REPRESENTING VANCOUVER’S WORKING GIRLS, 1890-1930

by

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B.A., University of Alberta, 1994
M.A., University of British Columbia, 1997

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Department of English, Faculty of Arts)

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

October 2002

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Date **October 7, 2002**
ABSTRACT

My dissertation addresses representations of the young women of Vancouver's working class, who, in the first part of the twentieth century, became touchstones for judgements on city life, work, and morality. Young, single, wage-earning women were something new and troubling to the middle-class administrators and social critics of the time. While the city's numerous single working men, with their overcrowded dwellings and tendencies to unionize, were considered somewhat disorderly, the necessity of their presence was never questioned. "Working girls," on the other hand, seemed to embody all that was unnerving and unnatural about modern times: the disintegration of the family, the independence of women, and the promiscuity of city life. These kinds of anxieties were not unique to Vancouver: the issue of wage-earning women was deemed a "social problem" in various western cities. But Vancouver's singular geopolitical situation meant that these anxieties were exacerbated and amplified in distinct and curious ways. In 1922, for instance, a law was passed "for the protection of women and girls" which prohibited white women from working alongside Asian men. What combination of racism, paternalism, and moral panic gave rise to such legislation? And how did the women react to being controlled and judged by such assumptions?

Rather than viewing the problems of wage-earning women as coextensive with those of working men - problems of wages, working conditions, and workers' rights - social administrators and reformers focussed largely on the moral implications of women's entrance into the workplace, particularly insofar as it represented a break from traditional Victorian ideals of domestic femininity. Denied the recognition afforded male workers as members of the labour force and economic agents, working women suffered various disadvantages in the workplace, their wages barely enough to survive on, and their rights as workers ignored by employers and union leaders alike. The tendency in historical accounts of Canada to overlook or underestimate the importance of women's work is undoubtedly in part due to the ideological disinclination to see or to represent women as workers rather than as wives and mothers. This is why my analysis focusses on the politics of gender and representation, for it is through representational conventions that women were pressured to embody a traditional domestic role, and likewise it is through a representational agenda that women were denied recognition as valuable workers.
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FOREWORD

Part of this dissertation has been accepted for publication. In November 2001, a revised and abridged version of Chapter Two was awarded the George Wicken Prize for Criticism by the journal *Essays on Canadian Writing*. The essay will appear in a forthcoming issue of the journal, and the publication information is as follows:

In 1891, Alice Barrett Parke went to visit her friends Lizzie and Mary Harding, who were living in Vancouver and working as school teachers. In her diary, Parke recorded this singular evening of girl talk:

We were all talking about marriage the other night, & Mary said so many people wondered why she had never married — how she had managed to withstand the opportunities and importunities of a new country, where so many men are walking about unattached. It seemed to me they are something like the little pigs in our old nursery rhyme who used to run about with knives & forks sticking in them, crying “Who’ll take a piece of me” — only these self-sacrificing creatures are pleading to be allowed to give the whole of themselves. However, to return to our subject, Mary said she had so long earned her own money, and spent it as she pleased, not having to give account to any one, that she could not bear the idea of having someone else give it to her, & she added “To tell the truth I don’t care to give up a sixty dollar school for a forty dollar man.” It sounded so funny I had to laugh. (44)

This rare account of female conversation in turn-of-the-century Vancouver touches playfully on issues of work and marriage and suggests the pleasures as well as the pressures experienced by young women inhabiting this far shore of Canadian civilization. My dissertation examines the social discourse that surrounded the figure of the urban working girl, especially in Vancouver and the West, where specific social and geographic conditions shaped the debate concerning women and work in the city. In her comments above, Parke refers to the large number of unattached men in Vancouver who outnumbered their female counterparts, and according to this account, dashed about in search of a woman who would take them. The expectation that all young women would indeed marry was strong, and 25-year-old Mary attests to being asked repeatedly why she is still unmarried. Her answer is a striking assertion of female independence which places the labour market against the marriage market in the most rationalist of terms. Her words would have confirmed the fears of many
social critics, who believed that women’s domestic roles as wife and mother were put in jeopardy by the increasing entrance of women into paid employment, a dubious moral sphere where social and financial independence might weaken women’s respect and inclination toward marriage. Parke’s depiction of young women blithely setting men against paychecks was not the vision of womanhood that the fledgling nation espoused.

My dissertation addresses representations of the young women of Vancouver’s working class, who, in the first part of the twentieth century, became touchstones for judgments on city life, work, and morality. Young, single, wage-earning women were something new and troubling to the middle-class administrators and social critics of the time. While the city’s numerous single working men, with their overcrowded dwellings and tendencies to unionize, were considered somewhat disorderly, the necessity of their presence was never questioned. Young, working women, on the other hand, seemed to embody all that was unnerving and unnatural about modern times: the disintegration of the family, the independence of women, and the promiscuity of city life. So serious was the moral danger surrounding these “working girls” that the very future of the nation, symbolized in these future mothers, appeared to be at stake. These kinds of anxieties were not unique to Vancouver: the issue of wage-earning women was deemed a “social problem” in various western cities. But Vancouver’s singular geopolitical situation meant that these anxieties were exacerbated and amplified in distinct and curious ways. In 1922, for instance, a law was passed “for the protection of women and girls” which prohibited white women from working alongside Asian men. What combination of racism, paternalism, and moral panic gave rise to such legislation? And how did the women react to being controlled and judged according to such assumptions?

Rather than viewing the problems of wage-earning women as coextensive with those of working men – problems of wages, working conditions, and workers’ rights – social administrators
and reformers focussed largely on the moral implications of women's entrance into the workplace, particularly insofar as it represented a break from traditional Victorian ideals of domestic femininity. The implications of this relentless reduction of women's work to issues of morality and social upheaval were far-reaching. While men could easily, almost automatically, inhabit the part of the worker, with the rights and recognition that accompanied that position, the roles of woman and worker were constructed in opposition – almost as antithetical – to each other. Expected to inhabit a domestic realm evacuated of issues concerning capital, politics or work, women were asked to embody social tradition and family, to be mothers to the new nation. When young women turned their backs on this sacred duty, they were subject to intense moral badgering from the reform-minded elite, to whom even the most far-fetched tales of white slavery seemed entirely credible, given the grave moral peril to which wage-earning women supposedly exposed themselves. Denied the recognition afforded male workers as members of the labour force and economic agents, working women suffered serious disadvantages in the workplace, their wages barely enough to survive on, and their rights as workers ignored by employers and union leaders alike. In fact, the conceptual apparatus that denied women the identity of worker persisted well into the twentieth century, and even now feminist labour historians continue to rewrite and revise labour histories that initially failed to mention women. The elision of women's work from Canadian history is undoubtedly in part due to the ideological disinclination to see or to represent women as workers rather than as wives and mothers. This is why an analysis that focusses on the politics of representation is especially important, for it is through representational conventions that women were pressured to embody a traditional domestic role, and likewise it is through a representational agenda that women were denied recognition as valuable workers.
Throughout the dissertation I place various kinds of texts into dialogue in order to examine the cultural contexts within which the figure of the working girl took on a range of meanings. I am particularly interested in how certain social narratives took hold of the popular imagination, and how those narratives were then implemented in order to explain and to dictate women’s roles in regard to work and domesticity in the West. Narratives of the white-slave trade, for instance, contained the implicit threat that women who left home for wage work in the city were placing themselves in dire sexual peril. These kinds of narratives constitute valuable social texts, providing insight into the cultural assumptions and social influences which followed women into their workplaces.

My work is theoretically informed by contemporary postcolonial and feminist thought. Anne McClintock and Adele Perry are especially adept at using the insights of current postcolonial theory to engage in historical cultural studies; and I similarly seek to understand the colonial and Victorian assumptions which were brought to early Vancouver and used to dictate women’s roles there. Perry’s book *On the Edge of Empire* documents race and gender relations in British Columbia in the mid-nineteenth century, and her analysis of codes of masculinity and femininity specific to colonial British Columbia has been useful to my study, for many of the assumptions regarding gender that took hold in the mid-nineteenth century continued to carry weight into the early twentieth century, despite the social transformations that accompanied industrialism. Robert McDonald’s historical account of urban development in *Making Vancouver* foregrounds the workings of class and status in Vancouver, where the middle class fought to establish the boundaries of respectability, and my work touches on these themes while remaining centrally concerned with the construction of gender.

The ambivalence concerning women’s new roles as wage-earners was shaped by a complex set of ideologies concerning domesticity, female sexuality, and women’s imperial responsibilities as the bearers of Empire. As Anne McClintock has argued, women’s entrance onto the Imperial
stage was largely choreographed by the "cult of domesticity." In Chapter One, drawing on McClintock's work, I explore the ways in which white women were incorporated into British Columbia's colonial agenda. Given that white women were considered vital to the healthy growth of the community, while also being in such limited supply, those women who did take up residence in British Columbia were under intense scrutiny and suffered from a degree of representational overkill. Vancouver's working women, moreover, were subject not only to the preconceptions born of colonial enthusiasm, but also to yet another layer of administrative zeal – the moral panic over women's work. At the turn of the century, industrialism was rapidly changing Canada's urban landscape, and the new figure of the urban working girl – usually young and single – challenged traditional notions of femininity. Because of the unmarried status of these young women, attention was drawn to their sexuality, and anxieties increased in the case of mixed-race workplaces – surely some form of "protection" was necessary. And accordingly, new kinds of legislation began to target this supposedly exposed and vulnerable, but often feisty and independent, group of women.

In Chapter Two I focus directly on literary representations of working girls in Canadian writing. In the US, the relatively new phenomenon of the independent urban working girl, sometimes referred to as the "woman adrift," represented for many writers the modern city – its opportunities, but also its potential for immorality and cultural disruption. In Canada, though, writers were more hesitant to address social issues and urban ills in their fiction, and the influence of the historical romance genre, dominant at the time, dampened demand for socially engaged fiction. Those works which did represent the working girl usually did so in the often marginalized forms of issue-oriented social realism or romantic melodrama. In this chapter I focus on four main texts: Agnes Maule Machar's *Roland Graeme: Knight* (1892), Isabel Ecclestone Mackay's *House of Windows* (1912), Bertrand Sinclair's *North of Fifty-Three* (1914), and Jessie Georgina Sime's
Sister Woman (1922). Since working women were considered a problematic social issue, much of the fiction that addresses them is strongly socially engaged; for this reason, part of my methodology involves reading works of literature as social documents. This approach, in turn, allows me to read literary works alongside social criticism of the day and to analyse the representational politics at work in both. While the texts I examine differ greatly from one another, they all use the figure of the working girl to raise questions about the renegotiation of gender in the context of urban industrialism. Female sexuality is of especial interest to these writers, signalling the unease – and sometimes the enthusiasm – regarding the new opportunities available to wage-earning women.

Chapter Three picks up on the preoccupation with working women’s sexual choices by examining the social discourse on prostitution. Sex work is one industry that, even today, tends to be judged in terms of sexual morality rather than work. But in the first part of the twentieth century, all women’s work was thought of in terms of morality, with prostitution as the worst case scenario. This is one reason why it is important to include an analysis of sex work in discussions of women’s labour, for the tendency to reduce the debate on women’s labour to questions of sex alone find its fullest articulation in the case of prostitution. One part of this chapter is an analysis of white-slave narratives and how they functioned to associate prostitution with mainstream working girls – as though to warn women of the dire results of challenging traditional gender norms. But I am also interested in prostitution as an example of women’s work which, though constantly under siege by the moral majority, was in fact a significant – even vital – segment of the economy in Western towns and cities like Vancouver. As in the case of other female-dominated industries, though the society at large sought to force women’s work into invisibility, the economic value of that work to the local economy was indispensable.
How did wage-earning women react to the attitudes of employers and administrators who consistently downplayed the value of their work while making offensive insinuations about their virtue? This is one question I address in Chapter Four, where I examine the 1914 cigar-stands controversy: here, a young man showed an indecent picture to a young woman working at a cigar stand, and as a result women were banned from working at cigar-stands, a ruling they vigorously protested, though, significantly, not with help from the organized labour movement. The labour movement was one arena for the expression of working-class resistance to social and economic exploitation, but organized labour, like the society at large (and arguably the working class in particular), was thoroughly shaped by the patriarchal dictates of male privilege. The labour movement perceived and often represented itself as a brotherhood, and the labour market's new contingent of lively young women was not deemed real membership material. Despite their frequent exclusion from the ranks of organized labour, however, Vancouver's working girls exhibited an enthusiastic spirit of resistance, and with the help of the highly charismatic activist Helena Gutteridge, they formed their own unions, staged strikes, and even proved the most capable of fund-raisers, combining their union commitment with a genius for organizing dances. But female forms of resistance were not always acknowledged by the union brotherhood. Just as women's labour was downplayed as temporary, unskilled, and supposedly marginal to the economy, so was their activism disparaged by a labour movement that only recognized protest in highly masculine terms of militancy and fraternal solidarity.

The plight of the working girl often took on symbolic significance: the working girl's troubles, for instance, might be used to represent the hardships of the working class at large, or her moral fall might signify the heartless amorality of capitalism. In Vancouver, where the white elite felt its identity threatened by Asian immigration, the working girl sometimes came to represent the
city's imperilled whiteness. Racist anxieties often coalesced around the mixed-race workplace, especially if it meant Asian men working alongside white women, but when a white domestic worker was murdered in a Shaughnessy home, with suspicion centering on her Asian co-worker, these fears exploded. In Chapter Five, I explore the racial discourse which drew on representations of young white working women in order to express deep-seated beliefs about racial and sexual purity in a multiracial society. A protectionist impulse to segregate white women from Asian men resulted in legislative agendas to ban white women from mixed-race workplaces, a policy which was highly unpopular among women workers, who didn't appreciate the kind of moral protectionism that deprived them of their income.

While the main focus of my dissertation is the emphasis placed on the moral and social problems posed by wage earning women and how this overshadowed the value and import of the work they were doing, a secondary focus concerns working girls' roles as cultural pacesetters. Kathy Peiss and Nan Enstad both study working-girl culture in the US in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and Carolyn Strange has studied young working-class women in Toronto. Drawing on the theories they develop, I analyse some of the cultural innovation that was taking place as young women engaged in new kinds of work, leisure, and labour activism, independent of traditional societal and family influences. From our perspective at the beginning of the new century, it is clear that the steps taken by these early participants in women's wage labour were groundbreaking; in fact, many of the results feared by the reform-minded community – that women might concentrate on their work instead of seeking only marriage, that they might delay motherhood or reject it altogether, that they might exercise the same sexual freedoms available to men – have indeed taken place, only rather than taking this as evidence of society's fallen condition, we congratulate a century of career women who changed society and the workplace. Some working
women, like Vancouver's Helena Gutteridge, saw that wage-earning women were in effect redefining the parameters of womanhood, and in my study I draw out some of these moments of gender transgression and transformation.
CHAPTER ONE

WOMEN'S PLACE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

It is a great call for women. There must be some who have the courage and the health to leave the ready-made comforts of the old country, and come into this wild beautiful West, giving their best of mind and body for the race and for the Empire.

Marion Cran, 1908.

Cultural narratives of gender in early Vancouver placed women between the highly traditional demands of home and family and the more material demands of the shifting nature of work. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Vancouver was one of the distant outposts of Empire, where a settler society primarily of British extraction sought to establish a stable and homogeneous settler culture amidst the chaos of ethnic and cultural diversity. Women had a definite part to play in this setting, and campaigns to bring British women to British Columbia were set under way. It was hoped women would bring a degree of civilization, permanence, and stability to the New World social scene: as wives and mothers they would reproduce British society both culturally and physically. This was a recognized ideal, born of imperial rhetoric and Victorian reverence for the home; but how seamless was this narrative once implemented? My interest lies in the contradictions which arose among competing principles of gender construction in Vancouver. And the figure around whom these contradictions tended to coalesce was the working woman. Women who were brought to Vancouver through immigration campaigns were wanted, in part, to fill a labour shortage, yet the value of women's work was consistently downplayed, and a resistance to accepting women
as workers would persist well into the twentieth century. In fact, the idea of work itself tends to shift as soon as women become the workers under discussion. As Keith Grint argues, concepts or definitions of work "are symbols of cultures and especially mirrors of power: if what counts as work is glorified or despised or gender-related, then the language and practice of work allows us to read embodied fragments of wider social power" (7). Wage labour is one area where gender difference forcefully asserts itself as a major organizing principle, so that male workers and female workers occupy utterly different conceptual spaces. In Vancouver, the kinds of work involving women tended to be devalued or elided, signalling in part that women's primary function was thought to lie elsewhere. But economic demand and the initiative of women themselves told a different story of women's place in the city. Standards of femininity and womanhood were contested when it came to the workplace: "Women were likely to find behaviour and qualities required of them in the world of work very different from — often antithetical to — those which they had been encouraged to cultivate at home" (Eisenstein 114). Moments of contradiction like this can reveal a great deal about cultural expectations, and it is through these kinds of contradictions that I attempt to read how working women were positioned in early Vancouver.

Starting with the 1862 Bride Ship initiative, I discuss the important connections between (often inconsistent) narratives of gender and imperialism which influenced women's incorporation into British Columbia's society and culture. I then move forward in history to explore how industrialism, which came quickly to Vancouver, further complicated the organization of gender and work, giving rise to new kinds of conflict in gender relations. Throughout, I try to draw out the inconsistencies in cultural expectations regarding gender and work, for these contradictions often point to the workings of power and ideology.
BRITISH COLUMBIA AND THE SHORTAGE OF WHITE WOMEN

In late nineteenth-century British Columbia and continuing through to the early twentieth century, single white women were considered a scarce and highly desirable commodity. Elsewhere in Canada, this was not the case. In Toronto, for instance, women outnumbered men, and the discrepancy increased as young women left rural areas for work in the city. British Columbia’s gold rushes, on the other hand, attracted large numbers of male settlers early on, and with an economy based on logging, fishing, and mining, it remained slow to draw women immigrants. Despite a rapidly growing population, men still outnumbered women by two to one in 1911 (McDonald “Working” 28). This gender imbalance gave rise to campaigns to bring women to the West, but the rhetoric of those projects, and even the notion of a gender imbalance itself, depended on a number of conceptual paradigms and assumptions, themselves productive of specific cultural narratives concerning gender in the New World.

Despite representations of a Canadian West devoid of the gentler sex, it’s not as though there were no women in the West. Campaigns to attract white women to the West may have depicted a society of bachelors clamouring for wives, but throughout the history of the fur trade, marriages between European trappers and Native or Metis women were customary; “Such interracial unions were, in fact, the basis for a fur trade society and were sanctioned by an indigenous rite known as mariage à la façon du pays – according to the custom of the country” (Van Kirk 54). That such unions were common and accepted long before the shortage of white women became an issue suggests that the discourse of female shortage was itself shaped by changing social systems. Only in the mid-nineteenth century, with the establishment of a settler society, did a shift in colonial thinking take hold, whereby interracial unions were frowned upon and white women became essential to the notion of civilized society. As Ann Stoler points out, sexual and matrimonial
customs in the colonies were subject to the changing dictates of imperial order: “European identities in the colonies were affirmed by a cultural repertoire of competencies and sexual prescriptions that altered with the strategies for profit and stability of rule. Thus concubinage was still seen to uphold a European middle-class standard in the 1880s, but seen to undermine it two decades later” (113).

In other words, that Vancouver considered itself to suffer from a “shortage” of women is indexical of this shift in colonial racism, in that Native women, formerly acceptable – even politically expedient – as wives of European traders, ceased to count, and white women, as representatives of a European settler culture, came to be of vital significance to the future civilization. The so-called “shortage” of women in Vancouver, then, had less to do with numbers and ratios, and everything to do with an imperial agenda which figured women as conduits of racial and cultural reproduction.

The degree of energy devoted to attracting white women to British Columbia is testimony to the significance ascribed to these women and to the roles they were expected to fill. The most striking such effort was undoubtedly the Bride Ship initiative of the 1860s. In this instance, the Columbia Female Emigration Society was founded for the express purpose of bringing women to the province by collaborating with the London Female Middle-Class Emigration Society, whose mandate it was to send women from England out to the colonies (Lay 23). The reason this partnership was so readily established was that, while women in British Columbia were considered painfully scarce, Britain, on the other hand, suffered from a female surplus. An 1851 survey in the United Kingdom concluded that, due in part to the departure of men to the colonies, out of a total population of 27 million, there existed a surplus of 650,000 women. And by the 1860s the number had reached 800,000 (Jackel xiv). Like the notion of a female “shortage,” the idea of a female “surplus” rests on specific assumptions about women’s place in society. The impossibility of the extra women in Britain finding husbands was a primary reason for their being labelled as “excess”
or "redundant"; thus women's roles as wives and mothers were considered so important that, failing marriage, women were judged obsolete, hence part of the "surplus." This heteronormative attitude toward women's place in society suggested that any woman (regardless of her sexuality) who did not marry (and so fulfill the requirements of gender normativity) was, to some degree, aberrant or anomalous and thus part of an imbalance. A 1908 travel narrative by Marion Cran examining the position of women in Canada is expressive of this attitude toward Canada's female "shortage" and Britain's "surplus":

Whatever may be urged to the contrary by the enforced bachelor women of my own land, I know that in their secret hearts most of them think of marriage as the ultimate goal. An honourable wish, by no means to be hidden with shame. Every healthy normal woman has it. . . . Our little Island on the edge of Europe is overcrowded with people, chiefly women, and a vast Continent in North America is at its wits' end for inhabitants, especially women. Now why does not plus go over to minus and level things up a little, in order to make both countries more comfortable. (247)

A nearly seamless narrative thus emerged, wherein Britain's surplus women, unable to marry and so fulfill the requirements of their gender at home, would be syphoned off to the colonial margins of British Columbia, where an excess of bachelors was desperate for wives and families. The promises of this imperial romance were undoubtedly seductive – hence the christening of the two convoys of women to British Columbia as "Bride Ships."

While little is known of the direct experience of the women who came to British Columbia on the Bride Ships, especially before they left, one account of the voyage survives in the work of Frederick Whymper, a travel writer who recounts his 1862 voyage to Canada aboard the Tynemouth, the first of the Bride Ships:

Our most noticeable living freight was, however, an "invoice" of sixty young ladies, destined for the colonial and matrimonial market. They had been sent out by a home society, under the watchful care of a clergyman and matron; and they must have passed the dreariest three months of their existence on board, for they were isolated from the rest of the passengers, and could only look on at the fun and amusements in which everyone else could take a part.
Every benevolent effort deserves respect; but, from personal observation, I can not honestly recommend such a mode of supplying the demands of a colony. Half of them married soon after arrival or went into service, but a large proportion quickly went to the bad, and, from appearances, had been there before. (23)

Frederick Whymper’s writing is a fascinating blend of colonial and romantic rhetoric, indicative of the interwoven narratives surrounding the Bride Ship initiative. Referring to the “invoice” of women as “living freight” which will “supply the demands” of the “colonial and matrimonial market,” Whymper objectifies them through the vocabulary of capitalist enterprise – as cargo or marketable goods – thus revealing the degree to which these women, and the Bride Ship initiative itself, were embedded in the terms and dictates of mercantile imperialism. Whymper’s rhetoric, in addition to the detail about the women’s confinement on the ship, conjures images of Imperial slave ships, similarly engaged in a colonial mercantile enterprise where humans were the “living freight.” Such a comparison may seem extreme, but it is nevertheless worthwhile to note such connections, even if only rhetorical, because they are signals of the inexorable power of the colonial enterprise, which did, after all, choreograph these more and less voluntary migrations.

One assumes that the Bride Ship women, however driven by circumstance to emigrating, were relatively willing passengers, yet their confinement, coupled with Whymper’s own view of them as cargo, suggests a sinister edge to this “benevolent effort.” In her 1928 history, Pioneer Women of Vancouver Island, N. de Bertrand Lugrin notes that “the first contingent of wives-to-be” (the precursor of the Tynemouth) who numbered about twenty were drawn from orphan asylums (147), and it seems doubtful that such young women (most of them between ages twelve and eighteen) would have been in a position to make free and informed choices about emigration. Shipped over by the boatload, these women were clearly being commodified, but it is not readily apparent what the primary intent of that commodification was. Conflicting narratives – imperial,
romantic, labour-related – imposed on the women constantly shifting definitions of their place in the new social setting. The middle-class women of the emigration societies wanted domestic servants, and Lugrin mentions that many of the Bride-Ship women had places waiting for them where they would start work immediately upon their arrival. But their commodification, indeed their objectification, was not restricted to their roles as labourers: “Some of them were pretty; most of them more or less buxom, for they had been chosen with a desire to create a pleasing first impression” (Lugrin 149).

Shortly following the Tynemouth’s disembarkation, Whymper relates how a brief mutiny resulted in the confinement of a number of the crew, creating a labour shortage which he and the young male passengers made up for by volunteering their services:

All the younger men came forward readily, were solemnly enrolled, and set to work at once. . . . We found it good exercise, and worked with a will. Did we not know that the eyes of sixty maidens were looking on approvingly as we helped them on to the consummation of their dearest wishes? We did, and even our parson creditably proved his “muscular Christianity.” (25)

Here, Whymper casts himself as an agent of chivalry and object of desire for the now fully romanticised, even fetishized, young maidens. The voyage to Canada, previously characterized as “the dreariest three months of their existence,” has now become the passage “to the consummation of their dearest wishes.” The juxtaposition of this highly romantic perspective with the earlier mercantile imperialist rhetoric is telling. The promotional material used to encourage British female immigration depicted the Canadian West as a land of romantic adventure, where an overabundance of single men guaranteed marital bliss. One such poster read, “Urgent! Thousands of nice girls are wanted in The Canadian West. Over 20,000 men are sighing for what they cannot get – wives!” (Jackel 28). And in a letter to encourage the founding of the Emigration Society which would organize the Bride Ships, a British Columbia clergyman wrote:
Dozens of men have told me they would gladly marry if they could. I was speaking of writing to beg that a plan of emigration might be set on foot; whereupon one member of the company immediately exclaimed, "Then I pre-empt a wife"; another, and another, and all round the circle of those listening to me said the same. Fancy the idea of pre-empting a wife! Yet, I assure you, this touches at the root of the greatest blessing which can now be conferred upon this Colony from home. Think of the 600,000 more women at home than there are men, and then think of what society is here. ("Columbian Emigration")

This is apparently the "matrimonial market" which Whymper states as the destiny of the Tynemouth passengers and as "the consummation of their dearest wishes," here made the sole reason for attracting women to the West and given further emphasis with the reference to Britain’s female surplus. Together, then, these texts both construct and are constructed by a recognized narrative of the time which figured colonial migration as romantic fulfilment, both for the unemployed and unmarryable women of Britain’s female surplus, and for the many lonely bachelors of the colonial frontier.

But the women brought to British Columbia through the emigration societies were not mere mail-order brides. In fact, as far as the middle-class women who formed the Canadian Emigration Society were concerned, their primary object was to redress the labour shortage of female domestic workers. As Marilyn Barber points out, "Class interests as well as imperial enthusiasms shaped the work of emigration promoters [who] . . . most warmly welcomed trained British domestic servants whom they and their friends could employ while advancing the cause of the Empire, but not educated women who would compete with their daughters for jobs and husbands" (145). In the minds of these women, those brought to British Columbia through the Emigration Society would enter domestic service, and then at a later time move on to marriage and motherhood. Their immediate roles as workers, however, rested on specific assumptions regarding their class position and designated place in society. As Adele Perry explains, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, "It became axiomatic to argue that British Columbia lacked a sufficient number of domestic servants. Without an adequate
supply of white women to labour in the colony’s households, supposedly normal gender, racial, and class relations were disrupted” (141). This class-specific and labour-related agenda underlying female immigration efforts belies the narrative of high romance employed by the promotional material and echoed by Whymper. Tales of colonial romance may be alluring, but more material incentives for the emigration societies included the labour shortage in domestic workers in British Columbia, and the problem of unemployed women in Britain. In other words, it was not just women-as-wives that were wanted for the colony, but quite specifically women-as-workers. One of the presiding members of the British side of the Emigration Society predicted a highly choreographed progression for the Bride Ship women:

At the time of girlhood these inmates of our workhouses may be sent to our new Colony, where they will be cared for by a Christian bishop, and where, having been first passed out to service, they will naturally, by the taking up of society become wives and mothers in a Christian land. (“Columbian Emigration”)

This is a progress narrative for gender which takes a girl from workhouse “inmate” through domestic service and into motherhood, via colonial migration as the enabling catalyst for the evolution. That domestic labour, the only work properly suited to women in the Victorian imagination – insofar as it wasn’t so much work as woman’s supposed natural proclivity – was part of this transformation is indicative of the gender and class specificity of the emigration agenda.

But this more materialist bent to the emigration campaign was embedded in its own set of fetishistic associations concerning domesticity as part of the imperial mission. As Anne McClintock argues, it is no coincidence that “the domestic” has the same etymological roots as “domestication,” meaning to civilize:

Through the rituals of domesticity, increasingly global and more often than not violent, animals, women and colonized peoples were wrested from their putatively “natural” yet, ironically, “unreasonable” state of “savagery” and inducted through the domestic progress narrative into a hierarchical relation to white men. (35)
According to this conceptual apparatus, the Bishop’s stated expectation for female emigrants becomes less a progress narrative of natural evolution and more a forceful agenda of conscription and conversion. The workhouse inmates, particularly as they were working-class women, would have been classified in the Victorian schema as degenerate, thus in need of civilizing, domesticating, and converting, a process suggested by the women’s submitting first to “the care of a Christian bishop” and then to being “passed out to service,” their dual recuperation as imperial subjects and as women being thus cared for in sequence. As McClintock suggests, the globalized Victorian cult of domesticity fundamentally defined women’s entrance into the imperial enterprise, for which the Bride Ship initiative provides a striking example. The fetishistic epithet of “Bride Ship” is itself a manifestation of the conceptual process whereby women were incorporated into a colonial fantasy that placed them in a romanticised domestic sphere, which completely elided the material social and labour value of the work for which they were needed. So even at this initial stage of women’s positioning within the New World of British Columbia, their roles as workers were materially indispensable, yet conceptually ridden with ambivalence.

In its day, the Bride Ship initiative was given a great deal of media coverage, and onlookers swarmed the dockside as the women arrived. Lugrin relates how one man supposedly made his way to the waterfront as the young women disembarked and seized one of them by the hand, then whisked her away to a hasty backwoods wedding to live happily ever after (156). The project clearly caught people’s imagination, and in many ways it is a story that serves as an origin myth for white women in British Columbia—a highly mediated and constructed origin informed by the conflicting agendas of the imperial enterprise. The Bride Ships of 1862 are a particularly striking and dramatic example of the desire to attract white women to the West, and while in later years women were not
quite so forcefully shipped in, the female emigration societies, the Salvation Army and eventually the Canadian government all continued to mount projects that would bring more female settlers to the province, particularly to fill positions in domestic service (Bush 385; Kelley and Trebilcock 189). Indicative of the multiple and sometimes conflicting narratives of gender in the New World, the Bride Ship story speaks to cultural assumptions and Victorian ideals which would inform the construction of gender in Vancouver for years to come.

WOMEN AND CULTURAL REPRODUCTION

As Jean Barman has documented, British Columbia attracted a larger proportion of British immigrants than other provinces, doubling its British-born population in the first decade of the twentieth century (139), and the social elite thus formed was eager to reproduce the culture most familiar to them, which they believed to be the most advanced in the world: “Whatever the locale, middle-class Britons sought to re-create familiar class-based institutions, ranging from social clubs to private schools on the British model. Underlying their actions was the same assumption of superiority over the host society that had half a century earlier been exhibited by many colonial Victorians towards Canadians” (140). Realizing this goal of cultural continuity, however, would not prove easy in the multicultural setting of British Columbia. Cole Harris describes the setting that the Bride Ship women and their successors would have entered, where the preferred representation of settlement as primarily British and white with a few peripheral minorities belied a much more chaotic cultural field: “Immigrants came from many different cultural backgrounds in widely different parts of the world. No individual culture could be replicated in British Columbia” (263). In his 1929 novel The Eternal Forest, set in turn-of-the century Vancouver, George Godwin describes entering Vancouver by train, as thousands of immigrants would have who journeyed West
on the CPR: “Through the window the long low platform made a picture of teeming humanity, a motley throng: smart townsmen, drummers with big grips, overalled loggers with fat, canvas-covered packs, white-turbanned Sikhs, negroes, Klootchmans, Chinese and Japanese. Vancouver in miniature. Vancouver, city of all nationalities, the West’s racial melting-pot” (119). Instituting a dominant white majority in this context required a deliberate strategy, wherein constructs of gender, race and nation figured largely. Such negotiations are not uncommon in settler societies: “Immigration and settlement in Canada were considerably more ethnically and racially diverse than the white British settler agenda suggested. Indeed it was this diversity which compelled the conscious construction of a racial / ethnic hierarchy” (Stasiulus and Jhappan 98). Constantly confronted by differences of culture and ethnicity, settlers clung fiercely to the vestiges of their cultures, creating icons and symbols out of every detail. Women were important figures in these struggles to solidify contested social norms because family, morality, and respectability had everything to do with cultural continuity and cohesion, and women as representative of these ideals were indispensable.

How did women and women’s bodies figure into the establishment of a cultural and ethnic hierarchy in the New World setting of British Columbia? It would seem that in addition to their maternal roles as the physical reproducers of the population, not only did they take up the day to day work of cultural reiteration, but they also came to symbolize, in their very bodies, the essence and purity of the original culture. Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias theorize this as an important connection between gender and nationalism: “Women do not only teach and transfer the cultural and ideological traditions of ethnic and national groups. Very often they constitute their actual symbolic figuration” (9). White women were integral, then, to the forwarding of a white British elite in British
Columbia: on a material level as members of and mothers to the collectivity, and on a conceptual level, as symbolic of a British cultural ethos.

These cultural and racial imperatives were articulated, in part, through the representation of women as moral influences in the community. Morality, in this case, consists of meticulously detailed codes of conduct and ethics which, built up over time, appear natural yet function as a technology through which judgements concerning the normal, the acceptable, or the deviant are established. Such a technology, which makes what is utterly fabricated seem inherently natural, was exactly what a British elite demanded to make their tenuous hold on a highly heterogeneous cultural milieu seem right and proper. In the Victorian imagination, women were closely associated with the construction and naturalization of moral ideals, though their relationship to them was not always harmonious. Competing cultural myths might one moment depict women as inherently pure and noble, the saving grace to a husband’s more wayward male impulses, while the next moment, the story of Adam and Eve would prove women’s moral weakness. Either way, women supposedly entertained an intimate relationship with morality, a characteristic which they would bring to the New World.

The colonial setting, meanwhile, was often depicted as a moral danger zone, where adventurers and frontiersmen might lose their moral compass. Frederick Whymper, for instance, characterizes the new country as subject to a “floating population” among whom there is “a large proportion of ‘black sheep’” (23). And Elizabeth Lewthwaite, who moved to British Columbia in 1896 to keep house for her brothers writes that “It is too often forgotten that the Colonies are the ‘dumping-ground’ for the ne’er-do-wells of the Motherland; so, naturally, cut off from the only rock which might steady them, they too frequently merely go from bad to worse in the land to which they have been sent” (118). Especially in Vancouver, known for its less-than-refined population of
loggers, miners and migrant workers, images of rowdy frontier bachelors fuelled perceptions of a morally dubious social setting lacking a feminine principle.

The Bishop of Oxford, speaking at the founding of the British Female Emigration Society, identified the moralizing influence of women as one reason to promote female emigration: “In founding our Colonies we should seek to reproduce in them, not alone the same tastes that we have at home, but the same moral and religious feelings that we have at home” (“Columbian Emigration”). That this urge for stability and homogeneity was articulated as a function of women’s presence in the New World is indicative of the assumption that gender relations are at the heart of cultural continuity. As Yuval-Davis writes, “Because of the central importance of social reproduction to culture, gender relations often come to be seen as constituting the ‘essence’ of cultures as ways of life to be passed from generation to generation” (43). Women were expected to be the custodians of tradition and morality in a context where the threat of cultural hybridity was only too imminent. The discourse of female incorporation into Canadian settler society thus invoked a binary with, on the one side, morality, tradition, purity, and whiteness, and on the other side, hybridity, cultural change, and interethnic affiliation, with women emblematic of the former and in need of protection from the latter. Morality, then, had everything to do with purity, sexuality, and bodily boundaries.

In this narrative of intercultural encounter, the presence of white women as moral influences guaranteed increased cultural and racial homogeneity. As Anne Stoler writes, “Male colonizers positioned European women as the bearers of a redefined colonial morality. . . . The presence and protection of European women were repeatedly invoked to clarify racial lines” (352). Women’s roles in reproducing Empire, then, turned on a highly gender-coded set of sexual prescriptions meant to allay the related threats of moral degeneration and racial miscegenation. Emblematic of both
culture and race, women's roles had to be carefully negotiated to maintain those social and bodily boundaries. Richard Dyer describes this connection between ideas of whiteness and female sexuality:

There are special anxieties surrounding the whiteness of white women vis-a-vis sexuality. As the literal bearers of children, and because they are held primarily responsible for their initial raising, women are the indispensable means by which the group—the race—is in every sense reproduced. . . . White women thus carry—or in many narratives betray—the hopes, achievements and character of the race. (29)

As with the imperial racism Stoler describes, women become emblematic of racial purity, and that function is active on a series of different levels, including the colonial, the cultural, the sexual, and the familial. In fact, that iconic status in turn relies upon a specific image of woman as inhabiting exclusively the private familial realm of wife, mother, and dutiful daughter, a domestic ideal in which sexuality is largely evacuated except in its reproductive capacity.

Women’s roles as moralizing influences were closely linked with—even dependent upon—their location within the private confines of home and family. In the Victorian imagination the family was the crucial staging ground for the construction of moral and sexual identity. Women in their domestic roles thus take on increased significance as the arbiters of that determining environment. Barbara Roberts explains the important ideological connections that were formed between woman, family and empire: “If the family were the cornerstone of the nation, the woman’s role as wife and mother was the cornerstone of the family and thus the key to building the nation. On her shoulders rested not only the nation, but the empire and the future of the race—or so thought the Canadian reformers involved in female immigration work” (186). Seen as a microcosm of culture, the family was of critical importance in the quest to instill British values in Canadian society. These expectations blend nicely with the romantic narrative where women immigrants are instantly
incorporated into the community through marriage, thus becoming the wives and mothers to the future nation. But, other than the legendary girl seized upon disembarking and married on the spot, such instant immersion into an idealized private sphere was neither plausible nor ultimately desirable for a society experiencing a female labour shortage. On the contrary, many of the women who came to British Columbia to fill positions in domestic service or other, more public, employment were unaccompanied and therefore devoid of the important familial connections necessary for that iconic womanly status. Women's place in the new society was being negotiated, then, through a set of inconsistent, even incompatible, narratives, and the resulting attempts to blend a discourse of family romance devoid of women's work with the more material demands of the colony created a troubling discrepancy.

On the one hand, women were expected to entertain a privileged relationship to morality, which they would use in a familial colonial setting to reproduce and naturalize European cultural dictates. On the other hand, women were needed in the realm of wage labour – primarily as domestic workers, but increasingly in other industries as well. But where women as wives and mothers were considered guarantors of morality and cultural stability, women as wage-earners occupied an entirely different relation to morality, at least in the minds of colonial commentators and administrators. This conflict influenced the debate on female immigration, with some encouraging the immigration of middle-class women, who, by virtue of their culture and breeding, would exert the civilizing influence so dearly desired, while others held that working-class women were better equipped to take on the hard work of frontier living. In her 1908 book of advice to potential female settlers, Marion Cran took the former view:

The working-class woman does not bring the intelligence to bear on domestic emergencies which a cultured woman can, out of her ignorance how can she reduce disorder to comeliness and make the prairie home a beautiful thing? ... A woman of refinement and culture, of
endurance, of healthy reasoning courage, is infinitely better equipped for the work of homemaking and race-making than the ignorant, often lazy, often slovenly lower-class woman. (109)

The Victorian urge to categorize and hierarchize the classes and races often resulted in curious conflations whereby the working classes could be viewed as racially inferior and incapable of the kind of progress which the Imperial mission represented. Women's role in Imperialism, moreover – their ability to embody tradition and act as civilizing agents – was dependent upon their specific placement within the domestic sphere. Working women, however, far from embodying the tradition of home and family, were a challenge to those very structures, and thus posed a threat to the ideal of cultural reproduction. Because of their dubious class and race positioning, their frequent lack of familial connections, and their alignment with the public sphere of labour, industry, and capital, wage-earning women outside the home were antithetical to the cult of domesticity, the crucial arbiter of gender construction in the Imperial context of British Columbia.

