

Alien Animals and American Angels: The Commodification and Commercialization of the Progressive-Era White Slave

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Human nature is at bottom the same the world over; and the vices which prevail abroad, once imported to our shores, will find congenial soil in which to grow here at home.¹

R. B. Perry

If there is one statement that succinctly summarizes the attitudes held by members of the Social Purity organizations about the nature of public vice in the early twentieth century, it is that of R. B. Perry. Delivered at the Eighth Special Purity Congress in Kansas City on November 9, 1914, this single sentence reinforced four separate beliefs: that mankind was a weak creature prone to temptation, that only Anglo-Saxon morality could ensure successful resistance to these temptations, that immorality was infecting the social structures of America through the non-Anglo-Saxon immigrant, and that unless confronted directly this contagion would sicken the public body of the United States. It was clear to this member of the World Purity Federation that public vice was the gravest threat facing the American population to date.

However, it was this attitude held by the social purists that illuminates the slippery, problematic nature of the white slave trade. By the time Perry spoke before the Purity Congress, the Social Purity organizations, in various forms and under various names, had been battling public vice and the perceived traffic in women for almost eighty years. The public had been alarmed and shocked by scandalous articles in major newspapers and magazines describing the existence of organizations dedicated to ensuring the continuous supply of fresh prostitutes for metropolitan brothels five years previously. The actions of the organizations ultimately led to

¹ R. B. Perry, "The Ethics of the Orient," *Light* 101 (January-February 1915): 13.

numerous public inquiries headed by such luminaries as John D. Rockefeller Jr., the Wisconsin Legislature, and the United States Senate, the substance of which culminated in President Taft signing the White Slave Traffic Act into law in 1910. Segregated metropolitan vice districts such as New York's Tenderloin, Chicago's Levee, and New Orleans' Storyville were under attack as reformers lobbied local administrations to curb the actions of prostitutes. Yet in 1915 George Mangold, the director of the School of Social Economy at Washington University, claimed that while the white slave trade had been all but eradicated and "the amount of prostitution has been greatly reduced," there was evidence that "commercialized vice is again apparent" on the streets of St. Louis.² It seemed that for all the Herculean efforts of the Social Purity organizations, prostitution still existed as a cause for concern in American society.

This dichotomy cannot be easily explained through the consideration of legal transcripts and public legislation, through police blotters or newspaper accounts, or even through the proscriptive literature produced by the Social Purity organizations themselves. Rather, by 1915 social reformers were no longer battling the existence of public vice, but were instead battling a monster of their own creation: the archetype of the White Slave. Growing out of the public campaigns of the social purity organizations as they disseminated their message of outrage against public vice, it had taken on a life of its own through the commodification of these campaigns in the form of consumable cultural artifacts. Indeed, by the second decade of the twentieth century the organized American traffic of women for the purposes of coercive prostitution had ceased to exist, if it ever existed at all, through the actions of the Social Purity organizations, but in its place now existed an enduring "urban legend" which to this day is still accepted as real. Modern social reformers and commentators are currently utilizing this archetype as the basis to confront the spread of prostitutes from the former Soviet Bloc into the west. It is important to note that the archetype actually has little to do with the reality of the prostitution, nor is it viable to claim that there existed no coercive prostitution in the United States during the Progressive Age; rather, it is the *archetype* of the organized white slave trade that is more myth than reality, and serves to obscure any reality that can be observed. In a sense the reformers promoting the archetype were more concerned with the adoption of their societal beliefs than the situations of any prostitutes within the public space. The adoption of the archetype into contemporary western culture both ensured and ensures

² George B. Mangold, "Fighting the Social Evil in St. Louis," *Light* 101 (January-February 1915): 50.

continued debate into the nature of prostitution, public morality, and the role commercial culture plays in continuing public discourse on these subjects.

The Realities of Progressive Prostitution

The belief in the existence of an organized trade in the traffic of women for purposes of prostitution was a staple of American moral reformers since the early years of the republic. In his study of prostitution in New York City, Timothy Gilfoyle noted that early nineteenth century reformers attributed the rise in teenage prostitution to seductions by “hedonistic philanderers,” and both accounts printed in the penny press and early court cases seem to indicate that there may have been some truth to the charges. However, he further notes that “tales of forced sexual exploitation obscured the larger reality of a prostitute’s life,” and cites both personal statements and statistical studies which indicate that most prostitutes entered the profession on their own accord for various reasons, primarily inter-familial conflict or economic concerns.³ The slippery nature of the evidence precludes the claim that there existed no forced prostitution in America throughout the nineteenth century, but it may be safe to state that there was no *organized* traffic in white, Anglo-Saxon women, either domestically or foreign born, into the United States, as was claimed by Progressive reformers; therefore, it is likely that the production of social purists existed to primarily emphasize the evils of openly tolerated red-light districts and, perhaps, to explain why there seemed to be so many prostitutes when speeches on public morality resonated with a largely female audience.⁴ There is additional, tertiary evidence indicating that there existed little traffic in white women for the purposes of prostitution in the latter half of the nineteenth century; in her biting indictment of the sex trade industry in

³ Gilfoyle, Timothy J., City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1992. Pp. 64.

⁴ Historian Ruth Davis, in her study of prostitution in the United States during the first two decades of the 20th Century, devotes an entire chapter to the white slave controversy, and attempts to address the slippery nature of the subject and evidence. “Perhaps a more useful way of distinguishing white slavery from other forms of prostitution during this historical period is to imagine a continuum along which varying degrees of force were used to bring a woman into prostitution and keep her there. At one end was white slavery, in which a maximum amount of coercion was used to sell a woman’s body for profit and in which a woman possessed nearly no avenue of escape. In essence, she was a sexual slave. At the other end of the spectrum were the more routine and casual forms of prostitution in which a woman might participate, not because she chose it out of a plethora of attractive alternatives... but because prostitution, under certain circumstances and conditions, might have appeared a better means of survival than other available choices. In between these two extremes existed forms of prostitution in which varying amounts of choice and coercion produced neither a totally passive victim nor an actor who could freely choose her own destiny.” Rosen, Ruth, The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1982. Pp. 113.

which she had been both a prostitute and a madam, Josie Washburn cites many reasons that women become prostitutes, but white slavery was definitely not one of them. As her *Underworld Sewer* was written as “an honest and candid investigation” that would hopefully “furnish such information as will cause the people of the nation to realize that they are plodding along the old, old lines, without any good results,”⁵ the fact that she did *not* mention forced prostitution indicates that there was likely little organized traffic for the purposes of coercive prostitution during the Progressive Era, and certainly no organized network engaged in the trade of white, Anglo-Saxon women.

Yet though there might not have existed any organized traffic in white women for the purposes of prostitution in the nineteenth century,⁶ the very existence of the aforementioned “red light” districts indicates that prostitution was alive and well during the Antebellum. It is into this arena that social reformers directed their energies. Largely made up of individuals whose field of experience stemmed from the nascent women’s movement, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, Civil War abolitionists, women physicians, philanthropists, and moral reformers, they felt that it was their duty to shape the development of American society for the betterment of all. David Pivar claims that this coalition “hoped for the reconstitution of society upon a new cultural foundation,” one that, through the “freeing” of the prostitute from her “chains,” would raise societal standards and require men to operate on the same plane of purity that was once only required of women.⁷ Yet he is quick to note that the general aims of the social reformers frequently diverged into side projects such as temperance, child rearing, and public health, and that while the reformers appeared to present a united front in their campaigns, the diverse membership frequently caused “a discrepancy between theory and practice” to develop. Because of these

⁵ Washburn, Josie, *The Underworld Sewer: A Prostitute Reflects on Life in the Trade, 1871-1909*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. Pp. 5. This work, originally published in 1909, is the only autobiography of a prostitute that has been confirmed as genuine by scholars utilizing census, banking, and marriage records.

⁶ It is important to note that the term “organized” as referred to by Progressive reformers is something of a slippery area, as it seems that the reformers relied heavily on suggestion and innuendo to make their point. When they spoke of an “organized traffic of women,” they implied a network of procurers, transporters, receivers, “processors,” salespeople, and owners who all worked in concert to enslave unwilling women into prostitution. The problem with the evidence is that none of the reformers actually spelled out this belief in full; rather, they would make a generalized statement, cite no evidence to support their assertions, and imply a vast criminal network, instead dropping vague hints at public rallies, speeches, and in progressive/reformist literature. Essentially, they repeated an unsupported claim so often that it became part of the white slave archetype, a commonly believed “fact” without supporting evidence.

⁷ Pivar, David J. *Purity Crusade: Sexual Morality and Social Control, 1868-1900*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press Inc., 1973. Pp. 7.

discrepancies it would probably be safe to say that the nineteenth century reform movement “had no philosophical consistency” and might be considered something akin to “a social religion,”⁸ and though this is no reason to summarily dismiss these movements as incoherent and ineffective it does call into question the members’ motivations and methods.

