73. On trends in the scientific foundations and ambitions of the field, see the references in n. 2.

74. Perrin, "Outdoor Recreation" (n. 63), p. 241 (emphasis in original).

75. In recent years scholars have debated the value of, and relationships between, women's "separate spheres," "women's culture," and feminism as historiographic concepts. See "Politics and Culture in Women's History: A Symposium," Fem. Studies, 1980, 6: 26-64; and Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," J. Amer. Hist., 1988, 75: 9-39.

76. For a contemporary analysis of celebration versus denial, see Rhode, "Theoretical Perspectives" (n. 71).

77. For an incisive discussion about the shortcomings of narrow constructs and dichotomies, see Scott, "Deconstructing" (n. 70). For a critique of binary categories in feminist theory, see Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations" (n. 71).

78. An example dealing with sexual science in turn-of-the-century America is Rosenberg, Beyond Separate Spheres (n. 13). A similar point is made--about medieval concepts of sex--in Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference (n. 14).

79. To the dismay of many women in the field, the "merger" of departments has increased the number of male administrators and coaches overseeing female activities nationwide. See the following articles by R. Vivian Acosta and Linda Jean Carpenter: "Women in Athletics: A Status Report," J. Phys. Educ. Recreat. Dance, August 1985, 56: 30-34; "As the Years Go By--Coaching Opportunities in the 1990s," ibid., March 1992, 63: 36-41; and "The Status of Women in Intercollegiate Athletics," in Birrell and Cole, Women, Sport, and Culture (n. 56), pp. 111-18.

Daniel Opler, "Monkey Business In Union Square: A Cultural Analysis of the Klein's-ohrbach's Strikes of 1934-5," *Journal of Social History* 36.1 (2002): 149-164.

Introduction: Strike As Drama

Labor historians in recent years have treated strikes as relatively marginal events, prefering instead to focus the cultural worlds and day-to-day lives of working-class people. In comparison to the rich meanings and analysis these "new labor historians" have unearthed in day-to-day life, strikes seem dull events indeed, especially as described by the "old labor history" of John R. Commons and his students. I would argue, as other historians have recently suggested, that strikes are in fact central to working class history, and that by redefining strikes we will be able to make them as rich and complex as any other facet of working-class life. Although the dictionary defines a strike as "a temporary stoppage of [work] in order to bring about compliance with demands," historians can better understand a strike as a cultural act, as a drama which workers use to convey their messages to potential supporters. 1

The importance of adopting this cultural definition of a strike is that it enables historians to use strikes differently. While strikes-as-work-stoppage force us to dismiss strikes as dull events to be passed over in favor of more revealing passages in working-class life, a cultural definition allows us to look at the messages inherent in the strike-drama. This includes both the messages which the strikers intend to convey, and other messages which we can perceive by close examination of the strike. In this way, we can force strikes to serve as valuable sources for historical information.

Novelist Leane Zugsmith demonstrated the validity of this sort of cultural analysis in a passage from A Time To Remember, her fictionalized account of the strikes which took place at the Klein's and

Ohrbach's stores in New York City's Union Square during the winter and early spring of 1934-5. In this passage, Aline, a young woman worker, is about to go onstage during a store-sponsored play performed by store employees. Nervous because she and her fellow workers had voted the night before to go on strike, Aline stops just before she is about to go onstage, goes to her empty dressing room, retrieves a handful of strike leaflets, and then goes onstage. Once on stage, instead of reciting her written lines, Aline proceeds to toss the leaflets out over the audience while making a speech about the strike that will begin the next day. In this brief passage, Aline has taken the boss's stage and stolen it. She has made it, for a moment at least, a vehicle for a worker's message; she has announced the strike by creating a drama. 2

Aline's fictional actions are potentially full of meanings about the competing messages of employers and employees and the theater as a contested space, but these fictional actions pale in comparison to the real actions of workers during [End Page 149] the same strikes at Klein's and Ohrbach's. In this paper, I perform a detailed cultural analysis of the actions taken during the Klein's-Ohrbach's strikes, the strikes Zugsmith addresses in her novel. In the dramas surrounding these strikes, I argue, one can find at least four prominent messages. First, there is clear evidence that the strikers analyzed the Klein's-Ohrbach's strike as a struggle of white-collar workers. Second, the strikers attempted to take advantage of the stores as a contested space between customers and management. Third, the strikers made a similar attempt to take advantage of the contests over Union Square among communists, workers, police, and store owners. Fourth, and last, these strikes demonstrate a complex gender system, which allowed working-class women a relatively large degree of agency.

"For All White-Collar Workers"

In general, retail workers were among the worst-paid workers in Depression-era New York City. The pay for such workers was lowest at downscale stores like Klein's and Ohrbach's, stores which catered primarily to working-class consumers. In 1932, a Klein's worker named Stella Ormsby wrote that "the girls whom [Klein] had displaced were receiving ten dollars per week and they were all discharged in favor of the new group who were getting only eight." For those eight dollars, workers were often expected to put in fifty-seven hours in hot, stuffy, and overcrowded stores. 3

Poorly paid and overworked, workers at these stores began forming unions in 1934. In December of that year, managers at Klein's fired 87 members of the communist-led Office Workers Union (OWU), a Trade Union Unity League (TUUL) affiliate. During that same month, December of 1934, approximately 100 workers under OWU leadership had already gone on strike against Ohrbach's, a store just a few doors away from Klein's which employed close to 1400 workers. Ohrbach's workers, probably encouraged by the passage of the federal government's support for unions with the National Industrial Recovery Act, demanded a pay raise, a 40-hour work week and an end to discrimination for union activity. Encouraged by the Ohrbach's workers' strike, the laid-off Klein's workers formed a picket line and began their own strike. 4

The strikers were never able to shut down the stores. The overwhelming majority of workers, in fact, were unwilling to go on strike, despite the low wages and heavy workload. Many of the workers simply had to protect their jobs, especially since it was not unusual for a worker at Klein's or Ohrbach's to support a family on his or her meager salary of eight to ten dollars a week. In addition, the State Supreme Court granted Ohrbach's an anti-picketing injunction, allowing police to arrest those strikers who attempted to form a mass picket line and block customers' entrance to the stores. 5

Since workers could not shut down the stores, they had to convince customers not to shop at Ohrbach's and Klein's. To do this, they relied upon drama. Specifically, they created a set of dramatic and often illegal tactics which they called "monkey business," which were intended to

disrupt the stores' operation wherever possible. 6

To perform the often technically complex acts which their monkey business campaign required, store workers needed help. Luckily, through the OWU and [End Page 150] the TUUL, the workers gained a number of supporters, primarily among white-collar workers. The strikers made a conscious effort to recruit these workers to their cause. Again and again in the strike literature, one sees reference to the label of retail work as white-collar work and retail workers as white-collar workers. Ruth Pinkson, an office worker who was also the ex-national organizer for the Office Workers Union, remembered these strikes as the "first big white-collar strikes in New York City," and suggested that the strikes were seen by many white-collar workers as a test case. In her novel, Zugsmith referred at one point to Aline's discovery "that a victory for them would be a victory for workers in all department stores, for all white-collar workers, for the labor movement as a whole." And Arnold Honig, a Klein's striker, suggested that the strike proved that even white-collar workers could be "good, militant fighters who can dose a backward boss with a good assortment of hell-fire." 7

The category of "white-collar," which these strikers used so successfully, was an extremely complex one. Particularly during the 1930s, people who might think of themselves as members of the middle class were unusually willing to define themselves as white-collar workers. Edward Dahlberg, a writer who joined the Klein's-Ohrbach's picket line, wrote about the issues raised by the Depression for white-collar workers:

> The college diploma was the exchange currency in the student's mind...for a ritzy law office and a motor carMarriage for the department store girl, being another economic diploma, was thought of in terms of leisure and West End Avenue, and the Holy Grail for the writer was the boulevards of Paris...but with vast unemployment, evictions, empty stomachs, [and] the wholesale slashing of wages these sleepy, moving picture wishes lost for the wisher[s] whatever little reality they once had.

The Depression, in Dahlberg's eyes at least, had destroyed the privileges which had once allowed some workers to define themselves as middle class. As a result, some members of the middle class found it "impossible and suicidal...to stand aloof," and instead decided to organize, to begin to think of themselves as part of the working class, as white-collar workers. By using the term "white collar worker" to describe themselves, therefore, department store workers implicitly called upon a wide range of supporters, including office workers, chemists, doctors, actors, journalists, and writers. 8

These allies were particularly useful during the strikers' theme rallies, where strikers were able to most clearly convey the support they had from other white-collar workers. Most Saturdays, the strikers held a theme rally in Union Square. Two of their most successful were Theatrical Day and Writers' Day, when theatrical workers and writers were called upon to come out and support their fellow white-collar workers by marching the picket line with the strikers. On Writers' Day, prominent novelists like James T. Farrell and Nathanael West joined Leane Zugsmith and Edward Dahlberg on the picket line, and got arrested for breaking the anti-picketing injunction. Other white-collar workers also showed their support. On Theatrical Day, the entire cast of the off-Broadway play The Shores of Cattano came down to the picket line. They, too, got arrested for breaking the injunction, and the play's performance that night was canceled. Supposedly, when the announcement was made that the play had to be canceled since the [End Page 151] cast was in jail, the audience burst into applause as a show of support for the cast. 9

There were at least two reasons for emphasizing the white-collar nature of the strike in theme rallies and strike literature. First, the strikers, through this analysis, found a way to think about the connections between their strike and a larger class struggle. Second, as we have already seen, it gave them a number of allies. Throughout the strike,

whether the strikers wanted to fill Union Square with people or to lay claim to the stores, they found other white-collar workers ready to help.

Particularly to challenge the bosses' control over the stores, the strikers would need this help.

Contested Spaces: In The Stores

Workers began their monkey-business campaign with attacks within the stores, actions designed to create confusion and disarray for those shoppers who crossed the picket line and shopped at Ohrbach's or Klein's. Often, white-collar allies would help them in these campaigns. At one point, for example, a chemist who was a member of the TUUL-affiliated Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians (FAECT) provided the employees with a box of white mice. The employees took the box into Klein's and let the mice run free, thus "frightening women shoppers who entered the store in ignorance of the fact that a strike is in progress there," as the Daily Worker put it. 10

Other actions were perhaps less frightening to customers, but created the same tense atmosphere within the stores. One day, strikers at Ohrbach's gave children of shoppers entering the store balloons reading "Don't Buy At Ohrbach's!" As Clarina Michelson, who led the OWU's Department Store Section at the time, remembered, "When the children would go into the store, the managers would have to run up and take the balloons away," causing the children to get upset and leading to loud arguments between store managers and the childrens' parents. On occasions like these, as Pinkson later remembered, "people started to get afraid to go into the store, because they didn't know what [the screaming] was all about." 11

Some of the strikers' goals during actions like these are extremely obvious. By interfering with the daily functioning of the stores, the strikers undoubtedly wished to prevent the stores from making money during the strike, which hopefully would make the store owners more willing to settle the strike quickly. In this way, these actions greatly resembled the sabotage tactics used, among others, by the Industrial Workers of the World earlier in the twentieth century.