In Making Vancouver, Robert A.J. McDonald comments on the reluctance to accept women in the workplace, or to regard them as truly respectable:

Apart from an obvious desire to protect their jobs in a trade already threatened by cheap 'coloured' labour, two barbers expressed a widely perceived concern that working in a masculine environment outside the home would have a 'bad moral effect' upon women. As one of them commented rhetorically to the male commissioners [of the 1913 BC Commission on Labour]: “I don’t think you would choose a lady barber for a wife.” (Making Vancouver 189)

That such a comment is, as McDonald notes, entirely rhetorical, signals the utter incompatibility, in the minds of both speaker and audience, of the idea of women as wives and the idea of women as workers. Moreover, since you wouldn’t want a lady barber for a wife, presumably because of the deleterious effect of working on her morality and feminine charms, it follows naturally that women
should not be permitted to be barbers at all. The narrative that cast women as wives and mothers to the respectable community was utterly unthinkable if those women were wage-earners in the public sphere, because in the popular imagination, working women in Vancouver inhabited a realm of vice so morally dangerous that it placed them outside the bounds of acceptable womanhood.

One way to reconcile this contradiction was to invoke the discourse of domestic service, emphasizing its value as the natural and proper sphere for women, and downplaying its status as waged labour and hard work. Indeed, some regarded domestic service as a suitable training-ground for young women, who would learn the domestic skills so important to their future roles as wives and mothers. But this set of attitudes was notoriously difficult to impose on Canadian working women, who consistently rejected domestic labour in favour of virtually anything else. In Britain, domestic service was often thought of as a relatively good opportunity for young working-class women both as a way to make a living and as a step toward marriage. A similar trajectory was thought to apply in the New World, as with the workhouse women who “having been first passed out into service” would “become wives and mothers in a Christian land.” But both Canadian-born women and young immigrant women tended to resist domestic service whenever possible. It is difficult to accurately establish the degree of this discrepancy in attitudes toward domestic service on either side of the Atlantic. For one thing, though, whereas in Britain the chores involved in domestic service were divided according to different positions within a household, in Canada there was often only one worker who therefore had to do everything, and certain chores were considered more demeaning than others. One of the bride-ship women, interviewed later in life, was severely disappointed with Canada and with the conditions under which she worked:

No, I was not happy, and I saw nothing beautiful about the new country. From the moment of landing I was disappointed, so was my sister . . . the rain and mud were dreadful . . . I used to cry myself to sleep every night. I slept in a garret room with big cracks that let in the
rain. The houses were all very poorly built. I was supposed to be a sort of companion; but though they kept Chinese help, there were tasks to do which were distasteful to me. (Lugrin 150)

Domestic work in Canada could be extremely onerous, yet middle-class Canadians consistently bemoaned the reluctance of young women to enter domestic service, painting them as selfish, demanding, and misguided in their pursuit of other work. In 1886, Sara Jeanette Duncan commented in *The Globe* on this disfavour toward domestic service: “The safe, comfortable life of the valued domestic servant, with all the pleasant relations it involves, is neglected for other ways of living, more laborious and more exposed” (30). In fact, long hours, low wages, virtually no time to oneself, and the threat of sexual advances from employers consistently made domestic labour a last resort to working women with any choice in the matter. As Mrs. Mitchell of the Vancouver Local Council of women explained, “People have so long looked down upon girls who do housework and subjected them to all kinds of indignities that young women of our day won’t take these things. They would rather starve” (317). Vancouver labour activist Helena Gutteridge even claimed that “there is a greater percentage of insanity among domestic servants than any other class of workers, probably due to the long hours worked and the endless monotony of drudgery” (“Woman’s Work”). So the narrative of gender progress where domestic service in the colonies was one step in a woman’s evolution toward wife and mother to the new nation was indicative of a set of social prescriptions which were not always successfully imposed on its chosen subjects. As a means of regulating the conceptual incongruity between women as workers and women as wives, then, the appeal to domestic service was tenuous at best. The cult of domesticity was powerful but not absolute.

Understanding women’s roles as cultural carriers is important if we are to map their place within the physical and conceptual territories of Empire, nation, and home. As emblematic of cultural continuity in the midst of intercultural turmoil, white women were subject to intense scrutiny
as they entered colonial British Columbia – a condition only exacerbated by their perceived scarcity. Essential to narratives of cultural and national identity, women were beset by colonial proscriptions and moral imperatives. But this cultural discourse of women as the custodians of tradition was highly monological in its location of women within a private domestic ideal. There was little latitude whereby working-class women could be integrated into this scheme, especially given their consistent resistance to domestic service. Critical fissures within narratives of female integration into British Columbia and Vancouver were becoming increasingly apparent, and profound contradictions would soon emerge concerning women’s place in the industrializing city. Such contradictions in cultural narratives are fertile ground for exploration, for the inconsistencies often reveal the ideological undercurrents which influence gender and power relations.

**WOMEN AND INDUSTRIALISM IN VANCOUVER**

_The labyrinthine and contaminated quality of metropolitan life not only leads to new cultural connections, it also undermines the presumed purity of thought._

Iain Chambers, 1994.

Industrial development in Vancouver was rapid and took place alongside a quickly growing population. Between 1901 and 1931, Vancouver’s population grew from 27,000 to 247,000. While the city’s economy still depended in large part upon primary resource industries such as forestry and fishing, which employed mostly men, service industries rapidly expanded to meet the needs of the quickly changing urban setting, and these increasingly drew upon a female workforce. That industrialism took place at such a high velocity meant profound repercussions in terms of social change and gender construction:

The first publicly recognized woman question in Canadian cities arose with the transition to an industrially based monopoly capitalist society. Although actual processes varied regionally, the colonial nature of the Canadian economy meant that for all Canadian cities,
industrialization was not a gradual development but was imposed in a relatively short period stretching over the three decades between the 1880s and the first world war. (Mackenzie 16)

Industrial and urban development, and their attendant social pressures were closely related to controversies concerning gender. And the figure most visibly influenced by these changes and engaged in the transformations brought by urban expansion in Vancouver was the working-class woman. Suddenly more and more visible in the public spheres of work, wages, and city streets, the unfamiliar figure of the working girl was evidence of the fundamental shifts taking place in the social fabric. Yet despite its rapid growth and modernization, Vancouver was in many ways still deeply committed to the social attitudes and ideals of the Victorian age. Middle-class reformers and city administrators were concerned by what they saw to be the unnatural effects of urban industrialism on the city’s young womanhood. In spite of the fact that it was the middle-class themselves who organized repeated efforts to bring women to the West specifically to fill a female labour shortage, when it came to any type of work other than domestic service, they clung vociferously to their Victorian attitude that woman’s place was in the home. This ideologically-driven disinclination to accept or recognize women’s entry into non-traditional workplaces would have far-reaching effects. Because women’s presence in new fields of labour was classified as an aberration to be reformed and restricted, the significance and value of the work women performed was consistently elided.

Women who entered the workforce, especially in non-domestic arenas, left the private confines of the home and family, a space associated with natural purity, and entered the public sphere of capital and industry, a realm suffused with metaphors of degeneration and contamination. The urban space of Vancouver itself was changing rapidly with modernization, and the entrance of women into that volatile setting was disturbing. An article in the Province on the need for domestic science classes for girls linked industrialism to the decay of home values: "Economic pressure has
burst open the doors of the home and its inmates, driven forth as outcasts and wanderers upon the streets of great cities, come to look upon the home as a mere lodging-house. Not only has man lost much of the domestic sense, but woman has lost pride in privacy and domestic seclusion” (“City and the School”). The rhetoric here seems to suggest the expulsion from Eden, as though an industrial society is a fallen one, and most telling of that fall are the changed attitudes of women. Part of the comfort of having women in the home, especially in an ethnically mixed environment, involved the cordonning off of their sexuality, but in the city, such supervision was not feasible. Mary Ann Doane explains how certain anxieties concerning gender were often products of modern urban change: “The conjunction of the woman and the city suggests the potential of an intolerable and dangerous sexuality, a sexuality which is out of bounds precisely as a result of the woman’s revised relation to space, her new ability to ‘wander’ (and hence to ‘err’). This was perceived as a peculiarly modern phenomenon” (263). Doane’s analysis helps explain the tendency in the early twentieth century to view urban working women in sexual terms and as particularly vulnerable to sexual downfall; working women were thought to be compromising their moral safety by moving so freely and independently through public streets and neighbourhoods. Vancouver in the early twentieth century consisted of specific sectors or ghettos identified with groups such as single working men, the Chinese community, and prostitutes, and the thought of young working women wandering through such danger zones was troubling to many. The Moral and Social Reform Council of British Columbia issued a report in 1912 on “Social Vice in Vancouver,” which claimed that “There is a constant siege being laid to the morals of young girls here. No unprotected girl is safe. The committee has had numbers of complaints of such annoyances from all parts of the city. Young women of the best character have been thus molested constantly” (3). As cultural carriers and as the nation’s future mothers, white women’s morality, purity, and sexuality were in need of careful
protection, but, to social administrators, working women seemed to be placing themselves in a dubious position for upholding those expectations.

As Elizabeth Wilson points out, there is a significant rhetorical connection between discussions of industrial urban development and debates on women's roles in society—both invoke the notion of the unnatural: "The real or imagined autonomy of the working-class woman in the factory town was often discussed in terms of the natural and unnatural. Urban life over-turned a symbolic natural order; and the linchpin of this natural order— the family —was the woman" (33). In the context of colonial intercultural encounter, women were meant to embody a traditional cultural essence; similarly, in the confusing context of urban transition, women were looked to as symbols of a jeopardized natural order. In this conceptual configuration, women's natural place is an idealized domestic space, where the boundary between public and private is constantly sanitized, with all traces of capital transaction and the work it depends on carefully obscured as evidence of a morally contaminated public sphere. Meanwhile, in terms of urban industrialism, the natural referred to a pre-industrial ideal, devoid of the exploitative conditions brought by monopoly capitalism and its agenda of maximization. The construct of the natural ideal was clearly fast receding into a romanticized historical memory. But perhaps in the minds of a nostalgic traditionalist elite it seemed that the former narrative of woman's natural place might be recuperated if women were properly influenced and controlled. And through those women, some degree of the natural could be retained in the face of more inevitable social and urban change. The rhetoric of the natural in the context of gender relations, then, has everything to do with power, especially when it comes to working women whose entrance into the arena of urban industry, labour, and capital is antithetical to every aspect of women's assumed natural place.
These kinds of ideological conflicts begin to explain why the entrance of wage-earning women into the rapidly growing public sphere of urban industry was so distressing to urban administrators and middle-class reformers of the time. In fact, Vancouver was certainly slower and arguably more reluctant than other Canadian cities to accept and facilitate the incorporation of women into non-domestic wage labour. Of the total number of working women in Vancouver, a higher ratio (42% in 1911) remained in domestic service much later into the century than was the case in other Canadian cities (Kealey 34). This could be indicative of a number of different circumstances – there weren’t as many other female-defined jobs in Vancouver as there were, for instance, in Toronto, where factory work for women was abundant. But certainly the highly gender-segregated field of employment in Vancouver influenced and was influenced by deeply held and longstanding ideologies about women’s natural place and strategies that might maintain that place.

Debates concerning working women differed according to the agenda of the parties involved, but what remained consistent was an inability to conceive of women merely as workers, with associated needs concerning wages, working conditions and so on; rather, working-women might be represented as victims of capitalism, willful and selfish girls wanting spending money, innocents in danger of corruption, “new women,” “women adrift,” and so on, all indicative of varying anxieties surrounding women and work in the city, but none of them able to separate the idea of the worker from the gender status involved. This tendency to reduce a working woman to her gender indicates how vast was the conceptual divergence between the idea of the working-class male – an absolute given of society – and the notion of the working-class woman – a social problem and threat to the natural order.

One way in which this conceptual divergence was (and is) managed involves the naturalization of the gendered division of labour; if women must enter the public realm and thus
upset the proper order of things, at least they can be confined to specific kinds of labour which, if not already coded as women's work, can soon be reformulated as such. A degree of order that reinscribes gender stereotypes is thus recuperated, and traditional, supposedly natural, gender constructions with associated power relations are to some degree upheld. A significant interplay thus emerges between the degree to which women are syphoned into jobs already coded as feminine and the extent to which jobs become feminine by virtue of women taking them up. Sewing, dressmaking and laundry work, for instance, were jobs which were coded as female very early on, partly because they were chores also traditionally done by women in the home, while clerical work was a field that started out male-defined but changed over in the early twentieth century. As Linda McDowell explains, gender is not a fixed essence which you take with you into a neutral workplace setting; on the contrary, gender is constructed in and through work, which is itself subject to specific gender expectations:

Occupations and workers themselves are socially constructed through a variety of practices to conform to a particular set of gender attributes. Occupations are not empty slots to be filled, nor do workers enter the labour market and the workplace with fixed and immovable gender attributes. Instead, these features are negotiated and contested at work. (25)

In Vancouver the gender division of labour was arguably more pronounced than elsewhere, because the most prominent industries involved the heavy work of resource extraction, always associated with male physical strength and masculinity. The factory work more prevalent in Eastern Canadian cities drew on both male and female labour, so although a gender division of labour was still apparent, the gender stereotyping of men doing the heavy work and women doing lighter, more feminine tasks, was not as fixed and ingrained as it was in Vancouver.

According to a survey of wage-earning women in Vancouver in 1911, about half were employed in domestic service, while the rest were variously employed as stenographers, teachers,
nurses, laundresses, saleswomen, waitresses, garment workers, telephone operators, and so on, all predominantly female-defined jobs at the time (Bannerman 299). The gender segregation of wage-labour is essential to understanding gender relations and gender formation in the context of industrialization and work. And the specific ways in which the gender division of labour manifested itself in Vancouver can tell us much about the city’s gender ideology. Because of the emphasis on supposedly masculine industries like logging and mining, the narrative that men chivalrously took the heavy work and allowed women the lighter, more domestic-related tasks was perhaps more prevalent in Vancouver than elsewhere. Even current historians, to a certain extent, accept the gender division of labour as natural; describing economic conditions in early Vancouver, Robert McDonald writes, “Women contributed to the region’s economy as well, though the masculine nature of work in the forest industry limited female opportunities for wage labour” (Making Vancouver 18). Here, women’s contribution to the overall economy is marginalized because of the “masculine nature” of a single industry. That the masculinity of forestry is so unquestioned here is further indication of how ingrained and naturalized these assumptions about work remain, even today.

While stereotyped and restrictive, the narrative about men generously taking all the heavy manual labour wouldn’t be so bad if it weren’t patently erroneous. Domestic work in particular, which involved heavy lifting, scrubbing floors, doing laundry manually, and working practically unlimited hours, was undoubtedly physically taxing. In British Columbia, women were also the primary source of labour for the demanding but poorly paid work in the canneries. In her column for the Vancouver labour newspaper, the BC Federationist, Helena Gutteridge objected explicitly to the hypocrisy of this fiction about labour division:
One of the pleasant conventions about women's work, still maintained by those who are unwilling to face the harsh reality, is the fiction that all the rough and disagreeable tasks are discharged by men... If the world's work were divided on the principle of giving to men the heavier tasks and to women the lighter and more pleasant duties, the male clerk should at once change places with the housemaid and the ticket-collector with the laundress. ("Woman's Work")

Gutteridge might have gone on to point out that the male clerk and the ticket-collector, despite their easy work, would likely both be paid more than the housemaid or the laundress. Playing on notions of male chivalry and feminine delicacy, the idea that men do the hard work conveniently elides not only the physical demands of women's work, but also, more importantly — ideologically speaking — its associated value. The gender stereotyping that has men doing the hard work on behalf of the weaker sex thus feeds into the devaluation of women's paid labour, and so justifies their lower wages. That Gutteridge identifies the gender division of labour and the assumptions which underlie it as conventions and fictions demonstrates her recognition of the ways in which society creates itself through these regulating narratives — narratives, moreover, which serve some more than others.

Wage-earning women, insofar as they represented the social changes brought by modernity, were touchstones for judgements about urban transformation. The desire to maintain traditional gender divisions asserted itself in the popular belief that women only did lighter varieties of work, with men doing the heavier, more important tasks, but the gender division of labour was already under challenge from women who resisted the false chivalry of that narrative, and who were eager for the opportunities of working life outside the home. What made this challenge to convention all the more disturbing to social critics of the day was the fact that the women most conspicuous in this movement into the public sphere of work were young and single: at the exact moment when they should be taking up their all-important function as wives and mothers, they were instead delaying,
even rejecting, that imperative by entering the very space most antithetical to true womanhood – the workplace.

THE SINGLE WORKING GIRL

As these overworked girls stream along the street, the rest of us see only the self-conscious walk, the giggling speech, the preposterous clothing. And yet through the huge hat, with its wilderness of bedraggled feathers, the girl announces to the world that she is here. She demands attention to the fact of her existence, she states that she is ready to live, to take her place in the world. Jane Addams, 1912.

In addition to the idea that women’s lower wages were in part justified by their doing lighter, less significant or skilled work than men, employers also argued that women’s marginalization and devaluation in the working world were related to their status as temporary workers. At the turn of the century and in the first decades of the twentieth century, young women tended to enter the workforce for the few years prior to marriage. Many of them expected, as did society, that marriage would remove them from the labour force. As Linda Kealey explains, “In the contemporary mind and in the official census returns, the typical working woman was young, single, and in the labour force only until marriage or family responsibilities precluded further wage work” (16). Of course, in some cases the anticipated husband might not materialize, a woman might choose not to marry, or necessity might dictate that married or widowed women work outside the home. But insofar as a typical working woman existed at all, she would have been young and single; hence the creation of an identifiable group known as “working girls.” Much of the controversy that surrounded this group of women was connected to their status as young and unmarried, conditions which contributed to representations of them as vulnerable and in need of protection. Employers exploited the women’s youth by claiming that their inexperience justified their low wages, as did their familial status – since young girls were presumably still living at home with their families, they needn’t be
paid a living wage, only enough for “pin money” or to supplement the family’s income. The following exchange took place during British Columbia’s Commission on Labour in 1912. Here the commissioner questions a laundry owner on the fairness of his wages:

Mr. Stoney: What do you think would be a fair wage for women?
Mr. Abrams: Women might be able to earn much more if they would stay with their jobs and not run around from one to another.
Mr. Stoney: That hardly answers the question.
Mr. Abrams: Women in the laundry or any place else as far as I know, if they would stick at the work and become efficient, would run from $10 to $15 a week. But that doesn’t figure the average woman.
Mr. Stoney: Figure the average woman. Have you any idea what it costs a young woman to live in a city like this, board, room, clothing, etc?
Mr. Abrams: I haven’t any idea. I am not a young woman and haven’t had any experience with any.
Mr. Stoney: With the minimum wage you pay a woman, $1.25 a day, if she were not living at home do you think she could live on that?
Mr. Abrams: No. I would not expect her to. . . . They should not be away from home, those that get $1.25 a day.
Mr. Stoney: Suppose it was not their own fault? Suppose their parents were dead and they had to go to work?
Mr. Abrams: I don’t expect they could live on that. But these girls that get $1.25 have homes and help to support the family by working in the laundry. That is the way I look at it. (105)

Young working women had a reputation for switching jobs frequently, a habit usually ascribed to the monotony of the repetitive, unskilled work open to them, the boredom of which might be slightly mitigated by moving from one to another. Here the employer emphasizes this temporary status in addition to the women’s inexperience and family situation to justify low wages. Despite his rationalizations though, he seems noticeably evasive, needing to be told his response “hardly answers the question,” and after stating with authority what women should do to improve their wages, he subsequently denies having “had any experience with any” of them. The interviewer, meanwhile, seeks to prove that no woman could live independently on the wages offered, and he asks the question at another stage, “What would she have to do?” – the implication being that she
would have to turn to prostitution. So while employers emphasized young working women’s unmarried status (which meant they should be living at home) to justify low wages, reformers also cited the singleness (though without family) of young working women, but in order to forecast their exploitation and moral downfall. In both cases, the unmarried status of working women was a focus in defining the “problem” of the working girl. The heteronormative assumption that single wage-earning women were destined for marriage and motherhood also contributed to their being regarded as temporary members of the workforce who didn’t need a living wage because they should shortly fall under the care of a husband with a “family wage.” The ideology of the family wage had the systemic effect of placing women in a financially dependent relation to men, seriously undermining women’s position in the labour market and their potential for independence; for women who did not marry, the family wage system was particularly debilitating. The single status of young working women, then, was a category fraught with meaning, contributing perhaps more than anything else to the representation of working girls as a social problem and moral dilemma.

Given Vancouver’s legendary abundance of bachelors, single women were under significant pressure to marry, but the assumption that marriage was the immediate goal of all young women was somewhat undermined by their instead getting jobs and joining a working-class youth culture that in many ways validated a single lifestyle of dances, dating, and commercial amusements. Carolyn Strange argues that “female singlehood was a characteristic that brimmed with economic and cultural significance in the early decades of industrial urbanization” (214). That the young female workforce tended to be single enhanced the degree to which they were looked upon in sexual terms. And the few years between childhood and marriage constituted an interim period in which the male control of either father or husband could not be guaranteed. It appeared that working girls were thus entering the morally dangerous world of industry at the precise time when they were most vulnerable to
downfall; as Mrs. Mitchell of the Local Council of Women put it, “Take any girl full of life and romance and poetry and keep her at that drudgery and you can see what a brave girl she must be to remain a good girl, especially when there are temptations all around her” (313). Because of their economic vulnerability, young working women were thought to be in particularly serious danger of giving in to the temptations of “the white slave trade”; this euphemism for prostitution is itself an interesting rhetorical study in that it sensationalizes the sex trade by adding racial metaphors – a conflation of othering both racial and sexual. (Pointing fingers about white slave trades also seems vaguely ironic coming from those who cheerfully imported shipfuls of white girls when it suited them). As Mariana Valverde notes, “In Vancouver and Victoria, there was much discussion about the role of Chinese men in the organization of the prostitution” (Age of Light 86). The Vancouver Star, a particularly racist paper with a dubious respect for facts, was especially concerned with the supposed danger posed to white women in the mixed-race workplace: “A contemporary has just made disclosures about the debauchery of a 17-year-old white girl by Chinese patrons of a Granville Street Chinese restaurant. Enquiries indicate that the facts are too unpleasant for public print. But white girls continue to serve under these vile conditions of near-intimacy with Chinese employers and patrons” (“Should Chinese”). Young working women became characters in urban narratives of sexual intrigue, their single status becoming, in part, a sign of sexual vulnerability.

To be single and earning wages in the public sphere further denoted a form of independence not usually associated with women, and indeed was considered conducive to a certain defeminization. The workplace, it was thought, had a degrading effect upon womanhood. Working girls, for instance, gained a reputation for using bad language, a trait judged to be inappropriate and unattractive in young women. A report about a number of young Vancouver women working as
waitresses at the Banff Springs hotel criticised a work environment characterized by profane language and too much makeup:

The girls are required to make themselves attractive looking, and with the thermometer in the kitchen, as it was one day recently, registering 114 degrees, the traces of fatigue can only be hidden by a liberal use of powder and rouge. Unless a girl is painted up like Jezebel, she will be sent away to make herself presentable.

Such a life does not tend to produce a high standard of ethics, and the only vent which the employees seem to find for their feelings is in a plentiful use of profane language. Any girl who cannot swear like a trooper finds herself very much out of place in these surroundings. This is perhaps scarcely to be wondered at in the circumstances. ("Wage Slaves")

What is at stake here are the boundaries of appropriate gender behaviour. In criticizing a workplace culture which included supposedly excessive makeup and profanity, social commentators were objecting to a transition in gender construction that was already under way. Single working girls might be dangerously vulnerable to sexual entrapment in the uncontrolled setting of work, but equally worrying was the thought that they might take advantage of that unstable arena to make choices, sexual or otherwise, independently of familial and social supervision. Toronto journalist Maude Pettit (a.k.a. Videre) posed as a regular working girl, living in lodgings and taking a few different jobs, to write a series of articles in 1912. Upon asking one young woman how she spent her free time she received the following account:

Here, says one girl, is how I spend my evenings: Monday night, an occasional (that means a man who just calls upon one sometimes); Tuesday, my steady; Wednesday, another occasional; Thursday, steady; Friday, another occasional; Saturday and Sunday, the steady. The steady worked three nights a week, so she filled up her program as above, according to her own words. ("There is")

This highly active and totally unchaperoned social life was of course much more available to young working women who lived on their own than to girls living at home, and this new kind of independence seemed to many a dangerous degree of social and sexual latitude to allow young women. Indeed the cultural importance of the social shift that took place when women entered the
urban industrial workforce and were thus enabled to rent their own rooms away from all family constraints cannot be underestimated in terms of women’s social and sexual freedom. As Kathy Peiss found in her research on working girls in turn-of-the-century New York, “The social and physical space of the tenement home and boarding house contributed to freer social and sexual practices.” (“Charity Girls” 63). It is no wonder then, that discussions about working girls frequently alluded to the question of their lodgings; since they lived in single rooms and had no sitting room, they entertained their male guests in their bedrooms, a situation deemed most undesirable to some, though apparently not to the young women themselves, as Maude Pettit found: “Do you shut your door when you have a gentleman in?” I asked of the girl in the next room. ‘O-o-o-ooh yes!’ she said expressively, ‘shut it and lock it.’” (“We Had”).

The single status of young working women enhanced the tendency to view them in terms of their gender and to view their problems as moral ones; approaching the same women as workers with problems related to their wages and working conditions was not on the agenda. Even in apparently obvious cases of poor working conditions, such as the 114-degree kitchen at the Banff Springs hotel, it is not the health and comfort of workers that is at issue, but the women’s overuse of makeup and unladylike language. The concern with maintaining gender norms often deflected attention away from women’s roles as workers and from the social and economic value of their work. Instead, their single and unsupervised status was the focus of interest. A contradiction manifested itself between the idea that working girls were vulnerable to moral and economic victimization and the fear that they were uniquely positioned to discover a sense of freedom which would allow them to play havoc with gender dictates. This was a problematic which underwrote the prominent rhetoric of protection for working girls.
The Discourse of Protection

*Thank heaven the women are awakening, and not much longer will they be exploited by employers and kicked under by their natural protectors.*

Helena Gutteridge, 1914.

From approximately the 1880s to the end of the first world war feminist politics, especially regarding labour issues, espoused a rhetoric of difference, extolling women's special abilities in motherhood and domestic skills while conceding that women's physical strength and endurance were less than men's. Later arguments for gender equality emphasize the similarities between men and women in order to justify women's right to equal treatment. But the argument for sameness is not always the most expedient, particularly if the conceptual climate maintains the belief in essential gender difference. Even in the fight for suffrage, a struggle to equalize the political rights of men and women as citizens, women reformers often argued that it was because of women's special knowledge of children and the home that they should have voting power, not because of any basic equality with men. An article in the women's column of the *BC Federationist* advocating women's suffrage stated that "Women are experts on the home and on questions concerning children. The home is the unit of the state; the children are the future of the race, and the expert knowledge of the woman along these lines cannot be disregarded without loss to the whole community" ("Some Reasons Why"). As Gary Kinsman notes, Canadian feminism in the early twentieth century lacked a progressive radical or socialist vision, so "Feminism based on equal rights for women was often subordinated to a maternal feminism that advocated women's rights as a way of protecting and extending the institution of motherhood in the home and in society" (115). In this ideological climate, arguments for equal rights, or equal pay for equal work, were not always viable. In fact, worker's "rights" tended only to be discussed in the case of male workers; Gillian Creese explains that in Vancouver, "Labour politics focussed on the appropriate sphere for working-class women,
not on their rights as workers. Indeed, women did not have ‘rights’ as independent workers as did men” (372). Wage-earning women, then, scarcely had access to the category of worker at all, and even less to the possibility of any corresponding “rights.” Nevertheless, the working girl problem needed to be addressed, and since it couldn’t be discussed in the same terms that were used for working men, a separate discourse congealed around the working girl, and its watchword was “protection.”

That men could invoke the idea of inherent rights as workers whereas women had to appeal to a notion of special protection is indexical of women’s exclusion from the more legitimized versions of rational subjectivity, like worker, citizen, or individual. The legal system took this into account. In her history of wage-earning women in the US, Alice Kessler-Harris explains that labour legislation in the early twentieth century took two different forms. The first pertained to working conditions, health and safety hazards, improved wages, and so on: these kinds of laws pertained to both male and female workers. She goes on to say, “The second kind of labor legislation – restrictive or prohibitive laws – aimed at excluding some workers from certain kinds of jobs altogether. These jobs might be defined by the time and place where they were performed or by the nature of the task. This second series of laws applied almost exclusively to women” (Out to Work 181). Labour legislation in Vancouver demonstrated the same disparity described by Kessler-Harris, indicative of the conceptual resistance to assessing working women according to the same criteria as working men. These prohibitive laws, such as banning women from employment in morally questionable settings like bars, or from overnight work, were directed toward women in order to safeguard their morals, health, and future capacity for motherhood. And where women workers were at issue, both these prohibitive laws and those pertaining to wages and working conditions were called protective legislation. Despite the traditional bent of the gender ideology at work here, in
many ways the reform work pertaining to working women which gave rise to such legislation was both necessary and groundbreaking, but its basis in an ideology of female weakness and gender role segregation lent it definite restrictive aspects. The rhetoric of protection for working girls, then, reflected prevailing attitudes of the day, and with male legislators cast in the role of protecting vulnerable working girls, a narrative of chivalry was being enacted on an institutional level.

Protective legislation for women in British Columbia was often implemented on moral grounds. In 1914, a ban was placed on women working at cigar stands, because a male customer had shown a dirty picture to a cigar-stand girl ("No Girls"). The Act for the Protection of Women and Girls, passed in 1919, banned white women from waitressing in Chinese restaurants (Anderson 159). And in 1909, although no legislation was enacted, a news story about a Chinese student in New York who killed his white Sunday school teacher prompted the Vancouver Police Commissioner to ask white women to stop teaching Chinese students in mission schools (Roy 14). The racial element in these cases indicates the important connection that existed, at least in the minds of legislators, between immorality and interracial environments like workplaces and classrooms. Part of the argument for racial segregation in British Columbia schools cited the possibility of interracial marriages which might result from childhood acquaintances (Roy 26). The workplace represented a similar kind of intercultural danger zone for women, where their moral and racial purity could not be guaranteed as easily as in the domestic sphere. Working women thus became key figures in the boundary maintenance between racial categories and gender spheres. In an important sense, protecting the white working girl was a way to protect these crucial social segregations, and so uphold both traditional gender roles and racial hierarchy. Here the discourse of protection betrays distinct overtones of an agenda of containment and control. The prohibitive aspect of protective legislation, where it denied women their jobs, continually reinscribed a version of traditionally
bounded femininity that was antithetical to the material actuality of women being workers. The women deprived of their jobs through such legislation seldom acquiesced willingly to being thus protected by having their right to work violated; they consistently protested both the laws that robbed them of their work and income and the associated representation of working girls as physically and morally weak. As I discuss further in Chapter four, both the cigar-stand women and the Chinatown waitresses demonstrated to protest the laws, and made statements denouncing claims about their moral vulnerability.

The less benevolent aspect of the protection campaigns is further evident in the use to which the discourse was put by working men, particularly in unions. Men who wanted to monopolize certain trades often supported protective legislation like limited hours and minimum wage acts which they knew would effectively disqualify women from entering certain positions and so competing with male workers: “The wage bargaining power of men is weakened by the competition of women and children, hence a law restricting the hours of women and children may also be looked upon as a law to protect men in their bargaining power” (John R. Commons quoted in Kessler-Harris 202). Meanwhile, they were interested to see how reforms like minimum wage laws would operate, and so judge whether to support similar legislation for themselves. Indignant labour activists like Helena Gutteridge accused union men of hiding behind the women’s petticoats and treating them like guinea pigs, all the while mouthing a false humanitarian chivalry toward their working sisters.

How truly grateful women should be to man for the protection he gives her if her interests and his conflict.

First she shall not join the union as in the early days, then she must, because his interests are at stake, then, finding that does not keep him top dog, she must leave the trade entirely alone it belongs by divine right to him, Oh, Chivalry, thy name is man!

Now the working of a minimum wage law is to be tried on women first. It is said that the saying “ladies first” originated in the middle ages when an enemy might be waiting round the corner to spring out and club one he disagreed with, so the ladies were sent first to protect
their male relatives. Our customs may have changed somewhat, but ladies first still holds good if it is a question of experimental industrial legislation. ("A Minimum Wage")

Gutteridge sees through the rhetoric of protection and mocks the hypocrisy of working-class men whose deliberate marginalization of working women exacerbated their exploitation in the labour market and workplace. In fact, protective legislation and reform work arose, to some degree, in order to make up for women’s marginalization in union activity. Despite that exclusion, perhaps in part because of it, much of the work done through protective legislation, such as establishing minimum wages, would prove to be groundbreaking, thereby putting women at the vanguard of labour politics. Yet those changes emerged from highly traditional arguments about women’s inherent weakness and men’s chivalric duty to protect them, beneath which lay the more opportunistic motives of men protecting their job security from female competition. Working-class culture, both in the workplace and out of it, could be highly restrictive in its attitude toward gender relations, and as Gary Kinsman explains, this conservatism inflected labour politics:

The struggles for a ‘family wage’ and for ‘protective’ legislation to keep children and women out of competition with the male worker — thus establishing the male ‘role’ as breadwinner — along with the call for sexual protection and control over women, organized a particular form of family life in the working class. The formation of gender within the working class included the affirmation of working-class forms of masculinity and patriarchal relations. (60)

Given the prevalent desire to aggrandize the work of men as heavier, more essential, and correspondingly more masculine, it is not difficult to imagine that part of what men were protecting in undermining the competition posed by women in the labour market was their own sense of masculinity and gender power. Working women thus occupied the utterly contradictory positions of essential inferiority as workers on the one hand, and competitive threat to masculinist organized labour on the other hand. No wonder protecting such wily creatures was as much an exercise in control as in philanthropy.
What is so fascinating in this arena is the interplay of contradiction whereby women were not only establishing themselves within a labour force reluctant to accept them but were also participating in crucial advances in labour politics and social policy even while a societal inability to see or accept them as workers persisted. Like the emigration societies, who were motivated by a female labour shortage yet who consistently depicted female immigrants as romantic brides soon to give birth to future citizens and elided their role as labourers, legislative reformers repeatedly "protected" women's morality and femininity by obstructing and prohibiting them from working. If working women were to resist this denial of their function as workers, their allies might logically have come from working men, but this group, while on one level recognizing the capabilities of women workers, quickly organized to suppress this threat to their dominance of the labour market by alleging women's inherent weakness and inferiority as workers and relegating them to the peripheries of labour politics. Ironically, this exclusion, which in turn required that women's labour issues be addressed on the alternate platform of protective legislation, resulted in women's placement at the forefront of labour reform. In a sense, by working a system suffused in the ideology of hierarchical and segregated gender spheres coded as the natural division of the sexes, working women stepped through certain blind spots to become central actors in groundbreaking labour reforms, the implications of which would be far reaching for both men and women.

Working women in turn-of-the-century Vancouver were the subject of intense interest among groups with otherwise widely different agendas and concerns: for reformers and women's groups they were objects for philanthropic projects, for legislators they posed problems of protection and control, for police they were associated with prostitution, for union leaders they provided useful test-cases in labour politics, and for writers and journalists they made excellent characters in tales of
urban intrigue. On a number of different levels, working girls were at the vanguard of change in terms of urban industrialism, gender construction, and the culture of work. In their roles and behaviour as women workers, they were pioneering new ways of enacting gender, and challenging both the ingrained assumptions unique to Vancouver, and the inherited traditions of a British elite. But breaching so many sets of interwoven assumptions and cultural narratives gave rise to many complications. Due to the social resistance to accepting women in the role of workers, ideologies of gender separation and hierarchy asserted themselves with force. The belief that women’s natural place was in the home meant that domestic work was extolled not only as the best kind of work for women, but as a form of gender progress whereby lower-class and immigrant women could be incorporated into established society and made ready for their eventual roles as wives and mothers in their own homes. This narrative was especially attractive in the colonial setting of Vancouver, where the rhetoric of Imperial progress suffused even the domestic sphere, and women were considered invaluable as guarantors of civilisation and family in the New World. Despite this glorification of women’s indispensable domestic talents, women’s work and labour in the home, as elsewhere, was either elided or devalued, according to attitudes that women’s work was easier, lighter, and less necessary than men’s. That women were thought important enough to be brought over in ships or attracted through promotional campaigns belies that denigration of their importance, and part of that importance undoubtedly rested in their labour power, since the groups involved in such campaigns repeatedly specified their desire for working-class women to fill domestic service positions. And the fact that many women left or rejected such work to join the non-domestic workforce is testimony to the demand for their labour elsewhere as well. A stark contradiction is evident here concerning women’s supposed place in early Vancouver, and it is in contradictions such as these that the ideology of gender construction and negotiation tends to manifest itself. In the
popular imagination women embodied tradition and family in the burgeoning nation, but more and more they were instead betraying those romantic notions by becoming eager and willing social pioneers in urban culture and the world of work.
At the turn of the century, the relatively new figure of the independent urban working girl represented for many writers the modern city: its opportunities, but also its potential for immorality and cultural disruption. At a time when women—in particular young single women—were entering the paid workforce in unprecedented numbers, there emerged in social commentary and fictional narrative the recognized figure of the working girl—the representational counterpart of society's new female wage-earners. It is to this culturally constructed figure that I refer in the following discussion of the working girl in Canadian literature. While many American writers seized upon the working girl as a heroine through which to explore the dubious social repercussions of modernity, Canadian writers were hesitant to address this female harbinger of change. In a literary market dominated by historical romance, the texts of social realism more likely to depict the working class were often neglected, but a more specialized suppression seemed to apply to representations of the urban working girl. Subject to exploitation both economic and sexual, the working girl had the potential to take on universal meaning as the innocent working-class victim of unprincipled capital, and in some texts this is her role. But the confidence and enthusiasm with which young women entered the urban fray significantly undermined the appraisal of them as unwilling sacrifices to industrialism. Not easily fixed in categories of innocence or corruption, the working girl's elision from Canadian
literature may in part reflect an unwillingness to face the complex social changes which she embodied. Notably, the few writers who did take up the figure of the working girl seem to fall into two distinct genres: either issue-oriented social realism or light-hearted popular romance, both often neglected in criticism then and today. While journalists and social reformers of the day voiced concern about the plight of working women, it would seem that literature directed at the middle-class literary audience was not expected to foreground social injustice too insistently, and it is this literature which entered the canon. There are, of course, myriad reasons for one text to be canonized and not another, but the coincidence that saw urban themes, working-class issues, and gender politics all frequently sidelined suggests a palpable resistance to acknowledging precisely those cultural conditions epitomized in the working girl. Those works which do address this figure were thus engaged in a politics of representation wherein even to depict the working girl was to invest meaning where it had long been denied. Just as working women were contributing to the industrial economy in a whole new way, working girls in literature were doing cultural work in figuring social transformation and gender transgression, and considering the momentous changes in gender expectations occurring in the twentieth century, the narratives that lent meaning to the wage-earning woman are social documents of great importance.

**SOCIAL REALISM AND WORKING WOMEN IN CANADIAN LITERATURE**

> And so, by force of cruel fate, as it seemed, this girl was as truly chained by invisible fetters to her daily toil among those relentless wheels and pulleys, as if she were a galley-slave.


In 1919, Jessie Georgina Sime published *Sister Woman*, a collection of short stories which addressed the Woman Question by portraying, in stark realist mode, the struggles of Montreal’s working-class women. Reviews of the work were not hostile, but they betray a marked ambivalence: “It is an
attractive and clever book, but the constancy of the point of view in the tales gives a certain monotony. But one doesn’t need to read them all at once” (Donovan 9). More intriguing than mere dismissal, however, is the opening statement of the Canadian Bookman review which situates its evaluation in terms of the national literature: “There are qualities about the collection of short sketches entitled ‘Sister Woman,’ by Miss J.B. Sime [sic], which make us hesitate to describe it as belonging to Canadian literature” (57). The reviewer admits that the writer has lived in Montreal for several years, and the setting is likewise Canadian, but “it is not a book for a young country. It is lacking in sentimentality and optimism, which we seem to demand from purveyors of fiction on this North American continent” (58). Despite these reservations, the review is not otherwise negative; the reviewer describes the story “Munitions” as “one of the most effective presentations in modern literature of the desire of the modern woman for economic independence” (58), and the whole volume as one “which should take rank among the best of the current work of English writers” (58). The hesitation to embrace the text as part of Canadian literature, then, would not seem to be based on any lack of quality, but rather on a feeling that, partly because of its dearth of optimism and sentimentality, the work was atypical of Canadian literature and unlikely to be appreciated by Canadian readers. The degree of ambivalence betrayed by these reviewers, and in particular the articulation of that ambivalence in terms of the national literature, is indicative of the reluctance to accept social criticism as part of Canadian literature. But that nationalist bent further suggests a reluctance to acknowledge current social problems in Canada, or to see fiction as one part of the debate needed to address social inequity.