But given the lack of any substantive evidence indicating an active, organized network trading in white women for the coercive prostitution, from where did nineteenth century reformers get the idea that one existed in the United States?⁹ Most American reformers were inspired by the actions of European reformers of the same era, specifically those in England, in the wake of William Stead’s 1885 expose on coercive prostitution in the *Pall Mall Gazette*.¹⁰ Pivar notes that “purity reformers on both sides of the Atlantic willingly exploited the incident,” and that American reformers observed with interest the rise in support they and their European counterparts garnered after the expose.¹¹

Yet there existed in the United States a “romanticized concept of American life”¹² in which such incidents could not occur. In order to bring the subject to the forefront of public consciousness the WCTU initiated an expose of their own utilizing the “abolitionist rhetoric” that was so effective in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to report on an apparent case of forced prostitution.¹³ However, Pivar notes that unlike the European public, “the expose failed to spark the emotion of moral indignation” among

⁸ *ibid* 10

⁹ There is an important distinction based upon both region and ethnicity in regards to the white slave archetype. The reformers attempted to sell the idea that there existed an active network trafficking in white, Anglo-Saxon women in the absence of supporting evidence. However, during the nineteenth century there *was* an active network engaged in the trade of Asian women, notably from China, to California and the western mining towns; see Benson Tong’s Unsubmissive Women: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994) for more details. *However*, this trade seemed to be ebbing by the last decades of the Nineteenth Century, long before Progressive reformers began campaigning against prostitution, and while it is *possible* that this network represents the source of the archetype, there is little evidence supporting this supposition. This racial distinction is important as it illustrates that the reformers largely ignored the plight of coerced *Asian* women that could be documented in favor of promoting a theoretical extension of their plight onto white, Anglo-Saxon women that could not.

¹⁰ Believing in a conspiracy of silence in the traffic of young English girls to the European mainland for the purposes of prostitution, William Stead enlisted the aid of a known brothel keeper to purchase Eliza Armstrong from her parents for placement as a prostitute in Europe. After publishing his expose in the *Pall Mall Gazette* under the sensationalist title “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon,” readers engaged in public demonstrations and forced Parliament to modify the criminal laws regarding the age of consent and transportation for immoral purposes.

¹¹ Pivar, Purity Crusade, 133.

¹² *ibid* 136

¹³ *ibid*

the American populace.¹⁴ It was clear that, in order to promote their agenda of curbing the spread in public vice that was most notable in urban red-light districts, the reformers needed to alert the public as to the dangers of the white slave trade.¹⁵ But in order to raise this alarm, the reformers first needed to redefine the very nature of prostitution itself.

The Fundamentals of the White Slave

During the early twentieth century, reformers and social purists generated hundreds of thousands of pages worth of discourse presenting their ideas as to the root causes of prostitution in the United States. It is important to note that throughout all of this production, none of the reformers ever presented a solitary reason for prostitution; rather, each accepted a select group of causes from which they could select their favorite in order to decry the spread of public vice. This discourse between individual theorists existed within the public sphere in the arena of reform periodicals and proscriptive narratives, and it was through the convergence of these individual arguments that the archetype of the white slave gained weight, in a sense becoming just as real as the rhetoric of the reformers. In examining the reformist arguments regarding the perceived effects that industrialization, political corruption, public morals, alcohol, immigration, and anti-Semitism had upon female virtue, scholars can begin to understand how the mythical white slave archetype became linked to the public realities of prostitution.

All social purists believed that one reason for the apparent spread of prostitution throughout the United States during the late nineteenth century was the dehumanizing effect of modernity in the form of industrial progress, both within the public sphere and within the home. Emma Goldman, the publisher of *Mother Earth* and pro-socialist agitator, held the opinion that capitalism was “the merciless Moloch... that fattens on underpaid labor, thus driving thousands of women and girls into prostitution.”¹⁶ According to her own view of female sexuality, keeping a large group of young women in overcrowded, overheated work conditions in an industrial setting tended to sexually stimulate them, and given that the only alternative to their homes

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ The phenomenon of coercive prostitution and simultaneous exploitation of it by reformers was not mutually exclusive; it only appears as such because there is no way to truly gauge the level, experience, and life of coerced prostitutes. Given the relative lack of corroborating evidence into the nature of “real” coercive prostitution we must examine Progressive discourse about “white slavery” critically, and attempt to separate what little “real” can be uncovered from the reformers’ *belief* as to what was real.

¹⁶ Goldman, Emma. *The White Slave Traffic*. New York, NY: Mother Earth Publishing Association. 1909. Pp. 1.

outside of the sweatshop were the streets or “places of cheap amusement,” it was only natural that they would encounter the opposite sex, thus leading to sexual encounters. “That,” she claimed, was “the first step toward prostitution.”¹⁷

Others held that it was not only the industrialization of America that contributed to the decline of public morals, but actually modernity itself. As B. S. Steadwell, the editor of *The Light*, wrote,

The advent of electricity brought us the telephone which is a necessity to any modern house of shame... it made possible the degrading picture show, and inventions which have been used largely to promote and cultivate immorality... girls and women have taken their places besides boys and men in schools, colleges, stores, offices, factories, and shops... This close association has brought opportunities for sexual gratification of which full advantage has been taken. The automobile... has made possible the “joyride,” and has built up the palatial “roadhouse” or country brothel.¹⁸

Finally, it was not lost on many social commentators that it was the very people decrying the spread of prostitution and perceived white slave traffic who had made their fortunes through industrial innovation. One wag in *Puck* noted that while Rockefeller headed a New York grand jury investigating white slavery, he had once stated that “the giant monopolies of America were like American Beauty roses; a lot of small buds *had* to be sacrificed in order that one gorgeous flower might be reared on each stalk.” The commentator then linked Rockefeller’s attitudes with economic depression and “the creation of social conditions that supply the White Slave mart with plenty of raw material.”¹⁹

Conversely, there were those reformers who instead placed a great deal of responsibility for the perceived spread of white slavery on the shoulders of corrupt politicians. E. Norine Law believed that “the slum politicians... have for years drawn their chief revenue from... the promotion of the public prostitution of women.”²⁰ Oliver E. Janney claimed that the root causes of the white slave traffic were “ignorance, indifference, business

¹⁷ *ibid* 3

¹⁸ B. S. Steadwell, “Some of the Causes of Present-Day Immorality,” *Light* (September-October 1913): 29. Quoted in Langum, David J., *Crossing Over the Line: Legislating Morality and the Mann Act*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994. Pp. 21.

¹⁹ “Cartoons and Comments: Slaves and Rose Culture.” *Puck* 67, March 2, 1910, p. 1722.

²⁰ Law, E. Norine. *The Shame of a Great Nation: The Story of the “White Slave Trade.”* Harrisburg, PA: United Evangelical Publishing House, 1909. Pp. 61-2.

interests and political expediency.”²¹ But it is important to note that during the height of the white slave hysteria, no actual evidence ever emerged linking the perceived trade with any official politician of any significant power. As the scandalous actions of New York’s Tammany Hall were just coming to light during the period, it is perhaps understandable that, given the corrupt nature of the city administration, social reformers would be willing to assign blame for white slavery to public corruption,²² even though no evidence exists to support this allegation. Still, it is likely that many in the general public were willing to believe the vague, unfounded allegations, given the other, factually supported corruption uncovered by the mainstream press.

Another tactic utilized to construct the archetypical “white slave” was the act of linking prostitution with moral decay. Many social purists believed that the perceived rise in public immorality sprang directly from the sins of the parents being visited upon their offspring. Law posited a direct link when she claimed “one-half the people live in vice and immorality, increasing the population with offspring possessed of the same low standard of purity...”²³ Feminist and social activist Jane Addams disagreed with Law as to the hereditary nature of low morality, but did agree that morality played a significant part in the prostitute’s downfall. She believed that blaming economic concerns such as industrialization was a way for those women entering prostitution to avoid taking responsibility for their condition, whereas “her love of pleasure, her desire for finery, or the influence of evil companions” were the real culprits.²⁴ Madeline Southard, a reformer who made her living by traveling the country giving social purity lectures, claimed that “the dance and the theatre” caused the “ruin of vast numbers” of young women, although she saved her particular vehemence for alcohol.²⁵ Finally, the Reverend J. G. Shearer listed “immoral literature and obscene and suggestive pictures” and “immoral or unclean amusements” as two of his six causes that contributed to creating the conditions in which

²¹ Janney, Oliver Edward, The White Slave Traffic in America. New York, NY: National Vigilance Committee, 1911. Pp. 80.

²² Given the many other well-documented instances of Tammany corruption, it would be surprising to learn that the municipal governments of the era were *not* involved in coercive prostitution; however, except for a few, relatively minor instances of low-level policemen generally involved in legal prostitution, there exists no hard evidence to support such a claim. Furthermore, an argument that municipal indifference contributed to the spread of prostitution (coercive or otherwise) singles out these entities for special consideration of an indifference that seemed indicative of societal attitudes throughout the United States during the period.