The actions inside the stores were also significant in other, more subtle ways, when one considers the complex task of running a low-cost store like Klein's or Ohrbach's in the 1930s. When operating such a store, managers had to make certain both that customers wanted to shop at the stores, and that, once customers entered the store, those customers would be under the control of management. By cutting customer services to the bare minimum and thereby offering extremely low prices, managers at both stores managed to attract large numbers of customers. In fact, in the 1930s, working-class people throughout New York City, but particularly from the immigrant communities of the Lower East Side [End Page 152] and the outer boroughs of Brooklyn and the Bronx, regularly went to Klein's and Ohrbach's to do their shopping. 12

While store managers were therefore successful in stimulating customer demand, they found controlling customers much more difficult. Their customers often behaved in an unruly manner, particularly during sales, when working-class consumers sought to stock up on as much clothing as possible. Novelist Albert Halper described one sale, for example: "Greater crowds of women were now storming all the entrances to Klein's...overturning tables stacked with handbags and blouses." Managers at both stores employed private security guards in part to deal with these sorts of unruly crowds. 13

The most important customer practice which store managers attempted to control was shoplifting. Since customers had direct access to merchandise at Klein's and Ohrbach's (a practice already abandoned at higher-priced stores), shoplifting was extremely common at these stores, and it could easily cost store owners like Klein and Ohrbach $100,000 a year. Working-class consumers not only practiced shoplifting within these stores, but they passed the skill on to their children. 14

Managers at both stores controlled this practice as best they could, often with little success. While store employees could have been extremely useful in helping to catch shoplifters, they were, in many ways, caught in between the customers and the store managers. On the one hand, not only were department store workers members of the same class as most of the stores' customers, but they also shared ethnic and neighborhood ties to the customers. They, like the customers, were primarily Jewish-American and Italian-American women; like the customers, many of them came from immigrant communities (most of the store workers, at least at Ohrbach's, were the children of immigrants rather than immigrants themselves), by this time mostly located in the city's outer boroughs. On the other hand, part of a store worker's job was to catch shoplifters, and Ohrbach's and Klein's extensive networks of informants and detectives ensured that any store workers who did take part in shoplifting, even to the point of allowing customers to get away with it, might well get caught themselves. 15

Since most store workers were of limited help, store managers sought other methods to control their customers. The private security guards were responsible for keeping an eye out for shoplifters as well as making sure that customers did not crowd the entrances. In addition, managers at Klein's hung huge posters on the interior walls of the store in five different languages warning that "Dishonesty Means Prison" and that prison meant "disgrace to your family." There is some disagreement, however, about how regularly managers carried out these threats. Supporters of Klein claimed that "the few who disregard these formalities and get caught [shoplifting] usually end up in the 'crying room,'...[where] he listens to their excuses," and often allowed them to go free. One employee at Klein's, however, wrote that "it is well known that Mr. Klein prosecutes [shoplifters] to the bitter end," unlike department store managers who catered to wealthier consumers. 16

Both Klein's and Ohrbach's were bitterly contested spaces during the early years of the Great Depression; managers sought to more thoroughly control their customers, and customers avoided managerial control, often successfully. With these constant struggles between managers and customers, the workers' actions [End Page 153] during the Klein's-Ohrbach's strikes take on new meanings. Strikers certainly intended to disrupt the daily functioning of the store, but in order to do so, they played into the already-existing struggles of managers and customers, and, as a result, created a very difficult situation for store managers. By letting mice loose and destroying elevators, store workers contributed to the often chaotic atmosphere within the store. As a result, during the strikes, managers' attempts to control customers were temporarily challenged by the strikers' attempts to control managers.

Contested Spaces (2): Outside the Stores

Directly outside the stores, Union Square was an even more hotly contested space than the stores themselves. Police and working-class demonstrators fought pitched battles in the streets surrounding Union Square, as communists fought with store owners and other local business owners over control of the three or four square blocks which made up Union Square.

The strikers quickly began using the Square as a space in which to carry on strike activities. As already indicated, every Saturday, the strikers made it known that the Square belonged to them and their allies, staging long and sometimes quite dramatic rallies, which often ended in arrests. In addition, strikers launched attacks on the exterior of the store buildings, effectively re-decorating these buildings as strike weapons. Pinkson remembered one such incident, when the strikers actually etched the words "STRIKE-DON'T ENTER" into the window of the Ohrbach's store, to the anger of management and the confusion of customers. 17

Perhaps the most pointed attempt on the strikers' part to make Union Square the center of a drama, however, was their use of the statue of George Washington. At the time there was a large statue of Washington in Union Square, seated on horseback with his arm pointing forward.

Early one morning the strikers took one of their strike posters, reading "Don't Buy At Ohrbach's," and placed it on the statue's outstretched arm. The symbol of freedom, Washington himself, had become a strike supporter, at least until the sign was removed later that day. 18

Again, actions like these were in part simply about letting the public know that a strike was in progress, and thereby preventing customers from entering the stores. However, as with the strikers' actions within the stores, their actions within the Square also had more complex meanings, particularly when placed in the context of the struggles going on before the strikes began.

During the Great Depression, Union Square became what historian and journalist Matthew Josephson described as "New York's Red Square...the very vortex of revolutionary activities" in New York City. Josephson went on to describe his impression of Union Square in the early 1930s. On one day when he visited the Square, he recalled, "Soapboxers were going on in routine fashion: 'Garbage! That's what the bosses give the American workers,' one of them shouted suddenly. His small audience responded with a roar of laughter, some of them waving placards with slogans such as 'Jobs-Not Charity.'" While Josephson describes the crowds as fairly passive, other observers suggested that the audience frequently gathered not only to listen to the various speakers, but to argue with other listeners or even with the speakers themselves about the issues [End Page 154] being discussed. One WPA worker, writing a few years later, described the Square as the site of nearly endless debates, suggesting that the soapbox speakers transformed the Square into a "diminutive Hyde Park," a space where working-class people came to speak on political issues. 19

The long political debates extended also to buildings around the Square's border. A number of small cafeterias lined Union Square, and one working-class woman who frequented them when she was young remembered that it was in those cafeterias that she had learned about literature and politics, primarily from other people her own age. Many young people would sit in the cafeterias for hours, talking about unions, class struggle, racism, or whatever other subjects happened to come up. Like the soapbox speakers, the cafeterias offered working-class people places to debate and discuss a wide range of issues. 20

Political rallies in Union Square also allowed working-class people to express their opinions on political issues. Rallies had been a part of the Square's history throughout the late 19th century, but during the Depression these rallies became larger and generally more violent, as police struggled to gain greater control over the growing crowds of protesters. Protests took place nearly every week in the early 1930s around issues ranging from the wrongful arrest of the Scottsboro Boys to unemployment relief, and any of these protests could end in violence. Albert Halper, a novelist who lived just off Union Square at the time, later remembered that "there were weekly left-wing parades which frequently ended with clubbings by the police. On Saturday mornings, I could see the mounted cops in the side streets, bunched together, resting, healthy faced, chatting cheerfully before the afternoon's action." 21

While many came to Union Square to engage in political expressions of one form or another, others-particularly women-came to the Square to shop in the numerous cheap stores which lined the Square's southern border. Here, too, the Depression affected peoples' presence within Union Square, as women in particular responded to the Depression by being more careful with their spending habits, and by bargain-hunting at stores like those bordering on the Square. As a result, Klein's actually did more business during the Depression than during the 1920s. In addition to these indoor establishments, street-peddlers selling low-priced food and other goods filled the southern end of the Square. Combined with the easy access to the Square by public transportation, these stores made Union Square "the place where we came to shop," as a working-class woman who often frequented the Square remembered. 22

Whatever the reasons that prompted crowds to fill Union Square, building owners around the Square were very aware of the crowd's

presence, and many attempted to control the crowd's activities by putting up signs. On the southern side of the Square, Klein's managers put huge signs in his store's windows advising customers of the "tremendous values in fur coats" and reminding them that customers had a right to their "money back within five days." Even the water tank, standing up above the rest of the building, carried with it the name of the firm, "Klein's."

On the northwest corner of the Square stood another building, also covered in signs. These signs, however, called for viewers to "Fight Police Terror, Unemployment, and War Preparations!" They called "for Defense of the Soviet Union!" and for the struggle of "class against class!" This building was the office [End Page 155] building of the Daily Worker, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the United States (CP). 23

While signs were an important way of attracting people's attention, both retail owners and communists also used pageantry to attract supporters. Communists staged most of the weekly protests which took place in Union Square during this era, as well as what was probably the largest and most important protest in New York City during the Great Depression. During their International Unemployment Day protest on March 6, 1930, as many as 100,000 protesters gathered to hear speeches calling for "immediate relief for the jobless from the funds of the city treasury and from taxes on the wealthy exploiters, for unemployment insurance paid for by the employers and administered by committees of the workers and unemployed, and for the seven-hour day and the five-day week." The speakers-most of them CP officials-called on the huge crowd which had gathered to elect a committee to take their demands to City Hall. The crowd roared back at the podium, apparently in agreement, and eventually a number of CP officials volunteered to serve as the Workers' Committee. However, when the protesters attempted to follow the Committee to City Hall, the Square became the site of a bloody battle. Police emerged, many with nightsticks, many on horseback, and, in order to prevent what they perceived as the beginnings of a riotous attack on City Hall, they began beating those protesters who were attempting to march south. Most of the crowd fled in the confusion; police arrested those who did not escape quickly enough. 24

International Unemployment Day and the smaller protests which frequently took place in Union Square served several functions. First, these protests allowed workers to express their political views; as already noted, in this respect they might be seen as similar to the soapbox speakers and the cafeterias which lined the Square. Second, communist-led protests frequently presented communists as the leaders of the working class. The Workers' Committee, made up of communists, was, after all, supposed to represent the city's workers, although most workers in New York City would hardly have accepted this representation. Finally, protests in Union Square allowed the communists an opportunity to lay claim to Union Square as their space, to force Josephson and other observers to acknowledge that it was, in fact, a "Red Square."

Business managers operating in the Square also found pageantry a useful tool to exert control over Union Square. The Union Square Centennial Celebration, held on April 23 of 1932, was little more than a lightly veiled challenge to the communists' presence in Union Square. Among other things, the celebration began with a large and very well-publicized "Americanization meeting," which featured former governor and Democratic presidential candidate Alfred E. Smith giving a speech on equality in America. Smith, well-aware of the significance of Union Square for communists and others who attacked ruling-class privilege, opened his speech by stating that "there is no such thing as a ruling class, though that phrase is often used to arouse passion." 25

During the Centennial Celebration, local business managers' call for Union Square as a public space for anti-communism was perhaps best illustrated by the actions of the police. As the New York Times described their participation, the police presented both "an exhibition

drill...in the art of handling a pistol and disarming prisoners," and, even more importantly, a second "exhibition drill by a [End Page 156] company of the Police Rifle Regiment in riot drill and formation," which ended in "a bayonet charge into a mythical [rioting] crowd." This bayonet charge, taking place as it did on the very site of so many actual confrontations between police and communist-led protesters, could hardly be described as anything but an open threat to the communists, and a fairly direct challenge to their continued presence in Union Square. 26

Smith's casual denial of the existence of class in America and the Police Rifle Regiment's demonstration of crowd-control tactics did nothing to prevent the communists from using Union Square for May Day, only one week later. As usual, communists gathered in Union Square to mark the occasion. That year, despite heavy rain, the thousands of participants in the annual march gathered in the Square for a few minutes before proceeding onwards to Columbus Circle. If the Centennial Celebration was intended as a threat, the communists clearly did not respond as the backers of the Centennial Celebration hoped they would. 27

Local businessmen therefore resolved to continue their campaign against communism in their neighborhood. Only a few weeks after that 1932 May Day protest, local business owners and managers formed the Union Square Association, an organization intended to "advance the interest of Union Square as a patriotic center." Samuel Klein served on the new Association's Board of Directors. 28

Both store-owners and communists, therefore, made similar uses of Union Square in the early 1930s. First, both attempted to control the environment in Union Square through signs and pageants, and to use that environment to communicate with working-class people-both potential consumers and potential communists-in the Square. Second, as part of these campaigns, store-owners and communists were extremely conscious of their image in the minds of the working-class people who frequented Union Square. The communists wanted working-class people to view them as the legitimate representatives of the working class. They used the dramatic International Unemployment Day protest, before it erupted into violence, to make some of their leaders just such representatives, through the Workers' Committee which the protesters chose. The store-owners used the environment to encourage working-class people to shop in their stores.

As they did in the stores, the strikers took advantage of the contested space of Union Square in their attempt to force management to negotiate with them. By redecorating the store buildings and statues, and by holding their own rallies and marches in Union Square, the strikers took a hand in the struggle over Union Square, and presented yet another challenge to managers' attempts to control their environment and thereby to control their potential customers.