In her introduction to Roland Graeme: Knight, Carole Gerson notes that “In nineteenth century Canada . . . realistic social fiction was generally rejected in favour of historical romance inspired by the example of Sir Walter Scott. So rare was the literary acknowledgement of social
problems that for Roland Graeme, one of the most sustained examinations of socio-economic issues to appear in Canadian fiction before the First World War, Machar chose an American setting” (xiii). Gerson explains that this may have been careful planning by Machar, who knew that America and Britain would likely hold the majority of her audience, while Canadian readers would more readily accept a social critique set outside of Canada. Roland Graeme appeared in 1892, but the Canadian distaste for socially engaged fiction persisted into the twentieth century as “scores of writers produced lyrical tributes to place and youth . . . or penned tender historical romances” (New 140). As William H. New points out, this predilection for historical romance was concomitant with a rejection of urban narrative. Despite the rapid expansion of Canadian cities, literature remained rural in setting and theme. Representing problems of social inequity may not demand an urban setting, but in literature of social critique the city, as the spatial manifestation of modernity, often provides the milieu in which questions of social injustice are represented in most detail. Furthermore, the most sustained challenges to the social order in terms of gender configuration were taking place in the city, as women’s entrance into the paid workforce brought about fundamental shifts in gender relations. As New points out, there was also a gendered aspect to the taste for rural themes in Canadian literature:

The general resistance to “city themes” was perhaps a refusal to recognize social inequities in Canada, perhaps part of a continuing rejection of women’s newly visible role in literature and (urban) politics. The city was in some sense figuratively theirs, just as received versions of “Nature” were extensions of male myths of control. (140)

The rejection of urban social themes in Canadian literature, then, was not merely a genre preference, but a refusal of those media which might allow for gender contestation. As one of the most visible and troubling figures of urban modernity, the working girl embodied precisely those conflicts which Canadian literature sought to avoid. It is not surprising, then, that Sime’s Sister Woman, despite its
acknowledged merit and its realist innovation, was excluded from established notions of what constituted Canadian literature, for it centred on the urban working girl.

While contemporary feminist critics such as Sandra Campbell and Lorraine McMullen have brought to light writers like Sime who have often been neglected in the canonization of Canadian literature, novels of socially engaged fiction are still largely marginalized, meaning that narrative representations of Canada's urban working girls have been all but buried. In the United States, the tale of the working girl is a much more recognized institution, with landmark texts like Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Dorothy Richardson's *The Long Day* standing out from a crowd of lesser known popular works and serialized fiction. Indeed, at the end of the nineteenth century in America, the prolific serial fiction writer Laura Jean Libbey made the working girl story into a formula romance and guaranteed best-seller, and her works may in some degree have influenced the Canadian writers who did portray the working girl in their fiction. In fact, the few texts which do revolve around this figure reveal a degree of class tension and social turbulence that is all the more fascinating for its Canadian context. One novel even has its working-girl heroine suddenly awaken to class hierarchy as she looks for work:

It had never before occurred to her that in applying for this place she had forfeited some of the rights of caste. Social distinctions had troubled Christine as little as they trouble most sensible Canadian girls. She had thought as little about her position as a duchess might: now, for the first time, she felt troubled and uneasy. (Mackay 66)

This passage draws on the Canadian myth of a classless society, a myth which often went unchallenged by mainstream literature which curtailed class commentary by excluding social fiction. As Christine's troubling realization demonstrates, the struggles of the working girl are inextricably bound to class inequity, and the Canadian reader of working-girl fiction was likely, like Christine, to feel troubled and uneasy when literature brought that conflict to light.
The four texts I discuss in detail here all feature themes of gender and labour, and though they differ greatly in their treatment of the social questions involved, the various depictions of the working girl suggest her representational power. Since the texts are little read today, what follows are brief summaries to clarify the content and genre positions of the texts.

As with the Canadian working girl’s realization of class in the quote above, Agnes Maule Machar’s *Roland Graeme: Knight* is a novel designed to elicit precisely this kind of awakening to social injustice. Published in 1892, it centres around a young, middle-class woman, Nora Blanchard, who comes to sympathise with her working-class sisters and subsequently embarks on a number of philanthropic projects to help them. The catalyst in her moral awakening is Roland Graeme, a member of the Knights of Labour and a Canadian, who introduces Nora to labour politics and thus educates the reader as well. With its focus on middle-class characters, the novel also clearly addresses a middle-class reader, urging sympathy for the working class in the form of maternal feminist philanthropy for women, and fair labour practices for men. Two minor characters are working girls employed at the town mill: Lizzie Mason, who supports an ailing mother and a wayward brother, is chronically overworked and on her way to an early grave by the end of the novel; Nelly Grove, meanwhile, the more spirited incarnation of the factory girl, displays the good looks and fancy dress which portend her fate as a fallen woman. These two versions of the working girl are recognizable tropes in both fiction and social commentary of the day, figures meant to evoke the pity and humanitarian impulses of a middle-class readership.

While the novel remains largely conservative in that class hierarchy is not overtly challenged, the way in which Machar executes her moral project is interesting in terms of gender. Although the title character and ostensible hero is male, the central character is undoubtedly Nora Blanchard, whose awakening to class inequity provides her character with the most development; Roland, by
contrast, is virtuous but static. In this narrative of labour unrest the presence of the Knights of Labour and the event of a strike suggest a male conflict, but the only working-class characters figured in any prominence are the working girls; meanwhile, what causes the major reforms for the mill workers are the complaints to the mill owner by his wife and daughter, who, like Nora, are appalled by the working conditions of the girls. The working girls, then, would appear to stand in for the whole working class, since their exploitation is the most visible and the most likely to elicit middle-class moral indignation; and the middle-class women, albeit by pestering their men, are the primary agents of social change. The novel is thus very much about the role of women in labour politics, even though in 1892 a relation between these two would seldom have been thought to exist.

Novels aimed at a more popular audience represented the working girl differently. Bertrand Sinclair’s most popular novel *North of Fifty-Three*, and Isabel Ecclestone Mackay’s *House of Windows* both depict the working girl as adventurous and capable. *North of Fifty-Three*’s Hazel Weir is twice subject to unwanted physical advances by men, and both times she successfully slugs the offender and proves herself both physically and morally superior. Published in 1914, the novel sold 340,000 copies, and Sinclair followed it with several novels also set in British Columbia, few of which, however, feature female characters so prominently. In many ways *North of Fifty-Three* depends on gender stereotypes, but a major part of Sinclair’s project is a critique of urban industrialism, and it is significant that for this he chose the working girl as the pivotal figure. Hazel Weir starts the novel as a stenographer in an Eastern city, engaged to a young man in real-estate, who breaks their engagement when he believes a false rumour that she had an affair with her boss. Hazel moves out to British Columbia to teach, where she gets lost in the woods and is found by Roaring Bill Wagstaff, who promptly kidnaps her to spend the winter in his isolated cabin. In many ways, this episode echoes the rumours of bride-ship girls being whisked off by wilderness men to
backwoods weddings; it is as though the novel’s working-girl formula is being highjacked by Western Canadian folklore. Wagstaff, ever the gentleman, does not lay a finger on Hazel, and come spring he yields to her demand to be released, escorting her to Vancouver and leaving her there. Hazel plans to pick up where she left off by finding work as a stenographer, but the bustle of the city is now alien to her: “She had her trade at her finger ends, and the storied office buildings of Vancouver assured her that any efficient stenographer could find work. But she looked up as she walked the streets at the high, ugly walls of brick and steel and stone, and her heart misgave her” (158). Just as the city thus threatens to overwhelm her, she encounters, on the corner of Seymour and Hastings, her ex-fiancé, Jack, who is full of apology for his past behaviour and begs her to take him back. Hazel cannot resist comparing him in her mind to Wagstaff: “And she could not conceive of Bill Wagstaff ever being humble or penitent for anything he had done. Barrow’s attitude was that of a little boy who had broken some plaything in a fit of anger and was now woefully trying to put the pieces together again. It amused her” (161). Soon after, Hazel makes her way back to Wagstaff’s cabin and they are married instantly. Hazel’s moral choice between the rugged wilderness life, considered here to be more honest, and wage-work in the city, is represented as a romantic choice between the hyper-masculine mountain man and the vacillating city-boy. In making money through mining, Wagstaff is willing to exploit nature but not people: “I don’t care to live fat and make someone else foot the bill. But I can exploit the resources of nature... It won’t be wealth created by shearing lambs in the market, by sweatshop labor, or adulterated food, or exorbitant rental of filthy tenements” (276). Wagstaff thus embodies the quintessential West Coast male, whose hard labour in resource extraction not only guarantees his undeniable masculinity, but also sets him on industrialism’s moral high-ground (environmentalism not being what it is today), and even assures his desirability to the opposite sex. However, this is also the figure which, when rendered as the
quintessential agent of British Columbia's economic progress, relegates women workers to the background or elides their presence altogether. Sources of profit which Wagstaff rejects as exploitative include the stock market, sweatshop labour, and renting tenements, all industries set exclusively in cities, sweatshop labour being often associated with women workers. As a working girl engaged to a real-estate man, Hazel begins the novel as a representative of the corrupt urban life: subject to harassment in the economically and sexually exploitative workplace and a victim of false innuendo, she is betrayed by her fiancé and ostracised by a hypocritical society. Here the working-girl figure is clearly the touchstone for judgements on city life and the moral cesspool of urban industrialism. Her journey to the West Coast, then, is a moral one, as well as a physical and romantic one. However, since redemption here is contingent upon rejection of city and workplace hypocrisies, and valorization of the explicitly masculine resource industry, Hazel must renounce her role as a worker and become the devoted backwoods wife. The romance, of course, naturalizes this transition, but an extended section of the novel involves Hazel's reluctance to give up the pleasures of the urban social scene for the isolation of rural British Columbia. By positing Hazel's redemption, figured as romantic fulfilment with Wagstaff, on renunciation of city life, the novel demonstrates the tendency for moral arguments on urban life to coalesce around the working girl, whose independence in a setting of moral indeterminacy is considered unmanageable and so demands containment.

Also aimed at a popular audience, Isabel Ecclestone Mackay's *House of Windows* (1912) shares many attributes with the formulaic working-girl romance, including sinister plots and kidnappings, a hidden family lineage, an almost thwarted romance, and a heroine whose flawless beauty is only exceeded by her perfect virtue. While still a baby, Christine is abandoned in the Angers & Son department store. One of the shop girls takes her home and, together with her blind
sister, raises the child as if she were their younger sister. When she is sixteen, Christine and her adoptive sisters fall on hard times and Christine also becomes a shop girl at Angers & Son. Meanwhile, a fallen-woman subplot rises to unusual prominence: before Christine appeared as a baby at Angers & Son, a shop girl there had turned to prostitution because of overwork, low wages, and the need to support an ailing mother. She died, but the mother recovered, and swore vengeance upon the owner of Angers & Son, Adam Torrance, whose indifference to the plight of his shop girls indirectly caused the downfall of the daughter. The avenging mother therefore kidnapped Mr. Torrance’s baby girl, and left her in the department store, this being none other than our heroine Christine. Sixteen years later, with Christine a shop girl, the old woman fulfills her scheme of poetic justice by kidnapping Christine and imprisoning her in a brothel, where she is every moment in danger of experiencing the same fate as the hapless daughter. A letter from the old woman to Adam Torrance informs him that his long lost daughter is not dead, but likely soon will be, or worse. The ensuing detective narrative has Christine finally rescued by Torrance’s nephew, who has loved her all along. The novel concludes with a merging of upper and lower classes: Christine engaged to the nephew, the blind adoptive sister engaged to Torrance, and the other sister matched up as well. Although it is set in an unnamed city in Eastern Canada, Mackay wrote the novel in Vancouver and she includes a subplot which sends the shop owner’s nephew to Vancouver, where he comments upon the charm and sophistication of the city’s young women. The romance formula tended to have the hero sent away as an obstacle to the eventual union with the heroine, and it is interesting that Mackay uses this convention to add a commentary on life in her own city of Vancouver, lending the tale a degree of West Coast character.

Undoubtedly the most serious work of fiction regarding the working girl in early twentieth-century Canada is J.G. Sime’s *Sister Woman*, set in Montreal and published in 1919. As Sandra
Campbell points out, Sime intended the form of her writing to reflect the character of modern urban life and for this reason she used the short story: “one feels in the cities, I think, the potentials of quite another kind of art – disjointed, disconnected art that finds its expression in thumb nail sketches, short stories, one-act scrappy plays and the like” (Sime quoted in Campbell 43). In *Sister Woman*, the stories revolve around the many incarnations of the urban working woman: seamstresses, secretaries, munitions workers, domestic workers, and so on. Many of the narratives also explore female sexuality by representing the relationships of working women with men, drawing special attention to illicit relationships popularly known as irregular unions: a secretary’s secret relationship with her boss, a housekeeper with her employer, an unwed couple faced with an unplanned pregnancy. All these are represented with a sympathetic yet unapologetic candour very unusual for the time. Employing the fragmentary form of the short story, Sime’s writing carefully connects the tone of urban life with the struggles of the working woman, and by further focussing on gender relations, her fiction places the working girl at the forefront of cultural transformation.

All four of these texts depict the working girl in narratives of social unease, with economic exploitation and sexual danger everywhere immanent. In fact, as with the boss who gets socked in the teeth in *North of Fifty-Three*, or the mill owner’s son who flirts with factory girls in *Roland Graeme*, the two are often conflated. In stories of the working girl, the alternating pressures of morality and money appear in infinitely variable permutations, and the attendant meanings shift with each new version. The working-girl narrative as the subplot for a middle-class morality tale in *Roland Graeme* works in a very different way than it does as the centre of popular romance in *The House of Windows*, where working-class virtue guarantees wealth and happiness. The fact that the figure of the working girl could act as a recognizable trope in a variety of texts, yet a trope with
myriad possible meanings, is indicative of the cultural significance of this neglected figure of Canadian literature.

ESCAPING THE CULT OF DOMESTICITY

In 1903, *Canadian Magazine* published an illustrated article by Annie Merrill entitled “The Woman in Business” which both described the secretarial working woman and advised her on proper conduct. Instruction on workplace etiquette gives way to fashion dictates and dating advice, all of which signal the desire to clarify class and gender norms for the ambiguous new figure of the urban working girl. While the first half of the article takes a fairly positive attitude toward “The Serious Woman in Business,” assuring us that “she is not necessarily mannish” (409), the second half displays a much more condemnatory tone: “Business is unlovely for a woman, and in many ways she were better out of it” (409). Where the unresolved ambivalence of the author becomes most obvious, however, is in her discussion of house-keeping and domestic work, as she castigates the business woman for neglecting the home, even though her own representation of house-work seems ample reason to reject it:

The fascinations of the constant excitement in a busy commercial life make the thought of house-keeping seem tame to the very young woman. Her immature judgement is not capable of giving correct values to the things of life. In common with the discontented “domestic,” who has left the goodly, if monotonous, kitchen, for the doubtful factory, she likes the regularity of business hours, remembering that at home her work seemed never really to end. (409)

To today’s reader, the discontented domestic and the woman who prefers paid employment to never ending house-work seem to be exactly capable of “giving correct value to the things of life.” Merrill’s implied chastisement of such women does not fully cohere in this passage, and the ambiguity is arguably symptomatic of the unresolved conflict between the cult of domesticity and
the figure of the working girl. This conflict and the ensuing debate about women’s renunciation of domestic work is an important part of the larger debate about women’s place in society, a debate suffused with anxiety over the transformation in femininity that accompanied women’s entrance into the public realm of work.

All four of the texts I am examining make a point of explaining why their characters are not in domestic service. In Roland Graeme, the factory girl Lizzie says, “I’d love, myself, to be in a good, quiet house, where one could sit down when one was tired, and not have to go out in the dark, all sorts of mornings, and have to be on the go all day! But, you see, if I live at home I can give mother my board, an’ that’s such a help to her” (66). Machar subscribes to the notion that domestic work is the best choice for the working-class woman, representing it as easier and healthier, while also assuring the reader that Lizzie is all the more worthy of our sympathy: she is not like those “discontented domestics” who deliberately upset the social order by rejecting servitude for the morally dubious factory—her needy mother makes domestic work impossible. Lizzie thus represents a version of the working girl as an innocent victim of modern industry, forced into an unnatural role which will culminate in her early death. Her function in the text is to awaken our pity and moral indignation, and it is significant that for her to hold that function, her work in the mill has to be represented as a necessity, not a choice. The industrial workplace then, was not only a morally questionable space in itself, but the mere choice to enter it could be read as a mark against you. Only once Lizzie has been cleared of that choice can she assume the mantle of innocence and go on to represent working-class victimization under capitalism.

In North of Fifty-Three, on the other hand, the heroine has no intention of entering domestic work, and the socialist politics of the text are much more radical than those of Machar, with the heroine eventually refusing not only domestic work but all wage work as exploitative servitude to
be refused along with the hypocrisy of class society. Initially a stenographer, Hazel already considers domestic service beneath her, demonstrating in her perusal of the Help Wanted column the subtle hierarchy of jobs for women. Sinclair also adds a geographic specificity to Hazel’s job hunt by foregrounding the demand for domestic help characteristic of British Columbia:

Then she turned to the “Help Wanted” advertisements. The thing which impressed her quickly and most vividly was the dearth of demand for clerks and stenographers, and the repeated calls for domestic help and such. Domestic service she shrank from except as a last resort. And down near the bottom of the column she happened on an inquiry for a school-teacher, female preferred, in an out-of-the-way district in the interior of the province.

“Now that – ” Hazel thought. (52)

Hazel takes the teaching job as a ticket out of the town where gossip and convention are pitted against her. Facing a degree of social ostracism because of a scandal caused by her boss, Hazel longs to turn her back on the hypocrisy of urban life: “She found herself hungering for change, for a measure of freedom from petty restraints . . . ‘What a country!’ she whispered. ‘It’s wild; really, truly wild; and everything I’ve ever seen has been tamed and smoothed down, and made eminently respectable and conventional long ago’” (55). With “tamed” as one of the root meanings of domestic, and the further terminology of convention and respectability, Hazel’s desire for wilderness adventure resonates with a sense of implied gender transgression. Rather than becoming demoralized by workplace harassment and unwarranted social censure, Hazel is galvanized with a pioneer spirit of adventure. From the independent working girl she becomes the single woman traveller, another challenge to traditional gender roles, also decidedly non-domestic; and rather than condemning her for this rejection of convention and domesticity, we are invited to admire her spirit of independence. By the time Sinclair was writing, the working girl had made great strides – far from the vulnerable workplace innocent of Machar’s novel, in the twentieth century she becomes
a force to be reckoned with — a heroine whose moral compass and self-reliance set her apart from her surroundings.

The most explicit representation of a young woman deliberately rejecting domestic service in favour of other work is J.G. Sime’s “Munitions.” Set on a street car packed full of female munitions workers on their way to work, the story relates the experience of one girl who left domestic work for the factory:

Just five weeks before and Bertha had been a well-trained servant in a well-kept, intensely self-respecting house — a house where no footfall was heard on the soft, long-piled rugs. (37) Regret! Reconsider! Never again would she hear bells and have to answer them. Never again would someone say to her: “Take tea into the library, Martin.” Never again need she say, “Yes, ma’am.” Think of it! Bertha smiled. . . . The joy of being done with the cap and apron. The feeling that you could draw your breath — speak as you liked — wear overalls like men — curse if you wanted to. (43)

In this story, domestic work is drawn as a suffocating immersion in quiet, static respectability, set against which is the fast-moving streetcar, full of rowdy munitions women telling off-colour jokes. Freedom from restraint and respectability further allows the suggested gender transgression of trading in cap and apron — signs of female domestic servitude — for the working man’s overalls and the license to curse freely. It is doubtful whether Canadian readers were ready to accept the idea of women being that relieved to escape housework for the unruly environment of wage work: the reservations of one reviewer are telling when he describes “Munitions” as “one of the most effective presentations in modern literature of the desire of the modern woman for economic independence — and the sometimes excessive reaction when that desire is gratified” (“Montreal”). Reading a girl’s enjoyment of a noisy street-car ride with her co-workers as an “excessive reaction” to independence is likely more an index of the reviewer’s anxiety than of Sime’s intention here.
Annie Merrill’s advice to working women in “The Woman in Business” outlines proper behaviour outside the workplace and suggests why the reviewer may have thought Sime’s character excessive:

Outside of the office the Serious Woman in Business takes life seriously. . . . She commands respect by her demeanor on the street, and in her social circle, which, though it may not be a large nor a fashionable one, yet represents the world to her. She is careful to avoid being conspicuous in her manner. (408)

The preoccupation with working women’s behaviour in public spaces demonstrates how new and troubling their presence there was. And the tendency of middle-class commentators to perceive their behaviour as excessive or conspicuous is further evidence of the feeling that they were thought to be out of bounds, beyond what was normal, acceptable, or perhaps even controllable. That they were no longer in the domestic sphere was one thing, but once unleashed upon the sidewalks and the streetcars, working women’s behaviour there suggested still other transgressions — of decorum, femininity, and sexuality. These connections between space, identity and sexuality are addressed by Sime in a lighthearted tone, as though to reassure her reader:

It wasn’t in the least that they were what is known as “bad women.” Oh no – no! If you thought that, you would mistake them utterly. They were decent women, good, self-respecting girls, for the most part “straight girls” — with a black sheep here and there, to be sure, but where aren’t there black sheep here and there? And the reason they shrieked with laughter and cracked an unseemly jest or two was simply that they were turned loose. They had spent most of their lives caged, most of them, in shop or house, and now they were drunk with the open air and the greater freedom and the sudden liberty to do as they liked and damn whoever stopped them. (35)

Although the tone here is very light and conversational, Sime does go out of her way to acknowledge that popular perception might mistake these girls for “bad women” or “black sheep” simply because “they made a row.” Her need to clarify that girls being loud in public was not a necessary indicator of questionable sexuality makes clear the conceptual links that existed between public space, female identity, and the threat of uncontained sexuality.
Part of the controversy regarding women's rejection of domestic service in favour of work in the public arena undoubtedly involves the relative visibility of the two spheres of work. As Anne McClintock points out in her explanation of the cult of domesticity, the whole point of the realm of tasks involved in domestic work is to erase all signs of work or labour: "The striking difference between the rationalizing of the market and the rationalizing of housework is that the latter is rationalized so as to render women's work invisible and to thereby disavow its economic value" (172). Clearly working women in the public sphere were visible in an entirely new way, but in addition, the work they did was eminently visible as well, in a way it never had been within the home; here, with kitchens, laundry rooms and servants quarters all pushed to the back, architecture itself reinscribed the domestic imperative to hide work. The social pressure to keep women in domestic service, then, was part of the suppression of the existence, visibility, and value of their labour. At the same time, the maintenance of women's traditional roles and the containment of female sexuality were both more readily secured through women's assignment to the domestic sphere.

I would argue, then, that a series of connections exists between the imperative to hide the evidence of women's work, the desire to curb changes in gender norms and female sexuality, and the suppression of representations of working women in Canadian literature. By representing urban wage-earning women, writers like Sime insisted on the materiality of women's labour as well as the social, economic, and cultural repercussions that flowed from it. Indeed, at a time when women's roles lay mainly in the reproduction of tradition, the cultural work of working women in terms of reinventing gender and sexuality cannot be underestimated, though it may not be as easily quantified as their paid labour. As the cult of domesticity demonstrates, the representation and implied
acknowledgement of that labour was precisely what a traditional majority sought to avoid, thereby denying both the material and cultural weight of this disturbing class of women.

Sime’s stories are set in Montreal, and “Munitions” would likely be set during the First World War, demonstrating that the criticism of women who rejected domestic service for work in the public sphere was still an important part of debates on the working girl in 1919. If this were the case for Eastern Canada, it was likely true for Vancouver as well, where, despite the existence of munitions factories and other sources of non-domestic employment for women, a combination of social factors kept a proportionally larger number of women in domestic work than was the case elsewhere in the country. In addition, the stereotypical view of Vancouver held that the economy and the associated culture of work were based on heavy industry and masculinity; to admit the contribution – economic or otherwise – of women’s work would threaten the very foundation upon which the identity of the city and its inhabitants was based. Perhaps the higher numbers of women in domestic service were influenced in part by this masculinist bias about the gender of work in Vancouver, a bias which would have meshed well with the cult of domesticity and its elision of female labour. Arising from this environment, Mackay’s *House of Windows* is interesting for its insistence on the harsh demands of women’s labour in department stores, and for its various representations of the single working girl, including a figure of impeccable working-class virtue, a fallen woman, an innocent victim of the workplace, and a heroine who inadvertently puts class hierarchy into crisis.
CLASS CROSS-DRESSING IN *The House of Windows*

*Again he took the small hand extended to him and again it seemed to change miraculously from the hand of Miss Brown into the hand of some delectable princess.*


Isabel Ecclestone Mackay moved to Vancouver in 1909, and wrote a number of novels, primarily romantic in tone and aimed at a popular audience, but she was better known for her poetry, which was grouped with that of Pauline Johnson. Published in 1912, *The House of Windows* draws on the dime-novel tradition of the working-girl romance, a formula popularized in late nineteenth-century America by Laura Jean Libbey, whose serialized narratives were devoured by America’s female working class. In Canada, a writer of comparable popularity could be found in May Agnes Fleming, but her romances featured primarily middle-class characters, whereas the working-girl romance always had a working-class heroine. So, while the works of Libbey and her counterparts were likely read in Canada, there was no equivalent trend in Canadian literature. *The House of Windows*, then, was unusual for Canadian literature of the day; with its urban setting and shop-girl characters, it represented a side of Canadian life not usually addressed in literature. Far from Sime’s direct realism, however, Mackay’s novel mixes realist depiction of working women’s hardships with romantic fantasies of danger, adventure, and wealth. Although beginning with detailed accounts of the everyday trials of shop girls, the novel progresses into an intrigue plot with the heroine kidnapped and almost raped before being rescued to claim her secret inheritance. Nan Enstad examines the genre of working-girl fiction at length in her book, *Ladies of Labour, Girls of Adventure*; these plots of mystery, intrigue and Cinderella romance characterized the working-girl formula popular in America: “The stories invoked the difficulty of working-class women’s lives – toiling at jobs that offered little hope for advancement – and offered them fabulous fantasies of wealth, fashion, success, and love” (19). In some ways, this popular culture form, closing with wealth and marriage which
remove the young heroine from the working sphere, would seem to reinscribe a traditional vision of female success. But as critics of the genre have pointed out, there is a noticeable current in such narratives running counter to readings that would thus circumscribe the meaning of these texts, especially as representations of class.

In *Roland Graeme*, the factory girl, Nelly, engages in a flirtation with the mill-owner's son, Harold Pomeroy, himself already engaged to another girl. This relationship is used to signify the moral degradation of both characters, but it is Nelly who fares worse in the end: although this relationship ends, it is implied she becomes a fallen woman. Working-girl narratives often feature an involvement between the working girl and the boss's son, representing the latter sometimes as hero, more often as wicked seducer. As Michael Denning points out in *Mechanic Accents*, narratives like this render class conflict as the direct, personal confrontation of sexual intrigue or harassment (196), but how that conflict unfolds may also indicate the social agenda of the writer:

Unlike the seduction novels that occasionally occur in middle-class fiction, which focus on the fallen woman, the Libbey stories [working-girl dime novels] are tales of the woman who does not fall, despite drugs, false marriage, physical violence, and disguise. Against middle-class sympathy for the fallen is set working-class virtue. (192)

*Roland Graeme* is very much a novel of "middle-class sympathy," where working girls are pitiable victims of industrial and sexual exploitation; while middle-class philanthropy might ease their suffering, there is no question of their class position changing, or of the women themselves successfully resisting their treatment. In the popular working-girl narrative, established by Libbey and played on by Sinclair and Mackay, on the other hand, the sexually charged class confrontation of working girl and upper-class man unfolds quite differently. In *North of Fifty-Three*, Hazel capably punches her boss in the nose and even somewhat enjoys it: "It seemed unwomanly to strike. But the humour of the thing appealed to her most strongly of all. In spite of herself, she smiled as
she reached once more for her hat. And this time Mr. Bush did not attempt to restrain her” (21). Hazel’s able self-defence here is a precursor of her ultimate rejection of class exploitation, represented through her relationship with the socialist hero. In *The House of Windows*, the gentleman seducer hovers around the heroine’s workplace, virtually stalking her, until she confronts him: “I do not know you,’ she said quietly, ‘but if you are a gentleman you will annoy me no further. I do not wish to appeal to the police.’ . . . It was a defeat as complete and unexpected as Waterloo!” (151). Christine is the embodiment of working-class virtue, and the introduction of this would-be seducer seems almost an off-hand way to highlight the impossibility of her being tempted. She does, however, strike up a romance with the boss’s adopted son, here the hero, who must actually masquerade as a working-class piano salesman so that Christine’s initial attraction to him remains unsullied by questions of class aspiration. These popular depictions of the working girl appealed to a working-class readership, who might well have been insulted if the working girl were represented as morally weak. Where narratives aimed at the middle class may invite sympathy for the downtrodden working girl, her vulnerability to seduction and her exploitation in the workplace seeming to go hand in hand, they nevertheless leave class divisions intact. The moral and physical strength of the working girl who ably fights off her assailants, meanwhile, suggests a working-class resistance to exploitation, sexual or class-based. The endings of working-girl novels in turn reward their feisty heroines with secret inheritances and propitious marriages that defy class boundaries.

What both the middle-class and dime-novel modes of fiction demonstrate, then, is that in narratives of working-class womanhood, class identity and sexual purity are inextricably intertwined: in *Roland Graeme*, Nelly’s vulnerability to sexual degradation is a product of her class-specific environment, while in *The House of Windows*, Christine’s unassailable purity is, depending on your reading, a testimony to working-class virtue or evidence that she was really a “lady” all along. This
connection between class and sexuality, and the dual readings that arise from it are part of a debate central to the working-girl narrative. As Michael Denning points out, "in the rhetoric of the late nineteenth-century bourgeois culture, a working woman could not be virtuous, regardless of her virginity" (191). To contend, as working-girl novels did, that the working woman was indeed a figure of unquestionable virtue was to assert that she was as good as any "lady." Hence the central problematic in these narratives: "Key to the dime novel plot is the question: Can a worker be a lady? That is, does work indeed degrade, spoil one’s virtue, make one coarse and masculine?" (Enstad 74).

Concerned with the proper deportment in public of the working woman, Annie Merrill, writing for Canadian Magazine, dispensed the following fashion advice for the "Serious Woman in Business": "She is careful to avoid being conspicuous in her manner. Dresses plainly. Does not try to ape the ‘lady,’ with gaudy imitations in gowns and jewels" (408). Accompanying this admonition is an illustration of the modestly dressed working woman, with the caption reminding us, "She dresses plainly." Merrill’s advice manifests the middle-class desire to clarify class divisions, especially when working-class women were at issue, and fashion was a major system of signification for female class hierarchy. In fact, the tendency of working-class women “to ape the lady,” as Merrill puts it, was a common middle-class complaint about working girls. Nan Enstad examines the middle-class preoccupation with working women’s supposedly inappropriate fashion choices. Through her analysis of working women’s consumer culture, she suggests that implicit in working-class women’s notorious fashion sense was a deliberate challenge to the conventional codes of ladyhood:

Working women dressed in fashion, but they exaggerated elements of style that specifically coded femininity: high-heeled shoes, large or highly decorated hats, exceedingly long trains (if trains were in style) and fine undergarments. . . . By appropriating and exaggerating the accoutrements of ladyhood, working women invested the category of lady with great
imaginative value, implicitly challenging dominant meanings and filling the category with their own flamboyant practices. (78)

Enstad draws a connection between this fantasy of ladyhood enacted through dress and the fantasies afforded working women in novels, where the working girl similarly becomes a lady. The heightened femininity of their attire, meanwhile, responded to the notion that work was masculinizing for women: class and gender definitions, then, were clearly both at stake. Mackay describes the shop girls in *The House of Windows* engaging in this exaggerated and decorative femininity through their hair-dos:

The fashion in hairdressing had also changed, and the young ladies behind the counters, who in Celia’s day had been content with neatly coiled or braided tresses, were now resplendent in towering structures which held the eye with the fascination of the wonderful. It was all simple enough to one who understood the mysteries of rats and buns and turbans and puffs and curls, but to the uninitiated the result was little short of miraculous, for even supposing that Nature, in lavish mood, had supplied such hair – how did they get it to stick on? (123)

That the hair-dos here are extravagant, defy Nature, and even include stick-on hair demonstrates the trend toward excess described by Enstad. Shop girls, in fact, whose work had everything to do with fashion and display, were thought to be particularly guilty of this kind of accessorizing overkill. In *Counter Cultures*, Susan Porter Benson describes how shop girls, working in the world of style and consumerism, often displayed their expertise through their dress, a practice which also narrowed the class gap between them and their customers, sometimes to the dismay of the latter (235). For Christine in *The House of Windows*, it is interesting that even before she starts working in the Stores, she is categorized with shop girls because of her appearance. Following her failed attempt to get work in a home reading to the lady of the house, the maid sums up her chances elsewhere:

“She’ll have some trouble getting anything respectable with that face, ... In her walk of life I always say that beauty is a drawback as often as not.” ... “And what would you say Miss Brown’s walk in life might be Martha?”
The maid shook her head slowly. “Oh, she’s got airs and graces enough! But you never can
tell. Shopgirls are getting very dressy, these days, what with their false hair and all! And
ladies don’t go about looking for work.” (75)

In other words, Christine resembles either a lady or a shop girl, according to her good looks (her hair
in particular is often mentioned), her dress, and her demeanor; the only reason not to classify her as
a lady is that ladies don’t need work. Notably, it is the maid who makes these deductions; a working
woman is highly versed in reading the subtleties of dress, deportment, and class, whereas the upper-
class woman here is less astute, though equally curious. This scene has everything to do with
identity and the class and gender markers that supposedly reveal that identity, but the working-girl
figure poses a significant challenge to her interpreters; undermining the maid’s apparent accuracy
here is the dramatic irony – though the characters are not aware of it, the reader knows Christine
really is a lady. Mackay is thus deliberately playing on the class and fashion ambiguities that make
the shop girl hard to distinguish from the lady.

In both the maid’s detective-like interpretation of Christine’s walk of life, and in the
narrator’s description of the shop girls’ eye-popping hair-dos, there is an element of the
indecipherable associated with working-girl fashion. To one of Sime’s middle-class narrators, a
shop girl’s dress is baffling:

The way Altabelle dresses is one of the riddles of the universe – anything the Sphinx could
possibly have to offer would be child’s play compared with it. Altabelle has, you see,
nothing whatever to spend, and no time to spend it in if she had, and yet she looks like the
Countess of Malmesbury every time. (122)

Nan Enstad has documented the frequent objections made by middle-class commentators like Annie
Merrill to the “tastelessness” of working women’s fashion choices. Middle-class critics thought
the working woman was “aping the lady,” but as Enstad points out, working-class women went
above and beyond what middle-class women wore, purposely adorning an excess of feminine-coded
accessories: imitation was not the point. Perhaps what middle-class observers of the time were slow to recognize was that, far from “aping the lady” or following upper-class trends, working women were engaging in their own sense of style, creating new fashion trends and, on a similar though larger scale, pioneering new cultural trends as well. Working-class women’s fashion then, speaks to their spirit of cultural innovation, deliberately drawing attention to their presence as women and as workers in the public sphere.

In fact, turn-of-the-century social critics like Annie Merrill not only judged fashionable working women’s attire as tasteless, but predicted that it was the first step toward immorality – where class-ambiguity led, aspersions of sexual impropriety followed. Mariana Valverde has documented the recurrence of the “finery-to-fall” narrative in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century texts, which connected working-class women’s love of finery to an inevitable moral fall:

“Finery” sometimes referred nonjudgmentally to “fine clothes,” for instance among the aristocracy. A more common meaning, however, connoted moral flaws on the part of the wearer. Finery in this pejorative sense meant clothes that were too showy, clothes that looked elegant and striking but were in some unspecified way cheap, if only because woman wearing them was herself a cheap imitation of upper-class womanhood. The same dress could be considered elegant and proper on a lady, but showy and dishonest on her maid. . . . Finery in the pejorative sense meant the type of female dress that signified or brought about moral ruin. (“Finery” 169)

At a 1901 meeting of the middle-class women’s society, the National Council of Women of Canada, one member gave a paper that lamented how young working-class women were leaving their country homes to work in the city and were thus losing their domestic skills; she uses fashion and dress to narrate this journey as one of moral decline:

‘M’amselle’ has now gained other knowledge; she has come to the great city, wears a hat with feathers pointing to the four winds of heaven, a dress of shoddy material in many colours; has become an attachment of a machine in a factory, living with two or three other girls in one small room in the salubrious atmosphere of a close street! I think she was a healthier, happier, better educated and more useful member of the community as a member of that farm household. I say it is a pity, not only to lose her skill and knowledge, but that
she should think it of ‘no account’, and so walk away from truth and beauty down the path of cheap imitation that leads to disaster. (Philips 138)

At the end of *Roland Graeme*, the fate of the factory girl who flirted with the boss’s son is rendered in a shorthand the nineteenth-century reader would have instantly understood when Roland says, “I met that poor Nelly, the other day, very much overdressed. I don’t think she works in the mill, now” (283). In *The House of Windows*, the Stores have a policy of “employing only such girls as have homes and other means of support” (144). When questioned on this, the owner explains:

> “Because long ago I investigated and found out that, as a matter of fact, a girl, entirely alone and dependent upon herself, would find it hard to get along comfortably upon her wage. This, in the cases of some girls more fond of display, etc., etc., led to a – ah – deplorable state of things. Things which I need not discuss.” (144)

Here once more, a taste for clothes or a fondness of display essentially stands in for the less mentionable sexual downfall of the working woman. But in addition, this assumed connection between dress and sexuality influences not only attitudes toward the working woman, but labour policies as well. Mackay’s is an informed depiction here, for in Vancouver and elsewhere it was common business practice to hire only girls who lived at home and had other means of support (Kealey 36); this reinforced the prevalent view that young women worked for “pin money” and thus did not deserve or require a living wage. This practically institutionalized preoccupation with working women’s consumer habits, especially in the heavily symbolic area of dress, suggests the widespread anxiety over their potentially transgressive desires. The store owner in this scene is upbraided by his sister who is lightly mocking of his euphemism – “fond of display, I think you said” – and his redemption in the novel involves a reformation of his labour practices. The way in which working girls’ fashion was considered indexical of their morality signals the conceptual bond between class position and sexual purity: dressing above your station was a moral failing. With
working women's dress signifying so much, it is no wonder that, like the novel, it became one terrain on which questions of ladyhood and respectability were repeatedly played out.