²³ Law, Shame of a Great Nation, 9

²⁴ Addams, Jane, “A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil.” *McClure’s Magazine*, Dec 1911. Pp. 233.

²⁵ Southard, Madeline, The White Slave Traffic versus The American Home. Louisville, KY: Pentecostal Publishing Company, 1914. Pp. 14.

white slavery could flourish.²⁶ Technically, in none of these opinions were the reformers actually addressing the “victims” of the “white slaver;” rather, they were instead decrying what they perceived as the primary vehicles engaged in the spread of public vice. Yet by examining the descriptions provided by these reformers as to the *nature* of perceived vice, a picture emerges that indicates a clear link, at least in select individuals’ minds, between immorality and lower-class “slum” neighborhoods. Law believed that the never-ending cycle of vice and immorality existed because “those born under these terrible conditions of impurity”²⁷ lived in areas where “they see nothing but filth... they hear nothing but oaths and the vilest of language... they play around doors that look into saloons and brothels.”²⁸ These arguments indicate that there existed an ongoing debate within the reform community as to the very nature of public morality and public vice, one in which the participants tried to determine which was the cause and which the effect.

Nearly every reformer believed that prostitution and the perceived white slave traffic stemmed from America’s love of drink. Given the prominent position the WCTU held within the larger community of social reformers, it is understandable that some of the most vocal opponents of prostitution were also virulently against the production, sale, distribution, and consumption of alcohol. Law was a fervent believer in temperance, flatly stating “the money Judas took for selling our Lord into the hands of His enemies was no more blood money than that which is derived in revenue from the liquor business,”²⁹ and that “the saloon is the mightiest weapon the devil has for beating souls into his infernal kingdom.”³⁰ Indeed, it seemed to many that the decay in public morals was just a symptom of the larger problem liquor played in prostitution. Madeline Southard wrote “we cannot emphasize too strongly the part that drink plays in the ruin of girls. No girl who drinks is safe... as alcohol destroys the power of inhibition necessary to the preservation of chastity.”³¹ To select reformers, the key to curbing public immorality, prostitution, and the perceived white slave traffic was to ban all alcoholic substances.

But the above debates only addressed the problems of the traffic without actually examining the participants. There were many within the

²⁶ Roe, Clifford G., The Prodigal Daughter: The White Slave Evil and The Remedy. Chicago, IL: L. W. Walter Company, 1911. Pp. 21.

²⁷ Law, Shame of a Great Nation, 12

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ *ibid* 17

³⁰ *ibid* 19

³¹ Southard, The White Slave Traffic, 13

social purity movements who believed, given America's history as a religious and moral endeavor, that both public immorality and prostitution stemmed from immoral immigrants entering the country and "infecting" America's social body. Law believed that a large factor contributing to the moral decay in the United States stemmed from the influx of "undesirable" immigrants, namely those who did not hail from Northern or Western Europe. She wrote:

The stock of the immigrants entering the United States, and especially its cities, is growing constantly worse. Drawn first from the higher and more intelligent types of northwestern Europe, our immigration has degenerated constantly to the poorest breeds of the eastern and southern sections of the continent.³²

Indeed, there were many who considered the roots of the white slave traffic flowing into the United States to be based outside, where it was either adopted by domestic villains such as Tammany slum politicians or directly controlled by foreign elements that followed the American sexual market.³³ Reverend F. G. Terrell claimed that because "foreigners, generally, look upon America as the Garden of Eden, as the Mecca of all poor persons," foreign white slave agents (notably based in Paris and referred to as the "French Syndicate") find willing victims to "import" into American brothels.³⁴ For some reason,³⁵ the reformers frequently cited France as an originating point for the perceived white slave traffic in America, as Clifford Roe did when claiming that "it was the procurers in France who first developed the business of exploiting girls to supply the vice resorts of North America," and that "the French girl slave soon became common" in American cities.³⁶

³² Law, Shame of a Great Nation, 58

³³ It must be noted that one key element of reformer discourse into both white slavery and prostitution in general is that few of the reformers had much to say about the male customers of prostitutes, other than they were being corrupted by public vice in general. A few feminist reformers dropped vague comments that there seemed to be something of a double standard when it came to public morality, but the vast majority seemed to hold the opinion that corruption flowed from prostitute to client only.

³⁴ Terrell, Rev. F. G., The Shame of the Human Race: The White Slave Traffic. Publishing Data Unavailable. 1904. Pp. 23-4.

³⁵ It is possible that reformers were scandalized by the perceived lack of morals exhibited in the social body of France during the last twenty years of the 19th Century. Known as the *fin de siècle*, this has been characterized as a period in which French society displayed an unusual desire for sensual entertainment, and sexual liberalism ruled the day. As no scholar to date has uncovered evidence indicating American reformer attitudes toward the *fin de siècle*, this connection must remain speculative.

³⁶ Roe, The Prodigal Daughter, 99

Yet it was not just the French who were cited as instigators of the perceived traffic in women. It was certainly believed by some reformers that in many cities Jews largely ran the entire white slave network. Law claims that while covering the trial of Edward McCann, a police inspector charged with bribery for protecting the white slave traffic in Chicago, the *Forward* wrote:

Seventy-five per cent of the white slave trade in Chicago is in Jewish hands. The owners of most of the immoral resorts on the West Side are Jews. Even in Gentile neighborhoods Jews stand out prominently in this nefarious business.³⁷

Additionally, Clifford Roe claimed that among the great influx of immigrants circa 1885 “there was a great influx of Austrian, Russian, and Hungarian Jews.” In his analysis, “among these immigrants were disreputable men and boys who had learned the art of procuring [women for prostitution] from the kaftan of Eastern Europe, and they soon began to develop this traffic in America.”³⁸ To many, the alien nature of Judaism was synonymous with moral decay, and the few instances where a player in the traffic of women was Jewish seemed to reinforce their beliefs.

At the conflux of these reformist discourses existed the “white slave,” defined as an innocent white woman, usually (but not always) a second or greater generation American citizen, weakened by the convergent forces of industrial progress, alcohol, and public immorality, and thus easy prey for foreign/Jewish predators either acting directly or through their corrupt domestic agents. It is only natural that as a composite of different perceived “evils” in American society that the white slave “problem” was considered the greatest threat facing the United States. In the minds of many reformers, if the public were made aware of this crisis their natural moral fiber would focus their activism to rid America of these problems once and for all. But the reformers in the social purity movements faced a problem when attempting to rally public support against prostitution in general and the white slave traffic in particular. The intersecting streams regarding the nature of prostitution faced competition from a separate discursive stream that emphasized the moral superiority of American society and culture as promoted by such notables as Joshua Strong, Alfred Thayer Mahan, and Theodore Roosevelt. This naturally patriotic stream emphasized the positive strengths of American society, and had the unforeseen effect of shifting

³⁷ Law, *Shame of a Great Nation*, 55

³⁸ Roe, *The Prodigal Daughter*, 100

perceived moral corruptions such as prostitution into the realm of the non-Anglo Saxon immigrant.³⁹ This patriotic counter-argument had the effect of shifting responsibility for curbing the spread of such corruption from the American home to the Customs Office, whose rather effective regulation of the immigrant gave the impression that the social changes called for by the reformers were superfluous. The wider population was not responding to their entreaties through the reform publications alone; they needed to disseminate their ideas through different means. By constructing an archetype of the “white slave” through repeated intersections of prostitution’s discursive streams, the reformers could provide the public with an easily consumable cultural vehicle, one that could naturally lead the consumer to the reformer’s own conclusions as to the solution to the problem. All that was left was for the social purists to present the archetype to the public.⁴⁰

Disseminating the Archetype

Once the various “causes” of prostitution had been identified and the white slave archetype had been constructed, it was easy for the social purists to disseminate their ideological platform to the general public through the sensational press. One of the leading journalists who made his name primarily on the strength of his white slave reporting was George Kibbe Turner, whose 1909 *McClure’s Magazine* article *The Daughters of the Poor* exemplifies the use of this vehicle. The author imparted the specific message that the perceived white slave trade was a foreign infection that threatened the social body of the United States. According to Turner, the white slave trade was a “European business” under the control of “the Tammany Hall political organization” that specialized in recruiting poor women from New York tenements for distribution “to every continent on the

³⁹ See in particular Alfred Thayer Mahan, “The United States Looking Forward”; Josiah Strong, “Our Country”; and Theodore Roosevelt, “The Strenuous Life.” In each case the author/speaker emphasized the moral nature of American culture and society as justification for foreign adventures, thus emphasizing the perception that moral weaknesses such as prostitution stemmed from non-American socio-cultural failings.