Working Women: The Sit-In At the Waldorf

The event which represented the climax to the entire strike took place far from Union Square, in the Grand Ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel during a dinner given to honor senior doctors at Brooklyn Hospital. Since he was on the hospital's Board of Trustees, Nathan Ohrbach was invited to sit at the dinner, along with New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. Some doctors, who identified themselves as white-collar workers and were sympathetic toward the [End Page 157] strikers, offered to get tickets to the event for a number of strikers. The strikers, knowing both that the mayor would be there and that the entire event would be broadcast on the radio, accepted the offer. 29

Here was Zugsmith's theatrical metaphor played out for high stakes. Ohrbach had a forum with a large audience of radio listeners, and had helped to create a drama to demonstrate his role as a great philanthropist in supporting the Hospital. And strikers and their supporters were ready to steal the forum, to make their own message, that Ohrbach was an exploiter of workers, the outstanding one. On the night of January 20, dressed in their finest evening clothes, several strikers surreptitiously

entered the Waldorf-Astoria. As LaGuardia began to speak of the important work done by Ohrbach and by the doctors themselves, a woman striker spoke up from the balcony. "I want to introduce myself. I am an Ohrbach striker," she called out. 30

Another woman striker spoke up from nearby in the balcony: "Nathan Ohrbach may give thousands to charity, but he doesn't pay his workers a living wage." Security rushed over, only to find out that both women had chained themselves to the balcony to prevent their eviction. 31 The guards immediately sent for hacksaws, and, as the audience struggled to make sense of the event, another striker, also in the balcony, took handfuls of flyers about the strike and tossed them out over the audience, to the amazement of all concerned. According to the New York Times, LaGuardia continued to speak, although without being heard, since both workers were also speaking. 32

The taking of the Waldorf serves as perhaps the clearest demonstration of the importance of messages and drama in strikes, and there are again multiple meanings to this action. Certainly the message which the workers intended to convey was well-expressed by the strikers who chained themselves to the balcony: that any money Ohrbach gave away resulted from his exploitation of workers. In addition, however, this action, like so many others, illustrates the surprisingly central role played by women in the strike. While a number of the strikers were men (no exact figures are available), strike leaders asked two women to invade the Waldorf. 33

The decision to use women in this action suggests the important and complex role of working-class women in communist politics during the early and mid-1930s. Communists clearly expected working-class women to be helpmates to working men. During the strike, articles in Working Woman, the CP women's newspaper, addressed issues such as how a working woman could dress without spending much money, what sorts of foods would most efficiently feed her family, and the importance of women's auxiliaries during men's strikes. Only once during this period did the editors print a letter about a wife who was having problems with her husband, and that was when her husband did not like the idea of his wife joining the Communist Party. 34

As part of this concept of the helpmate to the working-class man, Working Woman devoted a number of articles to more obviously political issues centered around the home, most importantly birth control and consumption-based activism. Particularly in the early 1930s, editors printed a number of articles on the proper methods of birth control in Working Woman. In addition, the editors devoted several articles to the food boycotts in New York City during the early 1930s, boycotts which were led by women. 35 [End Page 158]

The notion of the woman as home-based activist was only one of the ways in which communists politicized women's role as home-maker. Women also served as powerful symbols of workers' poverty and hardship in communist literature. One contributor to Working Woman identified women as the true victims of the Great Depression. "The wife of the unemployed gets the worst of it. She is the one to answer her childrens' cry for bread. She has got to face the landlord. All the misery of the shortage, of keeping the family from starvation in time of unemployment falls heaviest on the housewife." 36

To this vision of the politicized home-maker as both symbol and activist, the editors of Working Woman added extensive coverage of women's struggles in the workplace. Contributors constantly discussed women who were involved in the labor movement, and they portrayed women strikers not only as newsworthy and admirable, but also as militant fighters for the proletariat, much like male strikers were. 37

This complex analysis forced the communists involved with the strike to deal with gender in a rather contradictory way. Take, for example, Leane Zugsmith's description of the fictional scene at strike headquarters when the strikers discovered that they had won the strike:

> The floor quakes under their stamping feet. The ear drums recoil at the roar of rejoicing. Peck Hirschberg rushes outside to tell the pickets and call them off. Duke prances like a bear on his hind legs, forcing May Lundstrom to curvet with him. Mrs. Bauer's stumpy frame is shaken by shuddering sobs and her little girl, hanging onto her skirt, looks up with a puckered face, ready to cry with her mother. With a kind of ferocity, Manny Lorch and Muriel Cline hug each other, their eyes glazed with joy. 38

At the moment of victory, Zugsmith places her women characters in some fairly traditional poses: they cry, hug men, and dance, while at least one man has a constructive reaction, as he "rushes outside to tell the pickets and call them off." At the same time, in A Time To Remember, Zugsmith, more perhaps than any other proletarian novelist, gave attention to the militancy and importance of women in class struggle. Women adopted these traditional poses in a moment of celebration that took place only because of women activists' militancy during the strike.

These contradictions made women ideal actors in the sit-in at the Waldorf-Astoria. Women, as already noted, could serve as both powerful symbols of exploitation as well as militant agents to end that exploitation. Both of these aspects which communists identified with women were clearly present during the Waldorf sit-ins, which were clearly intended to convey both the strikers' militancy as well as the workers' exploitation. The sit-in was therefore rife with just the sorts of contradictions which communists identified with proletarian womanhood, and women became obvious and crucial actors in its realization.

The sit-in was at least somewhat successful. The newspapers gave the event fairly extensive coverage in the next day's papers. At the same time, with the exception of the Daily Worker, the press was overwhelmingly opposed to the strike and the two strikers who chained themselves to the balcony in particular, dismissing the strikers as "hecklers" who had disrupted a charitable event and had created chaos during the mayor's speech. 39 [End Page 159]

Still, the strikers' drama that night in the Waldorf was a successful one. Their actions, and not the amounts of the charitable donations which Nathan Ohrbach had given to the hospital, were the actions which the newspapers recorded, and their speech had been broadcast on live radio. It was, in many ways, the strikers' greatest success.

Conclusion

The invasion of the Waldorf turned the tide of the strike, and finally gave the union a victory, although it was a limited victory at best. In the early spring of 1935, managers at both stores offered to hire back the strikers. Klein's managers offered workers reinstatement and back pay; Ohrbach, who handled the negotiations himself, refused to grant strikers the raise they had demanded, but did issue a verbal contract guaranteeing a shorter working day. The union failed to win recognition as the workers' official bargaining agent at either store. 40

More tragic than the compromised settlement were the mass firings in the aftermath of the strikes. Within weeks after the strikes ended, managers at both stores began steadily firing workers who had participated in the strikes. Most workers, having survived for five months with no income during some of the worst years of the Great Depression, decided not to return to the picket line, though about twenty Ohrbach's workers did go back on strike, and eventually won a negotiated written settlement. 41

The Klein's-Ohrbach's strikes nevertheless retain an importance that far outweighs the number of participants involved, or the defeat with which the strikes ended. Their importance lies primarily in the way that these strikes lend themselves to a cultural analysis. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine seeing a sign on the outstretched arm of George Washington, or having workers disrupt a radio broadcast, and not attempting some sort

of cultural analysis of these events. These strikes are replete with messages for the historian, messages about the nature of white-collar working-class identity, working-class consumption, the contested space of Union Square, and women's role in communist protest during the 1930s.

While the Klein's-Ohrbach's strikes serve as particularly good examples of the need for a cultural analysis of strikes, they are not unique. While not all strike supporters re-decorate buildings and interrupt radio broadcasts with voices of their own, all have cultural messages to convey. Strikers carry picket signs and banners, create chants, sing songs, and distribute leaflets. These sorts of acts are, almost by definition, cultural acts. As historians of working-class life and culture, I would suggest that we must analyze these sorts of messages in greater detail, and by so doing, continue to revise and complicate our thinking about strikes.

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Endnotes

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1. For this definition of strikes, see Webster's Third New International Dictionary (Springfield, Mass., 1981), 2262. Robin Kelley argues explicitly that drama serves as a very useful metaphor to describe twentieth-century working-class protest (specifically civil-rights protest in the American South) in "Congested Terrain: Resistance on Public Transportation," in Kelley, Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class (New York, 1994), 55-75. While they do not specifically address the issue of the ways in which we define the term "strike," both Ardis Cameron, in Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts (Urbana, 1993), and Elizabeth Faue, in Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945 (Chapel Hill, NC, 1991), along with many other historians, provide good cultural readings of working-class protest, including strikes.

2. Leane Zugsmith, A Time To Remember (New York, 1936), 211-3.

3. Stella Ormsby, "The Other Side of the Profile." The New Republic (17 August 1932), 21.

4. Arnold Honig, "The Klein-Ohrbach Strikes," Office Worker (February 1935), 3. For the numbers of strikers and workers, see also "S. Klein: On-The-Square Store Plays Santa to Its Employees," Newsweek (29 December 1934), 28, and "Girl Striker Heckles LaGuardia; Chained to Box, Foils Ejection" New York Times (21 January 1935), in "Ohrbach-Klein Clippings" Folder, Department Store Strikes and Organizing in the 1930s Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University (hereafter Clippings, DSSO Papers).

5. For the economic pressures faced by strikers and scabs alike, see Ann Barton, "Home Life," Daily Worker (28 January [1935?]), in Clippings, DSSO Papers. Ruth Pinkson, interviewed by author, Garret Park, Maryland, 10 March 2000 (hereafter Pinkson Interview), confirms this. For the anti-picketing injunction, see "125 Pickets Seized At Ohrbach Store," The New York Times (17 February 1935), in Clippings, DSSO Papers.

6. For the term "monkey business," see Clarina Michelson, interviewed by Debra Bernhardt, New York, 20 October 1979 (hereafter Michelson Interview).

7. Ruth Pinkson, "Life and Times of an Elderly Red Diaper Baby," in Judy Kaplan and Linn Shapiro, eds., Red Diapers: Growing Up In The Communist Left (Urbana, 1998), 233. Zugsmith, A Time To Remember, 251; Honig, "The Klein-Ohrbach Strikes," Office Worker (February 1935), 3.

8. Edward Dahlberg, "Authors Declare Solidarity With Our Strikes," Office Worker (February 1935), 4. On the subject of the Depression's effects on middle-class identity, see also Daniel Walkowitz, Working With Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle Class Identity (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999), 113-176.

9. "125 Pickets Seized at Ohrbach Store." See also Jay Martin, Nathaniel West: A Life in His Art. (New York, 1970), 255-8. For the Shores of Cattano incident, see

Michelson Interview.

10. "Ohrbach Asks New Writ To Bar All Picketing By Striking Employees." Daily Worker (1 February 1935), in Clippings, DSSO Papers.

11. Pinkson Interview. For the chemists and their TUUL affiliate, the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians, see "Editorials," Office Worker (February 1935), 2. For the particular action, see Michelson Interview.

12. For this description of the shoppers in Union Square, see Anne Haicken, interviewed by author, Belleair Bluffs, FL, 4 August 2000 (hereafter Haicken Interview). See also Gertrude Reiss, interviewed by author, Brooklyn, NY 13 November 2000 (hereafter Reiss Interview). See also Nathan Ohrbach, Getting Ahead in Retailing (New York, 1935), 37-8.

13. Albert Halper, Good-bye, Union Square: A Writer's Memoir of the Thirties (Chicago, 1970), 100.

14. "S. Klein: On-The-Square Store Plays Santa to Its Employees," Newsweek (29 December 1934), 29. See also Haicken Interview.

15. For the close supervision and the responsibility to catch shoplifters, see Zugsmith, A Time To Remember, 60. For the connections between store workers and customers, see Haicken Interview.

16. "S. Klein: On-The-Square Store Plays Santa to Its Employees," Newsweek (December 29, 1934), 29; Stella Ormsby, "The Other Side of the Profile," 21. For shoplifting by wealthier customers in upscale stores and the relative leniency shown by store managers towards these shoplifting, see Elaine Abelson, When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store (Oxford, 1989).

17. Pinkson Interview.

18. Michelson Interview.

19. Matthew Josephson, Infidel In The Temple: A Memoir of the Nineteen-Thirties (New York, 1967), 126-7. Jacob Stein, interviewed by B. Hathaway, 27 December 1938, and Wayne Walden, "Conversations In A Park," 24 October 1938, both in Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, WPA Federal Writers' Project Collection. See also Arnold Eagle, "Man With Newspaper at Political Discussion Meeting, Union Square," Undated Photograph, in "Union Square-Park And General 2/2 (Photos)" Folder, Museum of the City of New York Archives (hereafter Union Square Folder, MCNY). While all of these sources indicate (it seems accurately) that most of the participants in these discussions were working-class men, it seems clear that women participated as well; see both Reiss Interview, and Arnold Eagle, "Men and Women in Discussion, Union Square," in Union Square Folder, MCNY.

20. Reiss Interview.

21. Albert Halper, Good-bye, Union Square: A Writer's Memoir of the Thirties, 79.

22. For the street peddlers, see Halper, Good-bye, Union Square, 79, and Arnold Eagle, "Female Street Vendor At Union Square," Undated Photograph, Union Square Folder, MCNY. For the importance of Klein's and Ohrbach's to Union Square, see Robert Hendrickson, The Grand Emporiums: The Illustrated History of America's Great Department Stores (New York, 1979), 443-445. See also Herman Kirschbaum, interviewed by B. Hathaway [Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, WPA Federal Writers' Project Collection], September 1938-January 1939. For the quotation, see Reiss Interview. For the effects of the Depression on Klein's in particular, see "S. Klein: On-The-Square Store Plays Santa to Its Employees," Newsweek (29 December 1934), 29.

23. Photograph of S. Klein's, 1928; United States History, Local History and Genealogy Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations; reprinted in Ellen Wiley Todd, The "New Woman" Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street (Berkeley, 1993), 100. Photograph of CP Headquarters on Union Square, Manhattan, 1930. rpt. in Michael Brown et al., New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism (New York, 1993), 14.