The store owner's desire to avoid hiring young women with the unfortunate fondness for display is ironic in an industry utterly predicated upon display. Such contradictions were bound to arise in the department-store setting, where the illusion of luxury and the glorification of the spectacle were often at odds with what was deemed appropriate for working-class women. Susan Porter Benson describes popular attitudes toward department-store work at the turn of the century as troubling to class and gender patterns:

Department-store selling had a thoroughly ambiguous status. On the one hand it involved behaving as a servant to the customer, being exposed to the public in a way most distressing to those who believed that woman's place was in the home, and being tarred with the brush of immorality. On the other, it offered upward mobility, glamour, and white-collar respectability. There were as many viewpoints on the social status of selling as there were individuals passing the judgements. (210)

That Mackay's version of the working-girl Cinderella myth should take place in a department store is fitting, for this largely female line of work was known as "the Cinderella of occupations" (Benson 181). Unlike domestic or factory work, department stores offered working women the very public role of customer service, opening the door to fantasies of romance with wealthy customers. At the same time, store workers became experts on the consumption that was a defining element of class identity: "Basking in the reflected prestige of the goods over which she presided, located at the centre of action of a culture in which material goods increasingly defined personal and public fulfilment, the saleswoman became a minor priestess of consumption" (Benson 233). On the one hand, store workers blurred class boundaries in their stylish dress and consumer savvy, but on the other hand, no proper woman would do such visible work in the public sphere. One of the store clerks in The House of Windows warns Christine that her good looks may be a liability: "Many unpleasant little
experiences will teach you. Of course, a girl can always take care of herself; still, it’s annoying! Have you noticed that good-looking man who has been in several times to have you match ribbons for his sister? . . . Did you notice the way he looked at you? . . . Well, look out for him, that’s all” (125). Suffused in the terminology of looks and display, these kinds of moral dangers were thought to make the visibility of store work unsuitable for women, despite this character’s assurance that a girl can take care of herself. In fact, while the visibility of the department store work troubled many, it was this very visibility that made these stores important sites in the debate on women’s work. The House of Windows stages a debate on labour conditions by referring to the stools provided for store workers, who worked for twelve hours and more constantly on their feet. Stools were supposedly provided for the women to rest on if necessary, but in fact, the stools were as much a part of the display for customers as anything else, as one ex-saleswoman in the novel points out:

“What do they have those stools for?” she asked. “It seems to me that they do the customers far more good than they do you girls. Makes them feel better to see them there, I suppose, so that after they have kept you on your feet for an hour or two, matching ribbons that won’t match, they can go home and talk comfortably about the conveniences provided for the comfort of shopgirls!” (35)

In the department store, then, everything becomes display, including the workers and the workplace labour practices surrounding them. While the stools here are merely cosmetic, the visibility of stores as workplaces would eventually make them the object of more serious scrutiny in terms of women’s working conditions. Mackay enters into this scrutiny through her narrative; at times sounding like the undercover workplace-exposés popular at the turn of century, the novel details the common abuses of this highly visible line of female work. While the moral and sexual dangers faced by the store workers enter into the narrative, the major characters all prove equal to such challenges, supporting the clerk’s assertion, voiced often by working-class women, that “a girl can always take care of herself.”
In the class narrative of *The House of Windows*, Mackay seems at certain points to oscillate between extolling working-class virtue, and reinscribing class essentialism by reminding us of Christine’s hidden birthright. When Christine is kidnapped by an evil old woman who intends to make a fallen woman of her, the detective assures the girl’s long-lost rich father that Christine would never fall because “blood tells. Don’t you ever believe but that good blood tells” (195). Yet her goodness is elsewhere ascribed to the devoted upbringing given by her working-class adoptive sisters. She herself never thinks of her own class position until she looks for work, and the class indifference ascribed to Christine, who “thought as little about her position as a Duchess might” (66), is also used to describe Vancouver girls, mentioned in a letter by the travelling hero, Mark:

One’s notions of caste get a sharp knock out here. . . . These girls, for instance, whose mother waited at table and whose father worked as a navvy, would be quite undismayed in shaking hands with a princess. It would not occur to them that there was any reason for undue diffidence. (138)

Mackay’s repeated representation of young women whose self-respect defies class distinctions suggests her endorsement of this tendency ascribed to “most sensible Canadian girls” (66). Meanwhile, the upper-class characters like Mark and the store owner have interactions with such women which shake their class-defined assumptions, and the store owner eventually marries one of Christine’s poor sisters, thereby transcending class division. Mackay seems to relish the moment where class distinctions are unexpectedly rendered visible and through that visibility shown to be unnatural and undesirable. By endorsing the views ascribed specifically to young Canadian women, even to shop girls, Mackay destabilizes class categories while also providing her novel with a Canadian specificity. To lend the working girl the voice of authority in matters of class was bold for Canadian literature, and perhaps the contradictions and inconsistencies in the class terminology of the novel indicate a hesitancy to fully challenge a conservative readership. Nevertheless, by
situating the working-class woman at centre stage of her narrative, Mackay was already defying convention for Canadian literature, and her representation of the working girl demonstrates her familiarity with this figure and the debates surrounding her. By representing the working girl, Mackay contributed to the visibility of this figure (otherwise largely invisible in Canadian literature), and indeed, by choosing the highly visible shopgirl as the heroine, and titling the novel *The House of Windows*, perhaps Mackay sought to lend greater recognition and social prominence to the working girl and her struggles. Considering Annie Merrill’s admonition to avoid being “conspicuous,” and the moral imputations concerning those “fond of display” or “making a spectacle of themselves,” to insist that women and especially working women deserve to have their presence felt, to be visible and recognised, was to protest codes of both gender and class. And in this way, the project of writers like Mackay and Sime cannot be underestimated.

**Sex and the City**

*There was the Factory – the Factory, with its coarse, strong, beckoning life – its noise – its dirt – its men. Its men! And suddenly into Bertha Martin’s cheek a wave of colour surged.*


Representations of the working girl are often mediating figures through which the cultural transitions of urban industrialism are negotiated. As Suzanne Mackenzie points out, “It is not a simple coincidence that periods of urban transition happen simultaneously with periods of gender role alteration. . . . Changes in the city and in women’s activities are inextricably linked” (24). Literature which represented the urban working girl took a great interest in her social life, for despite long hours and low wages, young working women were known for their pursuit of leisure; and the city offered new kinds of pleasures, many targeted at the growing demographic of single working
women. One area of leisure that underwent rapid change soon after the turn of the century was the practice of dating. Not surprisingly, Annie Merrill had advice on this activity as well:

This Serious Woman in Business will not allow men to squander money upon her, remembering the admonition of her good old grandmother, that such a course would be vulgar. She insists upon bearing her share of the expense when going about with her men friends, and the nice man will appreciate her position, amiably permitting her to feel a comfortable independence which to-day is making real comradeship between men and women such a delightful possibility. . . . It proves to him that she values his friendship and companionship for its own worth; that she is not accepting his attentions merely for the “good time” he is able to give her, in the way that the mercenary girl “makes use of” many a generous-hearted and blindly-devoted man. (408)

Two versions of the working girl appear here: the serious woman in business who listens to her grandmother’s advice, and the mercenary girl who uses men to have a good time. Meanwhile, the question over who pays for dinner was clearly as much an object of debate one hundred years ago as it is today. Merrill was reacting to the changing codes of dating, which may have been in part dictated by young women eager for amusement but low on spending money; Joanne Meyerowitz documents the habits of American “women adrift” living on their own and working in the city: “Adopting new urban dating patterns, they relied on men for entertainment, luxuries, and sometimes necessities. By the early twentieth century, many ‘women adrift’ belonged to urban subcultures in which women gave men sexual favours in return for limited economic support” (xviii). These may have been the “mercenary girls” of which Merrill speaks, but whether exchanging a few favours with men or insisting on paying their own way, working women were playing an active role in changing the rules of dating and the associated rules of gender relations. Merrill even makes a utopian gesture in her assertion that women who pay for themselves will enable a “real comradeship” to exist between men and women. Merrill’s advice signals the interest that was taken in the social practices of single working women, and the dual vision that opposed the morally upright woman who shuns
vulgarité to the mercenary vixen out for a good time: a contradiction which fuelled the imaginative fire surrounding the sex life of the working girl.

North of Fifty-Three's Hazel Weir has no family in the novel, but manages all her relationships on her own, without chaperones or advice. Working girls in literature tend to lack the traditional family and so have to fend for themselves. This was increasingly typical of actual single working women, who came from the countryside or from overseas to find work in the city. Often living on their own in rooming houses or hostels, single working women conducted their social lives free of family structure and according more to their own preferences than to conventional standards, and their influence on social codes was unmistakable:

By the 1920s, young middle-class flappers romanticized and imitated the working-class women who lived on their own and socialized with men. And popular movies and pulp magazines used the overt sexual behaviour of some "women adrift" to spread a new stereotype of women as sexual objects. In these ways, the wage-earning women who lived apart from family were a vanguard in the decline of Victorian culture. (Meyerowitz xxiii)

Signalling society's familiarity with the independent working girl as a romantic figure, Sime opens one of her stories: "A bachelor girl! What visions of cigarettes and latch-keys - and liberty!" (272). The reader here is expected to recognize the bachelor girl instantly along with the accessories which symbolize her independence. The unconventional relationships of single working women made possible by this independence feature in many of Sime's stories, and the intentionality of the female characters in entering into these is often reaffirmed - these are not innocents seduced but women whose social circumstances afforded them new choices: "And so they had - not drifted into it, not at all. They had entered perfectly open-eyed into an irregular union: into one of those unions with which our whole society is honeycombed to-day. Marion Drysdale had gone on working. She had taken nothing from David Winterford but his love" (95). In a literary context where the depiction of women engaging in illicit relationships was either completely absent or couched in the assertion
of moral imperatives, to represent this choice in such an unflinching way was bold. But there are a series of choices represented here, the connection of which is noteworthy; Marion will engage in a socially unsanctioned sexual relationship, she will keep working, and she will remain financially independent. In a sense, then, the basis of the relationship and the suggested equality of Marion and David is posited on the economic independence of the woman, made possible by her work. Women’s wage work was thus a determining factor in new types of relationships between men and women, and the immediate connection in this passage between work and sexual choices demonstrates the profound influence of women’s work in the cultural handling of gender.

Sime elaborates on how working women conceived of their relationships and distinguished their behaviour from that of socially stigmatized mistresses or “kept women,” and the difference has everything to do with their position as workers. In “An Irregular Union” a secretary who has a secret relationship with her boss makes a point of continuing to work and taking nothing material from her lover:

In plain words, she didn’t take any money for the gift of herself.

It is queer how a little practical fact like that can make an old episode seem new – a new thing in the history of the world . . . The little insignificant fact that she was able to “keep herself,” as it is called, changed for her the whole complexion of her love episode. It gave her confidence and self-respect. She could feel with perfect accuracy that she was not a “kept woman.” (79)

For this character, the fact of working colours her view of sexual relationships. Yet her need to justify her actions in her own mind and to separate herself from traditionally censured versions of female sexuality also demonstrates the difficulties faced by women who challenged social codes of gender and sexuality. Working women may have been pioneering new kinds of relationships, but destabilizing gender systems was not work to be taken lightly. The working classes may have readily rejected a certain degree of middle-class prudery, but enduring codes of female chastity and working-
class honour still had influence and in many cases contributed to working women's self-definition. Given middle-class administrators eager for evidence of moral degradation among working women, often the affirmation of purity was important not only to working women's pride but to their political activism as well. The niceties of an irregular union or the degree of supposed impropriety, then, were considerations of some importance. Sime, though she often focusses on the sense of liberation and independence among working women, also represents some of the subtleties and contradictions that beset women who took advantage of new found freedom. The secretary in "An Irregular Union," for instance, spends the story in her room waiting for the phone to ring because her lover is in the hospital, and, unable to visit him because of the nature of their relationship, she has to await news of his condition from a nurse who calls her. The new world of urban dating was an important manifestation of the desires of working women, but it was also a world of many pressures and constraints.

The freedom to enact new kinds of desire as well as the challenges involved in so breaking with tradition were both linked in important ways to working women's residence in the city. In "An Irregular Union" the single working girl rents her own room and so is able to engage in her secret relationship unchaperoned and unnoticed; the narrative likewise depends on the telephone, a relatively new form of technology which came first to urban centres and so marks the urban setting of the story. As in "Munitions," which takes place on a streetcar carrying women to the factory, Sime's other stories also lend prominence to urban technologies, suggesting the significance of these to her representation of modern women. In "A Woman of Business," the narrator repeatedly mentions the electric light beneath which she hears the life-story of a woman who made a career of wealthy lovers:
Madame Sloyovska has led what we call a bad life. She is thoroughly disreputable from head to heel. She has walked in the shadiest paths, and there are few dirty tricks that her hands haven't dabbled in. The snatches of her life, as she gave them to me hurriedly in the glare of that unprotected light, sounded like something you might read in a dime novelette. . . . Madame Sloyovska had had lovers galore, and when she had had one lover's money she had gone on to the next one and she had had his money. (204)

Sime emphasises the electric light here perhaps as a metaphor for the illumination of things usually kept dark and hidden. But it is striking that she uses specifically a modern technology to provide her metaphor, for in this way she links Madame Sloyovska's way of life to the conditions of modern urban settings. That her way of life depends on a type of sexual conduct wholly condemned by polite society thus suggests a link between urban life and illicit sexuality. The use of this illumination metaphor is another instance of a writer highlighting the existence of figures usually rendered invisible by both social custom and literary convention. In fact, the mention in this passage of the dime novelette is telling. The realist short story genre in which Sime is working is far from the dime novelette, yet by using this reference she signals the only other literary milieu in which Madame Sloyovska might be encountered. This gestures in a subtle way to the exclusion of certain women — working-class women or in this case sexually suspect women — from mainstream representation.

Sime was highly aware of the form of her writing, choosing the short story for its ability to mimic the fragmentation of urban life, so her thematization of technology is perhaps part of her insight into her own technology of writing. In a sense then, her story, like the electric light which figures in it, is rendering suddenly visible what was previously thought too sordid for exposure.

Sime's writing reveals the critical links between modern technology, urbanism, and women's work, and in this way her writing is highly sensitive to the social transformations that were taking place in part through the agency of working women. She could clearly imagine that the urban conditions that allowed working women a wholly new independence could lead to the creation of
wholly new kinds of women. Although some of her characters fall into feminine stereotypes in their relationships, evincing a self-sacrificing devotion to their lovers that is somewhat essentialized by Sime as woman’s nature, one story depicts a woman wholly separate from the heterosexual system. “The Bachelor Girl” focusses on a single working woman named Tryphena, whose way of life has always been free of men. Orphaned early, raised by a maiden relative, and educated in a convent, Tryphena now earns her own living as a masseuse for female clients only. The result, we are told, is a total indifference toward men:

Men for Tryphena really don’t exist. She does not so much dislike them – she simply feels an absolute indifference for and about them. They don’t exist for her. . . . This liberty to look past men she buys with work – hard, honest work. Her work is, as she says herself, “just rubbing arms and legs.” . . . She knows her work and she is popular. Women like her quiet ways . . . And they admire her too – Tryphena is emphatically a woman’s woman. (274)

For this character, the ability to support herself and live on her own has made possible a way of life and perception of reality that renders traditional gender relations completely obsolete. The narrator points out that “Old Maid is what they would have called her fifty years ago,” but Old Maids are usually thought of as women who have failed to find a husband; Tryphena, however, is not just indifferent to men, but she finds even the thought of marriage preposterous. Seeing her excited one day, the narrator wonders if she has a suitor: “‘Oh no,’ she said. ‘Not that.’ She looked at me reproachfully. ‘How could you think,’ she said, ‘I’d ever marry!’ I felt a positive criminal” (276). The narrator’s embarrassment here signals her feeling that she has blundered, her mistake consisting of the heterosexist assumption that Tryphena would ever be interested in men or marriage. Although the narrator does not draw further attention to it, this moment of realization – that not all women want men – takes place as Tryphena is giving her a massage, suggesting a more sensual level to this female dialogue. But the desire Sime elaborates on in the remainder of the story is more maternal in nature; Tryphena is excited because she has bought a baby from the nuns, who were watching for
an appropriate orphan for her to adopt. Now that they’ve found her a baby girl (“A boy! No, sir! What do you take me for?” (279)), Tryphena is engrossed in financial plans for single motherhood. Sime closes the story with Tryphena’s intention to name the baby Tryphosa, alluding to twin sisters from the New Testament named Tryphena and Tryphosa. The reference is perhaps a suggestion that Tryphena will raise the child in her own image, to relish sisterly female bonds and dismiss heterosexual convention. Although many of Sime’s stories address unconventional relationships of various kinds, this is the only one which suggests the possibility of rejecting heterosexuality outright, and it is striking how explicit the link is – almost cause and effect – between earning your own living and “this liberty to look past men.” Here, work provides a degree of freedom that will influence women on fundamental levels of identity and sexuality. Moreover, in 1919, the idea that a woman might intentionally set out to become a single mother would certainly have been unfathomable to many people; indeed, it would remain so to many people today. By representing the many possible forms the working girl might take, Sime shows an awareness of how subtle shifts in gender norms would give way to profound upheavals in the social fabric.

Carolyn Strange points out in her book on Toronto’s working girls that “The issue of sexual morality loomed like a dark cloud over discussions of woman’s work in the industrializing city, casting waged labour as a test of chastity rather than an economic or political issue” (22). Sime, however, resolutely sees the silver lining here, and in a society eager to condemn any increase in the sexual license of women, she demonstrates in the tone of her writing a way to recognize women’s sexual choices without castigating them. In a similarly utopian way, where many women virtually drew knives over who could be deemed a lady, Sime advocated a feminist sisterhood that would cross class boundaries. Though Mackay doesn’t write with the same degree of political conviction,
her working-class heroine similarly suggests the possibility of transcending class divisions. In fact, it would seem that where representations of the working girl lead, sexual transgression, class breakdown, and gender instability soon follow. A denizen of factories, city streets, and department stores, to her contemporaries the single wage-earning woman represented everything that was unnatural and unnerving about modern life. Those who were watching closely could see her potential to unravel social codes and critically redefine what it meant to be a woman in Canadian society. This is where writers entered into the cultural work initiated by these women: by representing this often disregarded figure, they insisted on new distributions of social respect and they validated the cultural innovations of independent women. Middle-class critics may have wished Sime’s characters were not quite so “extreme” in their reactions to economic freedom, but her unapologetic heroines were as striking in their realism as in their actions, making Sime’s book as prescient a work of literature as it is a social document.
CHAPTER THREE

"THE SOCIAL EVIL": PROSTITUTION AND NARRATIVES OF THE WHITE-SLAVE TRADE

The men of this country exerted as great a fascination over me as the whispering prairies, and I met them with a glad response I had never known before. I awakened to find myself the most sought-after girl in town and I rejoiced in my popularity.

Madeleine Blair, 1919.

The reform movement which took place across North America at the turn of century set out to raise standards of social purity by waging war on vice. The defining vice for men was drink, and numerous temperance societies sought to purge society of the liquor trade and thus to combat the evils of drink which accompanied it. The defining vice for women, meanwhile, was sexual downfall, the limit case being prostitution. Perhaps the symbolic value of these two vices as representing the limits of debauchery contributed to the image of the wide-open frontier as a space of lawless abandon, for many of the first European women to live out West were prostitutes, and if there was one consumer product that characterized the frontier, it was whiskey. The two vices met in the brothel, where the sale of liquor accompanied the sexual services offered, and the complementary commercial interests of the two industries made for remarkable profit. As the middle class established itself more permanently, however, reform efforts became more organized. While the vice of drink had an obvious target in liquor, the production and distribution of which could be systematically attacked, prostitution was a more complex industry, the subjects of which were human individuals whose motivations and practices were obscure and elusive.
Gender politics at the turn of the century were troubled by the effects of Canada's increasing urbanization and industrialization, and the female figures of the prostitute and the working girl both represented the changing moral landscape of the twentieth century. Because the working girl was involved in the public sphere of commercial pursuit – traditionally considered inappropriate for women – interpretations of her place within urban industrial settings often paired her with the only other visibly independent woman of the city, the prostitute. These two figures were troubling to conventional notions of femininity, and in an urge to fathom the dangers posed – both to the women themselves and to society – by rapidly shifting gender relations, reformers launched into analyses of female vice with all the enthusiasm of conspiracy theorists. The most remarkable product of these efforts was the supposed discovery of the white-slave trade, a vast international traffic in unwilling prostitutes. The narratives which illustrated the existence of this industry of sexual bondage soon congealed according to set conventions, but perhaps more intriguing still are the ways in which the narratives were put to use. As reformers agitated for the increased suppression of prostitution, white-slave stories were invoked to further vilify the inhabitants of red-light districts. And the horror-movie quality of the narratives, which had terrible fates befalling young women who happened, even innocently, to defy convention, signal the possible function of these stories in policing female independence. Like young wage-earning women of the nineteenth century who were often viewed as victims of industry, the white slave similarly represented an unwilling victim of sexual predators; but as the twentieth century progressed, the increased association of mainstream working girls with both white slaves and regular prostitutes reflected a harsher attitude toward the supposed moral laxity of young working-class women.
In 1885, William Thomas Stead reported a scandalous story of child prostitution in London entitled “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon.” This instantly famous story of the purchase of a thirteen-year-old girl from her mother for the purpose of prostitution travelled quickly to Canada and stayed in the press due to Stead’s subsequent trial on kidnapping charges; in order to prove how easy it was to buy a young girl for immoral purposes, Stead had done just that, and was ultimately imprisoned for it. According to Stead’s report, a child could easily be bought in the shady districts of London, whereupon she would likely be chloroformed and awake to find herself imprisoned in a brothel, from which moment her fate was sealed. Stead reported this having enacted the purchase himself, waking a terrified Eliza Armstrong from her drugged sleep, whereupon, the experiment complete, he sent her to the Salvation Army in Paris. This is far from the journalistic ideal of a distanced observer merely reporting the facts. Stead fully involved himself in the construction and enactment of the story, and in so doing he actually set out the conventions for what would become a genre unto itself: the white-slave narrative.

“The Maiden Tribute” was a primary text in the creation of the white-slavery panic which swept across North America at the turn of the century, peaking between 1910 and 1915. Cecily Devereux has documented the Canadian media reaction to “The Maiden Tribute.” From the colonial perspective of many Canadians, Stead’s tale of sexual depravity at the very centre of Imperial Britain was deeply upsetting to notions of progress and civilization: “At a time when the English Canadian nation was attempting to establish its own place within the British Empire and its own supposedly cohesive racial and cultural identity, ‘The Maiden Tribute’ played on a whole range of colonial insecurities and imperial sentiments” (51). Stead’s exposé brought the problem of prostitution to the forefront of social reform initiatives, and the character of the innocent victim, forced into the sex
trade against her will, was important in mobilizing the moral majority who would have trouble understanding prostitution as a choice even among few and unpleasant options. But it was the concern over a supposed international trade in women for prostitution that allowed this figure of the innocent victim to assume her specific role as the white slave. Canadians, suspicious of cultural mixing and the supposed dubious morality of ethnic immigrants, were easily incited by tales of unwitting girls caught in an international traffic run by vaguely “foreign” conspirators.

In 1921, at a time when anti-Asian sentiment in Vancouver was especially virulent, Hilda Glynn-Ward published her novel *The Writing on the Wall*. It is essentially a collection of racial stereotypes and alarmist narratives combined to elicit anti-Asian sentiment in the reader, and insofar as the novel thus draws on the recognized cultural anxieties of the day, it is not surprising that a white-slavery narrative is included. But Glynn-Ward’s version of the story is revealing in that it both reproduces the familiar narrative and rewrites it in order to localize it for the Vancouver context.

The tale starts in Vancouver with the broken-hearted parents desperate over the loss of their daughter, who has apparently eloped:

But there was an element of tragedy, of such utter hopeless despair in the attitude of these parents that even knowing nothing of the facts one would have realized there was something unusually sad about this particular elopement. And there was. Pretty Eileen Hart, the pride of her mother, the apple of her father’s eye, and only eighteen years old, had run away and married – a Chinaman. The horror of it turned them sick. She had been better dead. (83)

This depiction of the desolate parents is typical of the white-slave narrative, as is the sentiment that a woman’s death is preferable to her sexual downfall. Procurers in the white-slave trade, meanwhile, tended to be portrayed as “foreigners” of some kind, and marriage one way that they lured girls away from their homes and families. Following an initial letter from Eileen where she boasts of the wealth and status of her new husband, the parents’ worst fears are realized when they receive this hastily scrawled note:
Daddy, come and fetch me away quick, or I shall die. Wong has four other wives and they are beastly to me. They watch me every minute so I can’t run away, and I’m never alone. I think I’m in Victoria, but not sure, and I don’t know the street or the number, as I’m never allowed to go out. Please come as quick as you can Daddy dear! (84)

While the multiple wives of the Chinese husband are a slight twist on the usual characters of the brothel-madame and prostitutes who confine the victim, the tale of imprisonment here is otherwise typical. The father departs immediately for Victoria where he enlists the police and speaks to the Premier, all to no avail, since the Premier is corrupt and the police no match for the labyrinths of Chinatown; hints toward the conspiratorial nature of the white-slave trade are thus established and Eileen is never heard of again. Where the story diverges from the usual accounts of white slavery is that the character of the “foreign” procurer is not a stranger to the victim, but a long-time friend and school-mate (and presumably a Canadian citizen, though not recognized as such due to his racial positioning): “Wong Fu was an old schoolfellow ... he had always helped her with her sums and thus won her childish affection and admiration” (83). Typically the “foreign” nature of the procurer is used in order to distance the criminal from the “true” members of the community, who can then direct their outrage out toward the alien Other. But Glynn-Ward deliberately makes her villain both threateningly alien by virtue of his racial status and disturbingly familiar as an everyday associate and seemingly innocent schoolmate. She thus enlists the racism which would assign “foreign” status even to those born and raised in Canada, suggesting that even the most familiar faces and long-time members of the community are not to be trusted. She goes on to condemn co-education, a frequent focus for racist sentiment in British Columbia. This particular version of the white-slave narrative is thus tailor-made for a white Vancouver audience, whose anxieties concerning interracial marriage and the association of Chinatown with prostitution would find realization in Glynn-Ward’s lurid sensationalism. Her depiction of the white slave being kidnapped into Chinatown would have struck
a chord with Vancouver readers, since the red-light district there, while periodically changing location due to fluctuating police harassment, was often coextensive with Chinatown. The conspiratorial tone of Glynn-Ward's novel, wherein a thriving opium trade takes place beneath Chinatown in a maze of underground tunnels, lent itself nicely to the added element of sexual bondage. The way in which the international panic of the white-slave trade is thus modified and localized is worth noting because it reveals both the broad appeal of this cultural narrative and its ability to enlist specific regional tensions depending on the context. Perhaps this mobility explains part of its success as an urban legend which spawned major social reform attempts.

My analysis of white-slavery narratives does not turn on whether they were true or false, but rather on how they were constructed and deployed in the context of gender politics at the turn of the century. However, it is important to note that the white-slavery tales did have some basis in truth despite a good deal of sensationalism and exaggeration. To analyse them as a narrative genre does not mean to reduce them to wholly fictional status, and there is evidence that abductions of women into the sex trade did occur in some instances. In fact, the urge to deny this is interesting in itself. At the time when the panic was at its height, certain studies claimed to disprove that white slavery existed at all, and historians of today also frequently dismiss it as a hysteria that had no factual basis. As Ruth Rosen points out in *The Lost Sisterhood*, it was in the interest of certain groups to deny that sexual slavery existed: "Politicians, police, liquor interests, and property owners tried to convince the public that white slavery was simply a fantasy born of reformers' overactive imaginations. . . ." Despite this mixed record, a careful review of the evidence documents a real traffic in women: a historical fact and experience that must be integrated into the record" (115-16). She estimates that white slavery was likely experienced by less than ten percent of the prostitute population, making reformers' accounts exaggerated, but not wholly erroneous (133).
Meanwhile, the liquor interests and property owners Rosen mentions wanted to deny white slavery because it was the banner under which reformers campaigned for the outright suppression of prostitution. For landowners collecting high rent from brothels and for liquor merchants whose trade was connected with prostitution and red-light districts, this kind of activism was bad for business. And this signals the critical economic place which prostitution held, particularly in small economies like those of frontier towns such as Vancouver. As Greg Marquis points out, “Vancouver’s vice industry fulfilled social needs and was as essential to the city’s economic life as were its sawmills, railway facilities, and grain elevators” (243). While reformist zeal regarded drinking and prostitution as questions of moral failure and possible reformation, those involved even peripherally in the vice industry knew that a small but thriving economy was at stake, the elimination of which would have far-reaching and unpleasant effects for many people on a variety of levels. In this sense, attitudes toward prostitution resemble in extreme form those toward women in the paid work force in general, in that a persistent urge to regard women’s work as a moral problem elided the significance of their contribution both to individual industries and to the economy as a whole. As Lori Rotenberg points out in her study of prostitution in Toronto at the turn of the century, it is important to look at prostitution as one type of work within a range of female-defined employment: “The heavy emphasis on the ‘sinful’ nature of the prostitute’s sexual activity has obscured her role as a worker. But the prostitute is indeed a worker, a service worker who provides her body for use in the sexual act in return for a fee from her clients. In selling her labour power in a capitalist society she is subject to considerable exploitation and alienation, as are other women workers” (33). In the larger context of women’s work, then, it is important to assess the role prostitution played in influencing attitudes toward women and their relation to capital, work, and the city. White-slavery narratives were a key medium through which these attitudes were managed and maintained.
While Stead’s “Maiden Tribute” was of central importance to the inauguration of the white-slave narrative, the form of the story underwent various permutations as it embedded itself in the North American context. In John Shearer’s 1912 tract, “Canada’s War on the White-slave Trade,” explicit connections are drawn between sexual danger, urban development, and female employment, signalling specific social tensions of the day which found expression in this unique narrative genre. As Mariana Valverde argues, “For turn-of-the-century Canadians, the debates on public policy regarding prostitution constituted a key terrain within and through which the social was discussed and regulated: municipal reform, new ideas about sexuality and gender roles, class differences in culture, and ethnic/racial tensions did not only help to shape the prostitution debate but were also shaped by it” (Age of Light 79). Deborah Nilson has studied prostitution and the police response to it in early twentieth-century Vancouver, and she notes the influence of urban development and women’s entrance into the workforce on debates about the city’s sex trade: “It was believed that the unstable social conditions resulting from urban and industrial development indicated a moral breakdown in society. The idea of the “fallen woman” took on added force as women increasingly moved into employment outside the home” (206).

Misgivings about the rapid urbanization of North America often figure in these tales in the country-to-city migration typical of the formula: “The White Slave Trade finds some of its victims on the prairies whence they are taken to Winnipeg, to British Columbia, or to American cities where prostitution is ‘tolerated’ in ‘segregated’ areas” (Shearer 8). The image of the wholesome country girl being thus ensnared and whisked off to the city of vice was powerful in a context where increased migration from country to city, especially by young working-class women, seemed a recipe for disaster. And while a few tales had middle-class girls kidnapped by white slavers and rescued at the last minute, the more typical narrative addressed the “daughters of the working class,” for
whom the white-slavery narrative took on the aspect of cautionary tale, a warning for the girl who ventured far from home into the dubious territories of city streets, train stations, boarding houses, factories, and dance halls – the landmarks of the fallen city:

The first tells of an exceedingly narrow escape. An innocent looking advertisement appeared in the newspaper, for a domestic servant – work light – wages liberal. An unsuspecting country girl saw and took the gilded bait. She came to the Capital with no information but the street address of her future mistress. On arrival she found it necessary to inquire the way. The railway official happened to know that the address was of a house in the ‘Red Light’ district. The terrified girl was handed over to the S.P.C. officer and taken care of. One trembles to think how many similar lambs may not have thus escaped the slaughter. (Shearer 10)

This story is essentially one of mobility, but one which highlights only the danger, not the freedom of mobility. The country-to-city journey is inspired by the “gilded bait” of an employment opportunity, suggesting that the increased employment offered to young women in urban centres was not a real opportunity, but rather a trap laid for naïve victims. The reality of women’s growing presence in the workforce thus becomes a plot device in the stock narrative of sexual downfall, creating an impression that “innocent looking advertisements” for work – and perhaps by extension even innocent-looking work itself – are all just a cover for prostitution. White-slavery narratives, then, were instrumental in furthering a prevailing social attitude that the entrance of young women into the paid workforce was a moral danger in that even the most innocent-seeming situations were fraught with inducements to prostitution.

A constellation of social fears and stereotypes thus entered into the construction of the white-slave myth; the sex trade, perhaps more than any other subculture, has always been little understood but much speculated about, and considering the tendency to condemn prostitutes as irrevocably depraved, the narrative was somewhat recuperative in that it added the innocent victim to the regular cast of immoral reprobates. In fact, this aspect of the genre mirrors depictions of the working girl,
who likewise fell either into the category of morally suspect mercenary vixens or helpless victims of industry. In many ways then, the figure of the prostitute and that of the legitimate working girl were so intimately related on a conceptual level that one can hardly be spoken of without reference to the other.

THE WHITE-SLAVE TRADE AND THE WORKING GIRL

White-slave narratives were directed at both working- and middle-class audiences, but the female victim in the story tended to be working class and employed. Her fall from innocence was in subtle ways linked to the fact of employment, and while socialist critics pointed to low wages as the cause of prostitution, their arguments ostensibly did not apply to the white-slave scenario, in which the woman was forcibly kidnapped into the trade. Ruth Rosen argues that this was part of the middle-class appeal of the genre in that attention was directed away from real social and economic conditions leading to prostitution, and deflected onto villainous foreign procurers (133). Thus the pragmatic reasons that a link might in fact exist between working-class women and prostitution were removed, yet the association between the working girl and the white slave remained. Many felt that wage-earning women were exposing themselves to danger by entering the workplace, living independently, and engaging in a lively social life that appeared promiscuous to the older generation, but it is also worth noting that the middle class often tended to be suspicious of working-class sexuality; as Gary Kinsman points out, “Working-class and black women were seen as more ‘sexual’ than middle-class women, and there emerged a double standard separating male from female and middle-class ‘ladies’ from working-class women. This symbolic system affected the social organization of prostitution, and eroticism more generally” (57). While white-slave narratives often attributed the fall of the victim to country-girl naïveté or deceptive job ads, the relentless association
of prostitution and working-class women betrays a bias regarding working-class women’s sexuality that cannot be overlooked.

From 1880-1930, Canada underwent a process of rapid urbanization, and many historians link the white-slave panic to anxieties caused by this massive social change. The typical white-slave narrative involves a move from country to city, where the pastoral purity of country life, embodied in the innocent young girl, is faced with the corrupt machinations of the fallen city. Referring to the young woman who had a near escape when following an ad for employment into the red light district, John Shearer reminds his reader of “the need of faithfully warning all girls of the perils threatening them when they journey unchaperoned to any large city”:

These dangers are many times greater when girls go to the city to remain and earn their living amid new surroundings, and are compelled to make their home in the less expensive boarding houses, and to find amusement on the streets or in the cheaper places of entertainment, as well as to be exposed to various insidious temptations from employers and work-mates. (11)

It was not merely the city in general, then, which was dangerous and morally suspect, but specifically those parts of it which constituted the daily terrain of the single working girl: boarding house, street, and workplace. Anxieties about urbanization may have fed into the growing white-slave panic, but the more specific object of concern was the urban working girl, living on her own, engaging in new forms of work and leisure, and visibly changing the patterns of gender relations. That accounts of white slavery returned again and again to this one figure suggests the function of these stories as urban myths or Little Red Riding Hood morality tales, meant to warn, frighten, or discourage young women from treading these socially unsanctioned paths, where villains lurked waiting to ensnare them.

In 1912, B. Pullen-Bury wrote a travel account of her trip across Canada, in which she took special account of conditions facing the female immigrant. She was very troubled by what she saw
in the West, where affordable accommodation for independent women was scarce, and conditions at the YWCA were less than ideal. Leaving Cranbrook on her way to Vancouver she worries about the dangers posed to young wage-earning women on their own:

As I left this town early next morning, I observed from the train a number of small houses with lights in front of them of the colour of blood, and I thought of the perils the young of both sexes run in such places as these, where respectable housing for those who cannot pay hotel-rates is practically impossible to obtain.

*The danger is for the women and girls of Canada* far more than for an occasional emigrant! . . . History shows that no nation ever rises above the character of its women. In the West especially, the life of the girl wage-earner is hard. The lack of home, with its ties and its influences, means the weakening of restraint. The boarding-system, where girls, four in a room, often live and receive their visitors after business hours, is not ideal. (324; original emphasis)

Although Pullen-Bury begins with the very material observation that affordable housing was limited, she adds emphasis by placing the home in contrast to the boarding-house, with the lack of a proper home resulting in the “weakening of restraint.” In one sense, this is an interesting acknowledgement that the domestic sphere places restraints on a woman. But it also deflects the issue of prostitution from material circumstances to moral laxity by suggesting that wage-earning women’s living conditions lend themselves to moral weakening. This is once again an example of the tendency to disregard the material work-related concerns of wage-earning women (such as the ability to afford decent accommodation on low wages) in order to emphasize instead issues of sexual morality and gender conformity. In fact, the independence of boarding-house living did allow women a new degree of sexual freedom, but as Pullen-Bury’s comments show, the middle-class tended to interpret this as promiscuity and prostitution. Her tone is one of dire warning, almost threatening, once again suggesting that these narratives of prostitution were meant to serve a disciplinary function for women thinking of challenging traditional norms of gender and sexuality.
The narrative of the country-to-city move often picked up on this tone of impending threat and had as much to do with the violation of gender norms as with the nostalgic urge to preserve an already-lost pastoral tradition. A striking passage by Nellie McClung illustrates the tendency to render city and country on a scale of morality but also on a scale of appropriate gender behaviour:

The city offers so many dazzling, easy ways to wealth. It is so rich in promise, so treacherous in fulfilment. The city is a lenient, unfaithful nurse, pampering and pandering the child in her care not for his own good, but for her gain, soothing him with promises she never means to keep, a waster of time, a destroyer of ambition, a creator of envy, but dazzling gay with tinsel and redolent with perfume, covering poverty with cheap lace and showy ribbons, a hole in her stocking but a rose in her hair!

The country is a stern nurse, hard but just, making large demands on the child in her care, but giving great rewards. She tells the truth, demands obedience, and does better than she promises. Though she sends her child on long cold journeys, and makes him face the bitter winds of winter, she rewards him with ruddy health, high purpose and clear vision. (quoted in Jones 102)

While the city and country are represented here as two nurses, by the end of the first paragraph the city nurse has clearly become a prostitute. Considering that the nurse was one of the most highly respected versions of the working woman, even though she is only a metaphor here, to thus change her into a prostitute within the space of one sentence demonstrates the conceptual trajectory that matched the city with inevitable female vice, and even the most admired working girl with moral turpitude.

For young women, it was as much the departure from the home – her natural and proper place – as the move from country to city that was at issue. Leaving home for an independent working life signified for the young woman a departure from traditional expectations that her only move would be from one patriarchal centre to another when she married. For many Canadian women, leaving home to find work meant leaving Canada for an American city, thus compounding the departure from home by leaving the home country as well. John Shearer depicts the danger of such a move,
representing the success of working women abroad as little more than a convenient tale for wicked procurers to tell:

Everyone knows that for many years a constant stream of Canadian girls have crossed the border to earn their living as writers, nurses, teachers, stenographers, ladies' companions, seamstresses, domestic helpers, etc. Success in unusual degree has crowned their effort. Their integrity and industry and ability have been rewarded with generous remuneration. Stories of their success are widely known. This makes the work of the procurer the easier. His promises of an easy life and otherwise incredibly large wages are believed. Deceptive advertisements are answered. The innocent victims go blindly into a bondage worse than Hell. (4)

This passage is unusual in that Shearer actually acknowledges the achievements and success of Canadian working women – that they were valued for their ability and paid accordingly – but rhetorically, this recognition is only a set-up for the dire warning which follows, and which reduces the success of wage-earning women to little more than a convenient lure cast by wicked procurers. By thus linking even the greatest successes of working women to the white-slave trade, he undermines their subjectivity as workers and reinforces the tendency to subordinate the economic and social value of women's work to moral considerations. There is an interesting balance maintained in these accounts with the victims of white slavers repeatedly described as innocent and unwitting, yet always depicted as working girls – looking for work, arriving in a new city, engaging in popular new leisure activities. If white slavers were really so indiscriminately seizing girls for this supposedly enormous underground trade, why were middle-class girls never ensnared? The singling out of working girls as the only ones susceptible to becoming white slaves impugns not only their ability to take care of themselves, but their very way of life and by association themselves; as the sole at-risk population for sexual exploitation, they are implicated in their own downfall – their status as innocent victims becomes suspect.
The distinction between the innocent victim of sexual entrapment and the potentially willing prostitute became especially strained when the discussion of the working-girl problem turned to leisure activities. At the turn of the century, the dance hall was rising to prominence as the major recreational venue for working-class youth. The reaction of middle-class observers to this form of leisure is comparable to the reaction of today’s authoritarian elite to the youth culture of raves. The latest incarnation of youth recreation in dance halls mystified the adult elite who could only see a dangerous style of abandon in the unfamiliar proceedings. It is worth noting here that Vancouver’s population, as in many frontier towns, was relatively youthful, so a statistically large proportion of the populace was young, working, and in hot pursuit of amusement in their limited time off. But as Kathy Peiss points out in her study of working-class women’s leisure, “where young women saw an aura of sensual pleasure, middle-class observers of the commercial halls found immorality, drawing a lurid connection between working girls’ recreation and vice” (Cheap Amusements 98). The dance hall was thus routinely depicted as an enlisting ground for white slavers. Toronto reformer B.G. Jefferis describes the fatal combination of public balls and thoughtless young women in a point-by-point format:

1. Public Balls. – The church should turn its face like flint against the public balls. Its influence is evil, and nothing but evil. It is a well known fact that in all cities and large towns the ball room is the recruiting office for prostitution.
2. Thoughtless Young Women. – In cities public balls are given every night, and many thoughtless young women, mostly the daughters of small tradesmen and mechanics, or clerks or laborers, are induced to attend “just for fun.” Scarcely one in a hundred of the girls attending these balls preserve their purity. . . .
5. Working Girls. – Thousands of innocent working girls enter innocently and unsuspectingly into the paths which lead them to the house of evil, or who wander the streets as miserable outcasts all through the influence of the dance. The low theatre and dance halls and other places of unselected gatherings are the milestones which mark the working girl’s downward path from virtue to vice, from modesty to shame. (382)
A degree of contradiction is evident here in that both the Thoughtless Young Women and the Working Girls are engaged in the same activity, and both are working class, yet the first group seem more culpable for their own downfall – being thoughtless and out “just for fun” – whereas the Working Girls seem much less to blame, their innocence emphasized repeatedly. Jefferis himself seems confused, as though he would like to endorse the notion of the innocent victim, unwittingly lured into sin, but he can’t quite convince himself with the girls enjoying themselves so much. Kathy Peiss explains these dualistic conceptual tendencies as a product of Victorian ideals which were beginning to weaken in the twentieth century but were still much in evidence: “The reformers who made working women’s recreation a social issue drew upon a complex set of Victorian ideals and assumptions. Their gender and class position served as lenses through which they alternatively perceived working women as unwilling female victims and as enthusiastic members of the promiscuous lower orders” *(Cheap Amusements 165).*

Prostitution did, of course, take place in dance halls on both professional and casual levels. As Ruth Rosen documents, casual or occasional prostitution was practised in venues like dance halls by young women in need of extra income: “A dance hall prostitute explained to an underground investigator in Chicago that the six dollar weekly wage she earned in the basement of a department store did not cover her basic expenses. To supplement her income, she therefore “hustled” three nights a week at a dance hall” (151). Women engaging in this type of sexual service likely maintained a status of working-class respectability in their day-to-day lives, and ceased the practice when their finances improved. This casual prostitution was a nightmare vision to middle-class reformers whose Victorian ideals demanded that boundaries between respectability and vice be hard and fast. And what became increasingly apparent, especially in the realm of leisure, was that clandestine prostitutes were only one product of a swiftly changing culture where sexual dictates
were ever more flexible and contingent. Some women would never exchange sex for money but did expect men to pay for drinks, entrance tickets, meals, gifts, and taxis in return for a woman’s company and any favours she saw fit to bestow. Others might even see occasional prostitution as a means to the comfortable respectability they desired: “Many young women came to view prostitution as one step toward such upward mobility. Through practising occasional or full-time prostitution, they hoped to earn sufficient money to buy the proper clothes to attract a promising husband” (Rosen 158). For working-class youth the edict against premarital sex was weakening, while new standards to distinguish degrees of propriety and promiscuity were being established, but the dominant middle-class culture had difficulty recognizing these. To them, working-class youth and young women in particular – often looked to as symbols of traditional social mores – appeared dangerously profligate. The conceptual association between mainstream working girls and prostitutes, then, was enhanced and inflamed by changing social patterns wherein the conventions of sexual propriety, dating, trading favours, premarital relationships, casual prostitution, and professional sex work were readily distinguished by working-class youth, yet baffling and unthinkable to middle-class observers.