⁴⁰ It is very important to note that, due to space constraints, the goals and methodology of the reformist movements has been collapsed to emphasize only the common goals and methods of numerous, diverse movements. Disparate reform movements did not “conspire” to construct/disseminate the white slave archetype, but each used similar methods to accomplish their primary goals, namely the reshaping of public society. Future research into this subject and a different, non-space dependent format will address these concerns, but for the purposes of this study some level of anthropomorphization is required to present an important argument that would otherwise be considerably longer.

globe.”⁴¹ The author takes every opportunity to reinforce the foreign nature of the trade; after summarizing the historic traffic in women (and taking every opportunity to emphasize that it originated in Eastern Europe, implying that the primary beneficiary of the trade was “the Jewish *kaftan*”),⁴² Turner then spends the next two full pages sketching a rough outline of these organizations as they were imported to New York, where they naturally fell under the corrupt control of Tammany Hall. Most of the social purist proscriptive elements are there; anti-Semitism (either a historical link to Judaism or a vague mention of a “Jewish network” appears on virtually every page of the article), foreign immigration, and loose public morals (the catch-all category which included gambling, “Raines-law” hotels,⁴³ dance halls, and saloons) are all mentioned as causes for the spread of the trade throughout New York and, ultimately, the United States. Indeed, Turner goes so far as to claim that “one half of all the women now in the business throughout the United States started their career in this country in New York.”⁴⁴ Ultimately, because of his apparent in-depth knowledge of white slavery in the city Turner was subpoenaed to testify before the Rockefeller Grand Jury investigating the trade.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Turner, George Kibbe. “The Daughters of the Poor: A Plain Story of the Development of New York as a Leading Center of the White Slave Trade of the World, Under Tammany Hall.” *McClure’s Magazine*, Nov 1909. Pp. 45

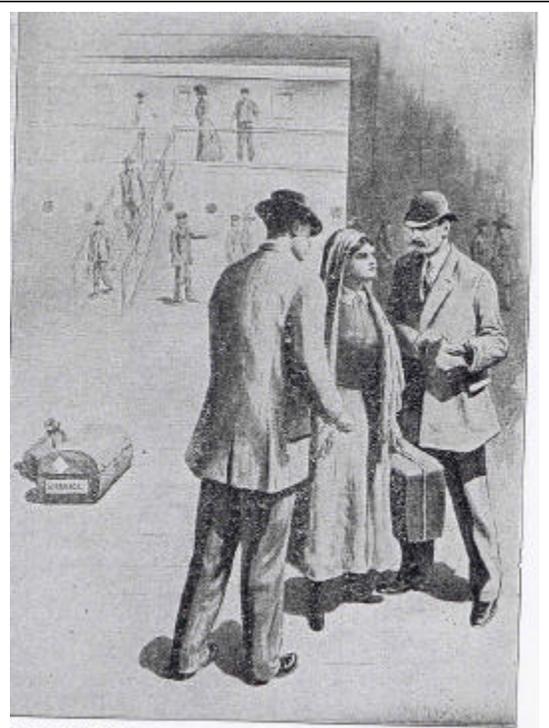
⁴² *ibid*

⁴³ Named after New York state senator John Raines, this 1896 anti-vice legislation was designed to keep working class saloons closed on Sundays and curb the practice of prostitution. The law dictated that only hotels with ten or more beds could serve alcohol on the Sabbath, but rather than curbing prostitution as intended, the Raines-law allowed saloon keepers to provide local prostitutes with on-site facilities to ply their trade. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 243-7.

⁴⁴ Turner, “Daughters,” 59.

⁴⁵ “The Rockefeller Grand Jury Report.” *McClure’s Magazine*, Aug 1910. Pp. 471-473. “Rockefeller, Jr., Takes Hold.” *New York Times*, January 10, 1910, p. 7.

But the reformers were not content to use words alone to convey their message. In many of the social purist tracts against the perceived traffic, illustrations and photographs were used as visual vehicles to reinforce the message presented in the text. Typical of these are the plates printed in Ernest A. Bell's *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls*;⁴⁶ each presented a graphic representation of a single aspect of the archetype for easy consumption. One example of these is an illustration entitled "*Friends Meeting Emigrant Girl At The Dock*," whose original caption read "foreign girls are more helplessly at the mercy of white slave hunters than girls at home."⁴⁷ Playing on both the experiences of a significant portion of the urbanized immigrant population and the domestic fear of the alien invader, this drawing portrays a young, innocent girl, newly arrived in the new world with (presumably) all her worldly possessions in her bag, flanked by two white slave procurers. The illustration includes several subtle points; the girl is only identified as a generic émigré, yet her features are clearly Northern/Western European. Her wide-eyed gaze indicates that she is an innocent, yet her overly enhanced bust (especially when compared to those on the women in the background) that cannot be contained by her simple shawl subtly informs the viewer of her rampant, "alien" sexuality. The small case to the left labeled "steerage" indicates that the émigré is probably of the lower classes, yet another indicator of both vulnerability and susceptibility to moral decay. The figures in the foreground are separated from those in the background by a significant distance; additionally, the murky, indistinct nature of the background figures seems to indicate that the white



"Friends" Meeting Emigrant Girl At The Dock. Two "procurers" meet an immigrant girl at the dock; contrast this image with the still from *Traffic in Souls* on page 29, which is more representative of the crowded conditions facing newly-arrived immigrants. In Bell's Fighting the Traffic. Facing Pp. 19.

⁴⁶ Bell, Ernest A., *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls: or, War on the White Slave Trade*. Nashville, TN: Southwestern Company, 1910.

⁴⁷ *ibid* 19 facing

slavery process not only begins at the moment the target steps foot on American soil, but that it acts to distance the target from any connection to her past. Clearly the message, featured prominently in the beginning pages of Bell's text, is that the roots of the white slave trade can be found overseas, an alien evil that was both infecting "domestic American" women and innocent foreigners. Though it is possible that some reformers were motivated through genuine concern for immigrant women, when compared to the vast majority of xenophobic rhetoric contained in reformist writings it appears that the majority felt that alien sexuality was a threat to the American public body, a belief clearly presented in *Friends*.

Compare this image with the one that immediately followed in *Fighting the Traffic*. Entitled *The First Step*, it represents the opposite side of the white slave archetype, focusing on the corruption of innocent



American girls. The caption reinforces the alien nature of the white slave trade, noting that “ice cream parlors of the city and fruit stores combined, largely run by foreigners, are the places where scores of girls have taken their first step downward.”⁴⁸ But whereas *Friends* emphasized the alien nature of the foreigner preying on its own, *First Step* takes the archetype a step further by adding the domestic element, asking, “Does her mother know the character

The First Step. The “domestic threat” counterpart to “*Meeting*.” In Bell’s *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls*. Facing Pp. 20.

⁴⁸ *ibid* 20 facing

of the place and the man she is with?" In this illustration a fresh-faced, angelic American girl, dressed in what appears to be middle-class attire, chats with a man at an ice cream parlor; the girl's graceful, swanlike appearance and underemphasized bust, especially when compared to the émigré's figure in the previous illustration, convey the impression of immature sexual innocence. But the "white slaver" at her table, rather than the generic, indistinct figures as in "*Meeting*," bears something of a sinister character, as evidence by his arched eyebrows and intense gaze. Additionally, whereas the facial features and skin tone of the "victim" appear to be Western European, the features and skin tone of the "predator" are darker, more angular, and swarthier, indicating that he is probably of either Southern or Eastern European descent. Finally, the "shopkeeper" in the background displays features that are barely human; his bushy, upswept eyebrows give him an almost horned, demonic visage, whereas his moustache gives the appearance of a scowling villain. Coupled with the

caption, the message that this vehicle imparts is that the innocent chastity of America's young women was under attack from the morally decayed, demonic alien-ness of foreign degenerates.

This then is key when attempting to understand the nature of the white slave hysteria; rather than portraying prostitutes as receptacles of alien sexual danger or domestic moral degeneracy (which, in their opinion, was bad enough), the social purists linked the commercial sex industry of the early twentieth century with the destruction of domestic American female innocence. It is even more telling when compared to the statistical evidence on the immigration status of known prostitutes and the few publicized court cases, in which nearly every woman named was an immigrant. By shifting the very nature of the prostitute from the foreign sexual animal to the fragile American angel, the social purists could portray public immorality as a threat to the moral fabric of the United States.

This was not a situation that the American public could stand for very



Two faces of the threat prostitution posed towards domestic purity. The figure on the left, from Roe's *The Prodigal Daughter* (pp. 16), claims "her clothes were taken from her," a highly sexualized description that contrasts with the angelic features of her face. The illustration on the right, from Bell's *Fighting the Traffic* (pp. 146 facing), provides an even more graphic portrayal of the threat, as the innocent, angelic girl prays for salvation moments before the evil, hulking figure in the background commences some vile, unspeakable act upon her. In neither case do the features of the "victim" portray the evidentiary reality of prostitution within the urban environment, but rather convey a different message; female virtue was a commodity that needed to be protected, else it would be "stolen" by those who would shift access to it from the family to themselves.

long. Citing the accounts printed in the scandalous press and utilizing the language of the archetype, the reformers toured the country speaking on the dangers of public vice and the particular threat that “white slavery” posed to the populace. The discourse on public morality and prostitution, in the guise of the white slave archetype, entered into a very public arena, and before too long the population insisted that the lawmakers do something about the threat.