24. "110,000 Demonstrate In New York For Jobless Demands; Defy Police," Daily Worker (7 March 1930), 1, 3. See also "Workers' Newsreel, Unemployment Special, 1931" newsreel footage (New York, 198-), and Harvey Klehr, The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Years (New York, 1984), 33-38.

25. "Union Square Marks Its Centenary Gayly," New York Times (24 April 1932), 17.

26. "Union Square is Ready for its Centennial," New York Times (22 April 1932), 20; "Union Square Marks Its Centenary Gayly," New York Times (24 April 1932), 17. While the city government was really the agent behind the Union Square celebration, it is very clear that local businessmen were closely involved with its planning. Among other things, the celebration luncheon was held in the restaurant within the Klein's store. See "Union Square Marks Its Centenary Gayly."

27. "Workers Line Both Sides Of Streets Despite Heavy Downpour in New York," Daily Worker (2 May 1932), 1.

28. For the formation of the Union Square Association, see "Form Union Square Group," New York Times (13 May 1932), 35.

29. Pinkson Interview; see also "Ohrbach Feast Spoiled By Two Comely Pickets Voicing Strike Demands," Daily Worker (22 January 1935), in Clippings, DSSO Papers.

30. This quotation is given in "Girl Striker Heckles La Guardia; Chained to Box, Foils Ejection," New York Times (21 January 1935) and "Ohrbach Feast Spoiled By Two Comely Pickets Voicing Strike Demands," Daily Worker (22 January 1935), both in Clippings, DSSO Papers.

31. Pinkson Interview.

32. Ibid; "Girl Striker Heckles La Guardia."

33. Haicken Interview.

34. "What Would You Do?" The Working Woman Contest, Working Woman (December 1934), 5.

35. On the issue of birth control see Grace Hutchins, "Birth Control," Working Woman (August 1935), 26; Dr. Margaret Lamont, "What Women Should Know," Working Woman (February 1934), 15. For an example of the articles on consumer struggles which appeared in Working Woman see Dora Rich, "Organize-Fight Against High Cost Of Living," Working Woman (November 1933), 10. For the history of consumer-based protest, see both Dana Frank, Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-29 (Cambridge, 1994), Annelise Orleck, Common Sense and a Little Fire (Chapel Hill, 1995), and Susan Levine, "Workers' Wives: Gender, Class, and Consumerism in the 1920's US," Gender and History 3, no. 11 (1991), 45-64.

36. "Effects of Unemployment on Workers' Wives," Working Woman (February, 1930), 3.

37. See, for example, "Department Store Strike Front," Working Woman (February, 1935), 3.

38. Zugsmith, A Time To Remember, 347-8.

39. "Girl Striker Heckles La Guardia; Chained to Box, Foils Ejection," New York Times (21 January 1935), in Clippings, DSSO Papers.

40. Labor Research Association, "Some White Collar and Professional Workers' Strikes, 1934 to date" (March 19, 1936), 4, in Labor Research Association Folder, DSSO Papers.

41. Pinkson Interview.

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Sob Sisterhood Revisited

Jean Marie Lutes

For female journalists who sought to enter the courtroom, the 1907 trial of Harry Kendall Thaw for the murder of Stanford White resulted in both a breakthrough and a backlash. The sensational case gave women reporters unprecedented visibility and new opportunities to cover serious news. For weeks, every major newspaper in New York City, where the trial was held, printed column after column of woman-authored trial reports. Women reporters had written about trials before this one, but never in such detail, with so much publicity, or in the company of so many other women.[1] Yet the Thaw case also spawned the dismissive label, *sob sister,* that would dog the careers of female news writers for decades. The term was coined to describe the four women who sat at their own special press table in the crowded courtroom: Winifred Black, Dorothy Dix, Nixola Greeley-Smith, and Ada Patterson.[2] As an early press historian tells it, journalist Irvin S. Cobb, "looking a little wearily at the four fine-looking girls who spread their sympathy like jam, injected a scornful line into his copy about the 'sob sisters'" (Ross 65).[3] Denoting a female journalist who specialized in sentimental or human-interest stories, or, more generally, a woman writer "who could wring tears," *sob sister* was in common usage by 1910, thanks in part to the voluminous newspaper coverage of the Thaw case between 1906 and 1908 (Schilpp and Murphy 116).[4] "For too long," one journalism historian remarks, "it was used to describe any woman reporter" (Belford 106). It later became a derogatory label for women novelists whose work was considered contrived and excessively emotional.[5]

Recent studies have characterized turn-of-the-century news writing conventions, especially those that shaped realist and naturalist fiction, as inherently masculine.[6] This inaccuracy has encouraged literary historians to misread journalism as a masculine antidote for women's influence on fiction—a misreading that naturalizes terms like *sob sister* and obscures the visibility of women reporters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To attain a better understanding of the popular press's influence on literary authorship, scholars must develop a more nuanced view of news writing, one that treats sensational narratives as a complex phenomenon in their own right and examines journalism's objective ideal with the skepticism it merits. Although the original sob sisters, like most of their fellow reporters, did not generally go on to write fiction or poetry, they helped to forge an emotion-bound template that shaped perceptions of women's literary labor for years to come.

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In just three syllables, *sob sister* recast trailblazing professionals as gullible amateurs. Perhaps worse, the catchy alliteration implied that newswomen were inherently hypocritical, since they manufactured tears for profit.[7] It also linked female journalists to the emotionally charged sentimental fiction of the nineteenth century at a time when the American literary establishment was attacking the genre with renewed vigor as shallow and trite. The hyperexpressive prose associated with the newswomen neatly extended the tradition of popular melodrama, but viewed through the standard framework of American literary history, these journalistic pioneers appear hopelessly behind the intellectual climate of their times: their work seems as distant from the era's unflinching realist and naturalist fiction as it does from the emerging experimental work of the modernists. Although recent scholarship on the interplay of sentimentalism, realism, and modernism has unsettled the once-firm divisions between these expressive forms and challenged the literary periodization that rendered the sob sisters anachronistic,[8] the writings of these early newswomen have attracted attention only as a predictable enactment of pop-culture pathos.[9]

Shrugging off the sob sisters has caused critics to miss a complex, far more compelling story of gendered assumptions overturned, sexual violence unmasked, and narrative authority in flux. The newswomen's role was more vexed—and less soothingly domestic—than Cobb's appellation suggests. The explicit sexual content of the trial testimony, combined with the commentary of women whose presence in the courtroom was itself deemed newsworthy, ignited a highly charged spectacle starring not just the trial participants but the women reporters too. That spectacle gained force when new professional visibility for women collided with conflicting narratives of female ambition and sexual vulnerability. Attending to the origins of sob sisterhood reveals a dynamic of authorship and spectacle, publicity and power, that continues to reverberate in the American public sphere.

The explicit sexual content of the [Thaw murder] trial testimony, combined with the commentary of women whose presence in the courtroom was itself deemed newsworthy, ignited a highly charged spectacle starring not just the trial participants but the women reporters too.

Although the sob sisters have much to say about the perils of being a woman writer, they also tell us how the national imagination adapted the conventions of emotional expression to a new era of mass-market publicity. They wrote for the "yellow" press, not

the more restrained, intellectually minded newspapers, in part because elite journals were much less likely to hire women (Gottlieb 58). Thus they were already embedded in a feminized phenomenon, since the brash, popular newspapers that employed them were depicted as deviant, feminine, and uncivilized by rival newspapers like the *New York Times* (Mindich 129–32). Sob sisterhood, however, is best understood as a product of a print culture that included not only the yellow press but also elite newspapers such as the *Times,* whose trial coverage developed many of the same themes and drew upon the same operative conventions as the more sensational dailies.[10]

The newswomen's tears are metonymic, registering the emphatic embodiment of the woman writer. That embodiment shaped both women's writing and its reception. Moreover, their assumed inability to transcend their tears—their bodies, their femaleness—confirmed their inability to act as disinterested citizens in the public sphere. Women, after all, could not even be jurors in New York State in 1907. Yet the sob sisters, by interpreting the trial for their readers, anticipated future female jurors—a point not lost on the newswomen or their detractors. Thus these reporters also set the stage for future debates not just about women writers, but about all women who assumed public roles: Could women be admitted into a hierarchical, rule-bound space without damaging decorum beyond repair? Were women really more emotional than men? What place did emotion and sympathy have, if any, in rational deliberations? The news coverage addressed such questions day after day, as the trial attained the status of a national event.

Despite its modern venue, the sob sister phenomenon harks back to a nineteenth-century notion of sentimental reading that Karen Sánchez-Eppler labels "a bodily act," a physically intense experience in which "tears designate a border realm between the story and its reading" (26–27). These news narratives are indebted to literary sentimentalism's focus on human connection and affectional loss (Dobson 266–67). Yet the phrase *sob sister* and its cognate, *sob story,* inject a jarring note of self-interest and acknowledged artifice into the sentimental tradition. For the New Woman, crying became a career move. If, as June Howard recently argued, the sentimental always calls attention to the constructed nature of emotion, marking "a moment when the discursive processes that construct emotion become visible" (245), then the newswomen became professional markers of just such processes. Newspapers marketed their stories as expressions of womanly sympathy, playing up a gendered role that nineteenth-century sentimentalism had solidified. A close reading of the newspaper accounts, however, reveals not only that the accused murderer (a man) showed *more* emotion throughout the trial than the women in court, but also that male-authored and female-authored coverage of the case was equally overwrought.[11] Nevertheless, the sob sisters, not their male counterparts, became focal points for arguments about the nature of objectivity, the dangers of sexual desire, even the national passion for publicity.

The newswomen emerge as central to the Thaw case because they act as vehicles of publicity, as particularized embodiments of what Michael Warner has called the "impossible" body of the mass public itself (250). Playing the dual role of objects and agents within the tradition-bound structure of the court, they symbolize the mass reading public, representing its interests and manifesting its desires. The trial coverage—with its repeated professions of sympathy and its desperate need to imagine a universe where redemption is possible and evil can be recognized and contained—also demonstrates American popular culture's refusal to relinquish the consolations of the sentimental. In the Thaw case, we see a newly secularized nation reimagining sentimentalism through a strikingly modern mass-media spectacle. As agents of that reimagining, the sob sisters embody the contradictions upon which it relies.

1. The Case

In June 1906, Harry Thaw shot and killed Stanford White in front of hundreds of witnesses on the rooftop garden of Madison Square. Because both the killer and his victim were well known, the crime became front-page news for months. A playboy with a bad temper, Thaw was born into one of Pittsburgh's richest families and heir to a coal-mining fortune. White—who had designed New York City landmarks such as the Washington Square arch and the original Madison Square Garden (the site of his murder)—was famous for high living as well as brilliant architecture. A married man in his early fifties, White had cultivated a string of teenaged mistresses.

The central figure of the trial, however, was neither the volatile playboy nor the flamboyant architect, but rather Thaw's young wife, Evelyn Nesbit Thaw. It was on her behalf, Harry insisted, that he had killed White. To support this claim, Evelyn, a former chorus girl and artist's model who had grown up poor in Pittsburgh, took the stand to testify calmly and in compelling detail about her sexual involvement with White. Her testimony, reprinted verbatim by every major newspaper in New York,

explained exactly when (she was 16), where (in a mirrored bedroom), and how (he drugged her with champagne and possibly something else) she lost her virginity to White.[12] Harry's defense attorneys used the story to argue that his outrage at his wife's "ruin" caused him to go temporarily insane on that June night. Yet Thaw's was an oddly retrospective rage; his defense insisted that he went crazy over an incident that had occurred *before* he married Evelyn.

The prosecutor questioned Evelyn at length about other men she had dated, forcing her to admit that her involvement with White lasted long after their initial sexual encounter and confronting her with evidence that Harry was an abusive husband and a habitual drug user. It didn't work. Even faced with a four-year-old affidavit, signed in her own hand, describing a chilling incident that occurred while she was traveling with Harry in Europe—he rented an isolated castle in Austria, took her there, whipped her repeatedly, and kept her a virtual prisoner for three weeks—Evelyn did not waver. She so successfully cast Harry as a heroic avenger of besmirched innocence that the jury deadlocked and the state had to conduct another trial the following year.[13]

The *New York American*'s front-page coverage of Evelyn's testimony could serve as a classic example of sob-sister trial coverage. The mournful article depicts Evelyn as a martyred wife who humiliated herself publicly to save her husband's life.

