly across the continent and completing the splintering of urban society into its constituent pieces. According to

¹⁸ Alger, *Ragged Dick*, 23, 26.

¹⁹ For Brace’s account of his efforts, see Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York, & Twenty Years’ Work Among Them* (New York: Wynkoop & Hallenbeck, 1872). For a recent account of the resettlement effort, see Stephen O’Connor, *The Orphan Trains: The Story of Charles Loring Brace and the Children He Saved and Failed, 1853–1929* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001). Another element of Brace’s effort was to encourage the development of smaller, self-contained settlements within large cities, “urban villages” that would be able to exert the moral pressure characteristic of smaller towns in the urban context.

Brace, New York's density and its extreme diversity—precisely the characteristics that antebellum writers held to be most “urban”—were responsible for magnifying the evils at the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder. The intensity of experience in the constantly growing city threatened to produce a strain of hyper-competent young men, accustomed to overcoming all obstacles, who would threaten the republic.

While Brace and Alger remained dedicated to various forms of urban charity and reform, the view conveyed by their larger program was that cities were simply getting too large to be managed or reformed, and the best solution was to leave. This sentiment, combined with the increased bureaucratization of reform efforts that grew out of the Civil War experience, changed the way that people thought about cities, their problems, and how to fix them. The legacy of the Founders that was seen as being up for grabs in antebellum city-mysteries fiction was definitively shattered by the Civil War, and the wave of foreign immigration that had begun before the war increased to a torrent, rendering America's cities even more diverse, more unsettling. The garden-variety political corruption that had troubled America's cities in the antebellum years erupted into the grand-scale venality of Boss Tweed's Tammany Hall, and the robber barons of the Gilded Age made the millionaires of the 1850s seem like pikers by comparison.

The dramatically expanded scope of almost everything that city-mysteries narratives tried to include rendered the form obsolete. As Richard Maxwell notes, the extreme growth of cities produced an “uneasiness verging on panic” as citizens “felt the

humanized world of the city recede from human view.”²⁰ *The Quaker-City* could no longer be captured, since the entire city could no longer possibly pass through Monk-Hall, leaving writers to focus only on one part of the city, or one person, replacing *The Mysteries of New York* with “Maggie, Girl of the Streets.” City-mysteries novels shared the ambition to “remove the veil” from the hidden confluences of money, power, and vice that connected the high and the low, yet the goal of offering a coherent narrative that wove the city together also reflects the desire to see cities as comprehensible, to forestall the fragmentation of the growing city’s tenuous unity into its cultural, economic, or geographic subcategories.²¹ The continuing magnetic power of America’s cities, which city-mysteries novels had helped at least in part to promote, rendered this ambition impossible to sustain as the nation emerged from the Civil War.

²⁰ Richard Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 261.

²¹ Hales, *Silver Cities*, 73.

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