Official Response

Representative of the many legislative investigations into the white slave traffic is that of the New York Grand Jury. In January 1910, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was chosen as the foreman of a grand jury investigating the claims made by the social purists and the press about the white slave traffic in the city. Rockefeller made clear his intention that the investigation would focus less on the sensational accounts and more on trying to ascertain the truth of the claims, and was quoted stating that “if the charges are true... then we must prepare the way for punishment, but if they are simply sensational slanders against this city of ours, they must be silenced once and for all.”⁴⁹ It is clear from the public statements of the grand jury that many of its members regarded the white slave hysteria in New York as little more than an extension of the Tammany Hall scandal of the earlier decades, and questioned Turner’s motivation for writing *Daughters* in the first place. District Attorney Whitman claimed that, given the scandalous nature of the white slave archetype and the public outcry that it inspired, “I rather think [Turner] should come to us,” and that if he had no proof to back up his allegations “he should say so now.”⁵⁰ Nowhere is this more apparent than in Judge O’Sullivan’s comments on the Rockefeller Grand Jury report in which he specifically cited Turner’s *Daughters* article in *McClure’s* as little more than an attack upon the governing structures of New York. To the grand jury, O’Sullivan stated that:

You had before you the author of the most scandalous attack upon the city. He admitted under oath that his article was overstated and deceiving. He was compelled under oath to admit that he had no evidence (not even hearsay) to support his statement.⁵¹

⁴⁹ “Rockefeller, Jr., Takes Hold.” Additionally, although many reformers were pleased with the attention Turner’s expose brought to the subject, many felt that it was somewhat lacking; Emma Goldman claimed that *Daughters* was “a very superficial investigation.” Goldman, The White Slave Traffic, 1.

⁵⁰ *ibid*

⁵¹ “The Rockefeller Grand Jury Report.” 473.

In his own defense, Turner never retracted the account he provided in *Daughters*; rather, he instead emphasized that he himself never claimed the existence of an *organized* network of white slavers, only that the practice existed. Furthermore, his rebuttal of O'Sullivan indicates that, similar to the slippery nature of prostitution itself, the existence and extent of white slavery in the United States was largely a matter of perspective.⁵² Quoted in the *New York Times*, Turner stated that "I affirmed that my article was neither more nor less than a statement of the facts *as I believed them to be* [emphasis added]."⁵³ This subjective, semantic distinction is important to understanding a large part of the white slave hysteria and how it could thrive in the large absence of any concrete evidence supporting the theory. Individuals took the basic facts on prostitution, applied their own experiences, perceptions, morality, and socio-cultural beliefs to these facts, and (depending on the combination) could either come to the conclusion that there existed an extensive network of white slavers operating in the United States (Turner), or that any instances of forced prostitution were largely isolated, individual, and limited (O'Sullivan).

Yet personal dislikes and politics were seemingly put aside initially in the interest of determining the validity of the claims. Mere days after the grand jury convened, one Joseph Kalinsky was arrested and charged with "keeping a disorderly house in Cathedral Parkway."⁵⁴ Two unidentified "girls" testified before the grand jury,⁵⁵ and less than three weeks later the first case tried under New York's new statutes restricting prostitution resulted in the conviction of Paul Trenka (or Drenka, as subsequent accounts noted), who was accused of "taking Lizzie Hartzo" (a.k.a. Harzso) from the house where she worked as a domestic and "selling her."⁵⁶

It is important to note that this is where the disconnect between the white slave archetype and the realities of early twentieth century prostitution become apparent. When the results of the investigations into real cases of prostitution were compared to the indistinct, amorphous accounts printed in the scandalous press, the public whose outcry led to the investigations in

⁵² Though it may be argued that O'Sullivan's desire to discredit Turner was a reflexive attempt to preserve New York City's image, it is more important to note that Turner himself backed away from his generic, implied argument that he put forth in *Daughters* to emphasize the few kernels of fact that he could prove. Conversely, Turner himself never actually attacked "the city" as O'Sullivan claimed, but rather attacked the corrupt city administration of which, it may be argued, O'Sullivan was a member.

⁵³ "Defends White Slave Story." *New York Times*, July 2, 1910, p. XX

⁵⁴ "On the 'White Slave' Trail." *New York Times*, January 7, 1910, p. 7.

⁵⁵ "Girls Tell of White Slavery." *New York Times*, January 14, 1910, p. 18.

⁵⁶ "White Slave Conviction." *New York Times*, February 2, 1910.

New York began to question the validity of the archetype, as all of the “villains” and “victims” caught up in the Rockefeller grand jury did not fit into the neat mold presented to them by the reformers. Rather than poor, innocent women from proper, moral, middle-class American homes, nearly every article that mentioned the names of those “rescued” from prostitution were newly arrived immigrants, usually from an eastern European country, and those who had sold them were frequently fellow countrymen who enjoyed some marital or familial relationship. The reality of the white slave traffic was not matching the archetype; rather than the organized networks of procurers headed by Tammany bosses and preying on unwilling innocents torn from home and hearth, the entire affair seemed to be the bailiwick of immigrants and marginalized peoples who largely entered into the trade semi-voluntarily. Additionally, there seemed to be no indication that any attempt at organization was undertaken on the part of immigrant providers/procurers, instead consisting of seedy, solitary affairs involving limited numbers of people acting locally, with similar methodology giving the *appearance* of common cause. Indeed, the *New York Times* notes that when Paul Trenka/Drenka was sentenced to one year in the penitentiary, his “victim” Lizzie Hartzo/Harzso “started to her feet with a loud cry. ‘It is my Paul,’ she moaned. ‘Let me die! Let me die!’,” after which she was carried out of the courtroom “fainting.”⁵⁷ The emotional response of Trenka/Drenka’s “victim” indicates that, rather than existing in a predatory relationship, the first “slaver” convicted by the Rockefeller Grand Jury enjoyed some close emotional attachment with his “victim.”⁵⁸

Just how effective were newly enacted laws at halting the perceived white slave trade? In 1914 George Mangold, the director of the School of Social Economy at Washington University, believed that the legislation enacted over the previous five years had curbed the traffic, and definitively stated that “as a white slave market, the city of St. Louis has been practically taken off the map.”⁵⁹ Yet others were not so confident, as when an anonymous author in *McClure’s* wrote that after a full year of investigations, legislation, and convictions, “the group of low politicians, pimps, and strong-arm men which compose the lowest strata of Tammany Hall had lost little of their dreadful power.”⁶⁰ As the public questioned the archetype and the police nabbed small-time criminals, the public aspect of the reformist

⁵⁷ “Jail Another White Slaver.” *New York Times*, February 19, 1910, p. 3:7.

⁵⁸ This affair is the only record of a white slavery trial to be found within the press. After this affair played its course, subsequent trials were very short on details, frequently failing to even reference the names of the accused. It is possible that this account detailed may be an exception, rather than a rule.

⁵⁹ George B. Mangold, “Fighting the Social Evil in St. Louis,” *The Light* 101 (January-February 1915):50.

⁶⁰ “‘Daughters of the Poor’ One Year Later.” *McClure’s Magazine*, Nov 1910. Pp. 120.

campaign began to unravel. The public examined the reality of coercive prostitution and found that few of the reformer's claims were valid, and while they may have accepted the "public morality" aspect of the movements' drive against prostitution in general and its perceived corrosive effects that it had upon the American social fabric, they began to disbelieve in the existence of a vast white slave network dedicated to the traffic of white women.

Indeed, it seems that five years after the hysteria cooler heads were beginning to prevail, examining the claims made by the social purists, scandalous reporters, and government investigators critically. Writing in 1914, an analyst in *Current Opinion* displayed a keen understanding of the relationship between the sensational news reports and the rising commodification of the white slave, noting that the hysteria generated by the campaign resembled the "popular gullibility... of the witchcraft days in old Salem."⁶¹ The "responsible" press too seemed to question the claims of the sensationalists and the purists, possibly in an attempt to reconcile rampant rumors with what little facts that could be verified and to calm frayed nerves:

Dailies like the *Chicago Record-Herald*, the *Albany Press*, the *Baltimore American*, the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, the *New York Sun*, and many others, have attacked the power of the catchword "white slavery," and have attempted to extinguish the conflagration of hysteria which has in many American cities followed the vague but sensational accounts of mysterious poisoning and abductions of young girls.⁶²

The hysteria eventually caused rescue workers, exhausted by a near-constant deluge of demands for them to do something about the situation, to refute the white slave archetype. "We frankly say that there never was a joke of more huge proportions perpetrated upon the American public than this white slave joke," stated A. W. Elliot, President of the Southern Rescue Mission. "There is scarcely a simmering of truth in the various stories of so-called white slavery... There have been a few girls lured into places and outraged and then murdered; but that is not white slavery, that is cold-blooded murder..."⁶³ While this may appear on the surface as semantic hair-splitting, it is important to note that some within the reform movements

⁶¹ "Popular Gullibility as Exhibited in the New White Slave Hysteria." *Current Opinion*, Feb 1914. Pp. 129.