> Throwing aside all modesty and pride, sinking every feeling to woman dear, baring her bleeding heart to the world—Evelyn Nesbit Thaw flung wide open the book of her tragic life, that all might read.
>
> A tremendous sacrifice, and a soul-crushing story.
>
> But in the hour of deepest woe the girl wife of Harry Kendall Thaw has this consolation, which will be all sufficient balm to her broken heart,—she has probably saved the life of her husband. (Hoster, "Prisoner" 1)

In its expression of moral outrage, its dramatic emphasis on emotional suffering, and its sympathetic identification with a wronged woman, this passage contains all the elements of the sob-sisterly story, save one: a sob sister. It was written by a man, William Hoster, who was responsible for most of the *American*'s front-page coverage of the Thaw trial. Hoster's reportage echoes the tone and content of many other accounts of Evelyn's testimony, authored by both men and women.[14] Assuredly, the sob sisters employed some bombastic rhetoric, occasionally trivializing not only themselves but all women, as when Greeley-Smith wrote of Harry Thaw's sister: "To the woman observer, quite the most peculiar thing about her is her fondness for pleats" ("Countess" 3). Yet the newswomen's prose was no more purple than their male colleagues', nor were their articles substantially more sympathetic to the accused murderer or his wife.

Press historians have described the general sentimentality of the era's news writing. One study notes wryly, "[T]he men who also covered the trials and did similar kinds of writing all escaped being called 'sob brothers,' 'weeping willies,' or any such appellative" (Schilpp and Murphy 151–52). The sob-sister label illustrates how easily misogynist stereotypes could be marshaled to obstruct women's professional progress; the snappy phrase slipped newswomen into a well-articulated feminized tradition. Yet simply noting the injustice does not explain it. What allowed the label to stick so tenaciously to women even in an era of new opportunities for higher education and careers? Why could the "weeping willies" sink comfortably into obscurity, while the sob sisters' melodramatic excesses would haunt women writers for years to come?

Spectacle, not style, made the difference. The newswomen's role as vehicles of publicity, as both objects and agents of the news, cemented their emergent identity as sob sisters. This identity was forged by their contested physical presence in court, by the self-referentiality of the "woman's view" promoted in their articles, and by the always implied, sometimes overt reciprocity between Evelyn Nesbit Thaw's body and the bodies of the women reporters. Their womanhood, defined most vividly by their capacity for sympathy, was repeatedly emphasized. The genteel photographic portraits that accompanied the newswomen's articles made their gender explicit, as did headlines like Greeley-Smith's "Thaw in Court as Seen by a Woman" and Emma H. deZouche's "Actors in Thaw Tragedy Seen by Woman's Eyes." In an era when bylines were used sparingly, a sob sister's name often appeared in triplicate: in a headline, a byline, and again as a caption for her own photograph.[15] Dorothy Dix and Winifred Black, the most established writers of the group, frequently received such attention, as in Dix's "Thaw Would Be Acquitted by Woman Jury, Says Dorothy Dix" and Black's "Juror Voting to Convict Deserves Divorce, Declares Winifred Black." While editors also published photographs and promoted name recognition of male columnists, they made women's pictures bigger and promoted their names more aggressively.

Newspapers also advertised women reporters' capacity for emotion. Like male writers, the sob sisters filed reports describing each day's main events. But unlike the newsmen, they were also expected to exhibit, as an advertisement for Winifred Black indi-

cates, their "depth of womanly feeling" (Advertisement 2). Their niche well marked, the newswomen were assigned to take the courtroom's emotional temperature. At the same time, they were on display from the moment they stepped into court. In the spectacle of sympathy they enacted, the white female body—as source of tears, as object of desire—became both fetish and filter, anchoring their narratives. As tears became their trademark, their bodies mediated the trial's most explosive content, delivered through the testimony of the accused murderer's wife.

Evelyn's story of sexual victimization, recounted to an overwhelmingly male audience, placed extraordinary demands upon the small cadre of newswomen, who were called upon to identify with the long-suffering wife while maintaining enough distance to protect their respectability. Confronted with their vulnerability as women, it was both necessary and dangerous for them to flaunt the link—the bodily reciprocity—between themselves and the seductive star witness. As a group, the sob sisters embodied the contradictions of the publicity that surrounded the case. If they wrote with "great depth of womanly feeling," they performed as advertised but risked being dismissed as irrational. If they wrote like the men, they destroyed the most frequently cited rationale for their presence in court, their ability to offer a woman's point of view. In fact, the newswomen did write much like the men, but the spectacle required them to appear, in the words of one columnist, as "women first, writers after" (Fairfax, "Calls" 5).[16]

Subjected to near-constant surveillance, literally set apart from the rest of the courtroom, the newswomen came to embody the sexual vulnerability of white women. (The news coverage repeatedly noted the whiteness of Evelyn's skin.) The fact that *none* of the trial reports interpreted Harry Thaw's obsession with his wife's loss of virginity as abnormal is a trenchant reminder of the privileged place that white women's sexual purity held in the national imagination. The horror of Evelyn's "ruin," not the act of murder, constituted the trial's emotional core. The sob sisters mediated that emotion, but it was the murderer himself whose horror was portrayed as most authentic. According to all news accounts, the first and loudest sobs in the courtroom came from Harry, not from his wife, mother, or sister, nor from the women reporters. When Evelyn testified about the first time she had sex with Stanford White, Harry burst into tears. The *New York American*'s front-page headline announced, "Prisoner in Tears During Wife's Ordeal" (Hoster, "Prisoner" 1). "Harry Thaw sobbed unrestrainedly," reported the *New York Evening World* ("Mrs. Evelyn Nesbit Thaw" 1). The same man who had donned a long black raincoat on a warm June night to hide his gun could not listen dry-eyed to the story of his wife's champagne-soaked encounter with White. According to the *New York Times,* "his agony had no hint of theatrical effect about it. He drew a handkerchief from his pocket, when he could stand the story no longer, and his heavy shoulders bent over the table. His face was hidden, but the broad shoulders twitched. Those near him could hear great gulping sounds as he fought to master his emotion" ("Evelyn Thaw Tells Her Story" 1). Harry's agony appears both reassuringly masculine and deeply authentic. Unlike Evelyn, whose performance on the stand was reviewed like the staging of a play, and unlike the sob sisters, who were accused of manufacturing tears to advance their careers, Harry escapes the charge of playacting. This is all the more startling because his loss of composure so clearly reinforced his defense against the murder charge. Evelyn testified that Harry asked her to repeat the details of her initial sexual encounter with White over and over, both before and after they were married. During these retellings, he would grow agitated, pace the room, and sob aloud, Evelyn said. Harry's attorneys, in turn, argued that Evelyn's story drove Harry to commit murder. The tears Harry shed in court bolstered his defense by illustrating the story's continued effect on him. Somehow, however, Harry's sobs were transferred to the women who wrote about them. Tracing that transference requires a closer look at the newswomen's physical presence in court, their bodily reciprocity with Evelyn, and their interpretations of the case against Harry.

2. "Excluded as Far as Possible": The Spectacle of Women in Court

The courtroom was packed on opening day according to the *Times,* which reported that "there was a collection of reporters and newspaper artists such as has never come together before, even in New York" ("Thaw Trial Begins" 1). From the beginning, female spectators were singled out as disruptive. "Foremost among those clamoring for admission were women, attired in gorgeous raiment, and to whom 'No' had no significance," said another first-day report (Hoster, "Complete" 3). At least one editorial cartoonist mocked women's interest in attending the trial before it even began: One paper published a drawing titled "The Eternal Enigma—Woman's Curiosity," depicting a flock of women rushing headlong through a door labeled "The Thaw Case" (Ketten 14). Blank-eyed but determined, moving en masse, the women bend forward eagerly, yet they are almost indistinguishable from one another in a crush of skirts, coats, muffs, and plumed hats. To

a person, they appear unthinking, aggressive, careless of others. That women's curiosity about the case would be labeled an "enigma" is itself mysterious: Given that the testimony centered on a woman's experience, why *wouldn't* women be interested? The implication is that the women's curiosity was necessarily idle; they were assumed to have nothing but prurient interest in the case. The cartoonist thus channels general anxieties about the mass public's access to the courtroom into his treatment of women's interest. The court echoed this strategy. Most of the people hurtling toward the courtroom door were men, yet it was primarily the women whose presence was regulated, reported, and debated.

Excluding women swiftly became the primary strategy for controlling the crowd.[17] Citing "the necessity of absolute decorum," the presiding judge, James Fitzgerald, imposed strict rules to keep order. Journalists, perhaps eager to curry favor, reported these measures approvingly: "Women especially will be excluded as far as possible. There really is not too much room for those with legitimate business" ("Thaw Stirred to Wrath" 3). Only women who could prove they were on official reporting assignments would be welcomed inside.

By banning all women from the courtroom *except* the newswomen and the defendant's family and friends, the judge created a professional pressure cooker for the female reporters. His order ensured their visibility and made their presence worthy of comment. Since the reporters were the only women allowed to remain other than Harry's wife, mother, and sister, and two family friends, they were inevitably linked to that small group, the nexus of trial publicity. Moreover, the newswomen acted as a lightning rod for the most troubling questions raised by the testimony. They took notes while witnesses documented the privileges of wealthy men and the limited options of poor women. They listened to detailed descriptions of Stanford White's parties, where provocatively dressed adolescent girls were made available to gratify rich, powerful men. They watched the prosecutor try to rattle Evelyn by implying that an operation to remove her appendix had actually been an abortion. In short, they observed a frontal assault on middle-class norms, and their response to the testimony indexed its disorienting effects. After the first day of Evelyn's sexually explicit testimony, the *Times*'s front-page report called attention to the female spectators to heighten the story's shock value. The article begins sedately: "Dressed as a schoolgirl might have been dressed by her mother, Mrs. Evelyn Nesbit Thaw yesterday told the jury . . . the whole story of her life, and her relations with White." The article then pauses to observe, "There were women in the courtroom. The story caused them to bow their heads and hide their faces" ("Evelyn Thaw Tells Her Story" 1). The news was not just the revelation of White's coerced sex with a teenaged Evelyn. Rather, it was the combination of Evelyn's testimony and the response of the women who were in court to hear it.

Even without a female audience, the trial content was likely to inspire public fascination. In addition to front-page coverage—including multiple articles each day, drawings of participants, and diagrams of the studio to which Stanford White took Evelyn—the newspapers filled pages with full stenographic reports of the proceedings. The publicity blizzard dismayed some readers. Church groups from as far away as Chattanooga, Tennessee, debated its wisdom, and some asked the government to censor the news coverage (see "Object to Thaw Testimony").[18] President Theodore Roosevelt took such umbrage at the newspapers' willingness to print "the full disgusting particulars" of Evelyn's testimony that he asked the Postmaster General to refuse to mail the offending journals ("Roosevelt Plans Thaw Censorship" 1). Although the threatened censorship never occurred, it inspired yet more front-page news.[19]

Once the testimony veered into the territory of dog whips, drug syringes, and the sexual initiation of adolescent girls, reports suggested that even more unauthorized women tried to gain entry to court.[20] The sob sisters trod carefully to avoid antagonizing the court, articulating women's legitimate interests in the trial and separating themselves from the unauthorized observers. Several mentioned the judge's ban on female spectators approvingly. None complained in print. Some did argue, however, that female readers, particularly young girls, *needed* to know details about sexual predators. "Girls, are you reading all about the Thaw trial?" asked Beatrice Fairfax. "If you are, I want you to take it to heart and profit by it. There is a lesson for every one of you in it. No doubt at one time in her career you all envied Evelyn Nesbit Thaw. . . . But now, girls, see where that 'luck' has landed her. Every one of you, no matter how poor or hard-worked you may be, is a thousand times better off" ("What Girls May Learn" 8). Fairfax, like many of her colleagues, recognized that fascination with Evelyn's wealth, beauty, and celebrity could mitigate the morally bracing effects of her downfall. Thus Fairfax reminds her (assumed) virginal readers that in the economy of virtue, Evelyn was poor indeed.

The sob sisters expressed no solidarity with the women who attended court without "legitimate business," sometimes even joining in the game of mocking the interlopers.[21] Adopting a briskly condescending tone, they sought to divert their readers' attention from the humiliating implications of their own embodi-

ment and to resist their role as symbols of the mass public's prurient interest. The sob sisters may have had even more reason to scoff at the female spectators than the newsmen, who ran little risk of being identified with the curious crowd in strawberry pink dresses (Black, "Testimony Too Tame" 3). Because their professional place in court was so tenuous, they repeatedly set themselves apart from those whose attendance could be dismissed as frivolous and unseemly. Here we arrive at a basic conundrum of the female court reporter's situation. Her womanhood *was* her angle. But her womanhood was also her primary obstacle to getting the story.

