



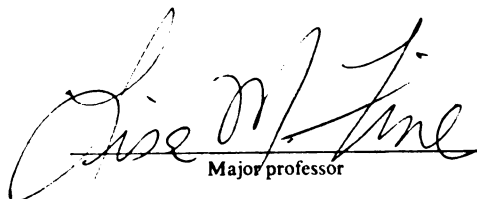
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"FIFTY-CENT SYBILS": OCCULT WORKERS AND THE SYMBOLIC
MARKETPLACE IN THE URBAN U.S., 1850-1930

presented by
Tammy Stone-Gordon

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

Ph.D. degree in American Studies


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**"FIFTY-CENT SYBILS": OCCULT WORKERS AND THE SYMBOLIC
MARKETPLACE IN THE URBAN U.S., 1850-1930**

By

Tammy Stone-Gordon

A DISSERTATION

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Program in American Studies

1998

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ABSTRACT

"FIFTY-CENT SYBILS": OCCULT WORKERS AND THE SYMBOLIC MARKETPLACE IN THE URBAN U.S., 1850-1930

By

Tammy Stone-Gordon

By 1850 the spiritualist movement in the United States had shown that performing the occult could be profitable work. By 1870, advertisements for the services of palmists, conjurors, clairvoyants, fortunetellers, mediums, and card-readers appeared regularly in the classified columns of urban daily newspapers. In the first decade of the twentieth-century, cities and states began passing laws against telling fortunes for money. This dissertation explores the meanings of occult work through newspapers, literature, film, graphics, and 1,430 seer advertisements in papers from San Francisco, St. Louis, Boston, New York, and Chicago.

Chapter One shows that middle-class perceptions of "rural innocence" allowed authors to romanticize the occult worker early in the nineteenth-century. Chapter Two asserts that mediums used the notion of "innocence" to make money channeling spirits, to assert that class disenfranchisement made mediums especially qualified, and to use prevailing notions of gender and race to justify their work. Chapter Three argues that middle-class perceptions of the "self-made man" led some writers to dismiss the occult worker as disrespectful of the market system and advertising's role in

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it. Chapter Four uses fortuneteller advertising to demonstrate that occult workers appropriated the language of professionalism in conjunction with declarations of ethnicized, racialized, gendered, and class "otherness" to validate their claims to status. Chapter Five shows how writers viewed seers through dominant notions of female professionalism. Chapter Six looks at the role of social purity and nativist language in the criminalization of fortunetelling in the early twentieth-century and shows that seers responded to criminalization by advertising not the power of the disenfranchised self but the effectiveness of the institutions and products with which they now aligned themselves.

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TAMMY STONE-GORDON
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To My Family

My family
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My family had an important role in the production of this dissertation, and I cannot thank them enough. I am most grateful to Chris Gordon. In addition to teaching me how to ride a motorcycle and make strong wine out of various and sundry fruits (two activities that tended to make me happy even during periods of heavy data entry), he gave me unfailing support and many insights into the issues engaged in this dissertation. I would not have fulfilled any requirements toward any degree if it were not for his help. My dad, Bob Stone, found a scrap of a 1903 *Detroit Free Press* when he was overhauling the pneumatic system of an old church building. This piece of paper containing exclusively fortuneteller advertisements was the beginning of the project. My mom, Pat Stone, encouraged me not to give up on higher education, especially when I most wanted to no longer pursue a degree. I am grateful for her encouragement. Tawni and Rob Scott, in addition to being extremely fun to be around, helped me in many ways, including lending me their truck so I could teach HST 313 in Farmington Hills. With Trevor Stone I traded satire and complaints about the crazier parts of graduate school. That helped me immeasurably.