⁶² *ibid*

⁶³ "Is White Slavery Nothing More Than A Myth?" *Current Opinion*, Nov. 1913. Pp. 348.

themselves began to deny the existence of an organized network engaged in the sexual bondage of coerced women as the archetype interfered with their labor to redeem the “real” prostitute.

Yet at the same time, the public was deluged with commodified white slave cultural products, as plays and films based upon the archetype were “attractions which crowd theaters” and had become “a source of substantial revenue to theatrical managers.”⁶⁴ One reporter on the *San Francisco Bulletin* stated that “the public love of the exaggerated and the sensational and its care-free avoidance of facts and cruel truths...is responsible in part for this slavery,” wisely disconnecting the white slave archetype as portrayed in popular culture from the harsh realities (such as alcoholism, drug addiction, venereal disease, poverty, and physical abuse, just to name a few) experienced by prostitutes in the 1910’s.⁶⁵ Indeed, in creating the archetype the social purists had done their job too well; one correspondent in the *New York World* claimed that after his wife attended a lecture on white slavery, “she is... of the opinion that there is an organization as formidable as the Steel Trust working day and night in the interest of vice,” and that it was a formidable task for him to convince her that more than half the male population of the United States was not engaged in the white slave trade.⁶⁶ The public was disappointed as well; one letter to the editor of the *New York Times* disappointedly asked, “Are they the only kind of white slaves we have?”⁶⁷ Before too long the archetype vanished from the pages of the responsible mainstream press. But in 1910, during the height of the hysteria, the constant repetition of the social purists and sensational reporters had allowed the archetype to take on something of a life of its own. Though the white slave had largely vanished from the pages of periodicals and out of the public discourse by 1915, production of cultural artifacts depicting the white slave and her sexual bondage continued, albeit for popular entertainment rather than public reform.

Selling the “White Slave”

David Langum, when he attends to the products created during the white slave hysteria, argues that they evolved concurrently with the discourse generated by the Social Purity organizations and seems to imply that they existed in a parallel yet separate stream that contributed to the

⁶⁴ “Popular Gullibility,” *Current Opinion*.

⁶⁵ *ibid*

⁶⁶ *ibid*

⁶⁷ “White Slavery Buncombe?” *New York Times*, May 24, 1910. Pp. 8.

hysteria.⁶⁸ By examining the reform movement and these products produced at the same time as complementary he ignores the *intentions* of the producers of these products, which illustrate the division between those with the aim of spreading the archetype in an attempt to reform American society and those with the desire to profit from such dissemination. It can be argued that the social reformers intended the cultural products to be used as a sort of “call to arms” against the perceived rise in public vice, but it is highly unlikely that Samuel H. London, producer of the film *The Inside of the White Slave Traffic*, was motivated by his moral concerns.⁶⁹ Rather, the creators of cultural artifacts had adopted the white slave archetype during the height of the hysteria in 1910, and in discovering that the subject matter was profitable they continued to produce literature, fine art, and films to satisfy the public’s near insatiable thirst for scandal and titillation. Additionally, by cloaking their works in the aura of “public service,” they could avoid censure for contributing to the corruption of public morals at the hands of the very social purists who had created the archetype in the first place.

The first cultural artifacts produced during the height of the hysteria were literary in nature. Indicative of this trend in the early years of commodification is Reginald Wright Kauffman’s *The House of Bondage*. First published in the summer of 1910, it tells the story of Mary, a.k.a. Violet, an innocent country girl who is lured to the big city by a professional white slave procurer. Once she is “broken in,” she is put to work on the streets, victimized by the police, robbed of her money by her pimps, becomes an alcoholic, starves, and is robbed again (this time by her landlord). She finally gains her revenge upon the man who procured her by infecting him with the virulent sexually transmitted disease from which she is dying. The initial reviews were mixed; Hutchins Hapgood claimed that the book, while “able... well written, well constructed, lucidly conceived...” contained “no vision.”⁷⁰ Conversely, the *Chicago Evening Post* claimed that it was a “social tract thinly disguised as fiction,” while a reviewer in *Life* claimed that it was “not even distantly related to literature. It is ephemeral fiction of excellent technique...”⁷¹ The general consensus of the reviewers

⁶⁸ Langum, *Crossing Over the Line*, 33-34.

⁶⁹ Indeed, Justice Gavegon of the New York Supreme Court went so far as to claim that the film was produced “not for the uplift of *public* morals but for *private* gain.” Throughout 1913-1914 the courts and social reformers argued amongst themselves and with cinematic producers as to the public benefit versus the corruptive risk associated with the showing of the white slave films. See Grieverson, Lee, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-20th-Century America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004. Pp. 151-191.

⁷⁰ Hapgood, Hutchins. Review of *House of Bondage*, by R. W. Kaufmann, *A Review of Books and Life* 32 (October 1910): 178.

⁷¹ Review of *House of Bondage*, by R. W. Kaufmann, *Current Literature* 49:6 (December 1910): 14.

was that Kaufmann wrote *House* in order to further the cause of the reformers in their campaign against the perceived white slave organizations.⁷²

Yet even within this early text there are elements designed to titillate the reader. Given the white slave archetype had informed any potential readers of the ultimate fate of Mary, it should come as no surprise that the last pages of the book describe her flirtation with suicide. She gathers the strength for one last attempt at redemption – and is rebuffed by the only person in the narrative who did not care that she was a prostitute. The entire work consistently sets Mary up for a fall, constantly raising her hopes only to dash them again on the next page. In *House*'s world, there is little human kindness and absolutely no chance at redemption or salvation, which would seem to contradict the reformers' stated goals in eradicating prostitution and redeeming fallen women. Additionally, the text could only be called a social tract in the loosest sense of the word; rather, it appears as an early form of commercialized pornography, utilizing metaphoric language to detail the misogynistic treatment of the heroine. Whereas the reformer white slave narratives would cut away from the moment of a victim's ultimate fall from innocence, Kaufmann instead lovingly relates the hellish nightmare that Mary is forced to endure:

That which had happened – there memory, in a blinding blast, reasserted itself. What had been but half-wittingly accepted was now wholly known. Hot irons were branding upon her brain the full history of all that had occurred: the deeds for which she had at last learned the name, and the deeds that, even in her own frightened soul, were nameless. There was nothing – nothing of her, hand and foot, and mouth and eye and soul – that was not defiled.⁷³

Passages such as these indicate that the author was less concerned about spreading the word about the traffic in women, and more concerned with

⁷² There may have been some tenuous connection between Kaufmann and another Progressive author of the day, Edith Wharton. It is interesting to note that both *House of Bondage* and Wharton's *House of Mirth* share the same basic theme and structure, where a young, pure American girl is seduced by glamour and wealth, and is destroyed through the heartless actions of those around them. However, the differences between Kaufmann and Wharton are just as telling; *Mirth*'s Lily Bart is a social climber whose downfall stems as much from her ambition as from those around her, whereas *Bondage*'s Mary/Violet is purely a victim of male sexual and economic aggression. It may be possible that *Mirth* may have been partially inspired by the white slave controversy around the turn of the century, but as it is missing key elements of the archetype and as Wharton never spoke directly towards the white slave controversy this is a purely theoretical connection at best.

⁷³ Kauffman, Reginald Wright. *The House of Bondage*. New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1910. Pp. 51.

creating a popular, highly sexualized narrative that popularized on the archetype and the hysteria of the era. As Langum notes that *House of Bondage* went through eleven printings in less than nine months⁷⁴ and as his book was adapted as a motion picture, it appears that Kaufmann made a tidy profit off of his endeavor no matter his original motivation.

⁷⁴ Langum, Crossing Over the Line, 33.