Newswomen earned special notoriety simply by being the only *authorized* female observers.[22] Their comings and goings were reported with equal interest. During the district attorney's aggressive cross-examination of Evelyn, for instance, several of them left the room. William Hoster uses the departure to punctuate his description of Evelyn's performance on the stand. The passage reads almost like a rehearsal of a sexual assault, crowned by the newswomen's exodus:

> She who had passed through the terrible ordeal of direct examination without tears or faltering, finally broke down under the strain. The tears came, great waves of emotion swept over her, and then, like an avalanche, came her confessions—a vast outpouring of hidden secrets, rapidly, eloquently, with entire abandonment. . . .
>
> [The prosecutor] took her in detail through every meeting she had with White following the incident of the studio [where they first had sex], pinned her down to the most damning facts, extorted admissions, drew forth explanations, descriptions, sentiments, thoughts, motives. The only women present—newspaper writers, in a measure hardened to the facts of the underworld—rose and hurried from the courtroom. ("Mrs. Thaw" 2)

By noting that "the only women present" fled from the spectacle of Evelyn's distress, Hoster caps his portrayal with the suggestion that even newswomen "hardened to the facts of the underworld" could not bear to witness this pseudorape. In doing so, he correlates Evelyn's sobs, her sexual victimization, and her forced confessions with the women reporters' abrupt departure. The passage links the witness to the newswomen, but even more remarkably, it connects tears and sex, linking one physical expression to another. Hoster's narration of Evelyn's breakdown in sexualized terms may be conventional, but in shifting directly from the witness's tears to the newswomen's rush for the door, he suggests that the newswomen responded to Evelyn's loss of bodily control by losing control of themselves. Rather than being riveted to their seats, scribbling down Evelyn's "vast outpouring of secrets," they ran away. Their embodiment—registered through Evelyn's tears—impaired their reporting by suggesting a professional conflict of interest: How can a reporter cover a trial when she can't stand to hear the testimony?

Obviously, if the newswomen had to prove their femininity by leaving every time a witness broke down or a spicy detail was introduced, their trial coverage would not amount to much. The newswomen had to answer this challenge by finding another way to reassert their womanhood, one that would protect their special angle while legitimating their continued presence in court. They found it in the figure that dominated the news reports: Evelyn Nesbit Thaw.

3. The "Enigma Wife": Interpreting Evelyn

Evelyn was the pivot around which the trial coverage revolved. "So far as the outsider can see, Harry Thaw's case looks doubtful," Clara Morris wrote as the trial began. "Yet it is impossible to consider him without including his enigma wife. Nowhere can you open a door in this case without finding Evelyn Nesbit Thaw behind it" ("Thaw Has Crown" 2). Dorothy Dix observed that as the trial wore on, public interest only increased in "the little butterfly woman who was the cause of the tragedy, and to whom every thread of the tangled evidence goes back" ("Sympathy" 3). Behind every door, at the end of every thread of evidence, Evelyn was imagined as the key that would unlock the case.

Newspapers reported minutely on Evelyn's dress, hair, complexion, voice, and demeanor, featuring sultry photographs from her modeling days: Evelyn adorned in jewels, curled up in a kimono, sprawled on a tiger skin, draped in gauzy fabric. Drawings of her demure appearance in court, veiled and girlish, supplemented the images, often taking up more space on the front page than the text of the trial reports.[23] While the sob sisters shared the general fascination with the chorus girl who married a millionaire, they also produced some notably dry-eyed evaluations of her. "I have no illusions about Evelyn Thaw," wrote Greeley-Smith in a cool analysis of the star witness's sexual history. "I think merely that she was sold to one man and later sold herself to another" ("Evelyn Nesbit Thaw Prepared" 3). Greeley-Smith interprets Evelyn's sex life through an economic, not moral, frame-

work, and characterizes her marriage as a form of legal prostitution, displaying more keen awareness of the consequences of socioeconomic oppression than "depth of womanly feeling" (3).

Such remarks, however, grow increasingly rare as the trial progresses. Their rational tone threatened the newswomen's niche as emotional chroniclers of the trial. Moreover, the newswomen's critical distance from Evelyn narrowed as they became increasingly pulled into the trial as participant-observers. Their visibility paralleled Evelyn's, both in court and in newsprint, since the photographs that accompanied their articles often ran side by side with images of Evelyn. Drawn into the spectacle they wanted to write about, the newswomen managed their visibility by rearranging the lines of sisterhood in strategic ways. Already vulnerable to charges of unwomanly conduct, they authorized their role as courtroom interpreters by claiming special insight into Evelyn's plight.

By identifying with Evelyn, the sob sisters turned their assumed womanly weaknesses, particularly emotional vulnerability, into assets. In a report on an especially harsh day of Evelyn's cross-examination, Ada Patterson makes this strategy explicit, describing Evelyn's glances toward the newswomen as appeals for sisterly sympathy: "'You are women,' she seemed to say . . . 'Being women won't you understand?'" ("All Against Her" 3). Patterson emphasizes the special rapport the women journalists enjoyed with Evelyn. To the question she plants in Evelyn's mind—"Being women won't you understand?"—Patterson's article rings with assurances that the newswomen did, indeed, understand. Yet that intimacy came with a price. A hypersexualized figure lodged in the eye of a publicity hurricane, Evelyn posed special challenges to the writers who staked a professional claim on their sympathy for her. Those challenges—and the bodily reciprocity that was both imperative and dangerous for the newswomen—are vividly apparent in Greeley-Smith's report on Evelyn's cross-examination. The headline, "The Vivisection of a Woman's Soul," imagines the soul as a material body being dismembered and disemboweled, anticipating the article's portrayal of an intensely physical threat, not just to Evelyn, but to the women reporters as well.

Greeley-Smith begins by establishing the image of a young woman forced to make sexual confessions to a male crowd: "Before an audience of many hundred men young Mrs. Thaw was compelled to reveal in all its hideousness every detail of her association with Stanford White after his crime against her" (3). Greeley-Smith then describes the reaction of the female reporters: "The newspaper women, perhaps half a dozen in number, whose duty it is to report the trial, writhed under the sting of the prosecutor's questions, bowed their heads before the hideousness from which Mr. Jerome [the prosecutor] ruthlessly tore the veil. Some of them fled before it. I honor those who remained, though I was not of them" (3). Here the sob sisters' identification with Evelyn is graphically physical: they writhe over questions directed at Evelyn. Their response to the testimony is more than visceral; they are said to feel as if they were on the stand themselves. The boundary that separates the witness from the writers—"the railed space" where, as Patterson noted, the newswomen were ensconced—collapses. This passage illustrates the bodily reciprocity between Evelyn and the women writers, then uses that reciprocity to confront the women writers' conundrum (how can they write about testimony they can't bear to hear?). In Greeley-Smith's report, her flight asserts her femininity while dramatizing her identification with Evelyn. In the logic of bodily reciprocity, even the gaps in her reports—the moments she had to look away, the times she left the room—intensify her connection to Evelyn.

Greeley-Smith then launches into a commentary on "duty" that highlights the tensions structuring the women's coverage. Definitions of womanhood clash with models of professionalism, while desire to identify with Evelyn competes with the fear of being swept into the category of sexual victim.

> There is no duty to a newspaper—and none that any newspaper would wish to enforce—that should not have succumbed to the horrors spoken in that courtroom. But there was a duty of giving to the trembling, weeping woman on the witness-stand any support that the presence of members of her own sex might afford. I think all the women present felt it, and only a sense of utter mental and physical nausea made any of them forget it and fly from the flaunted shames, the dark horrors of that court-room.
>
> Moreover, they fled from it in vain. For these horrors followed them into the sunlit street, into their offices, back to their homes, and kept relentless vigil at their pillows, making them wonder if the iniquity through which Evelyn Thaw had passed was to leave a permanent polluting stamp on all who heard it. ("Vivisection" 3)

Articulating a position in which gender solidarity transcends professional identity, Greeley-Smith argues that even professional duty would not require the newswomen to sit through Evelyn's testimony. Rather, it was the duty of sisterhood, of providing Evelyn with the support that "members of her own sex might afford." Only physical weakness—"a sense of utter mental and physical

nausea”—excused the newswomen from fulfilling this higher duty. Yet even running away does not allow them to escape the specter of sexual victimization. Greeley-Smith imagines them haunted, at work, at home, in their bedrooms, by their new insight into sexual predators. If the physical link between Evelyn and the writers gave the women’s news writing a special edge, it also made them vulnerable. Would they carry “a permanent polluting stamp”?

4. Managing the Blush of Authorship

As Greeley-Smith’s haunted report intimates, identifying with Evelyn Nesbit Thaw was both profitable and dangerous. It was a tricky business to be linked so intimately with a figure that inspired so much ambivalence. Was she victim or vixen? Besieged truth-teller or accomplished liar? Reporters of both sexes searched for clues. Nearly every writer noted the contrast between Evelyn’s sordid story and her girlishly innocent appearance. Her youth, her diminutive size, and her childish clothes were invoked repeatedly. Patterson called her “the slim girl whose wan face is waxen as the petals of a calla lily, the wife whose strength is frailness” (“Mrs. Thaw’s” 5). Similarly, the *Times* saw Evelyn as “a little bit of a thing who seemed as if she could never be the cause of all this trouble” (“Thaw Trial Begins” 2). Evelyn was, in fact, petite: Viola Rodgers reported that she was under five feet tall and weighed 92 pounds (4). But in these accounts, and many others like it, Evelyn appears to be a naïf, a passive victim who cannot be held responsible for what happened. Later, Dix expressed this view more baldly: “Whatever her faults, she has never had a chance, poor little plaything of fate” (“Evelyn Thaw Pitiful Plaything” 4). This sexless vision positioned the child-woman as object of desire, perversely made more desirable by her own *lack* of desire.

Evelyn’s commanding performance in court belied this innocent image. The reporters’ fascination went beyond the incongruity of her schoolgirl demeanor and sleazy past. It was not just her story, but the *way* she told the story: articulately, precisely, calmly. How could this small person—a “plaything of fate” blown about by a bad world—remain so tough on the witness stand? Her self-control inspired almost as much comment as her appearance. Reporters contrasted Harry’s display of feeling with Evelyn’s self-possession. The same article that noted the “great gulping sounds” Harry made while Evelyn described her first sexual encounter also observed that she “never once lost control of herself” (“Evelyn Thaw Tells Her Story” 1). Although Hoster, in the passage noted above, made much of an apparent breakdown during an early phase of cross-examination, most reporters marveled at Evelyn’s lack of emotion. After days of testifying, even while answering hostile questions from the prosecutor, she gave few visible signs of distress.

The sob sisters found Evelyn’s stoicism as remarkable as their male colleagues. “She held her self-control wonderfully for a time,” noted Black. “Clenching her little fists, she had herself go on and on to the very depths of horror” (“People Were Stilled” 3).[24] The paucity of Evelyn’s tears contradicted the repeated assertions of her childlike nature. Her self-possession also stood in ironic contrast to the bodily control she had lost to the men in her life. Moreover, her ability to suppress her tears during painful self-disclosure contradicted the feminine stereotype used to brand the newswomen as sob sisters. To some, of course, her self-control was itself suspicious. That Evelyn could face all those men without visible embarrassment proved her moral failings. Calling her “extraordinarily shallow,” deZouche condemned her: “Evelyn Thaw is not shameless; she is deficient in sensibility” (“Bared Her Life’s Secrets” 5). DeZouche’s review of Evelyn’s testimony, vicious as it was, accurately observed that Evelyn defied standards of middle-class femininity. Objectified by every newspaper in the city, alternately presented as the consummate sex kitten and the virgin wronged, Evelyn confounded the categories. Somehow, the newswomen had to acknowledge that, girlishness aside, Evelyn was not passive; this object of desire had her own desires as well. The sob sisters’ male counterparts faced this same problem, too, but with much less at stake: the newsmen were not identified with Evelyn in the same visceral way.

This struggle to represent Evelyn is especially clear in the accounts of the moment on the witness stand when, according to most reports, Evelyn’s poise utterly deserted her. In a last-ditch attempt to unsettle the star witness during cross-examination, the prosecutor read aloud from her diary. The diary had been obtained from Evelyn’s mother, who was cooperating with the prosecution. (Evelyn was estranged from her mother, in part because Harry’s lawyers had insinuated that her mother prostituted her to White.) The prosecutor selected a diary passage—reprinted the next day by every newspaper in the city—drawn from Evelyn’s observations of her classmates at a school she attended briefly when she was 17. It suggests that young Evelyn harbored ambitions that went beyond the domestic sphere.