The supposed association between prostitution and working-class leisure venues was an expression of the middle-class tendency to generalize that all sexual behaviour was tantamount to prostitution. As Mariana Valverde notes, “in 1913, Toronto’s leading moral reformers joined together to investigate ‘social vice’ in the city, and their 1915 report does not recognize a distinction between prostitution and going out on dates” (Age of Light 83). The venues where the white-slave trade was thought to be particularly threatening mark liminal spaces considered inappropriate for unchaperoned young women: the city in general, but more particularly the train station, the dance hall, the ethnic neighbourhood which often overlapped with the red light district, the street, and any
workplace named in, a deceptive ad for employment. But many of these spaces, such as the workplace and the dance hall, were precisely those arenas where wage-earning women were carving out new cultural territory and so travelling ever further away from middle-class norms and patriarchal control. Viewed in this light, the positing of the white-slave danger in those exact locations appears both as an expression of conservative paranoia and as an urge to reassert control using dire warnings and scare tactics.

FRONTIER PROSTITUTES

Reformers who propagated white-slave narratives assumed the voice of authority in depicting the sex industry, and by virtue of their social position, they had access to the mainstream media to disseminate their message. Less easy to locate are the voices of the women in question; lack of education, financial imperatives, and social ostracism are only a few reasons that writings by sex workers themselves are few and difficult to locate. But in examining social attitudes toward prostitution, it is important to gain some sense of what everyday life was like in the sexual service industry at the time. Prostitution in the West at the turn of the century was a significantly different industry from the one that exists today. Woman-owned and -operated brothels were the norm, and given the preponderance of young bachelors who populated the frontier, there was high demand for the services they offered. Of course, the sex trade has always been a highly stratified industry with different sectors of the trade catering to different classes of men. The life of a woman in a high-class brothel was very different from that of a street prostitute, and their earnings would differ accordingly. But until the militant suppression of the industry, which was implemented in Vancouver starting in 1911 (Nilson 213), prostitution represented a female-dominated industry where real profit could be made, and where wages were less influenced by the institutional sexism that depressed women’s
earnings in so-called legitimate industries. In her study of "women adrift" at the turn of the century in Chicago, Joanne Meyerowitz points out the importance of acknowledging the place of prostitution in the labour market:

Although historians often neglect the sexual service sector, it is central in defining the female labour market. Of the unskilled women adrift, only the sexual service workers were not paid as dependent daughters... Perhaps because employers and others distinguished so sharply between "dutiful daughters" and "fallen women," they could not assume that a sexual service worker had support from her family. (40)

Prostitution, then, represented an industry where the workers were treated as individual agents, supporting themselves, as opposed to the more general economy in which women workers were viewed as dependants, whose wages need not represent a living wage for a self-supporting person. For this reason alone, the sex trade would have held a strong appeal for women who, for whatever reason, had no other means of support. But it also provides a useful contrast to the mainstream economy where the value of women's work was always subordinated through comparisons to men's ostensibly harder and more valuable work, a comparison not applicable in the context of the sex trade.

Social critics at the turn of the century wrote and speculated a great deal about women's motivations in entering the sex trade, and the debate continues today as we try to calculate the degree of agency of prostitutes in choosing an often emotionally gruelling and physically dangerous industry rather than accepting alternatives which entail their own degrees of hardship and exploitation. The financial necessity of the individual occupies an important part of this debate, though it is by no means the only determining factor. While debates about the causes of prostitution often turn on the motivations, financial or otherwise, of prostitutes themselves, what is addressed less often is the financial necessity or economic importance of the prostitute to the larger economy. In the historical context of the Western Canadian frontier, the micro-economy of a hastily-established small town was
dependent on every financial transaction that took place, and the sexual service industry went hand in hand with the foremost consumer product on the frontier – liquor. Adele Perry notes that “Drink, like rough work, was indelibly marked on British Columbia’s homosocial culture. It was something of a colonial pastime . . . Drink, rather than the church or the domestic, seemed to sit at the centre of colonial society” (38). The partnership of liquor sales and the sex trade was strong enough to have a profound impact on the prosperity – or lack thereof – of any community. The frequent claim that prostitution was a ‘necessary evil’ referred to the supposed irrepressible sexual needs of men, but one wonders if proponents of that argument might not have had an economic stake in the question as well – an undeniable consumer need for something is bound to mean profit somewhere.

An example of how important sex for profit was to frontier society can be found in the writing of one prostitute and madame who published her autobiography using the pseudonym Madeleine Blair in 1919. Born in the US, she recounts her early experiences in a number of brothels throughout the Midwest. Her subsequent experiences in Canada, however, offer a rare first-person account of the sexual service industry as it existed in the Canadian West at the turn of the century. While it is important to treat the genre of autobiography carefully – not vesting too much in the seductive appearance of truth and authenticity in a text which is constructed to represent the author in a certain light – I include it here to redress a certain imbalance in critical discussions of prostitution in this time period, where the voices of the women themselves (being much harder to locate) are sometimes neglected, allowing the reformist rhetoric to dominate. For this reason, I have chosen to give Madeleine’s autobiography some prominence here as a rare and valuable historical document. It was published in 1919 by Harper and Brothers and there followed an unsuccessful attempt by a US Society for the Prevention of Vice to have it suppressed as obscenity (Carlisle xxii), but it has not received much attention since. As a first-hand account of one woman’s experiences
in the sex trade, however, it presents a useful counterpoint to the vice commissions and white-slave narratives so prevalent in this era.

In Madeleine's autobiography, I am particularly interested in her representation of how the sex trade embedded itself in local frontier economies, for while reformers who battled the "social evil" depicted prostitution as a social ill, Madeleine presents an alternate view of the industry as a vital part of a healthy economy, thus signalling the importance of women's work to economic growth. While Madeleine's travels did not take her to British Columbia, her description of frontier economies in Alberta and the place of the sex trade therein would to a fair extent apply to conditions throughout the West. When she arrives in Alberta, for instance, she decides to open her own house, and hears of just the place to do so:

I heard of a place in which the Mounted Police had closed the houses two years before because the women had made themselves so conspicuous that the citizens objected to their presence in the town. . . After two years the business men had raised an objection to the 'closed town' because of the decrease in business. They attributed this to the fact that the town had no attraction for the hundreds of single men employed in various capacities in that section. They maintained that as soon as the men drew their money they went to one of the neighboring towns to spend it.

Partly because of this pressure from the business men, but mostly on account of matters that had come under his own observation, the commandant of the Mounted Police had decided to let one house open in the place, if the right woman applied for the privilege . . . My informant was one of the leading professional men in this town, thoroughly familiar with the situation, and he gave me the full details. (254)

One tends to assume that the role of the Mounted Police would have been to suppress prostitution, or, given the pressure of business interests, to turn a blind eye to it. Instead, the officer in charge took an active part not only in condoning the establishment of a brothel, but in interviewing prospective applicants for the position of madame. His candour in the ensuing discussion of terms is equally striking as he clearly and deliberately set out for Madeleine her exact place within the town's society, economy and legal system: "The O.C. warned me against investing too much money,
because of the severe penalty for selling liquor without a license. . . . The police would not take official cognizance of any violation of the law unless a complaint was made by some citizen or hotelman” (255). Despite the law, no one pretends that Madeleine’s house will not sell liquor; instead, it is merely a matter of avoiding too many complaints, since the third complaint would carry a prison-sentence. Madeleine’s description of the rules and conventions of her own house, as well as her accounts of those she worked in, establish that the sale of liquor was just as important as the sale of sex in the profitability of a brothel, and Madeleine remarks on the centrality of drinking, particularly in Canadian culture:

In the Canadian Northwest the sale of liquor and the profits therefrom were greater than I had ever seen elsewhere. . . . There were no amusements and in the winter few recreations, so that drinking was the greatest indoor pastime.

The bars closed at ten o’clock at night, and at six on Saturday nights. The sporting-houses remained open as long as they liked, usually until four o’clock in the morning. And Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons were the times when we did the big business. (282)

Even without the element of sexual service, then, Madeleine’s house responded to demands which were not filled by the other sectors of the liquor trade, incorporating itself as a necessary component of the social and economic system. And as if that market were not enough, she inadvertently finds her house one of the most popular restaurants in town due to the talent of her hired cook. Madeleine’s business venture thus includes the furthering of liquor interests, the employment of roughly five prostitutes and two house workers, the financial support of the municipal authorities in the form of bribes, and the supply of food, drink and sexual services much in demand. She not only provided employment, then, but facilitated the exchange of money and so aided in the diversification and growth of the economy. The integration of her venture with local business interests is profitable to everyone involved, and demonstrates that the sex trade, while often represented as a subculture to be suppressed or denied, played an invaluable economic role in the opening of the frontier.
In this way, prostitution resembles other sectors of industry at the turn of century in which women were an important part of the workforce, yet were never given credit by a society which would not recognize them as workers – as valuable economic agents – because of their gender status, which, for sex workers especially, was always linked to their moral status. For mainstream working women this lack of recognition was reflected in their reduced political agency relative to male workers, as well as in their low wages and in the representation of their work as unskilled, easier and less vital to the economy than men’s work. Prostitutes, meanwhile, were similarly denied agency as workers (their occupation characterized as a life of ease), but perhaps because the sex trade itself was so removed from the dominant culture of respectability and traditional gender roles, the women’s wages were not depressed like those of mainstream working women. What seems evident, then, is that given a sector of the economy financially important to various local interests yet removed from the influence and requirements of respectability (or the cult of true womanhood), women’s wages therein rise dramatically. Admittedly, sexual service work has unique elements not wholly comparable to the forms of labour in other industries. Nevertheless, it seems worth noting that in an industry of great value to the local economy which is nevertheless excluded from the legitimate social order, the women who are the economic agents in that sector find themselves in a very different financial league from that of their mainstream counterparts. This signals once more how powerful a force the cult of true womanhood was, for by demanding that working women be seen only in terms of their consistency with the feminine ideal, these gender dictates made systemic economic and political subjugation appear natural and inevitable. Only in cases like prostitution, where the requirements of respectability and propriety have been utterly rejected, did the women therein begin to assume a different kind of economic agency.
The independence thrust on prostitutes by their exclusion from the community could function as either disadvantage or privilege depending on the context; because they were exempted from many social conventions by virtue of their occupation, prostitutes occupied a significantly different cultural position, and their corresponding experiences influenced their social attitudes and insights. The hypocrisy of community leaders, for instance, who denounced the social evil by day and were regular customers of it by night, demonstrated to the women the counterfeit nature of respectable society. In addition, the fact that prostitutes were routinely targeted by police for fines and arrests while their male clients went unmolested demonstrated the double standard of society in regard to male and female sexuality. Lori Rotenberg suggests that the marginalization of sex workers influenced their sense of identity and their consciousness: “Living and working on the social fringes of society, the full-time prostitute developed a unique and ambivalent kind of consciousness. She was not clearly a member of the petty bourgeoisie or of the working-class” (53). This makes the observations of writers like Madeleine of singular interest—especially when describing Canadian society.

An examination of Madeleine’s perceptions of Canada offers much that is seldom found in the textbook history. A skilled business woman, Madeleine was admired by the town authorities for her competence and discretion. And she in turn found a good deal to admire in Canadian life, which in her mind compared very favourably to her experience of the United States. Her motivation for moving to Canada was part opportunism, part adventure-seeking: “To my mind, the Canadian Northwest represented a land of great adventure, an unexplored country in which there was something hidden from me; when once I had heard the call of it my restless heart could know no peace until I had gone ‘to search behind the ranges’” (243). This passage is typical of the travel writer or the explorer who thirsts for adventure in uncharted territories, but when spoken by a
prostitute, it potentially takes on a fresh set of meanings. While respectable women at the turn of
the century could travel independently, to go exploring for the sake of adventure would have been
unusual, and would certainly have been a privilege of class. The reason that Madeleine, the daughter
of a family left destitute by an alcoholic father, can act on her desire for travel and adventure is her
experience in the sex industry, which provides her with financial independence and guarantees her
work anywhere should she need it, while also exempting her from the family ties and social pressures
attendant upon respectability. Madeleine, then, does what many of us today would like to – she goes
on vacation and decides to stay: “At the end of my month in Banff I had decided to remain in the
Northwest Territory, for here was the land of opportunity. With a small capital I could open a house
in some one of the busy towns, and in two years have a working capital of twenty thousand dollars.
I would then be independent” (252). Madeleine was exceptional among prostitutes for her business
acumen and her intellectual pursuits, not to mention her physical beauty and youthful looks which
were a natural advantage, so she cannot be seen as wholly representative. Nevertheless, for a single
woman in her early twenties supported only by her own earnings to thus calmly contemplate personal
and financial independence is a significant accomplishment and speaks to the kind of opportunities
available to prostitutes on the Canadian frontier. Prostitution represented for society the index of
how far down a working-class woman could fall, but from a financial point of view, it was also the
index of how much a woman could make. In fact, this may have been more true in the Canadian
Northwest than anywhere else. Having come from American cities where a more settled society and
longstanding sex trade made for greater competition, Madeleine sees opportunities in Canada that
did not exist elsewhere: sizing up the women in a Winnipeg house she remarks, “Not one of these
women could have competed in the open market with the younger members of her profession, but
here in this new country where hundreds of single men were hungering for feminine society they were making a great deal of money” (247).

Madeleine’s experience of the brothel system reveals a great deal about working conditions for prostitutes at the turn of the century, and these differ significantly from the North American sex trade today. With the closing of red-light districts which took place across the country between 1910 and 1920 in response to pressure from reformers, the working conditions of prostitutes declined significantly. The brothel provided women with a relatively safe working environment, while at the same time assuring their food and lodging. While the women paid rent and usually yielded half their earnings to the house, they would still make a decent income – more in the high-class houses. Ruth Rosen estimates that “the average brothel inmate or streetwalker received from one to five dollars a ‘trick,’ earning in one evening what other working women made in a week” (148). Brothels, meanwhile, were run by women, and while some madames were more mercenary than others, many took a maternal attitude toward the young women and fostered a caring and protective environment: a supportive female subculture. As Judith Walkowitz notes, “Numerous commentators remarked on the frequent acts of generosity between members of the ‘fallen sisterhood’” (27). Pimps, meanwhile, were frowned upon by madames and police alike. The only sector of prostitution in which they were prominent was the low level of the “cribs”, where prostitutes lived and worked out of a single room for little money, usually supporting a boyfriend-turned-pimp as well as themselves. In a sense, the elimination of the brothel reduced the entire trade to this more suppressed and oppressive level, and with the industry no longer in the hands of women, it became a much more dangerous and destructive way of life, with fewer profits going to women.

With a narrator as successful and articulate as Madeleine it might be easy to romanticize the life of the frontier prostitute, but her accomplishments are balanced by a great deal of adversity and
suffering. Venereal disease, alcoholism, pregnancy and abortion, as well as her feelings of disgust toward the male customers all enter into her account. These were hazards that every sexual service worker faced; they may have made more money than women in other occupations, but their lives were certainly not easy. Nonetheless, Madeleine refutes the wisdom of the day which dictated a downward spiral for prostitutes ending in their death within seven years: “Many of these women do leave the life, and many never return to it. Many make good marriages to men they really care for, and, contrary to the usual belief, these marriages are often happy, and few indeed are the wives who prove unfaithful” (326). At one stage, Madeleine herself has the opportunity to marry a man who is loving, wealthy, willing to forgive her past life and be father to the child she is carrying, but despite loving him in return, she refuses, demonstrating a spirit of independence impressive for a woman of her time: “His was a strong, dominant nature that would have moulded the woman of his choice to his own will, and I was as unmoldable as any girl possibly could be. Young though I was, I sensed that indomitable will, and I had no desire to beat out my own individuality against it” (164). Madeleine’s life as a prostitute and as a woman reflects the tenuous balance between the experience of intense suffering where bare survival is at stake, and the exercise of a strong will which admits no compromise. For this reason her story is a useful reminder that figures like the prostitute or the working-class woman cannot be reduced either to pathetic victim or invincible heroine, but rather occupy a range of positions not easily predictable.

Perhaps understanding this all too well, Madeleine found the reports about victims of white slavery absurd and offensive:

It was left for the enlightened twentieth century to create the Great American Myth. ‘White slavery is abroad in our land! Our daughters are being trapped and violated and held as prisoners and sold for fabulous sums (a flattering unction, this), and no woman is safe.’ And forthwith any woman or man who had a financial motive for spreading this myth proceeded to spread it. (322)
Through all her travels, Madeleine claims never to have encountered a real victim of white slavery, so based on her own experience she argues that it never existed. It is perhaps in her interest to suggest this, so the historical record remains contradictory, but she provides a certain amount of support for the argument that white slavery, if it existed at all, was marginal to most of the sex trade. Madeleine, with a knack for recognizing hypocrisy, sees the white-slave panic as “this clamour of the ignorant, the mendacious and self-aggrandizing, and the reformers for revenue only” (322). That reform was more likely driven by self-interest than philanthropy occurred to socialist critics in Vancouver as well: “Whenever the purity crusade is inaugurated by the henchmen and supporters of capitalism, either pious or profane, it is certain that some material interest lies back of it” (“About”). These comments in the Western Clarion responded to the results of a purity crusade to clear out the houses on Dupont Street: “The whole thing was engineered in the interest of the Great Northern Railway which wanted Dupont street property for terminal purposes. By persecuting the social outcast and driving her from this particular locality the value of the coveted property would be depreciated and the railway would thus save money in the purchase.” Prostitution, while fostering economic growth and generating profit for some groups, was a fiscal impediment to others, and it is perhaps not surprising that these interests enlisted a moral argument to hasten their material objectives. But once again, in the context of women’s occupations, the material aspect of their labour is relentlessly reduced to the level of gender and morality, and when we keep this in mind, the white-slave panic, rather than being isolated to the moral sphere, appears as part of the wider obscurantist agenda in cultural attitudes toward women roles and women’s work.
The idea that the white-slave trade was a danger particular to working girls served on the one hand to reduce them to child-like victims incapable of looking after themselves and on the other to castigate their independent lifestyle as inherently reckless. Perhaps partly in response to this contradiction, the category of the “feeble-minded” girl rose to prominence, her mental inferiority excusing her from full responsibility for her actions. Along with the invention of the feeble-minded girl went the construction of the female delinquent; both of these elicited the interest of social scientists, who veiled their moralizing in scientific rhetoric. This type of reform effort particularly irritated Madeleine, who aptly summarizes the situation by mimicking their discourse:

Above the tumult of the white-slave myth promulgators the voice of pseudo-science is striving to make itself heard. “These poor creatures are feeble-minded, they are the ripe and noxious product of poverty and degeneracy; this is the fertile and only soil in which they are produced. We must build institutions, that they may neither contaminate our own pure offspring nor propagate their kind.” (324)

Madeleine’s point of view is rare, for as a child of poverty who became a long-time prostitute, she speaks from the category these scientists were attempting to consolidate – a category which automatically disqualified its members from speaking for themselves as rational subjects – yet by assuming the institutional voice herself she mocks its authority. Her derision of the project and her contempt for those involved is clear, especially in her use of the term pseudo-science, which gestures toward the partly unconscious habit in many reformers of cloaking class and gender bias in an aura of scientific objectivity. She also emphasizes their institutional agenda; by pathologizing young women, medical authorities could exert a degree of control not available in the disciplining of sane, law-abiding individuals. While the white-slave panic provided a useful morality narrative for arguments connecting working girls and prostitution, the rhetoric of female delinquency took up where these stories left off, bringing in the authority of science and the arm of the law.
In 1912 the Moral and Social Reform Council of British Columbia issued a report entitled “Social Vice in Vancouver.” The agenda of the report was to describe the city’s vice problem and prescribe a solution – namely the wholesale suppression of prostitution as opposed to the quasi-toleration of the existing red-light district then located on Alexander Street. The report was one part of the ongoing dispute in Vancouver over police policy toward prostitution. Because the police knew that banning a red-light district would only result in the scattering of the sex trade across the city, and likely realizing the important role of the sex industry in the economic and social relations of a city with a disproportionate number of single working-class men, they would have preferred to turn a blind eye to activities in the Alexander Street area. As Greg Marquis argues, “the police better than anyone knew that the tenements of Chinatown and the rooming-houses, cheap hotels, beer parlours, and bawdy-houses of the downtown core were essential to Vancouver’s racial and class relations. The ‘underworld’ not only catered to the needs of a large part of the unskilled, seasonal working class and the city’s largest racial minority, it also provided employment for hundreds if not thousands” (267). But increasingly organized reform groups in Vancouver and across the continent were exerting pressure on lawmakers and police to suppress the sex trade and to disallow brothels. Middle-class women played an influential role in the reform movement, and while they would never succeed in their goal of eliminating prostitution, they and the reform movement did manage to change legal and police action toward the trade, and with the eradication of brothels and the scattering of the sex trade throughout the city, the working conditions of the majority of prostitutes became more dangerous and less profitable. If one considers the female involvement in the reform movement to be a phase in the feminist project, these reforms are arguably among feminism’s most significant failures, with a privileged group of women systematically persecuting a less privileged group to great effect. Prostitution has been one of the most serious stumbling blocks of North
American feminism, in part because of the inability to extricate a notion of prostitution as work from questions of morality and supposed degradation; this is precisely the stumbling block which long denied mainstream wage-earning women their deserved credit as valuable economic agents and cultural innovators.

While the 1912 Moral Reform report set out to advocate the increased suppression of the sex industry – a project ostensibly focussing on already-practising prostitutes – a significant portion of the document addresses the more general populace of young working-class women, representing the whole category as dangerously close to (if not virtually interchangeable with) prostitutes proper. In *Toronto's Girl Problem* Carolyn Strange attributes the social consternation over unruly young women in part to the rapid increase in the number of single women who flocked to the city for work, making Toronto’s population more than half female. Vancouver, on the other hand, was always disproportionally male, so it is somewhat surprising that girls were even numerous enough to constitute a “problem,” but as the report reveals, when it came to morality, girls were trouble:

> Our detention officer says that there is an enormous amount of vice going on with young girls in the city. . . . Girls of the age of 14 to 16 years have been known to leave home and stay away for days. Their employers have no means of knowing where they are residing. They register their home address, and when there is no home control they go where they please. The ruin in which such a course must end is only too evident. (5)

The mention of employers identifies working girls as the specific problem here, their freedom from “home control” tantamount to delinquency and vice. The story of employers having a home address for working girls where they were not to be found is revealing of the pressure to identify even the wage-earning woman with the home, but employers often required this because they preferred to hire girls who lived with family rather than independent women; they could then justify not paying a living wage. Naturally, some independent women would therefore supply a false address to secure employment. The working girls’ absence from the listed home mentioned in the report could be due
to this or any number of reasons, but the reform literature consistently reduced complexity or indeterminacy to a single conclusion: vice.

Working conditions, poor wages, and rooming houses for working girls all come under attack in the report as “causes contributing to the Social Evil,” strengthening the assumption that young working-class women were everywhere in moral peril, that their way of life was in itself tantamount to vice, and that many were unable to resist temptation. This is why the report states, as though with a sigh of relief, “A most valuable improvement was made in the law when the government secured legislation for the new Industrial School. A girl can now be taken into detention without having gone to the length of actual crime” (6). Young women, it would seem, constituted such an unruly group that dealing with them required the virtual suspension of the law, or at least of civil liberty. The report is referring here to the Juvenile Delinquents Act which was passed in 1908, allowing for a new kind of legislative control over youth. Carolyn Strange and Tina Loo outline the peculiarities of this Act designed especially for a select group:

With the exception of the 1876 consolidated Indian Act, it was the first statute to prescribe a distinct style of justice for a subgroup of Canadians. . . . Children could be charged with ill-defined offenses which, if committed by adults, did not amount to criminal acts. Consequently, youngsters faced the possibility of ending up in juvenile court for ‘incorrigibility,’ being beyond parental control, and ‘delinquency.’ (95-96)

That this kind of legislation had elsewhere targeted the native population indicates its unusual and discriminatory nature: only a group that is very different or aberrant needs a whole new set of laws just for them. But apparently this was the case for teenagers – especially working-class females – and Vancouver did not hesitate to address this newly constructed legal subject, the delinquent. As Indiana Matters documents in her article on Vancouver’s Industrial Home for Girls, the rationalization for incarcerating young, mostly working-class girls depended upon their being criminalized and pathologized for infractions which would never count as real crimes if perpetrated
by adult citizens: "It is quite evident that actual crime had little or nothing to do with the reasons why most female juvenile delinquents were imprisoned during this period" (270). The comparison of the juvenile legal apparatus to that constructed for the native population is once again suggestive here, since that group clearly never shared in the rights and privileges of citizenship, and suddenly as young women were gaining increased cultural prominence, neither did they.

Indiana Matters calculates that of all the young women admitted to the Industrial Home roughly eighty-eight per cent were charged with morals offenses and "incorrigibility," an indefinite term applied to any range of behaviour considered beyond the control of the parents. As far as the authorities were concerned, as is evident in the Moral Reform report, most female offenses related – or were made to relate – to sexual misconduct and immorality. Staying out all night, for instance, is frequently mentioned in literature on female delinquency as something obviously synonymous with prostitution and vice. But as Matters also points out, while some of the women may have engaged in prostitution on some level, and most had been sexually active, "many of those charged with incorrigibility and immorality were sexually active with only one partner and several had asked permission to marry the men with whom they were involved" (270). Once again, there is an unwillingness to distinguish between different degrees of sexual activity, so that premarital sex between partners willing to marry warranted the same punishment as prostitution. In fact, one expert on female delinquency created a special category of delinquency which utterly conflates prostitution with regular consensual sex. In her 1921 article in Social Welfare, Lucy Brooking, the superintendent of an Industrial School for girls in Toronto, identified three different kinds of female delinquents: first, the feeble-minded, second, "the girl who has not been immoral, but who is virtually unmanageable," and third, "the smart bad. This type is growing more pronounced, and is usually a product of city life. A few years ago, commercial prostitutes were found even among these
very young girls, but of late, promiscuous prostitution, with no end in view, except a wild and
clawless time, seems to be growing" (182). The “smart bad”, in other words, is a prostitute who takes
no payment for her services – meaning a woman who is sexually active of her own free will. Today,
the difference between being a sexually active single woman and a prostitute is obvious, nor does
it seems likely that the “smart bad” would have considered herself a prostitute, but in the first two
decades of the twentieth century, social critics were almost going out of their way to ignore and
confuse variations in sexual conduct. A militant urge to contain the shifting cultural norms of the
working class clearly motivated reform groups, who looked upon the young working-class woman
as symbolic of the promiscuous tendencies of urban working life.

As in the case of the white-slave trade and prostitution, female delinquency was consistently
perceived to be a problem relating primarily to working girls. Lucy Brooking goes on to identify
“Industrial conditions” as one of the main causes of female delinquency:

In these days the young girl is more thrown out, more exposed, more dependent as a wage
earner, than was the girl of a score years ago. In a case where a very young girl had been out
at all hours of the night, and with very doubtful company, resulting in a ghastly downfall, I
suggested to the mother, who was a decent woman, that she should have insisted on proper
hours and right company. She replied that she could not say much to the young daughter,
because “she brings in the rent.” (182)

Under the heading of “Industrial conditions,” one expects to find commentary on working
conditions, long hours, poor wages, or the intermingling of men and women in the workplace, but
here, the “industrial condition” posing a problem is the working girl herself; the young daughter’s
earning power directly undermines parental authority, suggesting a virtual cause and effect between
female employment and delinquency. And delinquency, for women, always meant sex.

While the category of the “smart bad” finds a way to obscure the distinction between any
consensual sex and prostitution, the designation of feeble-mindedness was similarly applied both to
prostitutes and mainstream working girls in such a way as to suggest similarity. In her article on
Toronto’s factory girls and the Toronto Psychiatric Clinic, Jennifer Stephen documents the way in
which working women were pathologized by psychiatrists such as Gordon Mundie, who wrote in
the 1922 *Canadian Journal of Mental Hygiene* regarding working girls:

> Many of these girls are mentally deficient, but with a manner and prettiness which, with their
> lack of mental control, leads to their delinquency. There is also the girl who thinks it is
> nobody’s business but her own if she chooses to adopt an immoral career. One such girl
> when questioned about her life said it had been a delightful experience. (311)

These comments suggest that it is not only the immoral career which proves the case of feeble-
mindedness, but the dangerous combination of physical attractiveness and independent thought. The
psychiatrist cannot perceive a cultural difference in standards of moral conduct, attributable to class,
gender or age difference, but instead must construct as deviant that which he disapproves of.
Sexually active working girls and plausibly all prostitutes were accorded the label of feeble-
mindedness, which was in effect an attempt to diagnose working women’s changing sexual norms.
As Ruth Rosen argues:

> In fact, feeble-mindedness described inappropriate gender and class conduct. By labelling
> such women feeble-minded, reformers could defend against, as well as condemn, poor
> women’s sexual aggressiveness, social boldness, impatience with delayed gratification, and
> disregard for the future. The term feeble-minded, then, became a way of classifying
> aggressive female sexuality, as well as expressing the growing class and cultural conflicts
> between penal reformers, eugenicists, and antivice crusaders and the target of their efforts,
> prostitutes and sexually deviant women. (23)

The white-slave narratives had warned girls against entering the danger zones of the city, the
workplace, and the dance hall, while recuperating a degree of innocence for the naive working girl
and the unwilling prostitute inveigled into the trade by deceptive procurers. But women’s continued
entrance into urban workplaces, accompanied by their resulting independence in the additional areas
of leisure activities and sexual choices, offended a conservative middle class, who increasingly found
ways to demonize their apparently willful defiance of feminine convention. The young women admitted to institutions like Vancouver’s Industrial Home for Girls suffered the consequences of this class, age, and gender conflict, but for every one of those unlucky enough to get caught, several more would have eluded authorities and cheerfully pursued cultural and sexual alternatives unthinkable to the previous generation.

The role of young working-class women, including prostitutes, as cultural pacesetters is elided by analyses that position high culture at the forefront of innovation. Madeleine remarks in 1919 that “the present-day craze for rag-time has floated up from the brothel. So have most of the other crazes” (148). Her imagery of cultural creativity happening from the bottom up suggests the potential of the subculture to influence the mainstream. As Kathy Peiss argues, with prostitutes sharing many of the same leisure spaces as working girls, young women had a variety of cultural and sexual styles visible to them:

In the promiscuous spaces of the streets, theatres, and dance halls, prostitutes provided a cultural model both fascinating and forbidden to other young working-class women. Tantalized by the fine dress, easy life, sexual expressiveness, and apparent independence, while carefully marking the boundary between the fallen and respectable, a working woman might appropriate parts of the prostitute’s style as her own. (Cheap Amusements 66)

Both prostitutes and working girls came under attack by middle-class critics for their dress, which was thought too showy, and an improper use of a woman’s wages. Similarly each new style of music or dance was vilified as too sexually charged for proper female conduct, and as Madeleine notes, these crazes were often associated with the brothel for good reason. Peiss is careful to point out, though, that within the spaces of cultural overlap and imitation, participants distinguished for themselves just where the boundaries were placed and what the limits of acceptable conduct were.
It was the dominant middle-class culture which obscured these distinctions in an attempt to curtail female sexual license.

The conceptual association between working-class women and prostitutes reinforced the tendency to treat wage-earning women as a moral problem, a tendency that denied their function as economic players. In a frontier city like Vancouver, moreover, a thriving population of prostitutes among proportionally few women likely enhanced the association between working-class women and sexual misconduct. Yet it was precisely the frontier culture and economy of the city that made prostitution a crucial part of economic growth and social relations. Nevertheless, attempts to denigrate both mainstream women's work and sexual service work were deliberate and sustained. In Vancouver, racial intolerance often influenced arguments over prostitution, for the red-light district frequently overlapped with Chinatown, and promulgators of the white-slave myth used this fact to suggest that Chinese men were luring heedless white girls into sexual bondage. The widespread cultural anxiety over young women on their own in the city was thus given a local spin that harmonized with other popular prejudices, indicating the flexibility of the white-slave narrative, which had a number of uses depending on the particular aspect of urban life under attack.

Nan Enstad documents a case in New York where employers, faced with a strike of female shirtwaist makers, hired prostitutes to mingle with the strikers: "Manufacturers knew that hiring prostitutes to stand on the same corners as the pickets would intensify the association between female picketing and disreputable behaviour" (91). At precisely the moment when working women asserted their political subjectivity by striking, the employers very strategically invoked the imagined connection between working women and moral degradation, undermining support for them by playing on powerful prejudices regarding female sexuality. This stunning example of gender politics at the turn of the century signals the powerful symbolic influence of the prostitute who, by her mere
presence in a certain space, renders suspect the respectability of the entire space and everyone in it. Both white-slave narratives and the rhetoric of delinquency invoked this symbolic figure as the limit case of female vice, and both tied prostitution to the working girl. But these efforts to police female independence could not wholly inhibit women whose paid labour and cultural pursuits were transforming gender relations and sexual norms.
CHAPTER FOUR

WOMEN’S LABOUR ACTIVISM IN VANCOUVER

“It is a significant fact in connection with the employment of women that they are always expected to fulfill the traditional duties of the sex no matter what industrial occupation they may follow” ("Woman’s Work"). This remark by Helena Gutteridge briefly outlines a simple but fundamental difference between men and women in the world of work – a difference which coloured virtually every aspect of working women’s lives including their labour politics. There were few unions in Vancouver before 1900 but the movement grew rapidly thereafter, as did women’s involvement in labour issues; after 1920, however, organized labour suffered a setback due to economic stagnation. The focus in this chapter is thus on the years between 1900 and 1920.

The expansion of urban industrialism in Canada which drew women into the public workplace was accompanied by the rise of the organized labour movement, and Vancouver in particular became known for militant and radical labour politics. But while organized labour may have espoused radical cultural reorientation that would undo the power relations which subjugated the worker, their social critique rarely extended to other forms of oppression such as gender relations. The male domination of the workforce was reflected in the corresponding culture of unionism, where work-related values associated with male physical strength, militant loyalty, and skilled craftsmanship were validated in a men’s-club atmosphere, with unions often being called “brotherhoods.” Women’s entrance into the sphere of organized labour was thus subject to many difficulties: often they were new to the workplace and planned to leave as soon as they got married,
so they saw themselves or were seen by others as merely temporary members of the workforce; many of them changed jobs frequently, looking for better conditions or just creating some variety for themselves, given the monotony of many women’s jobs; and some women’s occupations, such as domestic work, isolated women from one another, making it difficult to meet and organize. These are only a few of the obstacles that could hinder women’s attempts to unionize, but it didn’t help that male unions tended to blame women for being unorganized, assuming that female incompetence was the explanation – certainly not any prejudice on their part. In fact, the ideological inclination to deny the reality of women’s roles as workers and instead limit them to the “traditional duties of the sex” influenced trade unionists, whose assumption that women were not legitimate members of the workforce determined their view that they could not be real members of a union either.

The culture of working women, meanwhile, occupied its own social arena; in the first two decades of the twentieth century, gender politics often involved the valorization of female difference. Women’s suffrage campaigns cited the unique capabilities of mothers to exercise social and moral responsibility, while working women sought to improve working conditions by connecting the health of young women to that of the future nation. Women’s clubs were ubiquitous, and organizations like the YWCA created women-only spaces with social programs similarly run by and for women only. In the case of wage-earning women, who were often in their teens and twenties, the formation of cultural identities was also influenced by a rapidly evolving working-class youth culture which craved social events and demanded ever more exciting leisure activities. A unique set of cultural conditions thus provided the backdrop for working women’s entrance into labour politics, and those who joined the labour movement often introduced aspects of gender politics into their labour activism – a combination that could be both impressive and unsettling to traditional unionists. The intensely masculine world of the union would be surprised to find itself invaded by spirited young women whose politics ran as rampant as their dances ran late.
THE CIGAR-STANDS CONTROVERSY

In January of 1914, a young man approached a cigar stand in downtown Vancouver and presented the young woman working there with "an indecent picture" ("City in Paragraphs"). She complained to the police, and the next time he came by she asked him for the picture, he produced it and was arrested by a detective. His resulting sentence was a year in jail, which the editor of the Sun, one John P. McConnell, thought was "too severe for the offense," and indeed, from today's perspective, a year does seem harsh; what is remarkable, however, is the way in which the editor successfully deflected the issue of a young man in possession of pornography onto the supposed problem of young wage-earning women. In his opinion, and it was one soon matched by lawmakers, "the police commissioners should take some action with regard to this practice of employing young girls in this species of occupation" ("Undesirable Practice"). From his point of view, not only was the punishment too harsh for the crime, but the "palliating circumstances" which led up to the offense, namely the employment of a young woman in so public a setting, needed to be taken into account and rectified:

It must be admitted that young girls employed in such positions are exposed to conditions which can hardly fail to be harmful to them. We speak, of course, not of the positions in the offices of reputable hotels, but of those stands at the entrance to public buildings where only tobacco is sold. The salesgirls at these places are brought into constant contact with men, and men only: and very much into contact with many undesirable men. Unquestionably they are employed because they attract this class to purchase their wares. They are intended as a lure and as our correspondents say are regarded as such by their customers or by the majority of them. This was no doubt the view which the young man King took and while his conduct was not to be excused there were, in some measure, at least, palliating circumstances. ("Undesirable Practice")

Though McConnell begins by suggesting that it is the young women who are endangered by their very public workplaces and by "undesirable men," by the end of the passage these virtual sirens have lured a young man into an understandable lapse in judgement. In making explicit reference to the
public setting of the cigar stands, the editor of the *Sun* touched on the widespread feeling that wage-earning women were placing themselves in positions inappropriate to their gender, and were thus compromising their femininity and virtue: “They are in general much more free in their manner towards the male sex than many would consider quite consistent with modesty and innocence” (“Severe Sentence”). The implication is clear: the girl was asking for it. McConnell’s claim that the cigar-stand women were hired specifically in order to entice male customers with their feminine attractions further implied that the women were willing participants in a public enterprise wherein commercialism and promiscuity were as one. By thus representing the public commercial setting as one deliberately infused with sexual innuendo, he concludes that an average young man like King can hardly be blamed for his actions: “This being the case it is not unnatural to suppose that in showing this particular girl the picture he did, King thought that he was not being guilty of any shocking or unusual conduct” (“Severe Sentence”). Indeed, he even claims that while the cigar-stand women “cannot escape the contamination to which they are constantly exposed,” young men of King’s tastes are often wholly respectable: “many men of good position and respectable reputation have a taste for pictures that are hardly fit for exhibition in mixed company, and show them among their friends and acquaintances with the greatest freedom” (“Severe Sentence”). Apparently, when it comes to contaminating influences, pornography has nothing on the workplace.