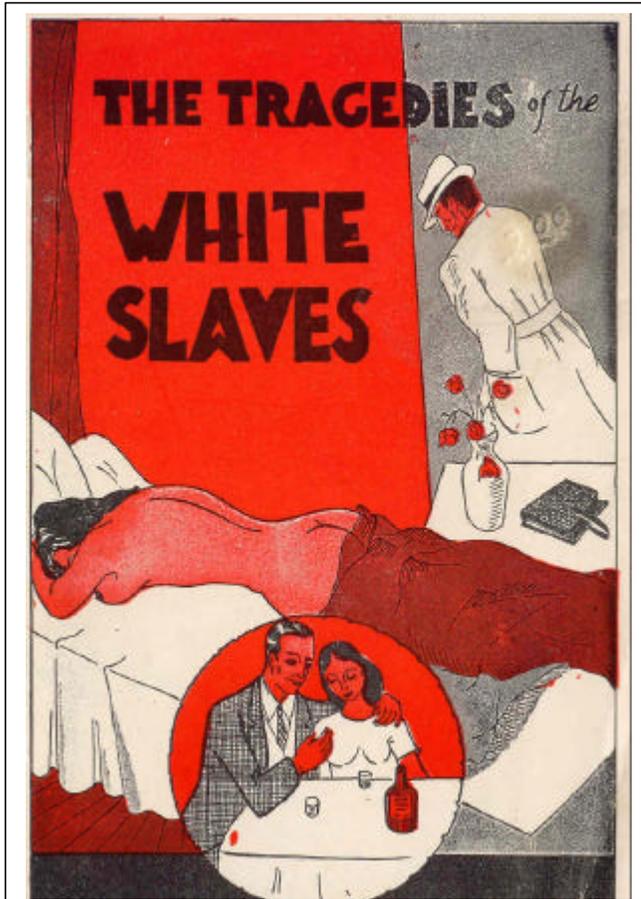
Another type of literary commodity utilizing the white slave archetype was the production of works that billed themselves as proscriptive cautionary tales in the tradition of the productions of the social purity organizations, but which emphasized the sordid nature of the subject in a manner at which Kaufmann merely hinted. Little more than pseudo-pornographic collections of short stories, they differed from the social purity

*accounts in that they concentrated on the degradation and shame of the “fallen women” and, unlike the former accounts that proposed solutions to the dilemmas at the end of their stories, offered the impression that there existed no hope for the victims. Typical of this production is H. M. Lytle’s *The Tragedies of the White Slaves*; from the start a prospective buyer’s eye is drawn to the tri-color cover depicting the seduction and “soiling” of a presumed innocent in an explicit, crudely-drawn cartoon format. Within the book the titillation factor increases as the very language used in ten “typical” accounts of women entrapped into prostitution emphasizes the sexual nature of the subject matter as opposed to the moral. Even the forward contains*

highly sexualized language: according to the author, “the lives of 5,000 young girls are laid upon the altar of lust every year in the city of Chicago alone,” and it is the “insatiable rapacity of man, the lust of the hunt, the demands of brutish passion” that is responsible for these sacrifices.⁷⁵ Additionally, the location of the narrative had shifted from the moral plain

⁷⁵ Lytle, H. M. *Tragedies of the White Slave*. New York, NY: Padell Book and Magazine Company, @1911. Pp. 5.

to the sexualized physical plain, evident in the subtle change in brothels described as generic “houses of ill-fame” by Bell⁷⁶ to yawning market houses that “constantly [hold] forth an insatiable maw into which new blood must be poured, new lives must be thrown, more young innocents must be devoured.”⁷⁷ And whereas the traditional narratives generated by the social purity organizations tended to gloss over the “breaking” of the



The colored front cover of *The Tragedies of the White Slaves*. Note the nudity of the victim; rather than emphasizing her innocence, the publisher instead chose to emphasize her sexual exploitation.

victim, Lytle instead emphasizes the degradation using indirect, highly sexualized language such as “after the orgies which had taken place while I was lying helpless and frightened”⁷⁸ and “I was turned out of that hotel near midnight in the rain without a cent of money in my pockets, bleeding from the outrages from which I had suffered...”⁷⁹ Still, all the old conventions of the white slave myth are here: the majority of the white slavers and brothel owners (when even mentioned) are either foreign or Jewish, the victims are innocents from rural/small town America, and the metropolitan/state governments do not act due to corruption and financial concerns.

⁷⁶ Bell, *Fighting the Traffic*, 183.

⁷⁷ Lytle, *Tragedies*, 6.

⁷⁸ *ibid* 105

⁷⁹ *ibid* 106

Meanwhile, in the world of fine art, around 1913 the sculptor Abastenia St. Leger Eberle presented a statuette entitled *The White Slave*. This work portrays a young, barely pubescent girl, bound and in full undress, in the middle of her “auction” by a white slaver. Besides the titillation factor that such a work would inspire, it is interesting to note the dissimilar features



The White Slave, a sculpture by Abastenia St. Leger Eberle. *Woman's Art Journal* (Spring/Summer 1986) 33. This sculpture is reminiscent of images featuring an Antebellum southern slave auction, only emphasizing a racial inversion between auctioneer and victim.

of the figures. The trafficker himself is depicted as black, a sharp contrast to his white victim, adding the racial component that was missing in the literary white slave artifacts. Here was a physical representation of the ultimate white slave archetype; a young, innocent white girl in the process of being auctioned for sexual servitude by a non-white, animalistic “other.”⁸⁰ There is no surviving record of the artist’s intentions in creating this piece, and biographic information on Eberle is sketchy; however, Langum claims that after this photograph appeared on the May 3, 1913 cover of *The Survey* it touched off an extensive letter writing campaign.⁸¹

But by far the most enduring, influential, and controversial cultural artifacts stemming from the adoption of the archetype were the films. Langum notes that “the white slavery movies caused the biggest

⁸⁰ One cultural connection that adds to the significance of this piece is the link between white slavery and abolitionism. As noted previously some of the reform movements were formed in the nascent years of the Civil War as abolitionist organizations dedicated to the eradication of slavery in the United States. By “flipping” the races of the figures in this sculpture Eberle could emphasize the current controversy while borrowing from reformist traditions that worked to eradicate Antebellum racial slavery.

⁸¹ Langum, *Crossing Over the Line*, 33.

sensation,”⁸² and indeed at times the controversy surrounding the production and display of these films was more intense than that of the reformers’ campaign against the white slave traffic. But more than that, producers of popular films quickly discovered that white slavery subject matter could be very lucrative.

Perhaps the most popular and financially successful film was Universal’s 1913 *Traffic in Souls*. Written by Robert MacNamara (perhaps better known for *Ireland, a Nation*)⁸³ and directed by George Loane Tucker,



An original shot from *Traffic in Souls* of a white slaver “luring” two unsuspecting Swedish girls to a brothel. This scene caused the extras, who happened to be real immigrants from Sweden, to protest the staged abduction to the point of physically confronting the “white slave” actors, forcing the director to reshoot on an abandoned waterfront. From Lee Grieveson’s *Policing the Cinema*, pp. 154-5.

the story line contains all elements of the white slave archetype; predatory slavers lurking in public areas for unsuspecting women, economic necessity forcing innocent girls out of the house, and how low and popular amusements threaten virtue. Each scene was written and filmed to simultaneously reinforce the archetype while

providing titillation to the viewer. Shot on a shoestring budget of only \$5,000, the film took in over \$450,000 at the box office,⁸⁴ an impressive amount considering that the average price of a ticket to such a film cost only twenty-five cents.⁸⁵ Yet reformers, though encouraged by the apparent interest the public had in learning about such social problems, evidently saw the white slave films as a threat to public morality, as they obtained

⁸² *ibid*

⁸³ “Notes Written on the Screen.” *New York Times*, Sep 20, 1914. Pp. X6.

⁸⁴ Sloan, Kay, *The Loud Silents: Origin of the Social Problem Film*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988. Pp. 84.

⁸⁵ Prices based on two advertisements in the *New York Times* of December 9, 1913. On this date *Traffic in Souls* played four shows at Weber’s Theatre, while at the Park Theatre four showings of *The Inside of the White Slave Traffic* cost the same. Display Ad, *New York Times*, Dec. 9, 1913. Pp. 20.

injunctions through the police department to ban the showings of such fare.⁸⁶ The controversy surrounding the film's display and the reformers' attempts to stop it provide perhaps the clearest example of the archetype gaining independence from its creators; in a sense, the social purists had no problem defining, promoting, and railing against the archetype so long as they were the only people able to define, promote, and rail.⁸⁷ Further evidence of the disconnect between the film's producers and the reformers can be found within the film itself; the head of the white slavery organization (Trubus, a not so subtle anagram of Caesar's betrayer) in *Traffic* uses the offices of a fictional social purity organization as a front for his criminal activities. Furthermore, modernity and technological innovation, rather than a threat to public morality as some reformers believed, in fact primarily brings Trubus to justice through the technological innovation of his last victim's father (a remote recording device, which the police in the film set up as an illegal wiretap).⁸⁸

⁸⁶ "Plan New Film Fight." *New York Times*, Dec 30, 1913. Pp. 5.

⁸⁷ It should be noted that there is no evidence that the reformers wished to profit from the archetype; indeed, they may have fully believed in their cause. In a similar vein, it is possible that the producers of the white slave films truly believed that they were creating their works for the public good. But the disparate and (at times) contradictory natures of both groups tend to blur individual motivations, and all that is left in the historical record is a struggle for control of the archetype. The conclusions reached within this essay are through extension of conflicts between social purists and filmmakers on other topics, such as fight films and physical hygiene films. In these cases both sides were locked in a conflict to determine content, distribution, and presentation to the viewing public. For longer studies of these subjects, refer to Sloan's The Loud Silents and Grieverson's Policing the Cinema.