I also would like to thank my committee. Lisa Fine was a model mentor and superb teacher. Her intellectual rigor and honesty and love of history provided me with both challenge

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and encouragement. Peter Levine gave me insightful comments on this dissertation and the guidance I very much needed to get through graduate school. Jenifer Banks showed me how good a person can be at teaching, and her comments on the literary parts of this dissertation made them much better than when initially conceived. She also opened her home to us and let me spend time with her dogs, both generous acts that I appreciate a great deal. Victor Jew taught the economic history seminar in which I began formulating this project. Doug Noverr encouraged me to participate in the PCA, which is something I will be grateful for for a long time. He also found me a laptop to use during the initial research stages on the advertisements. The following are folks whose teaching and mentoring have also been an inspiration: Gary Hoppenstand, Wilma King, Harry Reed, Joyce Ladenson, George Cornell, Steve Rachman, and Dean Rehberger.

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Quinlan-Leiby,

Gebhart. I als

Rosemary Possa

Theresa Evans,

Couture, and Je

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Quinlan-Leiby, Adrian Gaskins, Tonita Branan, and Mary Gebhart. I also owe thanks to Jill Anderson, Christy Rishoi, Rosemary Possanza, Allyson Samuel, Tony Michel, Andy and Theresa Evans, Jackie Carr, Dagny VanDuine, Hillary Nunn, Amy Couture, and Jeffrey Miller. Time spent with you all made my run here at Michigan State worthwhile.

List of Figures

Introduction: F

Chapter One: T
Symbol of Rural
1822-1852.....

Chapter Two: W
Mediums: Medium
Inequality.....

Chapter Three:
Aversion to all
and the Self-Made
Douglass.....

Chapter Four: "S
Professionalism a
1910.....

Chapter Five: A
"oman Lack Me";
James, Davis, and

Chapter Six: "Wh
Myths and the End
1930.....

Conclusion: Occu

Appendix.....

Bibliography.....

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	x
Introduction: Fifty-Cent Sybils and Symbolic Marketplace....	1
Chapter One: The Rural Occult Worker as a Middle-Class Symbol of Rural Innocence in Irving, Sedgwick, and Hawthorne, 1822-1852.....	19
Chapter Two: White Prophetesses and the Brotherhood of Mediums: Mediumship as a Symbolic Response to Class Inequality.....	50
Chapter Three: Humbugs, Fifty-Cent Sybils and "A Positive Aversion to all Pretenders to 'Divination'": Occult Workers and the Self-Made Man in Barnum, Thomson, and Douglass.....	82
Chapter Four: "Secret Workers" and Self-Made Women: Professionalism and the Occult Workers' World, 1870- 1910.....	117
Chapter Five: A Spooky Little Girl Like You and "A Cunjuh 'oman Lack Me": The Occult and Female Professionalism in James, Davis, and Chesnutt.....	162
Chapter Six: "Wholesale Raids on Fortunetellers": Urban Myths and the End of Seer-Centered Advertising, 1890- 1930.....	213
Conclusion: Occult Workers and Lower-Class History.....	252
Appendix.....	256
Bibliography.....	265

Figure 1, page 2
of darkness to
not the medium
room. A. Medium
1975 [reprint,]

Figure 2, page 2
frontispiece, H
(Chicago, 1895)
audiences' notice

Figure 3, page 2
seer's home, acc
Dunbar, "The Sun
21, 1912. Women
daily household

Figure 4, page 2
Richard Harding
Authors from Haw
an enchanting ye
become the victi

Figure 5, page 2
advertisement, M
photograph.

Figure 6, page 2
Francisco *Examiner*
combined titles

Figure 7, page 2
Magazine Section
The anonymous aut
immigrants or Afr
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Figure 8, page 26
advertisement in

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1, page 256: A. Medium reveals how he uses the cover of darkness to convince seance participants that spirits and not the medium play the instruments brought to the seance room. A. Medium, Revelations of a Spirit Medium, (New York, 1975 [reprint, 1922 edition]).

Figure 2, page 257: Cora L.V. Hatch-Scott-Richmond, frontispiece, H.D. Barrett, Life Work of Cora Richmond, (Chicago, 1895). Early elite mediums relied on their audiences' notions of beauty and innocence to ply the trade.