Rather than taking an innocent offender like King off the streets, it is the women who should be removed, apparently as much for the public’s protection as for their own: “What the offense of which this young man was guilty and for which he suffered so severely points to is the desirability of doing away, if possible, with the system under which young girls are employed as baits to induce the public to become customers” (“Severe Sentence”). That he never pauses to consider that this would deprive several young women of a much-needed income is typical of the dominant cultural
attitude of the time which regarded wage-earning women not as workers and members of the labour force, but as a social and moral problem. Indeed, what the cigar-stands controversy most clearly demonstrates is how the widespread representation of women’s workplaces as morally contaminated allowed for the complete elision of women’s roles as workers, entitled as such to at least the limited rights of wage-earning members of the labour force. Here especially, the figure of the working girl is not only herself transgressing social norms by her public presence and allegedly immodest behaviour, but is provoking such transgressions in others, like a magnet for disruption. These concerns over moral ambiguity and gender appropriateness superceded any practical consideration of working women’s needs or even point of view. While the Sun’s editor shows deep concern for King who will suffer from “the prison stigma, with which he will now be branded as long as he lives” (“Severe Sentence”), he never even names the young woman who went to the police and played an active part in securing King’s arrest. Whether hired for her powers of attraction or not, this young woman, it seems, actively refused to be subjected to the indignity of King’s behaviour, but her side of the story is missing. The editor undermines the legitimacy of cigar-stand work by claiming that the women are hired not as genuine workers but as sexual lures, thereby reinforcing the ideological propensity to reduce women workers to their gender status, positing them as a moral and sexual problem and denying them even the limited respect due to wage-earning members of the labour force. His suppression of the young woman’s side of the story, then, is a representational strategy which matches the material agenda of denying and erasing the presence of women in the workplace.

That the editor of the Sun so swiftly lit upon the exclusion of women from such employment as a solution to young men circulating pornography is evidence of a set of conceptual associations which was so characteristic of the time that it appeared natural. The editor’s disregard for a
woman's right or need to work, coupled with an impulse to eliminate women's presence in public spaces, prompts his appeal for a city bylaw, a suggestion he makes in a tone of the most disinterested common sense: "Would it not be well for the board of police commissioners to take this matter of employing these girls in such positions into their consideration and see whether it is not possible to enforce a regulation against the practice?" ("Severe Sentence"). The assumptions which underlie his suggestion – that women don't really need their jobs, that they should not be exposed to the public, that they need to be protected because men can't be expected to control themselves – are not merely attributable to sexism (though clearly that is part of the picture), but rather they draw on specific cultural narratives about women and work in the early part of the century. The impulse to deny women workers the same rights and political subjectivity that male workers commanded blended well with notions which matched femininity with the apolitical private sphere and the private sphere with the elision of work. These ideologies, however, were increasingly resisted by women workers who were demanding the political agency of their male counterparts and contesting the denial of their position and value in the workforce.

Following a ruling by the licensing board that the employment of young women in cigar stands would no longer be tolerated and that they should be discharged forthwith ("Women in Cigar Stores"), a delegation of the cigar-stand women appeared before the board to protest the ruling. The haste and thoughtlessness with which the board had passed the resolution became evident when it was revealed that many women were not merely employees but were the proprietors of the stands, a fact which demonstrated the tendency of the city administration to underestimate the extent of women's involvement in and commitment to their work. Besides their main complaint of being summarily deprived of their businesses, the women also objected to the cosy relationship between
the editor of the *Sun* and the license commissioners, who seem to have passed their ruling on little
more than the editor's suggestion. The women made no secret of their feelings toward the *Sun*:

Incidently, the chief speaker of the delegation referred to the editorial that appeared in The
Sun and expressed her intention of coming down to The Sun office with a big horsewhip and
administering chastisement to the first person she met, or, as she elegantly phrased it, “of
knocking the head off them.” (“Women Want”)

The *Sun* takes a derisive tone here, but nonetheless one cannot help but admire the women’s spirit
of defiance. The cigar-stand employees may have approached the committee primarily to defend
their right to work, but it seems likely, particularly in light of the desire to horsewhip the editor, that
they were not only displeased but insulted.

The view the editor had taken to their line of work and the behaviour he had attributed to
them would have insulted any woman’s sense of honour, and working-class women’s culture had
a great deal to do with honour and dignity. Alice Kessler-Harris identifies such concerns as
important influences in working women’s labour activism in the early twentieth century, when “work
values” and gender expectations could interact to incite outrage and defiance: “While workers with
similar traditions and roots share many work values, the ‘cultural baggage’ associated with gender
enters into a woman’s sense of ‘dignity’ or ‘honour’ at work, ordering her perceptions of what she
is willing to tolerate, and what violates her sense of dignity” (“Problems” 119). The cigar-stands
controversy is an excellent example of a conflict playing out on this moral stage where working
women’s honour and respectability – and what they should or should not be expected to tolerate –
is crucial to how the issues and events are perceived and then acted upon. We have easy access to
the media’s point of view through the *Sun* editorials (taking into account that the *Sun* tended to take
a conservative stance and to side with business over labour), but the working women’s point of view
is readable only in their recorded actions. Recognizing the importance placed by working women
on the principles of honour and dignity, then, may help us tentatively interpret some of their reactions here.

The young woman who reported King and had him arrested demonstrated through her actions that she considered his behaviour a violation of what was tolerable, while the women who protested the bylaw against their employment engaged not only in a political protest concerning labour rights but also in a battle over dignity, respect, and representation. When you say that someone should be horsewhipped, the offense tends to be not simply an infraction of laws, rules, or expectations, but a violation of social or moral principles as well. Another editorial in the Sun at this time, for instance, reported on the suggestion in England that the whipping post be revived for suffragettes: “Such a proposal is somewhat shocking to the feelings, but it may yet be necessary to adopt some such means of giving these unsexed females to understand that there is a limit beyond which they will not be allowed to go” (“Militant Vandalism”). Both of these threatened whippings thus communicate a sense of outrage, that “there is a limit” or a line you don’t cross. And notably, in both cases those limits demarcate what one gender demands from the other. The suffragette violated what was gender appropriate, undermined her own femininity and, by extension, gender relations at large, while the editor of the Sun, through his insulting representation of working women, deprived them not only of their jobs but of their honour and respectability as women. These are attacks by one gender upon the other, and the threatened whippings as a specific language of violence represent both the outrage and the desired retaliation for such transgressions. While the women’s primary argument to the licensing board involved their material needs as wage-earners, their dispute with the Sun editor involved not only the demand as workers to earn a living but also as women to command respect. And the fact that both of these (albeit tenuous) rights were being violated at once may partly account for the women’s prompt and forceful protest. This suggests a
cultural self-perception among working women wherein their identity as workers was tied, through concepts such as honour, dignity, and respect, to their identity as women, and those connections, in turn, influenced when and how they entered into political protest. Their position may not have been grounded in equality of the sexes, but given the circumstances it was likely the more viable alternative at a time when essential gender difference was an absolute given of the culture.

The cigar-stand women won a limited victory in that their jobs and businesses were returned to them, but with the stipulation that in the future, should one of the women voluntarily resign, she would be replaced with a man (“No Girls”) – an intensely essentialist response (though in terms of male self-interest, also an intensely political one), indicative of the general tenor of labour disputes involving gender in this period of history. Today, the case would likely be addressed as an instance of workplace sexual harassment, but it would take years of feminist activism to develop the language and representational strategies necessary to make harassment a recognized issue, and the impossibility of the case being seen in that light in 1914 reveals the specificity of how gender difference in the public workplace was managed at that time:

The point we made was that it was contrary to the moral good of the public that girls should fill these positions. The reply to that, which was, that a few women who could not do so well at any other occupation, were making a comfortable livelihood in this way, is by no means a sufficient one. Public morals should not be imperilled on any such grounds as that. (“Insufficient Reply”)

The *Sun*’s editorials, such as this one, were written mainly for the business class and present the material needs of the working class as nothing compared to the social upset incurred by women’s presence in the amoral public sphere of commercial enterprise. One might have expected the city’s organized labour movement to support the women’s case or at least to acknowledge it, the right to work being fundamental to their politics, but there is no mention of it in the labour paper, the *BC Federationist*, suggesting a failure on their part as well to recognize the situation not just as a dispute
over gender norms and morality but as an issue of labour politics. Or perhaps, in this instance, the well-known radicalism of Vancouver's leftist labour movement stopped short; socialist unionism was no guarantee of radical gender politics. The refusal to recognize women within the category of wage-earners betrays the deeply essentialist understanding of both gender and work characteristic of the time, and this automatic denial of women's roles as workers contributed to the widespread tendencies to dismiss women's work, to belittle the value of their labour, and to discount their political agency within the labour movement or even the women's movement.

THE GENDER OF THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

In Bertrand Sinclair's *North of Fifty-Three*, the central romance unites an urban working girl with a socialist labour man. Sinclair's interest in labour politics suffuses much of his writing and his sympathies lay clearly with the working man. His characters, often miners or loggers, debate labour politics, often espousing a socialist vision that would do away with the class exploitation inherent in industrial society. When *North of Fifty-Three*’s Bill Wagstaff enters into business, he consistently aligns himself with labour, not management; he either works independently as a miner, or, when he starts a mining company with a few others, he is the one who travels to the site and works with the miners to physically build the business, while his partners — identified as mere speculators — manage the finances. But he finds his utopia in the backwoods of British Columbia, where he can make a living without bending to the class exploitation of the modern city, which he describes as "big and noisy and dirty, and full of wrecks — human derelicts in an industrial Sargasso Sea — like all big cities the world over. I don't like 'em" (77). Hazel, on the other hand, is very much a product of modern city life: as a stenographer she inhabits one of the newly opened fields of urban employment for women, and as a single self-supporting young woman living on her own, she epitomizes the turn-of-
the-century figure of the modern working girl. In the course of their romance this unlikely couple gradually come together, but it is Hazel who does all the compromising: upon marriage, of course, she will no longer work outside the home, and she must also give up the pleasures of the urban social scene, which Wagstaff naturally recognizes as shallow and hypocritical. Ultimately, her education completed, Hazel realizes that Wagstaff’s version of utopia was right all along, and as the novel closes, she joins him in their wilderness retreat to present him with his newborn son. The saucy stenographer has been fully domesticated – the ideal companion to the rugged socialist hero. In its figurative union of the labour man with the working girl this narrative is in many ways analogous to the relationship between the organized labour movement and wage-earning women in British Columbia in the first part of the century. As Linda Kealey argues, “The male-dominated labour movement tended to treat the primarily young and single women workers as ‘other’ – that is, women’s concerns were often couched in language that emphasized their vulnerability to exploitation, their need for male protection, or their future roles as wives and mothers” (88). Just as Wagstaff finds Hazel lost in the woods, a narrative of chivalry and protection had the heroic union offering to take the helpless working girl under its wing, but by the end of the story, the woman’s domestic role as wife and mother tended to be reestablished to remove her from the workplace.

The class and gender exploitation inherent in the working world are symbolized in North of Fifty-Three by a series of men who make sexual advances towards Hazel. Her boss assaults her in the workplace, a travelling salesman tries the same thing in the BC backwoods, and finally Wagstaff kidnaps her to spend the winter with him in his cabin, as discussed in Chapter Two. In the first two cases, Hazel very capably defends herself and indeed inflicts some damage on her attacker: “Hazel jerked loose from his grip in a perfect fury, using at the same time the weapons nature gave her according to her strength, whereby Mr. Perkins suffered sundry small bruises, which were as nothing
to the bruises his conceit suffered" (65). In other words, Hazel is no helpless waif at the mercy of her environment, and one can imagine if she had been working that cigar stand she would hardly have had to summon the police to handle the situation. Fiercely independent, emotionally and physically strong, and able to find work and move across the country on her own, Hazel strives toward ever-greater freedom: “She found herself wishing she were a man, so that she could fare into the wilds with horses and a gun in this capable man fashion, where routine went by the board and the unexpected hovered always close at hand” (78). Hazel is thus attracted to the freedom of the wilderness, ultimately symbolized by Wagstaff. But as Wagstaff’s future wife, her abduction into that setting is a forceful one of capture and domestication, her will finally bent to harmonize with an isolated homestead domesticity. The reader is meant to recognize Wagstaff as qualitatively different from the other sexual predators, but the fact remains that this romance is a form of entrapment. And I would argue that in this aspect of the novel, Sinclair was (consciously or not) representing a particular dynamic of oppressive gender relations especially pertinent to the working class, for whom work-related issues of class exploitation could become significantly entwined with problems of gender domination and subordination in both workplace and union.

It is notable that in order to represent class exploitation in the labour market Sinclair uses a female worker subject to sexual harassment, while to represent working-class resistance he uses a hyper-masculine miner. The two different kinds of workers are thus hierarchized according to gender, with Hazel’s work experience depreciated as victimization and Wagstaff’s aggrandized through its association with comradeship and resistance. When Hazel wants to return to civilization once their winter confinement ends, Wagstaff himself is very disparaging of her work experience:

Springtime with you only means getting back to work. You want to get back into the muddled rush of peopled places, do you? For what? To teach class in school, or to be some business shark’s slave of the typewriter at ten dollars a week? You want to be where you can
associate with fluffy-ruffle, pompadoured girls, and be properly introduced to equally proper young men. (142)

Here, Wagstaff condemns not only the system of wage labour but also the fashion and social life characteristic of young working women; he collapses these disparate aspects of women’s work culture to argue for his asocial, noncommercial, isolated haven, a setting which may seem radical and inspired to him, but in terms of women’s roles, relegates Hazel to the most traditional, private, domestic role possible. Since his socialist politics, here; influence his disparagement of Hazel’s work and the “fluffy-ruffle” culture which surrounds it, we might be able to sympathize with him if his estimation of men’s work culture went along similar lines. But when it comes to assessing his working-class male associates he is all praise. In his mining operation, he leads five miners across a mountain range in the dead of winter to stake a claim and haul out gold, for which labour they are promised a share in the company’s profits. His description of them conveys their nobility, loyalty, and masculinity:

They surely earned it. You know what the North is in the dead of winter. . . . If ever men were entitled to what was due them, they were. And not one of them stuttered over his bargain, even though they were taking out weekly as much gold as they were to get for their full share. They’d given me their word, and they were white men. They took me for a white man also. They took my word that they would get what was coming to them, and gave me in the company’s name clear title to every claim. (315)

Wagstaff’s description valorizes the deeply male values associated with work – especially the hard manual labour of resource extraction – and the emphasis on loyalty and trust connects this passage with the ideals held by organized labour, for whom strict loyalty to the union was crucial. Furthermore, the men’s intimate connection not only as working men but as “white men” makes sense in the context of early twentieth-century British Columbia, where working-class solidarity was a matter of race as well as class. In fact, since Wagstaff is himself white, when he says “They took me for a white man also” he is using “white” as descriptor of character, meaning loyal, fair and
trustworthy; even though there are no non-white workers on the scene here, Wagstaff invokes the rhetoric of racial essentialism in order to express the inherent nobility of character embodied by the working man. British Columbia’s trade union movement was headed by white, skilled labour who had a significant interest in preventing non-skilled Asian workers from diluting the labour market and pulling down wages, so a racial ideology that united the union ideals of loyalty and solidarity with a specifically white masculinity would have made for a nice fit. This rationale for racism, moreover, applied equally to women, who were similarly blamed for undermining the labour cause by “accepting” lower wages, and who necessarily lacked the male-defined traits essential to the “real union man.” It is not surprising, then, that the depiction of working-class male bonding had such conspicuous overtones of both race and gender. And where Wagstaff thus idealizes working-class men by emphasizing their hardy masculinity, he denigrates wage-earning women by citing their decorative femininity. As Keith Grint argues, “The world of work, in particular the world of male manual work, is one where the pursuit of proletarian maleness – aggression, domination and physical strength – is embodied in many notions of trade union power and working-class resistance” (232). In a very real way, the working-class solidarity fundamental to the labour movement meant male solidarity, and the otherness of wage-earning women was not to be surmounted by any mere similarity of interests.

It is also noteworthy that although Wagstaff refers on various occasions to the probability of Hazel being harassed or “bucking up against the things any good-looking, unprotected girl gets up against in a city” (110), he never acknowledges the strength and capability Hazel has demonstrated in combatting her assailants. In this, his attitude toward Hazel is analogous to that of organized labour toward young working women; their roles as victims of wage slavery and sexual danger are recognized immediately, but their methods of resistance are overlooked, perhaps unidentifiable by
a masculinist system with a highly prescriptive definition of worker resistance. This may explain, in part, why the *BC Federationist* failed to report on the cigar-stands controversy: the women's protest concerning sexual conduct in the workplace and the right to work was as much a struggle over gender relations as a conflict of labour politics, and it is perhaps not a coincidence that a highly masculine labour movement failed to recognize the validity of a protest that challenged dominant gender conventions of the day. It should not be overlooked that most female strikes and protests concerning work were battles of workers against employers but also of women against men. The reluctance of organized labour to fully support the struggles of wage-earning women may, to some degree, reflect a hesitancy to see women's rights expanded at the possible expense of their own.

Vancouver’s trade union movement expected women to support their radicalism but in a way that kept gender roles highly traditional. The ideal form of women's involvement in unionism, therefore, was the “ladies’ auxiliary,” the organization of which was espoused by a 1918 article in the *BC Federationist*: “now if we only set about the thing properly we can get these ladies to work for us” (“Ladies Auxiliaries”). It does not occur to the writer that it was already women’s unpaid work in the home which allowed many men the free time to attend union meetings; on the contrary, he proposed to add to that unpaid labour by moulding women’s domestic work to reflect union aims more closely:

> There is no doubt that our industrial strength would be greatly augmented if our wives always demanded the union label. . . . This is not all, for we most urgently need committees who, without any savor of so-called charity, would go around visiting sick members in hospital, and make enquiries into cases in which through no fault of their own, our fellow workers may be in distress. These things are more in line with women’s work than men. (3)

Since women’s domestic duties usually included shopping for the household, modifying their consumer habits to favour the union label seemed a natural way for wives to support the union while still remaining within their supposedly nonpolitical domestic sphere. And the expansion of their
unpaid work as caretakers to include the entire community was similarly an extension of their traditional role, altered only enough to benefit the union more efficiently. This highly instrumental incorporation of women into union affairs took for granted that women’s primarily domestic roles as wives and mothers would remain untouched, and their position would accordingly be “auxiliary” or supplementary and subordinate.

As this passage makes clear, the notion of the ladies’ auxiliary applied to the wives of working men, not to wage-earning women in the labour force. But since the ladies’ auxiliary was the recognized category for women’s involvement in the labour movement, even when the women were independent wage-earners in the same industries as men, their membership in organizations tended to be segregated into separate locals, often still referred to as auxiliaries. This kept women from being recognized as full members of the union, meaning that they were often denied the rights and privileges of membership, such as financial support in the cases of illness or strikes or the equal opportunity to take on leadership positions.

This was the case in the 1902 strike of male electrical workers and female telephone operators both employed by the Bell Telephone Company. The operators joined the electrical workers union as a women’s auxiliary shortly before the strike, but as Elaine Bernard points out, “the women’s auxiliary was in fact a sub-local” (Long Distance 18) of the union, employed in the telephone industry just as the men were and so subject to the same risks and sacrifices entailed in a strike. One might wonder why the operators could not simply have joined the union on the same terms as the men, since they worked in the same industry for the same company, if in a different part of operations, but perhaps the name of the union explains something: the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers could hardly be expected to take in the “hello girls” as equal members. Influenced in part by the tendency to overlook women’s growing presence and value in the labour
force, organized labour could be both condescending and instrumental in their assessment of women’s corresponding place in the union. The 1902 strike was initiated by the electrical workers’ union, and having the operators strike along side the men was arguably crucial to the great success of this strike. While a strike by the electrical workers alone would undoubtedly be damaging to the telephone company, it would take longer for such an action to immobilize operations. With the operators gone, however, the headline of the *Province* on the first day of the strike aptly described the impact: “Telephone Strike is Still Unsettled: The Inconvenience Paralyzes Business” (“Telephone Strike” 1). The effect was instant, and the entire city felt it. Telephone operators occupied a unique position in the field of women’s employment in that the service they provided was undeniably essential not only in the functioning of businesses but in emergency situations, where the speedy summoning of firemen, police and physicians could save lives; a strike by operators, then, could have serious effects and needed to be resolved quickly. The operators may have been “auxiliary” to the union, but when it came to the strike, they were utterly essential. As an auxiliary, however, they did not enjoy the privileges of full union membership and received no strike pay, so the Trades and Labour Council appealed to the other unions for donations to support the operators: “The men already receive assistance from the international organization, and need no local help. The girls belong to what might be called an auxiliary branch” (“Telephone Strike” 3). While on the one hand this appeal for donations suggests a degree of trade union support and generosity toward the operators, it is nevertheless the telephone workers’ union itself which reduced the women to objects of charity while at the same time capitalizing on the leverage it gave their strike to have the operators on board. And the male union’s neglect of the operators’ local would continue after the strike.

Whereas incoming members of the electrical workers’ union received education both in aspects of the trade and in union issues, operators received no such training and the main union did
not exert any energy in fostering membership in the women’s local. Since the turnover in operators was relatively high, over time this neglect by the union to encourage and inform new union members seriously weakened the operators’ auxiliary, in turn undermining the larger union’s ability to bargain collectively for all the employees (Bernard, *Long Distance* 31). Despite the proof of the operators’ value to the union in the success of the strike, the union’s chronic failure to recognize them either as legitimate workers deserving representation or as useful additions to a strong union ultimately resulted in the collapse of the operators’ local during an extremely unsuccessful strike in 1906 (Bernard, *Long Distance* 37).

The 1902 strike did not last long and ended with the company giving in to almost all the union’s demands. Vancouver’s business community had placed great pressure on the company to settle the strike and the media coverage by the *Province* was also largely sympathetic to the union. The electrical workers had their hours reduced from nine to eight hours a day while retaining a daily wage between $3.00 and $3.20. The operators also secured an increase in wages so that depending upon how long they had been employed, they received between approximately 75 cents and $1.20 a day. Their demands had also involved a change in policy toward trainees, who had been paid nothing on the grounds that they were still only learning but who had in some cases been working for months. According to the settlement, these beginners would only work short shifts for ten days before going on salary. The operators were also granted up to three paid sick days per month and guaranteed a rotating Saturday afternoon holiday (“Hello to the Union Central”). Where the men’s demands focussed mainly on hours and wages, the women’s were slightly more complex and point to issues characteristic of women’s labour disputes in this time period. A variety of industries employing women paid trainees much less than other workers or even nothing at all for extended periods, and even when the Minimum Wage Bill went through in 1918, a provision allowed for girls
under 18 to work as learners for less than the minimum, prompting women labour activists to ask when a minimum wage was not a minimum wage ("Minimum Wage and Laundry Workers"). The employers' claim that young trainees deserved lower wages than more experienced workers conflicts with the notion also promoted by employers that almost all women's occupations including telephone operating were unskilled, a contradiction suggesting the ideological turn of the concept of "skilled labour," which sometimes referred less to any objective amount of proficiency than to the status and often the gender status of the work. The notion that women workers were, by definition, unskilled in turn influenced trade unions, whose long-standing bias toward skilled craft unionism enhanced their exclusionary tendencies toward women. The operators' insistence on a Saturday half-holiday is also noteworthy in that the demand for leisure time was more common in women's labour disputes than in men's. In his history of telephone operators in America, Stephen Norwood points out that in the first part of the twentieth century telephone operators in particular and young wage-earning women in general were enthusiastic members of a burgeoning commercial youth culture. Increased high-school attendance particularly among girls just after the turn of the century fostered more peer-centred organized leisure activities, contributing to young working women's sense of identity, and in turn influencing their priorities and the tenor of their labour politics (Norwood 9).

The form of female activism in the first part of the twentieth century which usually gets the most attention from critics and historians is the women's suffrage movement, while discussions of the labour movement tend to centre on men's activities, because of the largely male-dominated nature of trade unionism, especially in Vancouver. As Robert McDonald points out,

These several factors – a life cycle that took women when still young out of the workforce to marry and have children; values that limited the ability of women to gain occupational skills and thus acquire power in the workplace; and a general disinclination on the part of
male unionists to organize lower-status women workers – created a solid barrier against the unionization of women. (*Making Vancouver* 105)

While McDonald’s assessment of the obstacles impeding women’s involvement in labour activism is largely accurate, his suggestion that these formed a “solid barrier” is perhaps an overstatement. Vancouver’s workers were known to be among the most radical labour activists in the country and the women were no exception. Star Rosenthal has documented some of the early women’s unions in Vancouver, with strikes occurring in almost every field of women’s work: factory workers, store clerks, chambermaids, waitresses and laundry workers were all at some time involved in serious labour disputes, but since the reigning notion of labour militancy, like work itself, was gendered according to a masculine ideal, working women’s political subjectivity was consistently undervalued.

Nan Enstad points to the limits placed around resistance in a context of deeply ingrained beliefs about gender and status: “While strikes are indeed often exhilarating refusals of workplace hierarchies, they do not extricate workers entirely from the social forces that limit their agency and inscribe them into social hierarchies” (228). If what is defined as political protest or labour activism is automatically assigned traits of one gender, a process of exclusion takes place which denies the other gender access to the same avenues of recognized protest. The association of labour militancy with masculine ideals made women’s involvement in unions problematic or even unacceptable, and the same assumptions resonate today in the tendency to underplay the history of women’s labour activism.

**FINDING POLITICAL IDENTITIES**

The telephone operators who went on strike in 1902 received extensive coverage in the newspapers since this was one of the first times young female strikers had been seen in the city. There was great curiosity about their experience of the strike and some controversy over whether the men’s union
had unduly influenced them, an accusation the women vigorously denied. In fact, the operators appear to have embraced and enjoyed a great deal their newly political roles as protesters: “There was a rally of the linemen and the telephone operators in the O'Brien Hall yesterday afternoon and it is safe to say that no more enthusiastic lot of girls could be got together than the striking operators, who vigorously applauded the speeches delivered” (“News Advertiser Discredited”). Not long after the strike began, reports surfaced that a company official had been attempting to recruit young women in the West End to work as strikebreakers, prompting this letter from Jennie Brown of the operator’s union:

The Telephone Operators Auxiliary No.1, Local 213, I.B.E.W., takes this opportunity to notify all concerned that there is a strike on between the employees and the telephone company of this city, and until further notice, would urge that all young ladies and others refrain from mixing themselves up with the trouble by going to work under false representations by certain officials of the company. Those on strike are taking a stand against unjust conditions such as are obnoxious to all fair-minded and fair-dealing people, who recognize that an injury to one is the concern of all. (“First He Would”)

This appeal to the young women of Vancouver seems to have worked, for the company ultimately brought women from out east to work as strikebreakers, suggesting that at least within Vancouver, women could make an appeal like this and expect solidarity. The letter thus unites the language of labour politics with the ideal of gender unity, an unlikely mixture in some ways, but one that had a resonance for working women who were in many instances caught between the predominantly male ethos of labour unionism and the somewhat ill-fitting middle-class women’s movement. In this sense, there may be some descriptive merit to the idea that working women’s labour activism inhabited an interstitial space between two different kinds of political subjectivity often in conflict with one another, an uneasy position requiring a good deal of ingenuity and resourcefulness.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the women’s suffrage movement rose to prominence, and Vancouver women embraced the cause by forming not one but many groups and
clubs devoted to the issue. However, the world of women’s clubs was a distinctly middle-class realm organized mostly by married women with the time and energy to devote to afternoon meetings. When it seemed likely that the Liberal party would support women’s suffrage if they won the election, a few suffragists formed the Women’s Liberal Association to help with campaigning, but in this instance the class bias of the women’s-club conventions came under fire. An angry letter to the *Sun* asked, “Is this organization to be representative of the women of the city or of the leisure class? . . . The ladies, by holding their organizing meetings during the afternoon shut out completely the wage-earning element” (Arnold 4). This is just one example of the friction between middle- and working-class women in Vancouver, but it usefully demonstrates the everyday nature of class division where something as mundane as the usual meeting time could be the effective means of exclusivity. In fact, this conflict over meeting times had come up before when Helena Gutteridge joined the Pioneer Political Equality League, a women’s suffrage group which similarly held afternoon meetings. Already a member of the Tailors’ Union, Gutteridge grew frustrated with the middle-class bias of the group and founded the Evening Work Committee, inviting Vancouver’s working women to evening meetings at the Labour Temple every Wednesday. According to biographer Irene Howard, attendance at these meetings soon numbered over a hundred and they broke away from the Pioneer Political Equality League to form their own BC Woman’s Suffrage League (63). Gutteridge stayed involved with the other women’s groups, “but the ubiquitous Miss Gutteridge was never fully accepted socially by the middle-class women she worked with. She was, after all, a wage worker, a tailor” (Howard 100). That middle-class women were oblivious to working women’s circumstances or preferred not to think about women as wage-earners signals once more the tendency to perceive working women as little more than an anomaly and certainly not as a growing number of potentially influential women connected to the politically-minded labour force.
The Evening Work Committee, meanwhile, would prove immensely productive, providing a meeting place for the city's otherwise scattered women workers. It became the staging ground not only for working women’s suffrage activities but also for the formation of female unions including the Domestic Employees’ Union and the Laundry Workers’ Union. Even with a common cause such as suffrage, working- and middle-class women remained separate and divided from one another, and indeed, it would take several decades before the middle-class bias of the larger women’s movement would be effectively challenged.

That working women found a meeting place in the Labour Temple and a stronger voice in labour politics and press through the efforts of Helena Gutteridge speaks to a degree of support for them in the ranks of organized labour, at least as of 1913. Suffragettes tended to be highly pragmatic in soliciting male support for women’s suffrage, so depending on whom they were addressing, they promised to vote along similar lines. Articles in favour of suffrage which ran in the BC Federationist thus tended to suggest that women would use the vote to improve industrial conditions, or even to support the exclusion of Asian immigrants: “a proper law to keep out these people must be enacted and it is to the women’s interest as well as the men’s to partake in such legislation” (Clarke 2). But despite these tactics and the supposed support of women’s suffrage by organized labour, an article entitled “Why Women are to be Given a Vote” appearing on the front page of the BC Federationist only a month before the suffrage referendum demonstrated that male labour’s deep distrust of working women was unabated:

Women have worked for less than men; women do now work for less than men and women will continue to work for less than men wage-workers. For this and for no other reason they are to be given the vote some of these days. Thus the women will be better able to assist the employers, through governmental action, to perpetuate such conditions. . . . The government will be able, with the vote of the women, to maintain their political power. . . . The work of the trades union for the past fifty years will have to be done all over again. (“Why Women”)
The unnamed writer of this piece also cited the wartime conditions which had allowed more women into industry, giving them positions they would be reluctant to sacrifice for the returning “heroes.” This combined with the imminent passage of the women’s suffrage bill was enough to fuel a conspiracy theory that leagued employers and government with underpaid women all plotting to undermine the entire labour movement using nothing less than the diabolical women’s vote.

The middle-class world of women’s suffragism offered one model of political agency for women, but by overlooking the simple reality that wage-earning women spent their days at work they alienated a group of women who arguably had reason to want the vote more than anyone; as Gutteridge put it in the first women’s column in the *BC Federationist*, “The need of political power for the working woman is greater than that of any other class, and only when she is able to influence industrial legislation will she cease to be exploited and forced into starvation or shame” (“BC Woman’s Suffrage”). The organized labour movement, meanwhile, did provide a degree of material support for working women by providing a meeting space in the Labour Temple and a limited forum for working women’s issues in the columns of the *BC Federationist*. But male unionists were extremely protective of their own right to work, and as poorly paid unskilled workers, women, it seemed, posed a threat to the male dominance of the labour market. Working women in pursuit of increased political agency, be it in the arena of suffrage or labour rights, could look forward only to the most half-hearted support from the systems open to them; more likely, they faced veiled or open hostility from those whose class or gender interests lay elsewhere. Wage-earning women, however, were not easily put off, and in spite of the obstacles placed before them, they found ways to organize as workers and as women that showed a remarkable sense of spirit.

Unlike many of the city’s male unionists who were long-standing members of the labour force, often specializing in one trade for their whole lives, and bringing with them a history of
involvement in organized labour both in Canada and abroad, wage-earning women as a group tended to be young and therefore relatively new both to the labour market and to the idea of trade unionism. Their attitude toward organizing and the way in which they created a more politicised identity for themselves was thus understandably different from the corresponding process for men. Unable to rely heavily on existing organizations, working women increasingly turned to each other and they often blended their social activities with political organizing, so that leisure activities like dances and excursions took on an important political function in creating a sense of community and expressing a lively and defiant cultural presence. The expanding youth culture of dances, boating excursions, and raucous meetings was frowned upon by middle-class commentators who could only see a dangerous form of abandon in these largely unsupervised events, so for working-class youth of the day, their favourite social events already held a degree of subversive appeal. That women labour activists used these same events to express and promote their own cause suggests a degree of intimacy between youth culture and social protest not seen in more mainstream versions of labour or gender politics at the time. Recognizing that the appeal of social events would be useful in attracting the city’s working women to the organized labour movement, Helena Gutteridge and a few friends created a “Union Women’s Social Club” in 1915: “The labour movement will never be a great success unless the women workers are actively engaged therein, as well as the men, and it is the hope of the committee that the formation of the Social Club will tend in the direction of bringing women more closely in touch with the principles of unionism, and so help the labour movement as a whole” (“Union Women’s Social Club”). Gutteridge was nothing if not practical and she likely saw an opportunity to interest women in the labour movement by appealing to their cultural attitudes and social life. Alice Kessler-Harris similarly points out the necessity in this time period of recognizing gendered cultural identities: “For just as allegiance to trade union discipline among men
addresses the cultural factors unique to them, so organizing among women and maintaining their loyalty to the trade union require special attention to the cultural factors unique to wage-earning women” (“Problems” 119).

MISTRESSES AND MAIDS: THE DOMESTIC EMPLOYEES’ UNION

Union women’s frequent demands for shorter hours and better pay were motivated by a number of factors including wanting more time with family and time to rest, but also time for social recreation and leisure pursuits. One of Vancouver’s most interesting women’s unions, and the first of its kind in Canada, was the Home and Domestic Employees’ Union formed on a Wednesday evening in 1913. Their demands included a nine-hour day, a minimum wage, and union recognition, but their plans were not limited to bread-and-butter issues: “Beyond immediate plans it is hoped that eventually the girls might be able to lease a building and fit it up as a large rooming house to be run by them on a co-operative basis, where they could live, and spend their leisure time in healthful surroundings and social pleasures which hundreds of them are not able to enjoy as they are now situated” (Coote 28 Mar: 4). This vision of women not only joining a union but also living together collectively is a striking image of working-class gender unity, even gender separatism, and it points to the ways in which the ideals of unionism or socialism might be turned to use in a project where gender issues were more prominently at stake.

The Domestic Employees’ Union is an interesting case because unlike most other fields of women’s employment, in domestic work the employers were usually also women, and for this reason, the protests of the union expressed the class conflict that divided the city’s women. The lack of proper housing for single working-class women was an ongoing problem in Vancouver, and at the same time that the Domestic Employees’ Union was envisioning its rooming house, certain
philanthropic middle-class women formed a Protective Association for independent working girls in danger of “downfall.” In a special women’s edition of the Sun, the association claimed that “without doubt, some of the cheap boarding and rooming houses are not respectable,” and to remedy the situation, “a proposition will shortly be placed before all employers of girls to co-operate in establishing a big business girls’ club home uptown” (Unsworth 16). The Protective Association and the Domestic Employees’ Union, then, were thinking of the same thing, but by “all employers of girls” the middle-class women of the Protective Association certainly did not mean themselves; from their point of view, female domestic servants were fortunate to live in a proper home – it was the independent “business girls” whose cheap and degrading rooming houses needed to be replaced.

But from the union’s perspective, the women’s rooming house was a vision of freedom and communion far superior to the isolation and subordination of their employment situation. Lillian Coote, the leader of the union, was clear in her estimation of how far middle-class women’s benevolence extended:

One cannot help wondering whether the many philanthropically inclined women of this province have seen fit to practically ignore the domestic problem question owing to the fact that the remedy would affect them – that they, in common with other people, fall short when it is a question of touching their own pockets and causing them a certain amount of personal inconvenience. The improvement of conditions for domestic employees will undoubtedly affect these women. (11 April)

Society women may have been comfortable casting the sufficiently removed urban “business girl” as an object of charitable concern, but when it came to the working and living conditions of women in their own homes, they maintained a cultivated ignorance. In a sense, they wanted to have their cake and eat it too by congratulating themselves on their munificence toward the working class, while blithely ignoring the women whose domestic labour made possible their philanthropic leisure; the ability to deny the reality of women’s labour even though it was plainly necessary for the
functioning of society was endemic. Lillian Coote’s plans for the union also included a union-run employment agency which would not only help women find situations, but would “keep on record the nature of every situation in which any of its members are working, or have worked” (28 Mar: 1); in other words, the conduct of middle-class mistresses and families would be subject to evaluation by their domestic servants, and the assessments would be filed for future reference. One can only imagine the ramifications if such files were part of the historical record on Vancouver’s business class, but sadly the union did not survive long enough to implement its plan. Lillian Coote, however, suggests the likely tenor of such a report when she remarks that often enough, when a domestic worker secures a position, “she may find that what the woman wants is not a human being, but a machine that will scrub floors and clean windows from early morn till dewy eve and at the same time tolerate the persistent bull-dosing which only some women are capable of handing out to their help” (28 Mar: 4).

Though short-lived, the Domestic Employees’ Union is an impressive example of an all-female labour union whose politicization as workers seems to have radicalized both their class and gender positioning. Since women were generally considered temporary members of the labour force with marriage concluding their working days, their corresponding sojourn in the union was often assumed to be equally temporary, a source of prejudice for those who believed that only long-time membership proved the kind of loyalty necessary to proper support of the cause. The Domestic Employees’ Union, on the other hand, would subject its members to no such discrimination, especially on account of marriage:

The question was raised at the organizational meeting whether the girls might not eventually marry and thus leave the union . . . This is the golden west, the Eldorado where all women have such a good time, and no woman of the working classes who gets married need be afraid that she may have to leave the union because she is not out working. And anyhow
does a women work less hours, or get more wages, when she gets married than she did before? Well then. (Coote 28 Mar: 4)

The last sentences here refer to the fact of married women's unpaid labour in the home, declaring that fact as a good reason for married women, whether earning wages outside the home or not, to remain in the union, perhaps even hinting at the possible unionization of housewives. For 1913, the idea that women's unpaid household labour was evidence of the unfair devaluation of women's work and perhaps constituted grounds for unionization was undoubtedly radical and points to the potential of labour organizing among women to politicise them in ways that went beyond working conditions to challenge gender inequities in family and society as well as at work.

**Girls on Strike: The Laundry Workers' Union**

In 1918, the city's laundry workers went on a strike lasting four months. Union dues were collected when the union was first formed shortly before the strike, and these along with contributions from other unions would have helped the members of this predominantly female union get through the first part of the strike. But their dances, with proceeds going to support the strikers, became legendary. Helena Gutteridge, though herself a tailor, led the laundry workers in forming their union and going on strike for better wages and union recognition, and she did so at a time of great tension in Vancouver's labour politics. Only a month before the laundry workers went on strike, labour leader Albert "Ginger" Goodwin was shot and killed, having fled to Vancouver Island to avoid the draft. The officer who shot him claimed it was self-defence, but many thought Goodwin had been murdered for his labour politics, and a spontaneous twenty-four-hour strike by organized labour went into effect ("Albert Goodwin"). Vancouver's returned soldiers, deeming the strike unpatriotic, stormed the Labour Temple and attempted to push one of its occupants out the window. While the
stenographer bravely stood before the window to block the soldiers’ attack, Gutteridge reflected with some fear on the three hundred dollars in her purse – the union dues of the recently organized laundry workers (Howard 119). The laundry strike, then, took place in a context of extreme labour unrest, only a year before the Winnipeg General Strike would spread to Vancouver to ignite already bitter animosities between business and labour. For the young, newly-unionized laundry women in this era of high-spirited protest, the raucous behaviour on the picket lines would be matched only by the clamorous festivities of the dances.

One week into the strike, the *Vancouver World* reported that “Pickets were out at all the laundries and in one or two instances, where drivers not in the union left their laundries to make their usual calls, they were followed in autos by girl strikers who occupied their time hurling jeers and catcalls at the non-union members” (“Strike Ties up Laundries”). The picket lines were a clearly marked space for protest, and young female strikers seem to have relished the opportunity to forsake conventional codes of feminine restraint and carry out a sometimes violent vengeance against employers or “scabs.” A rather imaginative scheme involved strikers sending a “special picket” to the church attended by Alderman Kirk, a laundry owner. His wife was so offended by this reminder of the strike that she fired one of her own employees for being the sister of a laundry worker (“Laundry Workers Still”). As the strike dragged on and winter approached, the picketers built sheds near the laundries to shelter themselves from the rain, and their commitment garnered great respect from the *BC Federationist* which declared, “they deserve all the praise that can be handed to them, for they are simply splendid. ‘No faltering’ is their motto” (“Laundry Strikers”). In fact, things got somewhat out of hand. One of the male picketers, William Geoffrey, went to trial for assaulting a young female strikebreaker, allegedly pelting her with eggs and then kicking her so that she came to court with a visible limp. In her story, he had several girls hold her while he plastered her with
eggs and then kicked her, while his story was that he never kicked her but rather had seen her fall
onto a picket fence while the other girls were chasing her down the hill ("Pelted with Eggs"). The
union had to fund his defence, a significant drain on their resources as the strike dragged on, and
ultimately he was convicted. Girl strikers, meanwhile, were earning a reputation for violence on the
picket lines.