⁸⁸ *Traffic in Souls*. George Loane Tucker, dir. 1913. Copyright Kino International Corp., New York, NY. 1994.

Yet while the white slavery hysteria died down when public attention revealed the slippery, subjective nature of the subject, the melodramatic white slave films began to lose their appeal to audiences. Indeed, scholars of early twentieth century film note that by 1914, due to the sheer volume of fictional white slave cultural artifacts, the entire subject began to “appear ludicrous.”⁸⁹

Filmmakers began to parody popular white slave films;

1914’s *Traffickers in Soles* was a comedy that

played directly off of 1913’s *Traffic in Souls*.⁹⁰ Clearly, by 1920 there existed a complete disconnect between the social purists, who still campaigned to stop the spread of public immorality, and the white slave archetype, as evidenced by the drive to ensure that the nascent National Association of the Motion Picture Industry⁹¹ in 1916 “fail” any film that contained the theme of “white slavery.”⁹² Indeed, because of this self-regulation to avoid government interference in their nascent industry, 1916’s *Is Any Girl Safe* must stand as the last white slave film of the Progressive era; beyond this point, the subject becomes largely taboo in the motion picture industry. But the hard work had already been done, and the white slave archetype existed separate from the discursive streams of the reformers.



Promotional still from *Traffic in Souls*. The social purists felt that displaying actions such as the drugging and assault of women, violence, and criminal conspiracy were threats to public morality, ignoring the fact that the film was displaying the exact message that the reformers themselves were presenting in narrative and public speaking formats. Image from Lee Grieveson’s *Policing the Cinema*, pp. 163.

⁸⁹ Sloan, *The Loud Silents*, 85

⁹⁰ *ibid*

⁹¹ Established in July 1916, this organization was tasked with enacting a series of guidelines designed to encourage self-regulation of the film industry to avoid reformist agitation and legal troubles springing from the content of films.

⁹² Grieveson, Lee, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004. Pp. 206.

The New White Slaves

Almost ninety years later, it appears that concern over coercive prostitution is once again entering the public space. In the *New York Times Magazine* of January 24, 2004, Peter Landesman wrote of the contemporary traffic in women across international boundaries for the purpose of sexual exploitation. “Because of the porousness of the U.S.-Mexico border and the criminal networks that traverse it,” he bluntly stated, “the towns and cities along that border have become the main staging area in an illicit and barbaric industry, whose ‘products’ are women and girls.”⁹³ To the reader, this shocking expose into the illicit world of sexual slavery would be a revelation of a horrific crime that preys on the innocent.

Yet at the same time Landesman’s article could have easily been torn from the pages of a Progressive Era scandalous newspaper; although the actual statistics, legislators, and organizations reflect the United States of the early twenty-first century, the arguments are virtually identical to those published by Turner in *Daughters of the Poor*. The author claims that Kevin Bales, a modern-day reformer, estimates at least ten thousand people are trafficked into the United States each year for the purpose of sexual exploitation; there are anywhere between thirty and fifty thousand “sex slaves in the country at any time.” And they are allowed to exist because, per a “senior state department official... we are not looking for them.”⁹⁴ Today the perceived white slave organizations are based out of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, utilizing such methods to entice susceptible women as advertising for nanny positions in the United States, or scouting for models and actresses. Others promise waitress positions in Paris.⁹⁵ And these white slave networks “tend to be well-oiled monoethnic machines,” staffed by cruel, ruthless Russians.⁹⁶ Indeed, today several quasi-reformist organizations have sprung up to combat this perceived threat, operating under names like the International Justice Mission, Reaching Out, and the Bilateral Safety Corridor Coalition. But though the

⁹³ Landesman, Peter. “The Girls Next Door.” *New York Times Magazine*, Jan 24, 2004. Pp. 32.

⁹⁴ *ibid*

⁹⁵ *ibid*

⁹⁶ Landesman does not definitively claim violent mental imbalance, but the language he utilizes to describe the ruthlessness of the Russian white slavers certainly gives that impression. The author writes that a former white slave told him that her smuggler, one “Alex,” claimed that “if she didn’t show up at the airport, ‘I’ll find you and cut your head off.’ Russians do not play around. In Moscow, you can get a bullet in your head just for fun.” While it is certainly possible that Landesman is using these statements as literary descriptors to differentiate between slave and procurer, his choice of words has the effect of shifting both to the extreme ends of the moral spectrum, highlighting both the innocent nature of the victim and the bestial nature of her smuggler, with the result of reducing both to archetypical caricatures. *ibid* 33

article is full of dire statistics, heart-rending quotes, and a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, like Turner's *Daughters* the expose is long on emotion and supposition, and short on evidence. All his "victims" are given pseudonyms, and the only concrete "white slave" cases that he cites are small, one-to-three man affairs with limited resources and few prostitutes. His accounts, while alarming, are entirely anecdotal. Like the Progressive Era reformers, Landesman explains away the slippery, tenuous nature of his expose by citing fears of retribution on the part of the victims.⁹⁷ Though the accounts that the author cites *seem* to report on a vast network engaged in coercive prostitution, he provides little in the way of evidence to support his allegations, other than citing "experts" who themselves provide little supporting evidence.

And once more, racism and anti-Semitism are again part of this new discursive stream. Canadian investigative reporter Victor Malarek's *The Natashas*, a recent book-length "investigation" into forced prostitution throughout the world, cites Israel as a central clearing house in a global sex-trafficking network.⁹⁸ According to the author, "indifference toward trafficked women appears to be par for the course in the office of Israel's attorney general," and that the police are given orders not to interfere with the operation of brothels unless there is a public complaint.⁹⁹ Cases of white slavery in Israel are "routinely disposed of through plea bargains," and a stiff sentence for a policeman convicted in trafficking was "six months' community service."¹⁰⁰ Like Landesman's article, *The Natashas* is long on emotion, supposition, and anecdote, and short on concrete evidence. Even a cursory reading indicates that, save for 21st Century trappings, Malarek's study could have easily been produced during the height of the white slave hysteria. When compared to almost a full century of legislation, agitation, and activism against the traffic of women, both Landesman and Malarek's works indicate that either the white slave traffic is a massive, ultra-secret master criminal organization, spanning the globe and able to act at a whim, or it is once more the stuff of highly slippery and subjective evidence, constructed and presented in a way to further neo-reformist goals and

⁹⁷ *ibid*

⁹⁸ While it could be argued that Malarek is only illustrating the new global white slave network within Israel, it is interesting to note the extreme lengths to which he goes in order to castigate the nation. The only purported heroes within Israel are those who work for NGOs, most notable the Israeli Awareness Center, a "nongovernmental group that specializes in research on trafficking in women and prostitution in Israel." (p. 77) All other Israelis are either indifferent to the trade or co-conspirators with the white slavers.

⁹⁹ Malarek, Victor, *The Natashas: Inside the New Global Sex Trade*. New York, NY: Arcade Publishing, 2003. Pp. 124.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid* 125

personal gain. The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle, but as in the Progressive Era the archetype is once more obscuring the reality.

And with this nascent resurgence in social reformism, the archetype of the white slave is not lurking too far behind in popular Western culture. On October 18, 2004, the CBS Network aired an episode of their hit television show *CSI: Miami*, entitled “Legal.” While investigating a murder at a nightclub, the Miami crime scene investigators uncover a criminal conspiracy headed by the owners of the club and a nearby spa to smuggle Eastern European women into the country for the purpose of forced prostitution. The climax of the episode is reminiscent of the climax of Tucker’s *Traffic in Souls*; the police race to the location where the women are kept in order to “rescue” the “victims” from their lives of shame. A reviewer of the episode claims that “human trafficking is [a] hot topic these days,” and refers the reader to an in-depth study on the white slave trade for more information... *The Natashas*, by Victor Malarek.¹⁰¹ Though there is (probably) no connection between the reviewer and Malarek, this reference indicates that just as in the Progressive Era, the archetype and reformist discourse feed and build on each other, creating a dichotomous existence that allows the other to exist while simultaneously ensuring its own survival in the public sphere.

The story of the white slave trade as it exists in reality is not one that could ever truly be told, given the slippery and subjective nature of the evidence. Depending on one’s point of view, white slavery could either be a massive criminal conspiracy on a scale never before seen in human existence; conversely, it could merely be the work of select individuals profiting from limited cases that are only linked through a general similarity of cases. But the archetype, with all of its proscriptive warnings and causal reasoning, exists separate from the reality of coercive prostitution, and instead exists in its own special place independent of the real world. Given the similar patterns developing in the realm of social reform as evidenced by the 2004 white slave products in the form of magazine articles, literary works, and popular teleplays, it appears that the archetype shows no sign that it will ever truly fade away.

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¹⁰¹ Huntley, Kristine, *Review of CSI: Miami Episode “Legal.”* October 19, 2004; available from <http://www.csifiles.com/reviews/csi/legal.shtml>; Internet; accessed December 10, 2004.

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