Figure 3, page 258: Artist's depiction of a visit to the seer's home, accompanying the article by Olivia Howard Dunbar, "The Survival of Sorcery," *Harper's Weekly*, September 21, 1912. Women seers made room for occult work in their daily household routines.

Figure 4, page 259: Artist's depiction of Vera, frontispiece, Richard Harding Davis, Vera, the Medium, (New York, 1908). Authors from Hawthorne to James and Davis saw the medium as an enchanting yet malleable young woman who could easily become the victim of evil-minded manipulators.

Figure 5, page 260: Pandora's ad, *San Francisco Examiner* advertisement, March 11, 1906. One of the few to use a photograph.

Figure 6, page 261: The Medium Mrs. Dr. Clark's ad, *San Francisco Examiner* ad, April 8, 1900. Women seers often combined titles such as "Mrs. Dr." or "The Reverend Mrs."

Figure 7, page 262: Graphic accompanying *New York Times* Magazine Section (Part 5) article, December 12, 1909, 7:1. The anonymous author condemned seers as unscrupulous immigrants or African-Americans who "prey for the most part upon a densely ignorant class."

Figure 8, page 263: Professor Akpan Aga's December 20, 1922 advertisement in the *Amsterdam News*.

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**Introduction:
Fifty-Cent Sybils and Symbolic Marketplace**

COUNTESS ZINGARA, gypsy palmist, clairvoyant; 25c., 50c. daily, evenings. 60 West 25th st., near 6th avenue.

--New York World classified ad, March 7, 1910

. . . he was ready to proceed with his inquiries into the mysteries of the cheap and nasty necromancy of the day, and to encounter the rest of the fifty-cent Sybils with an unperturbed spirit.

-- the "Cash Customer" persona of Mortimer Thomson, beginning his visits to New York's fortunetellers, in The Witches of New York 1859

In the latter half of the nineteenth-century, thousands like Countess Zingara advertised occult services in urban daily newspapers. The spiritualist movement, which began in 1848 and included the production of autobiographies of occult workers, had shown that occult work could be profitable. Writers like Mortimer Thomson commented on the phenomenon of occult work in ways that diverged sharply with the image occult workers put forward about themselves as those who could help the helpless and soothe the troubled.

This dissertation examines how two different groups advocated different ways of knowing in response to their different social situations. As the twentieth-century neared, authors (primarily white and middle-class) became more professionalized and more respected as arbiters of culture. Seers, most of whom were lower-class and in large part racially or ethnically "other," began to claim that their talents merited the respect given to professionals who were formally educated. The fact that lower-class "others" claimed professional status in the latter half of the

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nineteenth-century is significant in that this was the time in which professionalism developed as a middle-class measure of talent and intelligence. Hence seers' claim to professional status was an assertion that the lower-classes were not drudges or morons simply responding to the dictates of industrial capitalism without exercising voice. Instead, seers publicly insisted in the seer advertisement that they--as "others" racially, sexually, and economically--were creative, resourceful, and intelligent. Thomson, like others of this class, used the image of the debased occult worker to defend the rationalized world-view of the privileged, middle-class white male and guard empiricism as the measure of respectability. Thus the figure of the occult worker emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth-century as a site of class struggle.

The history of occultism in the United States has focused primarily on two distinct periods: the witchcraft panics of the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-centuries and the rise of spiritualism in the 1850s. In each instance historians have focused on the cultural, social and economic changes that brought about occult movements or the attempted suppression of occultism. Howard Kerr and Charles Crow have rightly stated that the history of the occult in America is characterized by diversity of practitioners, methods, and beliefs, but that the common thread of American occult practices in the last few centuries has been that "the more visible forms of the occult have shared a continuing

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¹Herr and Crow,
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²Carol F. Karlsen
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relationship of tension with the values and institutions of the cultural mainstream."¹