> [A] girl who has always been good and never had a word of scandal breathed about her is fortunate in more ways than one.
>
> These girls are all just that kind. They have been kept

> from the world all their lives and know very little of the mean side of it. And then, on the other hand, there is not one of them who will ever be 'anything.' And by 'anything' I mean just that. They will perhaps be good wives and mothers and die good wives and mothers. Most people would say, What could be better? But whether it is ambition or foolishness, I want to be a good actress first. ("Witness Blushes" 3)

Hoping to embarrass Evelyn, the prosecutor had chosen a passage that struck at the heart of her witness-stand persona as a dutiful wife who sacrificed her reputation to her husband. The diary documented the teenaged Evelyn's critique of the social expectations for women that the witness-stand Evelyn was striving to fulfill. It proved not just her awareness that "most people" believed nothing could be better than for a woman to die a good wife and mother, but also that she knowingly resisted the prescription. When she writes of her classmates, "there is not one of them who will ever be 'anything,'" she equates traditional womanhood with achieving nothing. The prosecutor exposed her as a woman who cared more about having a career than being a wife and mother. It was that much better that the career Evelyn had chosen was acting, since this ambition could be used to discredit her testimony as a nice bit of stage work.

The tactic worked. After days of trying, the prosecutor succeeded in forcing Evelyn into an involuntary revelation. Under the front-page headline "Witness Blushes for First Time in Her Six Days of Testimony," the *New York Times* coverage opened by reprinting the diary passage quoted above. Then the reporter gleefully described Evelyn's reaction, noting that the witness "blushed for the first time during the six days she has been on the witness stand. The soft, ivory tint of Evelyn Nesbit Thaw's face became suffused with a delicate pink, which gradually deepened on the cheeks to a blush. She had not expected a disclosure of the secrets of her own mind and heart as a schoolgirl" (1). Building on Evelyn's confessed acting ambition, the reporter presents her courtroom appearance as if she were in costume, "still garbed as a schoolgirl and affecting a childish lisp" (1). He juxtaposes the outfit and voice to her blush, a physical response over which Evelyn apparently has no control. The blush, then, tokens "the secrets of her own mind and heart" (1); it authenticates the diary's sentiments and belies the innocence suggested by Evelyn's dress and manner.[25] She is no longer the sexual object made more enticing by the absence of her own desires. Instead, the blush verifies Evelyn's life of desire, revealing not only her personal ambitions but also the self-awareness to be ashamed of them.

Samuel Hopkins Adams, writing for *The World,* also noted that Evelyn responded to the diary "with a distinct reddening of the cheeks" ("School Diary" 2). Like the *Times* reporter, he interpreted this uncharacteristic lapse as deeply telling. "It was the blush of authorship," Adams wrote, "and it was, I believe, the first weakness of the sort that the witness had evinced at all. The most distressing parts of her testimony had brought no blood to her face—only given her a waxy pallor" (2). Evelyn's blush—an uncontrollable sign of physical discomfort, a bodily betrayal of sorts—appeared not when she described waking up disoriented in White's bedroom, not when she rejected the prosecutor's insinuation that she had had an abortion, and not when she denied that Harry had stripped her naked and whipped her in an Austrian castle. Rather, she blushed over her own written words, over her professed desire to be something other than a wife and mother. When Adams calls it "the blush of authorship," he imagines Evelyn not as a bashful writer, but as a woman whose own body has betrayed her duplicity. Stressing her surprise at the diary's appearance in court and assuming that Evelyn could not blush on purpose, Adams juxtaposes the crimson truth of her worldly ambitions with her lily-white performance of innocence.

Male- and female-authored articles diverge more distinctly in their coverage of Evelyn's blush than in any other part of the trial. The sob sisters refused to gush over this testimony as their male colleagues had. Less eager to crow over a young girl's privately documented career ambitions, more sensitive to the blush of authorship that might appear on their own faces, they played down the diary's significance. Dix wrote that Evelyn's cross-examination "was brought to a dramatic and pathetic close by the foolish introduction of her schoolgirl diary" and called it "a quaint and rather piteous human document" ("Evelyn Thaw Has Triumphed" 2). Youthful ambition appears natural, not pathological, here. "Though Mr. Jerome [the district attorney] read the slangy passages of this interesting human document with as insinuating an emphasis as his varied voice could summon," Greeley-Smith reported, "the worst interpretation that Mrs. Thaw's worst enemy could place upon it is that at sixteen her view of life was, as the New York vernacular phrases it, 'hip'" ("Evelyn Thaw's Schoolgirl Diary" 3). The newswomen defended Evelyn's right to express herself without restraint in her own diary and scoffed at the portentous tone of the newsmen's coverage. Their response, calibrated to sidestep debate over the propriety of Evelyn's ambitions, was indulgent, understanding, sisterly. In deflecting attention from the revelation of Evelyn's desires, they also deflected attention from their own.

5. Called for Jury Duty? On the Judgment of Women

By bringing the blush of authorship into the courtroom, the sob sisters inevitably engaged fundamental questions about how the public sphere was constituted and who could be allowed to operate within it. Thus the question—what if women *were* jurors?—demanded to be asked and answered.[26] Early in the trial, Clara Morris confesses that she is grateful the defendant is a man. Ever sensitive to the male gaze, Morris asks, "When was a female defendant ever tried by twelve of her equals?" ("The Room" 3). Certainly the Enlightenment ideal of the civil public—where individual interests were eschewed in favor of interests that could claim universality—sought to exclude the emotional baggage that women, whether burdened by natural inclination or social expectation, brought into court. But if women were already interpreting the trial for the public, why couldn't they interpret it for the law?

The few times that the newswomen defend their presence in court and acknowledge the controversy surrounding their trial coverage, they take on just such concerns. Some argue for women's judgment as an alternative mode of justice, while others minimize the threat women pose to the disinterested ideal championed by the masculinized public sphere. Arguing that the newswomen's excessive sympathy was a badge of honor, Beatrice Fairfax employs a conventional line of defense. "The little handful of women journalists who sit together in one corner of the courtroom have been dubbed the 'pity platoon' by some scoffer who wrote better than he knew. . . . [A]ll honor to them that they are women first and writers after" ("Calls" 5). Fairfax's formula supports the logic of the sob-sister label by representing the newswomen's sex roles as necessarily prior to and more important than their professional roles. Equating a capacity for pity with honorable womanhood, she imagines the female writers as release valves for the human emotion felt by everyone in the courtroom. Shunted into one corner of the courtroom, these sob sisters promise to humanize the law without disrupting the male hierarchy that governs the public sphere.

Not all of the newswomen take such a safe route, however. Despite the myriad ways they were aligned with Evelyn Nesbit Thaw, several journalists invoked a model of public service that proved more soldierlike than sisterly. In one of the most illuminating defenses, Patterson argues for the value of the women reporters' emotional contributions as writers *and* potential jurors. Her article "Women Juries in Future Foreseen as Real Necessity" balances advocating women's public roles and apologizing for them. By disavowing her status as an embodiment of the mass public's interest, Patterson also writes *against* the spectacle that was defining sob sisterhood. She begins by acknowledging the controversy in general terms, suggesting that her male colleagues resented the presence of newswomen: "Perhaps by reason of their presence the certain male representatives were relegated to less comfortable seats. Perhaps that presence suppressed a tendency to too candid comment. Perhaps it represented to the caviliers [*sic*] a lessening of their revenue" (3). Implying that the objections to women's presence are inherently selfish, she suggests that the male reporters wanted only more space for themselves, more freedom to make inappropriate remarks, and more money. Patterson also acknowledges the strength of the public disapproval, however. She notes that some people disagreed with the judge's decision to allow any women into court, including those employed by newspapers, and she delicately defends the judge's ruling: "By his act in admitting [women] Judge Fitzgerald reflected the spirit of his time. That spirit is that woman must shoulder her burden and march on uncomplainingly on all the forced marches of life. If woman has ever been a mere kitten of humanity that time has passed. She is a soldier in the army of life" (3). By linking women's public roles to the "spirit of time," Patterson recognizes women's rise in power as a critical feature of modernity itself.

Adopting a self-consciously masculine model replete with martial metaphors, Patterson insists that the newswomen are performing an unpleasant public duty. She distinguishes the reporters from the casual female spectators who were accused of frivolity and voyeurism by stressing the assignment's disagreeable nature. She even insists that the newswomen would prefer to avoid the trial altogether: "Of the handful of women in the so-called royal box of the yellow-walled courtroom there is not one who, if asked whether she wanted to attend the Thaw trial, would not have answered 'No.' Of course, they would rather have gone shopping or to a matinee or for a drive in the park" (3). Reminding her readers that the newswomen enjoy typical female pastimes, Patterson feminizes her colleagues while turning the charge of frivolity on its head. In her formulation, the sob sisters have proved their seriousness by forcing themselves to attend the trial, by *not* going shopping or to a matinee. She elaborates on the military analogy: "Good soldiers they, when ordered to serve in the Thaw trial they obeyed. The managing editors who, in planning the handling of the big trial as generals plan their campaigns, assigned women to the field, took no arbitrary step, obeyed no erratic impulse, made no experiment. They supplied what the public demands, and the public demands that women shall supplement men in the world's work" (3). For Patterson, the newswomen are "good soldiers"

who are *supplementing* men, patriots serving the republic, not the morbid curiosity of the masses. She offers a broad vision of women's influence on the public sphere, prophesying that women will help to transform the American justice system. Indeed, these sob sisters' presence in court casts them as the logical forerunners of women jurors. "The judgment of women writers is the nearest present day approach to that actuality of the future, the women's jury," Patterson writes (3). "The public wants the individual feminine angle of vision on the Thaw case. The world has plenty of cumbersome masculine logic in the administration of its affairs. What it needs . . . is the logic plus a woman's insight" (3). Patterson has taken Fairfax's formula to the next step. "Woman's insight" is so valuable, she argues, that it should be fully integrated into the public sphere. It is emphatically women's duty, she insists, to meet the public's need for the "feminine angle of vision."

Greeley-Smith took a slightly different approach when she defended the sob sisters' reputation for sympathy. She tartly reminds her readers that the American justice system requires defendants to be presumed innocent. "Yet," she writes, "women who have ventured to do this, who have given young Thaw the benefit of this provision which the sternest juryman has to observe, and written about him as a presumably innocent and very unfortunate young man, have been termed contemptuously the 'sympathy squad' by persons who seem to consider that the whole duty of newspaper writing consists in securing a talesman's [potential juror's] middle initial" ("Nixola Greeley-Smith" 3). Here Greeley-Smith mocks the obsessive attention to detail and the worship of objectivity that helped give rise to the realist aesthetic. Moreover, she insists that the newswomen were doing what "the sternest juryman" had to do: giving Harry Thaw the benefit of the doubt. She aligns the sob sisters' sympathy for Harry with the traditions of American justice and even suggests that male reporters' pursuit of the disinterested ideal has kept them from recognizing the complex emotional reality of the trial. She also cites Harry, not Evelyn, as the primary object of the newswomen's sympathy.

Because it was Harry, after all, who was officially on trial, the newswomen's judgment of *him* offered the best glimpse of how women, given the chance, might perform on a jury. And the sob sisters judged Harry very gently indeed. Despite—in part because of—their bodily reciprocity with Evelyn, the women writers ultimately professed more sympathy for her violent husband than for her. They made him into the hero of the trial, refracting their identification with Evelyn into sympathy for Harry. They demonized Stanford White, while holding up Harry as a good man whose murderous act was best interpreted as rightful vengeance, even a necessary purification of a corrupt society. They embraced Harry's cause with disturbing enthusiasm, presenting him as a hero for marrying Evelyn despite her promiscuous past and glossing over both his own promiscuity and his class privilege. They obfuscated his abuse of Evelyn, suppressing evidence of his violent behavior and drug addiction. Worse, they normalized his obsession with Evelyn's "ruin." They let pass unremarked the disturbing evidence that Harry forced Evelyn to retell her coerced-sex story again and again. Indeed, the newspapers, by repeatedly retelling Evelyn's story, encouraged readers to identify not with Evelyn, but with Harry; they assumed that readers wanted to hear the story as frequently, and as fully, as Harry did.