The Laundry Workers' Union, however, had the support of the city's labour movement, and
various unions contributed to the strike fund so they wouldn't be pressured to end the action for lack
of income. Since members of the Laundry Workers' Union were mostly women working in an
unskilled, female-defined industry, they weren't considered to be taking jobs away from men, and
with the element of competition removed, organized labour could afford to be more generous here
than elsewhere. As Gillian Creese has shown, women employed in traditionally female-defined jobs
were more easily accepted by trade unionists than those in male-defined fields (370). Perhaps this
feeling of good will along with the sense of community fostered by the movement's recent losses
and battles surrounding Goodwin's death contributed to the success of the Laundry Workers' dance
and whist drive, a social event attended by almost every unionist in the city:

At 11 o'clock crowds were certainly pouring in, and it was necessary to call in a second
orchestra in order to accommodate the great throng. In less time than it takes to tell a second
dance was in progress in the hall previously used by the whist drive. . . . Speeches were
delivered by Miss Gutteridge, from both platforms, and she was most enthusiastically
received. . . . Every branch of organized labour turned out in great style and numbers. It did
one's heart good to witness such a feeling of fellowship that existed in that hall. It might
have been that Labour was celebrating some great victory. In fact that is just what it was.
An overwhelming proof of unionism. ("Laundry Workers have Good Time").

That a dance could so powerfully signify union solidarity suggests that the social bent characteristic
of women's involvement in labour unions was a valuable unifying force and also a way for women
to organize and express their commitment to unionism without resorting to the conventional male-
identified traits of militant brotherhood typical of much union culture. Insofar as dances provided an important source of income for strike funds, the material connection between social pursuits and organized protest was quite direct, so much so that later, when the laundry workers were back at work and recognized the importance of a telephone operators’ strike, they expressed their support by putting on a dance on the operators’ behalf: “The proceeds will be devoted to the aid of the Telephone Operators, who are still on strike against discrimination. That the dance will be well attended, there is no doubt, apart from the desire to assist the Telephone Operators, the reputation of the laundry workers in running social affairs makes success a certainty” (“Laundry Workers to Hold Dance”). Now that their reputation preceded them, their dances were a valuable instrument in a prolonged strike, contributing financially while also providing a venue for the expression of union sympathy and solidarity.

The Laundry Workers’ strike was further influenced by the specificity of women’s forms of labour activism in that the settlement of the strike was arbitrated primarily by the newly established Minimum Wage Board. Helena Gutteridge, Mary Ellen Smith and Helen MacGill were the force behind this legislation, passed in 1918, and it was a battle which was won relatively easily compared to the suffrage campaign. Though some advances had been made in organizing women workers into unions, the mainstream labour movement was always biassed toward skilled male unions, and it became clear that legislation was where the real differences would be made in improving working conditions for women. Using the tactics of moral suasion, advocates of the minimum wage for women argued that young working women, as the nation’s future mothers, needed a basic subsistence wage to protect their health and prevent them from turning to prostitution. As one writer for the women’s column in the BC Federationist put it, “Women cannot be overworked and underpaid without being underfed and affecting the future race” (“Some Reasons Why”). Appeals
to gender difference were simply more effective in this cultural climate, and legislation for women and children in industry effected the changes which unionism failed to. Nevertheless, the radical implications of gendered labour legislation such as minimum wage laws should not be underestimated. At a time when the primacy of the free market to naturally dictate wage scales according to the supply and demand of the labour market was considered inviolable, women who influenced the legislation of a minimum wage were engaged in groundbreaking political change, even if it was based on gender essentialism. Vancouver’s wage-earning women filled out surveys on their basic cost of living and then negotiations would begin with employers who tried to reduce the amount. Here, difficulties arose: retail workers were the first to negotiate a minimum, and while the women specified $16 per week as the very least a woman could live on, the minimum wage was set at $12.75, a disparity which was attributed by the *BC Federationist* to the vast power imbalance between negotiators:

> How could it be expected that any employee sitting opposite her employer, could have that freedom of thought that would be necessary for any fair results. One of the girls was from the Hudson’s Bay Company. Mr. Lockyer is manager of the Vancouver branch of that company, and no matter how fair Mr. Lockyer would be, the very fact that the employee in question was sitting in opposition to her employer, would have an unfavourable effect on her. (“Minimum Wage is Set”)

Wage-earning women tended to be in their teens or twenties while business owners and managers would mostly be middle-aged men, so when working women sat opposite their employers in a labour negotiation, it was a confrontation of women against men and of young against old. The spirit of a lively youth culture primed for defiance was likely a source of some strength in circumstances such as these, but some of the minimums set were still clearly inadequate. Moreover, girls under eighteen years of age were not subject to the minimum wage, a source of great irritation to Gutteridge who noticed that Help-Wanted ads suddenly started specifying that only girls under eighteen need apply
The Minimum Wage Board settled the wage dispute in the Laundry Workers’ strike by establishing a minimum of $13.50 per week, actually slightly more than the union had at first demanded when the strike was declared. They remained on strike for a short while after the wage settlement to try to secure union recognition and a closed shop, but in this they were unsuccessful and, their resources strained by court cases, they returned to work four months after the strike began.

The Laundry Workers’ strike is a fascinating narrative in terms of gender, for the female-dominated Laundry workers’ Union drew on a variety of cultural resources to make their protest a success. The strike came at a time when the labour movement at large was in a fighting mood, and the women involved seem to have enjoyed the opportunity to forsake conventional restraint to take up newly politicized identities as female strikers. As the cigar-stands controversy makes clear, women’s presence on public streets was frowned upon, but the picket lines offered a new social space outside the bounds of traditional femininity – a setting where noisy protest and even violent confrontations could be valorised as demonstrations of loyalty and spirit. With the new frame of reference opened up to them by union membership and strike activities, the young female strikers adapted popular youth culture to fit the setting, and organized the most successful social events the labour movement had ever seen. Even though they had the support of male organized labour, however, the Laundry strike was settled through legislation made possible by other women. Thus a variety of different cultural trends influenced this strike, and the way in which the laundry workers manipulated the different cultural technologies available to them speaks to the resourcefulness required of an often embattled women’s labour movement.

When the laundry workers organized the dance on behalf of the telephone operators, the operators were involved in the city-wide strike organized in support of the Winnipeg General Strike.
of 1919. At first, the operators stayed at work because it was recognized that they provided an essential service, but as the protest weakened and employers banded together to crush the strike, the strike committee called out the operators as a last resort (Bernard, *Long Distance* 59). When the general strike was called off, the telephone company offered to take back the operators but supervisors would be demoted, so that only anti-union supervisors would remain. Facing this discrimination, the operators stayed on strike along with the male craft workers of the telephone company, but eventually they had to return on the company’s terms. Elaine Bernard has documented how these events entered into the folklore of telephone workers as a narrative celebrating the heroism of operators, “last back” from the general strike, but the story also became a cautionary tale about how organized labour demanded women’s support and then left them out to dry (“Last Back” 113). At the time, the operators were greatly praised in the *BC Federationist*, which declared, “The action of the telephone girls in responding to the call for a general strike has placed them in a class by themselves amongst women workers in this province. With only a few backsliders, these girls have won the admiration of all those who admire grit and working-class solidarity” (“General Strike Called Off”). In retrospect, however, the general strike had done the operators few favours, requiring them to join what was essentially a sinking ship, and then leaving them to fend for themselves while everyone else went back to work. The *BC Federationist* also commented that “The girls are showing a remarkable spirit of solidarity, considering that it is the first strike that they have been involved in” (“Hello’ Girls”). Apparently the *BC Federationist* had a short memory where it came to the operators, who had struck both in 1902 and 1906; admittedly, given the rapid turnover and young age of most operators, these specific women were likely striking for the first time, but the *BC Federationist*’s comment elides the operators’ history of union participation and strike experience, thereby suppressing the representation of working women as active members of the labour
movement. Organized labour was thus subject to the same habit of mind characteristic of the larger society that cast a shadow over women's labour, denying their social and economic value, and reinscribing their traditional roles which exempted them from matters of work and politics. Accordingly, the notion of the ladies' auxiliary to the trade union sought to maintain women in their domestic roles as wives and dependents while at the same time capitalizing more fully on that unpaid labour by moulding it to serve male union members more fully; interestingly enough, the *BC Federationist* article on ladies' auxiliaries mentioned earlier ran at the same time that the Laundry Workers' strike was taking place, in the same issue that ran the headline, "Laundry Workers are Standing Firm," and advertised their second dance ("Ladies Auxiliaries"). Suggesting the formation of ladies' auxiliaries at a time when strong and active unionization of women was so much in evidence demonstrates that full and equal participation was not what male unionists wanted at all – rather, they were hoping for a more dependent and domesticated version of female involvement.

There is no question that working women fared better when they relied on one another for support. When a depression struck in 1914, the city offered no unemployment relief to women, demonstrating the systemic and convenient denial that women were members of the workforce and required financial relief just as other (male) workers did. Helena Gutteridge once more rallied her forces and secured funding for a Women's Employment League, a cooperative venture that provided employment and housing for women by renting a building downtown where they took sewing jobs and made toys and Christmas puddings for the upcoming holiday season (Howard 108). As in the case of the Domestic Employees' Union, an overtone of gender separatism resonates in this cooperative venture that sought to provide at once a living space, a working space and a social refuge for working-class women with no other means of support. As time went on and women secured certain political rights such as the vote, they also found ways to infiltrate the labour movement, and
their greatest successes tended to have the same separatist flavour, with all-female unions faring better. Drawing on a vibrant youth culture which already enjoyed a reputation for defiance of middle-class values, young working women fashioned a political identity for themselves that drew both on a valorized gender difference and on their roles as workers, entitled as such to the rights of wage-earners. That the male-dominated labour movement often failed to recognize the legitimacy of women's forms of protest is perhaps due in part to this combination of gender and youth cultures wherein social gatherings and celebrations could signify political solidarity as forcefully as any traditional union meeting, but could appear frivolous or distracting from a conventional point of view.

Vancouver's organized labour movement consistently underestimated women's potential and actual contribution to labour politics, and historians have equally dismissed women's roles in the city's labour history. Feminist critics of this time period, meanwhile, have tended to focus on the middle-class women's suffrage movement, an important campaign but one which often deliberately excluded working women who could have been valuable allies. What emerges from the investigation of working women's political and labour activism is a sense of the culturally innovative nature of working-class women's pursuits, which took place under various material and ideological constraints yet demonstrated a high degree of political motivation and a remarkable spirit of defiance.
CHAPTER FIVE

POLICING RACIAL BOUNDARIES: VANCOUVER’S WHITE WOMEN WORKERS

Went to Vancouver Hotel to hear the speakers of the Provincial Party, but found it terribly dull, so went to a dance. Janet Smith (quoted in “No Fear” 1924)

A 1913 headline in the BC Federationist read “Scotch Girls Cheaper than Chinamen.” Young women from Scotland had been brought to Vancouver specifically to replace Asian cannery workers (“Scotch Girls”). As the two groups commanding the lowest wages in a labour market deeply segmented by race and gender, women and Asians often found work in the same low-paying industries such as domestic service, laundries, restaurants, and canneries. The white manager of this Vancouver cannery felt his control over the Chinese workers was compromised by a system where he communicated only with one Chinese foreman who was in charge of his own set of workers. The Scottish women were expected to prove less expensive and more tractable, suggesting that stereotypes of female passivity may also have entered into the hiring process. In fact, labour and the workplace proved to be intensely productive sites in the activation of race and gender ideologies, for the personal and cultural encounters which took place there could both challenge preconceptions and ignite deeply felt prejudices. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of the unsolved death of Janet Smith, whose suspected murder by a Chinese fellow-domestic gave rise not only to a prolonged murder investigation but also to a vicious debate about the dangers posed to white women in the mixed-race workplace. Just as working women’s supposed moral vulnerability was repeatedly
stressed at the expense of their rights and needs as valued workers, the preoccupation with the unsullied whiteness of working women similarly eclipsed their roles as workers, emphasizing instead a version of white femininity under threat. Yet the representational strategies involved in the construction of an iconic white womanhood lend themselves more easily to a middle-class ideal of wives and mothers in a white domestic haven than to working-class women whose morally and racially suspect workplaces might sully their spotless whiteness. And for this reason the rhetoric of protection for the working girl often concerned itself with her whiteness, and indeed when whiteness itself was under discussion, the image of the young working-class woman was invoked to embody a whiteness imperilled and under threat due to contemporary immigration patterns. Often called the “Gateway to the Pacific,” Vancouver experienced its proximity to the Eastern hemisphere through immigration patterns distinct from the rest of Canada. While white women from the British Isles continued to be in demand as domestic servants, Asian immigration was a constant focal point for racial hostility, and while these two immigrant groups – white working women and Asian labourers – may seem unrelated, they actually became intimately associated in the popular imagination through their shared occupations in the interracial workplaces of the city.

RACIAL DISCOURSE AND WORKING-CLASS WOMEN

The preoccupation with the mixed-race workplace and the need to separate white women from Asian men were long-standing features of debates on women’s labour in British Columbia. In fact, initial recommendations to safeguard white working women extended beyond Asian men and sought to ban women from working with Greeks and Italians as well. In 1911 the Local Council of Women submitted recommendations on women’s working conditions to the BC Commission on Labour, advocating that “In no case shall Caucasians be permitted to work together [with] or be employed
by Asiatics, Greeks, Italians” (Local 9). As Council-member Janet Kemp explained, “Regarding employment with Greeks, Italians, etc. that is a very urgent point because it is a matter in which real injury is being done our girls” (9). The mutability of racial distinctions reveals itself here, in that Greeks and Italians were looked on as distinct racial groups in 1911, whereas by 1919, when legislation was actually passed on this issue, only Asians were still specified in this manner. Ann Stoler argues that it is this very mutability in racial constructs that makes them so convenient in nationalist rhetoric:

Discourses of sexuality, racial thinking, and rhetorics of nationalism have several things in common. All hinge on visual markers of distinction that profess to – but only poorly index – the internal traits, psychological dispositions, and moral essence on which these theories of difference and social membership are based. The strength and weakness of such social taxonomies is that they are malleable, their criteria opaque and ill-defined. (133)

Constructing the idea of the Asian menace, then, was a representational project that required significant time and effort, with hazy distinctions made to appear as racial essences, and those essences in turn associated with appropriate or intolerable sexualities. The legislation of 1919 and the Women and Girls Protection Act which replaced it in 1923 both grew out of a desire to separate white women from Asian men, but both laws addressed Asian-owned businesses, particularly restaurants and laundries, by making it an offense for Asian employers to hire white women. This excluded cases where white employers hired both white women and Asian men, such as private households with white maids and Chinese houseboys, or other white-run businesses like canneries, hotels, and so on. This omission, along with the fact that these laws were seldom enforced, fuelled the controversy created by the alleged murder of Janet Smith by her Chinese co-worker, and led to MLA Mary Ellen Smith’s campaign in 1924 to extend the law to private households. The most frequently stated reasons for racial segregation in the workplace were the Asian-identified drug traffic and, subsequent to the Janet Smith case, the possibility that Asian men might assault white
women. While drug deals, sexual harassment and even violence did and still do occur in workplaces from time to time, there was very little evidence that Asian men had a monopoly on such abuses. As Mary Ellen Smith sought support for the “Janet Smith” bill in 1924, *The Province* noted that in crimes committed against women in the past year, English, Scottish, and Irish men led the way with forty percent, while not a single Asian man had been prosecuted in such a matter (“Domestics Bill”). Yet a great deal of energy went into elaborating narratives of the Asian menace; they were highly instrumental in the political agenda of many members of the white majority, and the figure of the vulnerable working girl was here, as elsewhere, a cypher for anxieties about the modern urban scene – which was an increasingly multicultural sphere.

How, then, did racist ideology inform the debates about and representations of the working girl? One peculiarity about British Columbia that was not replicated elsewhere to an equal extent involves the gender ratio that made men outnumber women until well into the twentieth century; this discrepancy was amplified among Asian immigrants, very few of whom could afford to bring wives or families to Canada with them. These demographics, in concert with a segmented labour market placing women and Asians at the bottom of the wage scale, meant that for British Columbians the mixed-race workplace referred quite specifically to white women mixed with Asian men. And since young working women on their own in the city were already thought to be occupying a position of some moral ambiguity, the added element of close working associations with Asian men seemed further to undermine the social order, violating traditional boundaries meant to segregate genders and races. Social prescriptions which sought to clarify such racial lines found spatial expression in the delineation of a separate and identifiable Chinatown as opposed to exclusively white neighbourhoods for the respectable middle classes, and these neighbourhood divisions reflected the more fundamental desire to ensure the physical separation of bodies; but among the working classes, such
clean divisions were not easily maintained. Many downtown workplaces brought young women into close proximity with Chinatown and into close association with Asian co-workers who lived there. Working women were thus leaving the sequestered private sphere for a racialized public sphere devoid of traditional markers of respectability. In the case of young working women, moreover, issues of sexual downfall and prostitution were always of concern. As Kay Anderson points out, for moral reformists, “the anxiety was heightened in Vancouver by the location of its ‘restricted area’ (where prostitution was tolerated by the police) right next to the predominantly male Chinese quarter from the time the city was incorporated” (97). This seeming conflation of racial and sexual otherness suggested to some a cause and effect relationship, as though interracial encounters might go hand in hand with sexual downfall and so lead to the associated danger of miscegenation. Since whiteness and purity share such an intimate conceptual space, especially for women, the idea that young working women were in danger of having their whiteness compromised by interracial workplaces fuelled a protective impulse to redraw racial lines and rid the workplace of one group or the other. Once again, working women were in danger of losing their jobs to a moral imperative.

In 1922 a prolonged debate took place in the House of Commons regarding legislation which would put an end to Asian immigration. British Columbia had long sought to enact such an immigration ban, but only the federal government had the authority to do so, and it struck down BC’s attempts until 1923 when the Exclusion Act finally went through. The debate included a litany of racial stereotypes which were endemic to British Columbia from the 1880s on. Robert McDonald outlines the four dominant racial stereotypes through which the white population viewed the Asian community, all of which were evident in the political debate:

One stereotype is the perception at the time that hordes of Asian immigrants might inundate British Columbia and destroy its collective character as a land of White, European-based settlers. The second is an emphasis on the vastly different cultures and institutions of Asians,
which, it was believed, insulated them from the influence of White society and made them unassimilable. The third is a focus on the willingness of Asians to work for less than White workers considered a ‘fair’ wage, thus lowering the European community’s standard of living. The fourth stereotype is the assertion that Asians, especially Chinese and Sikhs, were ‘unclean, diseased, and a threat to public health.’ (Making Vancouver 206)

The House of Commons debate returned many times to the unassimilable nature of the Asian community, but it is important to note, as McDonald points out, that although their customs and culture were considered alien, assimilation in the early twentieth century often referred specifically to marriage with white Canadians, not, as it does today, to the adoption of Canadian cultural norms. And the dominant attitude of the time held that such intermarriage was not only undesirable, but would produce degenerate progeny. As one speaker in the House stated, “The real test of assimilation is intermarriage. The divergences of the two races is so marked that intermarriage does not tend to perpetuate the good qualities of either race” (Canada 1516). This preoccupation with marriage and the threat of miscegenation suggested the need for a degree of sexual surveillance that would cordon off white women from Asian men. One symptom of this urge to contain white women’s sexuality was manifested in the intolerance shown to mixed-race couples, but only those including a white woman. In fact, as Robert Campbell argues, in the context of public spaces such as beer-parlours the category of the mixed-race couple only existed when a white woman was involved – other combinations were a non-issue: “A mixed-race couple was a white woman with a man of colour, especially a black man. As categories of official and popular concern, women of colour with white men and mixed-race couples that included no white member simply did not exist” (85). A white woman with a man of colour, meanwhile, provoked instant disapproval, because such a couple represented the disruption of racial codes and social hierarchies:

The reaction that they provoked emphasized the racial norms of decency. A man of colour ‘racialized’ himself – that is, engaged in indecent behaviour – if he was in the company of a white woman. Yet the woman also became less white, or pure, because of her behaviour.
The potential for miscegenation threatened the dominance of white men and ultimately destabilized the category of ‘white.’ (Campbell 81)

While the ultimate test of assimilation, then, was believed to be marriage into white Canadian society, actual mixed-race unions involving white women were totally unacceptable to the white majority which subscribed, in this sense, to a racialized patriarchy.

Hilda Glynn-Ward, author of the intensely racist book *The Writing on the Wall* (1921), was quoted in the assimilation debate to the effect that “Marriage between orientals and whites has never been known to produce anything but degradation for both because it is an unnatural thing” (Canada 1516), and her comment highlights the fact that the debate on the impossibility of Asians assimilating into Canadian society was also influenced by the discourse on eugenics. Eugenics was a pseudo-medical discourse which asserted a racial hierarchy with white English-speaking Anglo-Saxons at the top and all other ethnicities and nationalities ranged below. Eugenicists interested themselves in a wide range of national reforms including highly selective immigration, birth control for the working classes, and sterilization of the mentally unfit. Angus McLaren points out that the movement was a convenient way to impose a veneer of authority on long-held prejudices: “eugenic arguments provided apparently new, objective scientific justifications for old, deep-seated racial and class assumptions” (49). The discourse of eugenics often drew on metaphors concerning the national body politic, warning that the wrong kind of immigration would undermine the purity of the nation and “the race”: “It is desirable that we should have a white Canada and that we should not become a yellow or mongrel nation” (Canada 1516). Thus both on the individual level of marriage and on the national level of immigration policy, the mixing of Asians and whites represented for many a kind of racial contagion. And while exclusionist legislation sought to protect Canada on a national level from unwanted racial elements, on an individual level, racial divisions and the preservation of
whiteness were enforced through strict attention to moral codes and sexual proscriptions. Both of these racist agendas drew on representations of white femininity to signify an often sexualized racial threat.

One speaker appealed to the House on just these grounds when he gestured to the idea of white and Asian men being part of a human brotherhood but then qualified such notions by asking, "what about these people for brothers-in-law?" It is all very well to refer to them as brothers; but would any honourable gentleman of this House consider an alliance between a sister or a daughter of his and a Chinaman or a Japanese? Is there an honourable member to whom such an alliance would appeal?" (Canada 1521). That his questions were meant to be purely rhetorical signals the unthinkable quality of assimilation through marriage in the view of the white majority. But an appeal to the members of the House in terms of their daughters and sisters signals something more as well. In her book on white women and racism, Beyond the Pale, Vron Ware explains how familial representations of white women could take on an important racial symbolism in imperial or national contexts: "Whether as Mothers of the Empire or Britannia’s Daughters, women were able to symbolize the idea of moral strength that bound the great imperial family together. In their name, men could defend the family in the same spirit as they would defend their own wives, daughters or sisters if they were under attack" (162). The idea of Asian men marrying into the families of Canada’s political representatives was calculated to elicit a paternal and brotherly interest in young womanhood that was both protectionist and proprietorial while at the same time operating on a symbolic level to elicit a specifically masculine and racist patriotism. Wives and mothers had related roles to play in the service of a white Canada, but in this instance it is young white women of marriageable age who embody an endangered whiteness in need of careful guardianship.
Although the sisters to be sheltered from interracial contact were not, in this instance, identified according to any particular class position, young working women occupied the same field of representation, defined by a protectionist impulse and a feeling of sexualized racial threat. Added to this, however, were the more materialist concerns of the labour movement, for whom the Asian threat was as much economic as it was moral or cultural. Labour activists often opposed Asian immigration on the grounds that it created unfair labour competition which drove down the standard of living for the white community, and while labour unions usually invoked this argument in order to protect their predominantly male membership, in the House of Commons debate Vancouver's embattled white working class was represented through depictions of young working women:

When there are so many young women out of employment, the oriental problem becomes a serious affair. One young woman said “I have two bits left”. I have lived for the last two weeks on two pints of milk and two doughnuts a day, and when I go to look for a job I mostly meet a Chinaman at the door and am told that I am not wanted.” It is pretty hard for these young women that we have allowed into our country orientals to fill the jobs that our own people should fill. Another young woman said “I am supposed to be good, I have got 75 cents left, I am two weeks behind in my rent. The landlady says I must pay the rent or she will take my clothes. I have to earn the money some way”. And yet the Chinamen are taking the jobs those women ought to have and want to fill. (Canada 1533)

This speaker draws on the familiar figure of the lone working girl living on the brink of poverty and every day in danger of either starving or turning to prostitution despite her best efforts to “be good.” And while utterly conventional, this representation of the working girl is interesting in that it demonstrates the flexibility of the figure: where white slavery is at issue, she embodies innocence endangered; where labour reform is needed, she is evidence of inadequate wages; where the city is criticised, she warns of a heartless modernity; and here she is the victim of unchecked Asian immigration. What is also interesting about this example is that while the first story addresses the material and economic issues of a labour market segmented by race and gender, the second story quickly returns us to the realm of morality, where the working girl’s imperiled virtue is the primary
concern. Indeed, that is the advantage here in terms of persuasion. If one used a male subject to represent competition in the labour market, this story would stop at the unemployment of whites who compete with Asians for jobs, but with the destitute working girl, one can bring in the added pathos of innocence lost and so turn the knife that much further. The same speaker claimed that “The young girl, who, through lack of employment is forced to work in the restaurant with some of these orientals, is eagerly looking to see what the members of this House are going to do on this question” (Canada 1533), hinting once more that the difficult labour market would push young working women into ever more compromising positions if Asian immigration were not halted.

The fact of a labour market segmented by race and gender is evidence of how easily social prejudices like racism and sexism are incorporated into a capitalist system. If one really wanted reforms to prevent the employment of white women with Asian men, one logical way to proceed would be to redress the power imbalance within the labour market which relegated socially disenfranchised groups like single women and Asian men to the bottom of the wage scale. A universal minimum wage and laws requiring equal pay for equal work would be necessary first steps in rendering the labour market less prone to replicating social hierarchies. In debates concerning the problem of white women in the interracial workplace, however, this kind of systemic remedy was never considered; as far as British Columbians were concerned, the amelioration of working conditions and an unequal labour market were distant concerns compared to seeing racial divisions cemented, white femininity secured, and Asian immigration stopped. These were the motivating forces in the campaign to police the interracial workplace, and the resulting disregard for the rights of the workers therein and for the value of the work they did demonstrates how powerfully race and gender prejudice could distort matters of women and work in Vancouver workplaces.
In the anecdote about the starving girl unable to find work because of Asian competition, the Chinese are only indirectly to blame – by saturating the labour market – for the young woman’s potential downfall, but more extreme racist narratives depicted Chinese men as procurers and drug-dealers deliberately victimizing young white women, who were sometimes their employees:

What is known as “snow parties” are held. Chinamen of great wealth, engaged in this odious practice, and living in expensive, luxurious quarters, give parties at which white women, whom they employ, act as hostesses. Young girls are invited from about the city to take part in these so-called social functions – perhaps at a dance, perhaps at a card party; something of that kind. Interspersed among these young people are two or three addicts who are trained and whose business it is to inveigle other people into the use of narcotics (1529) . . . A girl of twenty-three, through the use of morphine and cocaine, had a child by a Chinaman named Pete Kong, a notorious Chinese drug peddler. She injected morphine into the infant with a hypo needle until it died – her mind being so distorted. (Canada 1530)

This latter story about the baby is almost certainly either a fabrication or an urban myth given its lurid details and its too-easy conflation of white female downfall, miscegenation, and drug-induced crime, all of which form elements of the speaker’s argument to ban Asian immigration. It also seems to suggest that you can get pregnant by taking drugs, creating a link between drug-abuse and the corruption of whiteness. Indeed the opium trade was so firmly connected in the mind of the white majority to Chinatown and the Chinese population that there was a perception that for a white person to use the drug was to undermine their white racial status. Young working-class women were thought to be particularly susceptible to drug-addiction because of their interracial workplaces and because their leisure pursuits like dances were considered dangerously unregulated. The Beacon, a monthly Vancouver paper, took great interest in the drug traffic and warned of the dangers of Chinatown’s opium dens for young people: “These conditions exist right here in Vancouver. Many shop girls are said to be addicted to a mild use of the drug as a stimulant. This mild use grows to very serious proportions. In dance halls in the city of Vancouver the use of ‘snow’ or white stuff is common” (“Editorial”). The shop girl was a frequent figure of pathos because she was publicly
visible in a way most young working women were not and it was known that she worked for long hours on her feet; the idea that she might resort to stimulants may have seemed plausible to many readers and was likely meant to evoke their sympathies. But as with the girl whose drug use led directly to a mixed-race baby, there is a feeling of whiteness compromised in the young white girl dependent on illicit Asian-supplied drugs.

Racial discourse in Canada drew on a litany of stereotypes which shaped popular perceptions of both Asian and white populations. And the figure of the white working girl often functioned as a trope within national narratives, embodying on one hand the promise of white nationalism and on the other the vulnerability of white purity to impending racial contamination. Representations of the working girl, then, informed certain threads of the debate on Asian immigration, and functioned as rhetorical figures in an argumentative strategy: to appeal to the figure of the single white working girl was to elicit a specific protectionist response to the idea of whiteness under threat. Whether the context was the drug traffic, the flooded labour market, the possibility of assimilation or miscegenation, the white working girl was a touchstone for debates on racial exclusion. But despite this popular interest in working women and the maintenance of their pristine whiteness, the pragmatics of women's position in the working world vis-a-vis the labour market, unequal wage-scales, the value of their work both to themselves (earning a living) and to the community (providing necessary services and functions) were never addressed. On the contrary, the emphasis on women's roles as vessels of whiteness deflected attention away from their needs and rights as workers. Thus middle-class administrators moved forward with plans to police the interracial workplace and even eliminate women's jobs therein without ever considering the financial implications this could have for self-supporting women.
At the time of the Janet Smith case, anti-Asian feeling had hit a new height culminating just the year before in the Asian Exclusion Act which essentially put a stop to Chinese immigration. The immigration of white women from the British Isles to work as domestic servants, on the other hand, was still considered highly desirable and had passed from the hands of individual women's societies to be administered instead by a government bureau – the Women's Division of the Department of Immigration and Colonization, established in 1920. Asian immigrants and white domestic servants, then, were both objects of great interest in Canada's national narrative, one representing a figure of threat, one of promise.

In 1922, Canada and Britain made an arrangement with a decided imperial ring to it: the Empire Settlement Agreement provided assistance for agricultural workers, juvenile immigrants, and female domestics. The Women's Bureau concerned itself with the selection, transport and placement of unaccompanied women immigrants, and while their work was mainly helpful and well-intentioned, their brand of maternal feminist philanthropy could be highly prescriptive as well. In her 1924 annual report, the head of the Women's Bureau pointed out that "It is necessary that all women coming to this country should be most carefully interviewed by a Canadian woman in order that we may secure a type of woman who will settle down in Canada and become good citizens; also, there are certain classes, such as factory workers, that must be discouraged because we already have an adequate supply of these workers in Canada" (Canada 52). The Empire Settlement Agreement was strongly biassed in favour of those who would settle in rural communities, so factory workers were ruled out as a "class" even though women domestics and female factory workers would have occupied the same economic class. Also, by entering the public arena of work and money, factory workers challenged traditional gender roles in a way that domestic servants did not. Follow-up
reports were administered by the Bureau to confirm that women who came to Canada to work as domestics stayed in those positions. Such strict selection criteria and follow-up surveillance demonstrates the very precise kind of social engineering that underwrote female immigration policies: female domestic servants came the closest to fulfilling both the labour demands of the growing country and the ideological requirements of visibly traditional gender norms. This was no small task given that these two criteria were in certain ways antithetical: traditional ideals of femininity and the cult of domesticity sought to remove women from the realm of paid work and render their unpaid work invisible, whereas the constant demand for domestic servants to do this very necessary work belied those visions of domestic ease. This paradox was reflected in the ambivalence concerning women’s paid employment and in the unwillingness to acknowledge its true value. Female immigrant domestics, then, were subject to precise but conflicting agendas related to labour demands, gender norms, and racial preferences. For the Women’s Bureau, making their charges meet these many demands was no small task.

While the Empire Settlement Agreement applied to immigrants from the British Isles, many of the women immigrants bound for domestic service positions also came from Eastern and Southern Europe. The Women’s Bureau took charge of all unaccompanied women immigrants – meeting them upon arrival, escorting them to women’s hostels, supervising them in groups on west-bound trains, and arranging for their placement in private homes. But some of these new arrivals were less than eager to make it to their final destinations; train conductresses seem to have been part-chaperone, part-warden in their mission to safeguard women immigrants: “The greatest vigilance has been necessary, day and night, by railroad officials and conductresses to guard these girls to their destination. Foreign girls have at times jumped from the windows of the train, not wishing to proceed to their destination. These girls are liable to leave without a moment’s warning, so that
constant supervision is essential” (Canada 1929-30, 81). Single female immigrants, then, though desirable, were an unruly group who needed almost constant supervision from the time they left Europe through to their placement in service, and even then, keeping them in service required further vigilance. Julia Bush analyses female immigration schemes and points out that “Moral surveillance was integral to a philosophy of female emigration which, despite its sometimes emancipatory aura, stood rooted in a class-bound patriarchal society and a racist imperialism. Servant girls were believed by the emigrants to be far more prone to kick over the traces both in their work and in their general behaviour” (60). And in their history of Canadian immigration policy, Kelley and Trebilcock note that many British female domestics were deported in the 1920s if their behaviour transgressed moral codes: “Departmental records reveal that offending public mores, such as bearing an illegitimate child, contracting venereal disease, living with a man out of wedlock, and having more than one sexual partner, were often the underlying cause for expulsion” (192). In a national narrative that espoused a white ideal complemented by largely traditional gender roles, then, servant girls occupied an important but precarious position. Asked to embody the promise of a racially and morally pure society, they were actually deeply distrusted, subject to vigilant surveillance, and suspected of imminent betrayal of national ideals.

It is interesting to note that while sporadic panics would break out about working women – especially domestic workers – being in some form of danger because of their Asian co-workers, no similar concerns applied to the white mistresses in houses employing Asian help, even though the spatial proximity of the shared house was presumably identical. It is as though the class distinction formed an impervious barrier not only between the white mistress and the Asian houseboy but also against the very thought that any danger could exist in that context. The fact that what is a complete non-issue in the case of the middle-class housewife is a supposedly tangible and significant danger
to the white female servant is a contradiction which signals the already-compromised nature of the working woman’s perceived position. As a single working-class woman, she was inherently vulnerable to social and moral threats in a way that middle-class women never were. Anne McClintock explains how female servants in the context of Empire, partly because they blurred the boundaries between home and workplace, occupied a socially ambiguous and morally uncertain position: “Like prostitutes and female miners, servants stood on the dangerous threshold of normal work, normal money and normal sexuality, and came to be figured increasingly in the iconography of ‘pollution,’ ‘disorder,’ ‘plagues,’ ‘moral contagion’ and ‘racial degeneration’” (154). This suspicion of the purity of female servants appeared in the Janet Smith case when Smith’s “character” came under intense scrutiny, as though the victim’s sexual purity were a factor in the crime; such a consideration is common in a rape case, but wouldn’t seem immediately relevant in a murder. With the Chinese houseboy as the main suspect, however, attention quickly fixed on the nature of the relationship between the two servants in a way it never would have if Smith had been mistress, not servant. At a time when the country was deeply invested in the idea of nation-building, then, working-class women in particular tended to awaken anxieties concerning the fragility of the social and moral landscape, especially in terms of its racial dimension.

JANET SMITH AND DOMESTIC INTIMACIES

Vancouver’s downtown core signified for many an unregulated territory of racial otherness, sexual vice, and lower-class dissipation – this in contrast to the quiet domesticity of the Tudor-style homes in respectable Kitsilano and well-to-do Shaughnessy. But in 1924, those preconceptions were overturned when the cheerful and popular young nurse-maid of a Shaughnessy home was found apparently shot to death, and the Chinese houseboy was the only one on the scene. The many details
of the Janet Smith case have been dwelt on at length in Edward Starkins’ *Who Killed Janet Smith?* and MacDonald and O'Keefe’s *Canadian Holy War*, so I will only briefly summarize the major events. Janet Smith worked as a nanny and domestic servant in the home of F. L. Baker on Osler Street in Shaughnessy. On the 26th of July 1924, she was found dead in the basement by the Chinese houseboy, Wong Foon Sing, and the police were called. Seeing that she had a gun-shot wound to the head and the gun by her hand, they assumed it was a suicide and didn’t bother to preserve or fully detail the crime scene, thereby destroying potentially vital evidence. The suicide theory quickly came under attack, but a coroner’s inquest ruled the death accidental, and Janet Smith was buried. By this time, though, suspicion had fallen on Wong Foon Sing, due in part to the claims of a close friend of Smith named Cissie Jones, also a domestic worker, who said that Smith had been afraid of Wong. Wong was kidnapped, held overnight, and beaten by investigators associated with the police, but their attempts to force a confession were fruitless. The murder theory gained credence though, and the body was exhumed for autopsy, whereupon a second inquest ruled that Smith had been murdered. By the end of the year, MLA Mary Ellen Smith responded to public pressure by proposing the “Janet Smith” bill to prevent white women and Asian men from working together in private homes. The bill was never passed, however, because it was ruled unconstitutional. The case stayed in the papers for another year as a clairvoyant came forward with evidence drawn from the mystical sphere, and Wong was kidnapped again, this time held for over a month, beaten and tortured, then released and charged with murder. With no evidence to speak of, however, he eventually went free, while his captors, all affiliated with the police, were brought to justice. The Janet Smith case had many sensational elements and narratives seemed to grow up like weeds at every turn in the case. Had there been an unrequited interracial romance between the two co-workers? Was F. L. Baker a drug dealer trying to cover his tracks? Had there been a decadent party
at the home where upper-class debauchery had gone awry? Was it a case of police corruption? What would Smith’s secret diary reveal? The Janet Smith case played on fears and prejudices that were ever just below the surface of Vancouver’s pleasant self-image, and in its rise to the level of urban myth, it represents an important formative narrative in the city’s social history.

The second inquest regarding Janet Smith’s death which concluded that she was murdered was held about a month after her death, and during that time, Vancouver’s Scottish societies had taken up the case, urged by Cissie Jones. At this point, competing representations of Smith began to take on great importance in the various scenarios thought to lead up to the death: was she a devoted servant, an embodiment of pure white femininity defiled? Or was her death tied to working-class moral laxity and a too-active social life in the day’s libertine youth culture? The Janet Smith mystery began to function as a cautionary narrative about women in the interracial workplace and in the unsupervised leisure sphere. Cissie Jones strongly asserted Wong’s guilt, claiming Smith had told her she feared him: “She was very very nervous. Terribly nervous of the Chinaman day after day. For the last three days before her death she was afraid to go into the kitchen for her meals... I told her to go into the kitchen and get something in spite of him, and if he laid a hand on her to pick up something and hit him with it” (“Girl Witness”). Jones was an outspoken young woman who resented the snobbery of the upper classes toward domestic servants, and was determined to see justice done by her friend. She figured largely in the second inquest, where Wong’s lawyer, Harry Senkler, questioned her closely concerning Smith’s feelings toward Wong. His main piece of evidence was Smith’s diary, which, he asserted, showed no evidence that Smith feared Wong in the least. But rather than sticking to the two or three entries in the diary where Smith mentioned Wong, Senkler read from many portions, thereby revealing much more about Smith’s personal life than would seem immediately relevant to the case. Smith had a very active social life and was going out
with three or four men in addition to her fiancé: “He says I must love him alone and have nothing else to do with any other man, but I like them all, Arthur, Steve, Carl and John. I suppose folks will think I am a terrible flirt” (“Girl Witness”). Indeed, Smith’s employer did get a little ruffled on account of her maid’s many admirers, especially when they all phoned the house in one day: “All the boys phoned me. Mistress doesn’t like it, but I do” (“Girl Witness”). Senkler dwelt at length on Smith’s romances and her leisure pursuits, all the time challenging Jones that if Smith had truly been in fear for her life she would surely have mentioned it in her diary, especially since she went into such detail about other aspects of her personal life. But by dwelling at such length on Smith’s various flirtations, Senkler began to paint her as a not entirely innocent victim. Jones objected to insinuations regarding Smith’s virtue and went out of her way to counter Senkler’s representation of Smith as an untamed flirt. “Janet always helped her mother by sending money to her” (“Girl Witness”), she said, telling of Smith’s good nature, and, using an odd combination of facts, stated, “She complained to me often about being nervous of being left so much alone with a Chinaman and when she did get a Sunday off she went to church” (“City Scots”). For Jones, establishing that Smith was killed by Wong went hand in hand with establishing Smith’s good character and working-class honour. The last entry in Smith’s diary told of an evening out where “Hall provided me with drinks until I feared catastrophe” (“No Fear”), but the “Witness explained that they were soft drinks, and Miss Smith feared stomach troubles from it.” Finally, when Senkler asked her if the extracts of the diary had changed her opinion of Smith, Jones replied, “No, I don’t take any notice of it. She did not run after men” (“No Fear”). Reporters noted that the court took great interest in the cross-examination and were vocal in their support of Jones: “the crowd, patiently hostile at the cross-examination, muttered again and again in approval as the girl refused to read anything into the diary entries but what would bear out the character she had given her dead friend” (“Girl Witness”). The
use of the word “character” is replete with meaning here, for the contest between Jones and Senkler was essentially a battle over representation. Jones, full of spirit and deeply loyal to her friend, was heavily invested in Smith’s female working-class honour, and she refused to see her represented in any other light. Senkler, on the other hand, drew on carefully selected excerpts from the diary to represent Smith as an uninhibited and carefree romantic. He may have had a few reasons for this. In many legal cases, the victim’s degree of innocence influences the severity of judgement against the culprit: killing a prostitute, for instance, has traditionally incurred less condemnation than killing a so-called “good” woman. Enumerating Smith’s many admirers might also serve to spread suspicion beyond the houseboy. Janet Smith thus began to represent different things to different people: spotless white innocence defiled by the Asian threat for some, servant-girl romanticism run wild for others.

One theory that sprang from the diary entries detailing Smith’s complicated love-life suggested that the killer was a woman who sought revenge against Smith for stealing her boyfriend: “Was Janet Smith the victim of a jealous quarrel? . . . the latest suggestion is that the unfortunate girl, who according to testimony at the previous inquest and entries said to have been found in her diary was fond of the company of the opposite sex, died as a result of her friendship for some male friend” (“Woman May”). This theory was short-lived but demonstrates the remarkable capacity of the case to generate narratives, this one stemming from what some believed to be Smith’s too-active and unsupervised love-life.

Whether a romance might have existed between Janet Smith and Wong Foon Sing was soon a question of considerable interest. The urge to view the young woman’s workplace as a site of sexual intrigue or moral downfall was perhaps even more powerful here than elsewhere, since the Smith murder stood to confirm society’s worst fears about the female work environment. Smith
made very few references to Wong in her diary, but two stand out. One was written quite soon before her death and read, “Sing is awfully devoted: gave me two rolls of film for my camera, also sweets, and does all my washing and ironing” (“No Fear”), and the other, an earlier entry, seems even more suggestive: “Poor Wong must be in love. He has just given me a silk nightie and two camisoles” (“No Fear”). This latter quote, though, is ambiguous, because there is evidence that it refers to a different Wong – also a domestic worker but in a different house – probably F. L. Baker’s mother’s house (“No Fear”); the newspapers, though, either failed to pick up on this distinction or left it vague. More ambiguity surrounded an anecdote reported in the *Star* that Smith “had been on a visit to the McRae home and the Chinaman had resented her absence, retaliating by locking her out” (“Janet Smith Feared”). F. L. Baker later explained that Wong had Sundays off and Smith was out when he left and locked the house after him. She had her own key but had forgotten it, so was locked out on her return (“Janet Smith Case”). The tendency to misread events, then, or to impose certain readings onto the events was pervasive in this case, demonstrating its power to ignite the popular imagination. Establishing whether Wong had had feelings for Smith was of particular interest to the newspapers and the public, because sexual advances made by Wong would confirm widespread fears about the interracial workplace, and by extension, about race and gender relations at large. A sexual threat to white women from Asian men had a symbolic dimension that inflamed a masculinist racism. As Vron Ware argues, “One of the recurring themes in the history of colonial repression is the way in which the threat of real or imagined violence towards white women became a symbol of the most dangerous form of insubordination” (38). The rage that stemmed from this alleged dual assault on Smith herself and the unassailable whiteness she represented likely motivated the intense desire for revenge against Wong that culminated in his repeated kidnapping and torture by the police’s henchmen. By operating on this symbolic level, the Janet Smith mystery played to
deep-seated racial hatreds, revealing how powerful representations of Smith and Wong were in illuminating and shaping the attitudes of the day.

Rather than treat the case as an individual or isolated event, people sought to generalize from it regarding domestic workers, interracial workplaces, immigration policies, and so on. They therefore needed Janet Smith to represent all servant-girls, and Wong Foon Sing all Chinese houseboys. This reflects the same impulse that frequently surrounds the figure of the working girl in that she is looked to as a symbol of larger social ills or a representative of moral breakdown, not merely as an individual or a worker in a social and economic system. The Scottish societies, for instance, used the case to criticise immigration schemes to import domestic servants:

Last night caustic comments were made as to the manner in which the investigation has been handled so far, while the practice of bringing young girls out from the Old Country and leaving them alone in isolated houses with Orientals was roundly condemned. . . . “People bring these girls out from their homes and they should look after them. They are morally and legally responsible for the well-being of these girls, and they should be prepared either to keep all white help or all Oriental help if they cannot guarantee their proper protection,” was the loudly applauded statement of a member of the council [of the United Scottish Societies]. (“Scots Demand Inquiry”)

The Scottish societies took a special interest in the case because Smith had been one of their own, and they painted a picture here of young girls torn from their homeland and left all alone with no one but sinister Asian co-workers. This emphasis on the women being alone and isolated suggests the anxiety that surrounded the single status of the typical young working woman, particularly in domestic service. The separation from family, homeland, and any sort of male guardian seemed to compound the problem of the interracial workplace: “The tragedy of Janet K. Smith, the lone Scotch girl who appears for some time before her tragic death in a Shaughnessy Heights home to have lived in terror of her Chinese fellow domestic, forces the question as to whether or not white girls and Orientals shall be allowed to share common employment” (“Should Chinese”). Smith may have
been "lone" in the sense of being single and having no family members in Vancouver, but according to her diary, she was hardly lonely; rather, the "lone" here signifies the supposed vulnerability of the unattached self-supporting young woman who has stepped outside the protective and possessive influence of the family. That this emphasis on the "lone" working girl appears in connection with a patriotic impulse suggests that the threat of interracial contact raised an indignation that was protectionist toward young womanhood, but also proprietorial concerning available female nationals. It was the combination of conventional fears about single women in the workplace and racist desires to secure an allegedly threatened white womanhood that made the Janet Smith mystery so compelling and so worrying as a narrative of race and gender in Vancouver.

Obviously no one cared much about the "lone" loggers and miners who had to work with all kinds of people under all kinds of conditions. But according to the Vancouver Star at least, this had less to do with gender difference than with the supposed nature of the workplaces:

It is a case of race psychology. The white and yellow races, while they may be able to work together in mills, trade, or in connection with railroading or as producer and consumer, cannot assimilate when it comes to domestic association.

In the situation under consideration, that of domestic help, the problem of propinquity enters into the question. It is not morally in the eternal fitness of things that a white girl or woman should be placed in a position where she is constantly coming into daily personal touch with a Chinaman under the same roof. Such a measure as that proposed would render this impossible. ("Chinese and White Girls" 13 Nov: 4)

The editor of the Star, Victor Odlum, had taken a strong interest in the Janet Smith case from the start, and several pieces he wrote objecting to white women working with Asian men were part of the public pressure for legislation on the issue. Here he makes an interesting distinction between sites where Asians can supposedly assimilate and where they cannot; in the public sphere of male labour the interracial workplace is acceptable, but as soon as one enters the domestic workplace the opposite is true because of the "eternal fitness of things." As in other contexts where the female
workplace is at issue, male and female workplaces are believed to be inherently different because moral imperatives overshadow the women's roles as workers and the economic pragmatics of the situation. For Odlum, the domestic workplace does not work according to the same rules or norms as other workplaces, perhaps because it blurs the divide between the public sphere of labour and capital and the private sphere of family and procreation. It is important to remember here that to the white majority true assimilation meant intermarriage, but the vision of mixed-race marital and domestic unions was unacceptable, so the idea of assimilation in the domestic sphere, even as a workplace, conjured images inherently disturbing to the white elite. Thus Victor Odlum can gesture to supposedly universal absolutes as reasons for segregation in the domestic workplace, while other (male-dominated) workplaces are fine.

It is unlikely that female servants would have described their work as involving “daily personal touch” (unless it was avoiding such contact from male employers) – indeed, they would likely have been insulted – but the conceptual association between the domestic sphere and sexual reproduction was such that within that space male and female workers appeared intimate in a way that co-workers in other settings did not:

Following a scandal or a tragedy, it is easily possible for a community to be stampeded into the adoption of hasty and foolish measures.

But the matter under consideration is a psychological one. There can be no question that the intimacy which such a condition as the employment of white girls and Chinamen in the same home brings about leaves the door open to all sorts of possibilities. It is a racial as well as a moral question. (“Chinese and White Girls” 9 Oct: 4)

According to a domestic worker who wrote an article for the BC Federationist just two months before Janet Smith’s death, the most pressing problems with working conditions for servants included poor wages, no fixed hours, the monotony and loneliness of the work, and the snobbery of employers (“Domestic Servants”). With the Janet Smith case came a sudden surge in interest among
the general public in the daily lives of servants, and yet none of these practical concerns was addressed. Instead, everything turned on the dangers of interracial contact between co-workers. Once again the practical concerns of women as workers were displaced by moral alarmism, this time with a racial threat, and the sexual possibilities of an interracial domestic setting obscured the more mundane but arguably more pressing issues of women’s rights and needs as workers. The total elision of domestic workers’ practical concerns in favour of the moral imperative to segregate the races was fully manifested when resulting legislation stood to deprive large numbers of women of their positions. Most employers, they had reason to believe, would keep their Asian workers and dismiss the white women.

In fact, the opinion of white female domestic servants seems to have been split on the issue. Mary Ellen Smith’s campaign for her Janet Smith bill received a boost when 28 white female servants quit their jobs rather than work alongside Asian male co-workers:

“I do not know whether it is a panic among them or not but I have learned of twenty-eight girls who have quit their jobs in Vancouver because they refused to work with Orientals,” Mrs. Smith said. “This movement would seem to indicate that their employers prefer to keep the Chinese rather than the white girls. If such discrimination were pushed to extremes it would be serious for our own white women indeed.” (“Servant Girls Quit”)

Considering that the policy she sought would seem to be not only “discrimination pushed to extremes” but discrimination legislated, there is an irony to Smith’s comments. But the fact that she had initiated and campaigned for this legislation without ever considering that it would endanger the women’s jobs shows not only an utter lack of forethought but also a fundamental disregard for the importance of those jobs to the women and the value of the work they did. By privileging the moral aspect of women’s working conditions and ignoring the material ramifications of her legislation, Smith participated in the consistent devaluation of female labour. White women domestics were
evidently split on the issue, because in spite of the twenty-eight who walked off their jobs, a different delegation intent on safeguarding their jobs organized to protest against Smith's bill:

> Opposition to the “Janet Smith” bill, now before the Victoria legislature, sponsored by Mary Ellen Smith, is to be voiced by groups of girls representing the sisterhood of housemaids in Vancouver, it was learned through the Trades and Labour Council today.
>
> When the bill is pressed in the house a delegation is expected to speak on behalf of the girls, who fear that passage of the bill will throw large numbers of them out of employment. Employers prefer all Chinese to all white girls, they will contend. (“Housemaids Opposed”)

The bill also faced opposition from the Chinese community, which sent a delegate to oppose it on the grounds that it was discriminatory and baseless – the Janet Smith mystery, after all, was unsolved, so proved nothing about alleged dangers posed to white women by Asian workers. For the moment, white working women and their Asian co-workers had similar interests in resisting the prejudicial legislation and asserting instead their rights as workers. Ruled unconstitutional, the Janet Smith bill was never passed. That the female domestic workers themselves were split on the issue, however, demonstrates the ambivalence that permeated the issue of gender in the interracial workplace: the 28 women who quit their jobs clearly did feel threatened in the workplace, either due to the panic surrounding the Janet Smith case or from experiences of their own that are not recorded. Those women who protested the legislation, on the other hand, were motivated by the prospect of unemployment and saw the need to assert their own rights as workers to protect a needed source of employment for women. It is an interesting case where the subjects of a virulent ideological discourse themselves enact the split in opinion – one group confirming the supposed dangers of their racialized workplace by reacting in fear, the other refuting the threat by resisting any interference in their workplace situations.
The Janet Smith mystery and the ensuing attempt to legislate a racially segregated workplace for women influenced the debates about the working girl and exacerbated the tendency to privilege moral concerns over practical matters. With whiteness a principal marker of their identities, women workers were subject to the vigilant surveillance thought necessary for the nation’s single white womanhood. Often believed to be sexually vulnerable by nature of their unchaperoned presence in the realm of paid labour, young working women seemed doubly at risk of succumbing to a sexualized racial threat, especially when the interracial workplace came under attack as a danger zone for racial mixing. When everyone jumped to the conclusion that Janet Smith’s Chinese co-worker had made advances on her before murdering her, the case seemed to confirm people’s worst fears about women in the interracial workplace. These hasty conclusions in turn fuelled far-reaching racist campaigns to segregate the female workplace, curtail Asian immigration, and subject the female workforce to special protective regimes. By foregrounding the all-important whiteness of working women, politicians like Mary Ellen Smith obscured their roles as valued workers and reinscribed a notion of vulnerable femininity at risk. This disregard for the value of women’s labour, particularly in the case of domestic work, allowed legislation like the Janet Smith bill to appear logical despite being impractical and unconstitutional. Racial tensions thus exacerbated the urge to perceive women’s workplaces as moral and sexual danger zones, allowing the actual work itself and its value to the women and to the community to be rendered practically invisible.
CONCLUSION

DOMESTIC PROGRESS NARRATIVES AND WOMEN'S UNPAID LABOUR

Alice Barrett Parke moved from Ontario to British Columbia in 1891 to keep house for her brother and uncle who were working as ranchers in the Okanagan valley. Soon after her arrival she recorded in her diary a few reflections on women’s domestic role in the frontier West:

I never realized before the wisdom of the words “It is not good for man to be alone”; it would be amusing, were it not too strongly pathetic, to see the little makeshifts of bachelor housekeeping. There is no doubt in my mind that woman’s sphere is, as a rule, in the house. Of course, genius may force her out of it, or dire necessity drive her forth to soar – or to struggle in higher flights or harder paths, but the quality of a house maker is essentially woman’s, and perhaps if she did her work better in this line, men might be stronger and nobler. (5)

Parke moved to British Columbia on the explicit understanding that she would relieve her male relatives from domestic duties and thereby allow them to focus more fully on their outside work. Her comments here display a lively combination of traditionalism and attitude: on the one hand she articulates the earnest imperial ideology that woman’s place is in the home – by creating domestic havens in the midst of the colonial wilderness, women would, in a sense, domesticate the unruly colonial men, making them “stronger and nobler.” On the other hand, she displays a highly derisive attitude toward these bachelors, who would be “amusing” if they weren’t so “strongly pathetic.” One doesn’t usually expect the Angel in the House to have an acid wit. Yet Parke was in many ways typical of women who came to British Columbia at the behest of male relatives in dire need of domestic rescue.
Women's domestic talents were in great demand in the West, where bachelors were often forced to keep house on their own or in all-male households, and their incompetence in this arena was much remarked upon. A frequently recurring narrative, like Parke's, had a female relative induced to join a frontier household and take over its management; upon her arrival, a kind of makeover would take place as she transformed a ramshackle shelter into a smoothly functioning household with regular meals, clean sheets, and fireside comforts. The male members of the household, delighted and astonished by the transformation of their home, would settle into more domestic habits, confirming the restorative effect of a proper home on the male temperament.

But despite the many benefits, both social and material, attached to this domestic progress narrative and the obvious expertise women like Parke demonstrated in their household work, the domestic arena remained firmly outside the sphere of capital, so there was no estimation of domestic work as valuable in the way that paid work or wage labour were deemed valuable. The unpaid labour of domestic work simply did not count as work in the same way that men's paid work counted. But then, as we have seen, women's wage labour did not count as work the way men's did, either. To what degree then was the devaluation of women's paid work in the public sector related to the disregard for women's unpaid work in the home? And to what extent were domestic ideologies playing into this chronic tendency to render women's work invisible?

In 1996, about a century after Parke's arrival in British Columbia, Statistics Canada for the first time included a survey on unpaid labour in its Census – evidence that unpaid labour is beginning to be recognized for its social and economic value. But at the previous turn of the century, the conceptual division between home and workplace amounted to a hard barrier despite the nature of domestic work which was both arduous and highly productive; where today we buy almost all household items, in the frontier West women regularly made clothes, soap, candles, and large
batches of preserves, all the while attending to meals, laundry, childcare, and so on. To deny the social and economic value of this much labour demanded the strict maintenance of a complex ideology of gender, domesticity, and work in the colonial context and beyond it. And this deeply ingrained conceptual apparatus influenced not only the definition of gender roles but also the interpretation of what counted as work.

DOMESTICITY AND MASCUINITY IN THE WEST

British Columbia's disproportionate ratio of men to women was due in part to the male-dominated industries of mining and logging which drew many male settlers to the province. But it was not only the large numbers of men compared to women that caused concern, but also the type of men. Adele Perry documents the culture of masculinity which dominated British Columbia in the nineteenth century and which I would argue persisted into the early twentieth century, if to a lesser degree. As she points out, gold rushes in particular seemed to draw a certain type of man: "The disrespectful image of gold mining could be a powerful lure for white men disillusioned with industrial capitalism and the visions of masculinity it offered. Embittered by the false promises of capitalism, they sought an environment where hard work would secure them manly self-sufficiency and respect" (38). The hero of Bertrand Sinclair's *North of Fifty-Three* (1914) exemplifies this self-selection process which drove certain men away from the restrictive demands of urban respectability; Bill Wagstaff turns his back on the city and its double-dealing business men: "And to dabble my hands in their muck, to settle down and live my life according to their bourgeois standards, to have grossness of soft flesh replace able sinews, to submerge mentality in favor of a specious craftiness of mind which passes in the 'city' for brains – well, I'm on the road" (312). Many, like Sinclair, saw a kind of nobility in these hardy Western men. In *West Nor'West* (1890) Jessie M. Saxby described her travels in the
Canadian West and compared British men to those she encountered out West: “It is refreshing to eyes accustomed to the tired, anxious faces, and listless or stilted gait of the average Briton, to look on those manly Titans of the West. . . . You feel that here is a race of men who must be winners in life's battle, and who can keep what they win 'by the might of a good strong hand’” (69). Literary representations like these reinforced the image of a virile and rugged manhood which belonged to the untamed West, and it was a manhood specifically linked to the physical strength born of hard work in manual labour.

But not everyone revered the Western man so wholeheartedly. As Adele Perry explains, colonial administrators were troubled by a prevalent culture of masculinity that actively rejected middle-class norms and respectability in favour of a hard-working, hard-drinking, manly camaraderie. The more middle-class version of masculinity that was in ascendence espoused a much more temperate ideal:

The mid-nineteenth century witnessed the refashioning of dominant ideologies and practices of both masculinity and race throughout the English-speaking world. Middle-class masculinity especially was recast in the mould of the self-controlled, temperate, disciplined, and domestic patriarch. . . . The cumulative result was the creation of a dominant white masculine ideal in which European men were complete only when living in heterosexual, same-race, hierarchical unions.

The racially plural milieu and overwhelmingly male character of British Columbia’s settler society rendered these ideals at best difficult to achieve. (20)

While Perry’s focus is the mid-nineteenth century, the desire to reformulate British Columbia’s society by balancing the genders and reforming an unruly culture of masculinity certainly lasted into the early twentieth century, especially in Vancouver which aspired to an increasingly refined urban identity. There was a strong desire, then, to refashion masculinity in British Columbia and many believed that the presence of white women would offset the troubling homosocial scene:

The want of home life is keenly felt as a very great calamity by those western settlers. They envy such of their number as have been fortunate enough to induce sister, wife or mother to
come and “keep house.” All would gladly do likewise. There seems about one woman to every fifty men, and I believe the old country could confer no greater boon upon this fine young nation than by sending it thousands of our girls to soften and sweeten life in the Wild West. The want of feminine influence tends to make the men (so they acknowledge) restless, dissatisfied, reckless, and godless. A Canadian gentleman of influence and education said: “Better even than money – and goodness knows, we need capital badly – should be a cargo of home-loving girls.” (Saxby 69)

Saxby implies a direct relationship here between the scarcity of white women and male dissipation; while the arrival of women – specifically home-loving ones – is immediately restorative. It is also interesting that the unnamed Canadian gentleman contrasts the need for women with the need for capital, the implication being that the two are diametrically opposed. For while the role of men in British Columbia and the version of masculinity that went along with it was explicitly linked to labour and capital, the role of women was constructed in direct opposition – as a mitigating element that would curb that too-masculine culture, representing instead a traditional ideal untarnished by the sordid realities of work and capital. The desire to see a feminine principle balance out the male excesses of the West, then, was an important part of a complex gender ideology that carefully and deliberately positioned women outside the conceptual terrain of work and labour, and while this applied in particular to women as representatives of domesticity, it also contributed to the disinclination to see women as workers of any kind, in or out of the paid labour market.

The fact that women were wanted in the Canadian West first and foremost in their domestic capacity is highly important to the analysis of gender and work in frontier British Columbia. As Anne McClintock points out, women’s role in Imperialism was wholly bound up in the cult of domesticity whereby the establishment of proper homes would reinforce the appropriate hierarchies of gender and race indicative of a successful civilizing mission. In British Columbia, gender norms were endangered by a preponderance of all-male households: “To create homes without white women was to challenge increasingly hegemonic concepts of gender and domesticity” (Perry 21).
A great deal of emphasis was laid on the supposed inability of men to create a clean and comfortable home without a woman, "a 'bachelor's shack' being often synonymous with disorder if not dirt" (Lewthwaite 118). Narratives of the household makeover that took place upon the addition of a woman to a bachelor home told of a transformation from chaos and disarray to order and hygiene. Elizabeth Lewthwaite joined her brothers in British Columbia at the turn of the century and described her arrival at their farmhouse:

Here, indeed, my expectations were more than fulfilled. Lowly though my ideal had been, it was a world too high. The rubbish that was round about was amazing (and this is characteristic of most bachelor's establishments, all that is not wanted being simply pitched outside) . . . And then – when I got inside – even now I can hardly look back without a feeling of horror. (113)

By the end of an account like this, the woman establishes a clean and orderly household where before there was chaos and "horror"; at the same time, traditional gender roles are reaffirmed as the troubling all-male household is replaced by reassuringly familiar gender roles and the appropriate division of labour. Freed from domestic chores – the performance of which might be somewhat compromising for those "manly Titans" – the men can immerse themselves more fully in the public sphere of paid work, while the woman does the representational work of signifying, by her presence in the home, a traditional vision of gender and culture. Moreover, as McClintock has argued, the rationalization of work that accompanied the rise of industrialism accentuated the conceptual split between paid work in the public sector and unpaid work in the home: "The striking difference between the rationalization of the market and the rationalization of housework is that the latter is rationalized so as to render women's work invisible and to thereby disavow its economic value" (172). Canada felt itself in dire need of women to lend their supposedly innate domestic expertise to frontier households, and yet contradictorily, this essential work, when performed properly, became invisible, its value unrecognizable.
Women’s supposedly natural domestic abilities were constantly referenced by religious and social reform groups who wanted to see the rowdy bachelor culture replaced with a more middle-class domestic respectability, but one wonders if the exaggeration of women’s domestic calling was complemented by an equal exaggeration of male domestic incompetence. According to Adele Perry, just as male settlers in British Columbia were glad to escape the demands of more mainstream versions of temperate masculinity, so were many of them content to remain unmarried and live alone or with other men, acquiring and even taking pride in domestic accomplishments like cooking (25). The tendency to overstate women’s love of the home and men’s incompetence therein may have been part of the desire to reaffirm traditional gender roles which were clearly under threat; gender roles, moreover, which had women work for free. Mrs. C.M. Bayfield submitted a paper to the National Council of Women when they met in Vancouver in 1907, stating that “there is one profession in which men are not successful; they don’t even attempt it without a woman to help them. I mean Home-making. No man ever made a home for himself yet, but they all want one” (67). One wonders what she actually means by a home here, since men obviously did live on their own in permanent dwellings of one kind or another. The implication seems to be that a living space can only be counted as a home if there is a woman present, demonstrating once again the conflation of women and domesticity, but also disqualifying men from any domestic participation of their own. This exaggeration of gender stereotypes in relation to domesticity was part of the prevalent association of men with work, labour, and capital in the public sphere, and the deliberate disassociation of women from those affairs. The domestic sphere was necessarily devoid of any evidence of labour, no matter how essential the work done there may have been.
HOUSEWORK AND THE DEVALUATION OF WOMEN’S WORK

The influence of these exaggerated gender categories with regard to the work done by women both in the home and in the paid workplace was significant. Women were sought out in the Canadian West to foster a settler-society complete with traditional gender roles, and the reluctance to admit them to new social arenas like the paid workplace was considerable. Indeed the reluctance to admit that women were workers of any kind was substantial, for despite the seemingly obvious labour involved in running a household in the West, where there was little household technology to aid in cooking meals, doing laundry, making clothes, and so on, domestic labour was never truly valued as real work. Canada’s increasing industrialization fostered the idea that the value of work corresponded to wages paid, and since work in the home was unpaid, it appeared to be worthless, or perhaps just not work at all. That housework was considered a natural proclivity of women added ideological weight to the apparent non-existence of housework in terms of labour value. In their book on the gendered segregation of labour in Canada, Pat and Hugh Armstrong explain this suppression of housework’s value:

Women who work exclusively at home without pay are not regarded as workers because they neither exchange their capacity to work for wages nor sell their goods and services directly in the market. As a result, housework is not subject to the discipline of the market. Its conditions, hours, and productivity, as well as its rewards, are of no direct market concern. . . . Not rewarded in market terms, housework as work is invisible in those terms. (87-88)

But while women’s unpaid work in the home was thus carefully sequestered, conceptually speaking, from men’s paid work in the public sector, in the case of women in the paid workforce, it retained a huge influence over how women were perceived and represented in terms of their relation to work. When women began to enter the workplace, their new role as wage-earners was not considered to be analogous to that of men in the workforce – rather, it was considered an extension (and preferably a temporary one) of their unpaid work in the home, or in other words, an extension of their role as
women. Their work was therefore viewed as only slightly more valuable than their housework and was waged accordingly at a little more than nothing. The refusal to allow women to step into the role of worker as it applied to the well-recognized labourers of Western Canada was steadfast, and this ideology of gender and work that denied women recognition as workers was so profound in its influence that even contemporary scholars have trouble recognizing women’s place within labour history.

One explanation for at least the initial tendency to perceive women’s paid labour as merely an extension of housework (and therefore not real work according to that schema) is based on the fact that when women first entered the paid workforce, their jobs tended to involve work also traditionally done in the home, such as cleaning, sewing, doing laundry, and so on. Keith Grint explains that “women’s work outside the home has become circumscribed by their activities within it, resulting in the construction of occupational sex-typing. Thus employment opportunities for women have historically been restricted in the main to analogous domestic activities” (33). With increasing industrialization, many products that were once made home-made, like clothes, bread, soap, and more, were instead mass produced and marketed, but women continued to participate in the production of those items, especially clothing (Armstrong and Armstrong 83). This then paved the way for the association between women’s paid and unpaid labour, which in turn naturalized the economic devaluation of that labour.

This explanation of the connection between women’s unpaid work in the home and the devaluation of women’s labour in the paid workforce is certainly one part of the equation when it comes to the erasure of women’s work, but it ceases to function quite as well when it comes to women’s entrance into non-traditional fields (like clerical work), where not only were women still denied the status of male workers, but where the field itself would rapidly be redefined as appropriate
to women and therefore poorly paid. The commercialization of domestic tasks thus had an influence on the devaluation of women’s paid labour, but it is only part of the story. Indeed, the fact that tasks traditionally performed in the home are duplicated in the paid workplace demonstrates the ongoing value and necessity of those tasks, the recognition of which would undermine the hard division between unpaid work in the home and paid work in the public sphere. As Keith Grint points out, “Since almost every activity undertaken without payment in the home is also undertaken for money in the formal economy the distinction between work and non-work is seriously flawed. . . . We do not have a division between work and home that is free from ideological nuances because the very model of work we operate with is a patriarchal model” (32-33). Women’s unpaid work in the home and their waged labour in the workplace are thus highly interactive in terms of how they are understood and valued both socially and economically. And especially in the context of British Columbia, where there were such specific social pressures to conform to an Imperial cult of domesticity, it is important to consider them together.

**UNDOMESTICATED WORKING GIRLS**

While a middle-class ideal continued to represent the home and the work done therein as the ideal provenance of Canadian women, the influence of industrialism and urbanization, not to mention the inclinations of women who saw the advantage of drawing their own paychecks, drew women increasingly into the public realm of paid labour. That it was young single women in particular who were entering the workplace – and doing so with some enthusiasm – did nothing to ease the anxieties of the reform-minded establishment. The Vancouver chapter of the National Council of Women of Canada was preoccupied to a greater extent than other local councils with preserving a traditional version of domesticity, and they looked on young working women with serious misgivings.
According to Mrs. Bayfield’s paper presented at the 1907 Meeting of the National Council of Women in Vancouver,

No one will dispute that in its homes lies the true strength of a nation. That the home life gives the tone to political and social life, and that there souls must be trained for time and for eternity. . . . Yet at the present time it seems that our Canadian homes are in danger of slipping from us. Our young married women find their burden too heavy for them to bear. . . . Our girls congregate in shops as clerks and in offices as stenographers, often underpaid, but they prefer this to helping in a home which their education has caused them to consider menial work. When they marry they make poor wives and mothers, and worse housekeepers, and so the evil goes round in a circle and gets worse. (67)

Combined in this passage we see the glorification of the home linked to a rhetoric of nation-building, the feeling that the domestic sanctuary is under threat, and the location of that threat in incompetent young married women and young working women who no longer value the home but prefer instead the paid workplace. While the National Council of Women did a great deal of meaningful work for women across Canada, theirs was not a radical vision, and their outlook was firmly rooted in middle-class ideals and attitudes. The figure of the single working girl did not fit into their maternal ideal of female domesticity; indeed, she stood quite possibly to undermine it altogether, by rejecting work in the home, paid or not, in favour of non-traditional jobs in the public sphere which, far from preparing her for marriage, actually bred a contempt for those supposedly sacred domestic duties and feminine qualities.

The Vancouver Local Council seemed more concerned about this threat than the other Councils, and as a counter-measure to the decay of domesticity they became very active in promoting domestic science classes as part of the educational system. Where other Local Councils sought to foster domestic skills by establishing a few cooking schools,

The Vancouver Local Council takes a wider view – they aim at educating not a few, but all girls who pass through the Public Schools, by requiring that Domestic Science shall in future be a compulsory part of the system, from the primary classes upward.
They feel that the whole mental attitude of Canadian women towards Home and “Home-making” needs to be changed; and sound instruction on Domestic Economy be a part of every woman’s education. (Bayfield 1908, 91)

The domestic science movement rose to prominence in the first three decades of the twentieth century, and it combined traditional domestic ideals with a scientific infatuation for standardization and hygiene – manifesting the dominant preoccupations of the day. The segregation by gender in schools, with girls taking domestic science and boys training in crafts that would prepare them for the workplace, represented a kind of social engineering in support of the segregation of labour, with girls being syphoned into unpaid labour in the home, and men into skilled labour in the paid workforce. Barbara Riley has studied the history of domestic science in British Columbia and explains that “Contemporary beliefs held that industrialization had seriously dislocated Canadian society and that with the disintegration of the home, the school had to take an active role in shaping those who would shape the social order” (42). Maintaining gender norms was a crucial part of this social vision, and proponents of domestic science appealed to nature to support differing educations, claiming that equality led to warring between the sexes:

Domestic science tries to utilize and develop the instincts which nature has implanted in every girl. . . . With co-education and competitive examinations, Canadian girls expend their energy trying to beat boys at their own game and to vindicate their emancipation in the eyes of “women with a mission.” . . . When they marry and to that extent fulfill their natural functions, they are unable to make home a fit habitation for love and happiness. (“City and the School”)

That British Columbia, more than other provinces, sought to institutionalize domestic science as a mandatory course for girls signals its profound commitment to the maintenance of traditional gender roles and to the division of labour inherent in those. Young women who were uninterested in domesticity are represented here as not just incompetent but downright combative toward men, indicating the power struggle that formed the subtext of this controversy. Domesticity was supposed
to regulate both masculinity and femininity, but if young women refused to participate in those ideals, society could be facing a serious upheaval.

The suggestion that equal education led directly to gender conflict and that such conflict could be offset by reaffirming domesticity and its traditional gender hierarchies indicates the marriage imperative that adhered to the cult of domesticity. Girls were not taking mandatory domestic science classes so they could set up their own homes with competence and live independently while pursuing their own careers. Marriage was absolutely the point of this gender-specific educational agenda, and once again the special priority assigned to that objective in British Columbia is telling. In a province preoccupied with its gender imbalance, which was often represented as an embarrassment of riches for women who could pick and choose from a wealth of willing bachelors, it stands to reason that girls would hardly need worry about their domestic skills, or lack thereof, in a marriage market so clearly in their favour. Yet the impulse to rehearse young women in domestic duties persisted, perhaps a symptom of the social pressure to see every last available woman married, requiring that young women be firmly persuaded to comply with that social imperative.

Working-girl culture, meanwhile, flew in the face of these conventions. Living away from family homes, either singly or with one another, and enjoying a vibrant leisure culture where they could choose to date several men at once or none at all, while at the same time earning their own money in the dangerously unregulated workplace, young working women were actively rejecting the domestic ideal and all its trappings. They often postponed marriage, at the very least until an aspiring mate could offer them more than what they made on their own. In some ways, working women could afford to impose new standards on their suitors, and those who were shrewd enough to see that marriage and motherhood would hardly reduce their workloads chose to stay on their own.
Young women gained the independence to make such choices by virtue of earning their own wages. Working girls and their paid workplaces were thus implicated in the rejection of domesticity and the decay of traditional gender roles which that rejection signified.

While female-defined jobs in the paid labour market, like sewing and laundry work, often resembled the unpaid work performed in the home, with both kinds of work drawing on the same skills and both economically undervalued, there was one striking difference. The unpaid work performed in the home was considered the eminently appropriate occupation of women: when performed well, it garnered a certain respect, and could, moreover, be ennobling both for the woman herself and for other household members. The moment those same tasks were paid for in the workplace, however, they became evidence of female degradation and moral decline. These utterly contradictory attitudes toward tasks which were otherwise so similar demonstrates how forcefully the factors of space (home versus workplace) and capital shaped the meaning of women’s work. Was the condemnation accorded to women’s paid work a kind of social recrimination meted out against women who demanded wages for work they were meant to do for free? If so, the devaluation which forced women’s work into near invisibility takes on a new set of possible meanings. There is at least descriptive merit to the idea that the censure of women’s paid labour as morally compromised could stem from a social resentment toward women who were stepping out of a traditional, self-effacing, domestic invisibility into a competitive public sector where demanding one’s worth in wages was only sensible. Such thoughts likely contributed to the ideological unease that surrounded women’s entrance into the workplace, and if this challenge to the gendered status quo is what the young generation of single working women represented to a traditionally-minded majority, one can see why
they became such targets of control and reform and why those reformist impulses adhered so closely to women's contested roles as paid workers.

Young working women were enmeshed in a powerful politics of representation. Maternalistic women's reform groups often sought to depict them as innocent victims of a mercenary capitalism, forced into the public workplace despite the natural appeal of domesticity. And this figure of industrial victimization was called upon periodically to symbolize the community under threat: if prostitution and vice were the issue, narratives of the working girl lured into sexual downfall by answering a job advertisement quickly became ubiquitous. And when Vancouver felt that its white majority might be threatened by unchecked immigration, tales quickly surfaced of helpless white working girls imperilled by mixed-race workplaces. Yet these carefully constructed and swiftly promulgated social narratives tended not to bear up well under closer scrutiny. Janet Smith's death seemed initially to confirm all the stereotypes about the potential danger posed to young white women in the mixed-race workplace. But on further investigation, not only did the case against the Asian co-worker disintegrate, but the pure and innocent representation of the victim proved untenable, as Smith's lively social life and many admirers muddied that chaste narrative of spotless whiteness. The representation of working girls as hapless victims of urban industrial conditions was never fully adequate for young women who often claimed, as does Mackay's shopgirl character, that "A girl can always take care of herself" (125).

The enthusiasm with which young working women were joining the workforce and using their independence to join a wholly unsupervised youth culture that valorized being single and unchaperoned signified to many a marked decay in social and moral standards. And yet the impulse to read these new cultural practices as simple moral depravity demonstrates the interpretive shortcomings of the social establishment. For many working women, their leisure pursuits
harmonized nicely with their working life, solidifying social ties and creating a vital sense of community, especially productive in times of activism and resistance, when these social ties served to inspire the loyalty and spirit required for a strike or protest. Young women workers, like Vancouver’s laundry workers in 1918, organized dances during their strikes, using the event to demonstrate solidarity while syphoning the proceeds into the strike fund. Such demonstrations of resistance and activism on the part of working women were often battles over representation, with women demanding more recognition, monetary or otherwise, for their roles as workers, while battling representations (like the *Sun*’s depiction of cigar-stand women) that denigrated their value as workers while attacking their moral worth as women. These battles which often pitted young women workers against older male employers show women fighting for recognition as legitimate and valued members of the workforce, while employers sought to denigrate their worth by reiterating the fact that they were “just girls.” One laundry owner at the BC Royal Commission on Labour in 1912 defended the low wages he paid female employees by stating that “They are girls, mind you. They are not women. You can’t class these girls that get $1.25 a day as women” (105). For this employer, the gender and youth of his employees was justification enough for meagre wages – the nature of the work, or the skills, effort, or responsibilities involved never even made it to into the discussion. His comments are reflective of the pervasive tendency to focus solely on working women’s gender status – on their girlhood – to the exclusion of their identities as workers and as wage-earning members of a valuable labour force.

The concerns of working women, such as low wages, working conditions, and union membership, even when identical to those of male workers, were always addressed in a way that made gender the primary factor: would low wages lead to prostitution? Would working conditions affect future motherhood? Shouldn’t female union members form their own auxiliaries? A working
man, and particularly a married working man, was considered to be fulfilling his duties to family and society through working; as a worker he demonstrated a familiar and legitimate form of masculinity, and his work was often thought to be ennobling and a good in itself. The construction of gender that gave wage-earning men an almost automatic right to the identity of worker, with the social and political recognition that accompanied that status, and yet denied women any similar recognition is important to our understanding of Canada's social history, for it was a major organizing principle in questions concerning work.

British Columbia longed to embrace a traditional and primarily middle-class social ideal with men working to support families where wives ran the household and daughters helped in the family home until getting married themselves. The concept of the family wage paid to men supported this vision, while the tiny wages paid to young women reflected that they should be living at home – not depending on a paycheck that was never meant to grant them financial independence. But the imposition of these ideals on the social milieu characteristic of British Columbia at the turn of the century was not a seamless process. A proportionally large male population which tended to embrace a hard-working, hard-drinking, bachelor lifestyle did not always feel itself in need of a temperate domestic influence. And especially in urban areas like Vancouver, women were finding the options afforded them in non-domestic labour more attractive than the isolated and repetitive work in the home. When she finds a job as a shopgirl, the heroine of Isabel Ecclestone Mackay's *House of Windows* cries "I've done it! . . Let's celebrate! . . I've got a place, a position, a job, a 'sit'! I'm an independent working person. Votes for women!" (111). Here, employment, independence, and women's rights are all united in a moment of unqualified delight by the newly hired shopgirl, who, in this working-girl narrative, has just set foot on the path to adventure, romance, and moral triumph.
At the turn of the century, Vancouver's young working women were beset by a representational politics that was either forcing them into invisibility or depicting them as the morally compromised result of urban industrialism. The reigning ideology that held the categories of woman and worker to be mutually exclusive undermined women's claim to the credit due to them as a valued labour force. This persistent tendency to align productive labour with masculinity and to overlook the labour of women has persisted well into the twentieth century and into the academic study of these topics, so that social and labour history continue to segregate questions of work from questions of gender. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf recommends that in order to appreciate women's neglected roles in history we must learn to think "poetically and prosaically at one and the same moment, thus keeping in touch with fact – that she is Mrs. Martin, aged thirty-six, dressed in blue, wearing a black hat and brown shoes; but not losing sight of fiction either – that she is a vessel in which all sorts of spirits and forces are coursing and flashing perpetually" (50). With her everyday struggles and independent spirit, the figure of the working girl seems uniquely equipped to elicit just this kind of dual perception. The working girl and the representational complexities surrounding her, then, are important to our understanding of Vancouver's past, for rather than being a simple addition to an account of the city's past, she shows how constructions and representations of gender powerfully shape our understanding of historical circumstances. When she entered the workplace, the working girl stepped into a whirlwind of contradiction about women's place, the perils of the city, and the meaning of work, and she foreshadowed much about women's changing roles in the twentieth century.
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