Treated to a courtroom drama that vividly documented the systematic exploitation of (white) women by (white) men, the sob sisters blinked. Rather than negotiate the complex terrain of early-twentieth-century sexual politics, they cast Harry as the heroic avenger in a modern seduction plot. *Most* news reports, not just the women's, cast Harry as the heroic avenger. But given the newswomen's demonstrated willingness to challenge norms of female behavior, their interpretations of Harry's behavior are strikingly conventional. Black wrote that if she had a husband on the jury, she would sue him for divorce if, after hearing Evelyn's story, he voted to send Harry to the electric chair ("Juror Voting" 3). Other newswomen embraced Harry's cause with similar enthusiasm.[27]

Positioned on the front lines of women's journalism, Patterson's "good soldiers" picked their battles carefully. They were not about to challenge men's role as protectors of women. Nor did they shy away from generalizing about women's essentially emotional nature and consequently impaired ability to reason. In their judgments of Harry, the sob sisters often reinforced damaging stereotypes. In a story headlined "Thaw Would Be Acquitted by Woman Jury, Says Dorothy Dix," the subheadings say it all: "Killing Through Jealousy Appeals to Female Heart" and "Emotions Would Almost Entirely Govern a Decision by Fair Sex." Women, according to Dix, were incapable of achieving a disinterested stance: "If a woman jury acquitted Thaw—and I think it would—it would do more so on its emotions. Whether it would be more emotional than a man jury we cannot tell until we hear the verdict of the man jury" (4). Here we find some skepticism, perhaps even an incipient critique, of the legal system's claims to disinterestedness. Having categorized women's reasoning as emotional, Dix concludes by suggesting that men's reasoning may not be much different. Interestingly enough, in both of Thaw's trials, "the verdict of the man jury" supported her suggestion. Thirty years before a woman would be allowed to serve on a jury in New

York, the male jurors in the Thaw case followed the sob sisters' lead. Thaw was never convicted.

6. Conclusion

By accepting the sentimental call to sympathize, the newswomen undertook a necessary but largely thankless task. In a recent study of nineteenth-century adultery cases, Laura Hanft Korobkin argues that although sentimental conventions often shape legal discourse, trial transcripts, with their contradictory assertions and moral complexity, can never create wholly sentimental narratives (89). Korobkin's point is particularly relevant to the Thaw trial because so many newspapers printed complete trial transcripts in addition to the standard coverage. Readers had access to a broad range of information about the case, including competing interpretations of Harry's (and Evelyn's) behavior. This profusion of information made the newswomen's roles as sentimental advocates both more crucial and more vexed. Presiding over an overwhelming amount of information, they promised to guide readers through the morass of data.

The women reporters were called upon to mediate a violent, contradictory narrative. In this task, their bodies, along with their words, served their sentimental ends. When the trial narrative threatened to veer out of control, disrupting too many cherished assumptions about gender, race, or national identity, the sob sisters offered a soothing vision based not only on their reports but also on the visible combination of their whiteness and femaleness. By managing "the blush of authorship" so successfully, the newswomen achieved powerful symbolic status as emblems of sentimentalism in an increasingly heterogeneous and fragmented modern world. As many scholars have noted, nineteenth-century sentimental narratives tended to encourage readers to identify with the sufferings of the disempowered, often enslaved persons, women, even children. With chilling success, the Thaw trial coverage adapted sentimental conventions to inspire compassion for the sufferings of Harry Thaw, a rich white man whose own father had so little confidence in him that he changed his will so Harry's entire inheritance would go into a trust fund controlled by his mother (Mooney 83). The sob sisters were not the only—nor even the primary—architects of this spectacle of sentiment. Nevertheless, they became its standard-bearers. In the process, they wrote themselves into national prominence even as they wrote themselves out of American literary history.

Notes

1. Before the Thaw trial, the few women who reported trials usually worked alone. In 1875, the *San Francisco Chronicle* sent a female correspondent to Henry Ward Beecher's trial (Fox 92). Elizabeth Jordan recalled being the only woman reporter at the 1893 trial of Lizzie Borden (Jordan 119). Better known is Susan Glaspell, who wrote "A Jury of Her Peers" and *Trifles,* based on her coverage of a 1901 murder trial in Iowa. Glaspell, too, was the only newswoman in court (Bryan 1293–1364).

2. Although these four writers were responsible for most of the female-authored reports, at least eight other women received bylines for trial accounts.

3. Journalism historians, citing Ross's 1936 account, give Cobb credit for christening the sob sisters. He is a likely candidate, although my study of the trial coverage did not authenticate his coinage. Reviewing reports from mid-January to mid-March 1907 in the *World, Evening World, New York American, New York Times,* and *New York Evening Journal,* I found many references to the newswomen, including "pity platoon," "sympathy squad," "female railbirds," and "lady muckrakers," but no specific "sob sister" reference.

4. Dictionaries agree that *sob sister* came into use in the 1910s (Mathews 1588; Chapman 516). Sometimes, the phrase also signified an advice columnist, a role that would later make one of the newswomen, Dorothy Dix, a household name.

5. One of the first novelists to earn the dubious title was Fannie Hurst, who titled a 1916 short story "Sob Sister" and later became good friends with Ada Patterson, one of the Thaw trial reporters.

6. See, e.g., Keith Gandal's *The Virtues of the Vicious: Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, and the Spectacle of the Slum* (1997) and Michael Robertson's *Stephen Crane, Journalism, and the Making of Modern American Literature* (1997).

7. Former newspaper reporter Mildred Gilman's 1931 novel *Sob Sister* illustrates the term's negative connotations. Gilman characterizes the career of her spunky protagonist, Jane Ray, as misguided and hypocritical: "Here was her chance to harden herself to everything in life, to every shock and emotion and human sentiment. [Jane] struggled to become a hard-boiled sob sister. . . . She carefully schooled herself to promise freedom to criminals and false hopes to those in distress, to deceive the mothers of murdered girls and steal pictures from them. And at last, Jane Ray, without seeming to feel anything herself, could pour more anguish into her copy, more deep emotional feeling, than any other sob sister" (19).

8. For an excellent synthesis of approaches to genre in early-twentieth-century fiction, see Howard, esp. 213–82. On modernism and mass culture, see Strychacz, esp. 1–83; on modernism and sentimentalism, see Clark; on sentimentalism and realism, see Nancy Glazener's *Reading for Realism: The History of a U.S. Literary Institution, 1850–1910* (1997) and Hildegard Hoeller's *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* (2000). For a reading of the Progressive Era as sentimental, see Harker 56–57.

9. With the notable exception of Martha Merrill Umphrey's recent study of sensationalism in the *Evening Journal*'s trial coverage, the Thaw case has received scant scholarly attention. Even Phyllis Abramson's *Sob Sister Journalism* (1990) has no sustained analysis of the reportage. However, the case has inspired several popular history books. See Suzannah Lessard's *The Architect of Desire: Beauty and Danger in the Stanford White Family* (1996); Michael MacDonald Mooney's *Evelyn Nesbit and Stanford White: Love and Death in the Gilded Age* (1976); and Gerald Langford's *The Murder of Stanford White* (1962).

10. Recent studies have argued against the dichotomy between information and entertainment journalism and challenged the myth that the yellow press corrupted fact-based journalism to serve the uneducated tastes of poor and/or immigrant readers. See Joseph W. Campbell's *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies* (2001) and Randall S. Sumpter's "Sensation and the Century."

11. On men's neglected roles as producers and consumers of sentimentality and melodrama, see Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler, eds., *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture* (1999); Jennifer Travis, "The Law of the Heart"; Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised"; and Tom Lutz, "Men's Tears and the Role of Melodrama."

12. Because the age of consent in New York at this time was 16, Evelyn's coerced sex with White would not have been considered statutory rape in a court of law (Odem 30–31).

13. Eventually Thaw was found not guilty by reason of insanity and committed to an asylum, where his imprisonment was improved by family cash. When he was declared sane and acquitted of all charges in 1915, he immediately divorced Evelyn on grounds of adultery (Mooney 287). For a detailed analysis of Thaw's defense strategy and a different reading of its implications, see Umphrey.

14. Cf. Samuel Hopkins Adams, who claims that "[n]othing more sickening, more appalling has ever been seen in a court-room than this slow, piecemeal stripping naked of a woman's soul" ("Not All" 1).

15. Although bylines were increasingly common by 1907, most articles still appeared without them.

16. The spectacle obscured the fact that not all women writers found emotional resonance in the trial. Blanche Walsh, for instance, dismissed it as a shallow spectacle: "The Thaw trial is an animated iceberg. Feeling and emotion do not enter into it for one minute" (2). Unsurprisingly, I found no more Walsh bylines during the trial.

17. This strategy was not original. A quarter-century earlier, similar policing efforts occurred in the Beecher-Tilton trial (Fox 92–95).

18. For related incidents in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Kentucky, see "Crazy Over Thaw Case."

19. In New York City, the US District Attorney warned that he would prosecute violations of federal statutes prohibiting the mailing of "obscene matter" ("Jerome Checks Thaw Defense" 1).

20. "More than a score of women fought through the crowds," said one report ("Crowd at Court Breaks Record" 1). Two days later, an article reported that the number of women in court had tripled (deZouche, "Rush" 4).

21. The sob sisters were not the only women who wanted to see the trial. My survey suggests that out of about 300 people in court on a given day, about 20 were women, and sometimes the number was much higher. Only four to six of these women were actually news reporters.

22. As reporter Charles Somerville put it, "No woman was allowed to pass the door save those who represented newspapers" (2).

23. While the other major players in the case were also pictured, my survey of the coverage suggests that images of Evelyn outnumbered images of everyone else by more than four to one. For more details and a complementary analysis of Evelyn's role in the trial, see Umphrey.

24. Dix used the same terms: "She held herself under wonderful control and told her story in a level monotone, sadder than any tears could have been" ("Evelyn Thaw's Story" 3).

25. This view of complexion as a moral barometer echoes the sentimental typology Karen Halttunen finds in middle-class conduct manuals of the 1840s (88). Although Halttunen argues that the conduct rules were soon recognized not as guarantees of sincerity but rather as scripts for genteel performances, the reports of Evelyn's blush suggest that even in the early 1900s, sentimental typology was familiar enough for writers to invoke it with confidence.

26. Women were not eligible to serve on juries in New York until 1937. The state policy allowing women to be exempted easily from jury duty did not end until the mid-1970s, and lawyers were permitted to use peremptory challenges to screen jurors on the basis of gender until 1994, when the Supreme Court banned the practice. See Kerber ch. 4, esp. 136–41.

27. See, e.g., Wilcox, "He Killed."

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Women in the driver’s seat: The auto-erotics of early women’s films

Jennifer Parchesky

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, women drivers of automobiles emerged as signal figures of the ‘New Womanhood’. Freed from both the confines of the domestic sphere and dependence on male drivers, they embodied an autonomous mobility that challenged conventional gender roles. Operating recalcitrant vehicles in often hazardous conditions, early women motorists – especially the celebrated race car drivers and cross-country pioneers – demonstrated ‘masculine’ courage, stamina and technical skill. While such unladylike behavior did not go uncensured, the press and public on the whole celebrated the woman motorist – typically young, affluent and attractive – as a positive symbol of female emancipation.[1]

As previous scholars have observed, automobiles figured prominently both in the on-screen exploits of a new breed of action heroines and in off-screen publicity about stars’ personal vehicles, from images of ‘serial queen’ Helen Holmes repairing her own stunt car (infant daughter at her side) to Anita King’s highly publicised Paramount-sponsored transcontinental solo journey in 1915.[2] Yet there are even broader parallels between the pioneering women motorists and the women directors, producers, screenwriters and stars who sat, metaphorically, in the ‘driver’s seat’ of so much of the early film industry. Not only actors but women in all branches of the industry were celebrated in fan magazines, the mainstream press, and even girls’ dime novels as hardworking, technically skilled and courageous, holding their own in a man’s world in conditions that were fast-paced, physically demanding, and subject to all kinds of human and natural disasters.[3] Like women motorists, women directors emphasised the technical demands of their craft – ‘[k]nowledge of camera operation, of lighting effects, and of all the hundred-and-one less important mechanical details’ – even as they insisted that ‘there is no reason why [a woman] cannot completely master every technicality of the art’.[4] While women in both fields tended to emphasise individual achievements over collective struggle, both motoring and filmmaking were deeply imbricated in the larger feminist movement. Suffragists promoted their cause with both spectacular cross-country automobile tours and stirring propaganda films throughout the 1910s; in 1913, when California women won the vote, director Lois Weber and a coalition of studio women made national headlines by sweeping to victory the nation’s first all-female municipal government in the newly incorporated Universal City.[5] Whether behind the wheel or behind the camera, women’s mastery of exciting new technologies offered a spectacular image of New Womanhood as both practical power and thrilling adventure.

In this essay, I examine three films about female automobility in which women held key positions of creative control: *Mabel at the Wheel* (1914), directed by and starring Mabel Normand; *Something New* (1921), written, directed, produced by and starring Nell Shipman; and *Zander the Great* (1925), starring Marion Davies with script and ‘editorial direction’ by Frances Marion. Spanning the heyday of

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