In the case of seventeenth-century witchcraft, historians' views have differed greatly over which "tension" produced the practice and hysteria of witchcraft. Carol Karlsen in Devil in the Shape of a Woman determined that Puritans drew on the construction of women as witches to punish women who were overstepping gendered boundaries of economic power and political voice. Richard Godbeer in The Devil's Dominion argues that possessions were the result of religious conflict between the ancient practices of healing, divination, and supernatural protection and the dominant Puritan order.²

The spiritualist movement of the latter half of the nineteenth-century has provoked similar debates. Ann Braude, in Radical Spirits, finds the rise of spiritualism to be a result of its iconoclasm, which had appeal to reformers (especially women's rights reformers) who looked for alternatives to the hierarchy of organized religion. R. Laurence Moore in In Search of White Crows asserts that nineteenth-century occult practice was informed primarily by tensions in the authoritative ascendancy of science and technology over religion. Authors who have studied some of the other late nineteenth- early twentieth-century occult

¹Kerr and Crow, "Introduction," The Occult in America, (Urbana, 1983), 4.

²Carol F. Karlsen, Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England, (New York, 1898); Richard Godbeer, The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England, (Cambridge, 1992).

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practices have focused on the implications of occult practice for the cultural elite. In No Place of Grace, T. J. Jackson Lears examines the educated elite's search for "intense experience" by focusing on its use of Eastern and/or peasant mysticism, artisinal craftsmanship, and martialism. Lears offers this quest as paradoxical evidence of hegemony; the educated elite's interest had the effect of stabilizing their class position by sharing symbols with the lower classes. Peter Washington in Madame Blavatsky's Baboon asserts that occult practice was characterized by cults of personality that allowed white American elites to express their fascination with exoticism and (inadvertantly or not) secure imperial power.³

Most studies of the occult have focused on these behaviors as primarily connected to the aspirations and tensions of the middle and upper classes. This dissertation builds on these works in order to explore the other half of the hegemonic relationship identified by Lears: the creation and function of the occult worker in the lower classes. It also explores how some characterizations of occult workers authored by elites attempted to negate the power claimed by occult workers for the lower classes. This dissertation

³Ann Braude, Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Womens' Rights in Nineteenth-Century America, (Boston, 1989); R. Laurence Moore, In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture, (New York, 1977); T.J. Jackson Lears, No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920, (Chicago, 1981); Peter Washington, Madame Blavatsky's Baboon: A History of the Mystics, Mediums, and Misfits Who Brought Spiritualism to America, (New York, 1993).

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departs from earlier works by looking at the occult worker as a worker and by examining the meanings occult workers took in different yet connected fields of discourse. I use the terms "occult worker" and "professional seer" interchangeably because the very nature of prophecy-for-profit problematized the rigid dichotomy between higher-class professional and lower-class worker. Occult workers relied exclusively on their own bodies for pay; they had no bosses and rarely removed themselves from their own homes for the purpose of work. They set their own prices, their own hours, their method of divination; they could refuse customers if they chose (and the high number of ads specifying "ladies only" indicates they did this quite regularly). They added occult work to the regular rhythm of their work lives, which most often meant domestic labor or piece-work sewing. They also claimed proficiency in fields of knowledge claimed by educated elites: medicine, counselling, social work, ministry and business. Yet very few occult workers made enough economic capital to consider themselves "comfortable." They not only had little prestige accorded them, they were openly villified for being informally educated and hence "ignorant." Non-seers consistently wrote about them as inhabiting the darkest of the dark dirty spaces of the urban landscape. And unlike middle and upper-class urbanites, they did not divide their homes into spaces meant for work and spaces meant for interaction with friends and acquaintances. Clients saw in the seer's home the evidence of her household

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labor, and hence the evidence of her status as a lower-class woman. In terms of geography (public and private), education, and economic capital seers were "workers," but in terms of the functions they performed in the community and the ability they had to control the specifics of their own labor, they were "professionals."

The term "occult" itself is a slippery one. I use the term to refer to the methods of divination occult workers advertised in urban dailies: clairvoyance, channeling, conjuring, cartomancy, herbology, teacup-reading, chiromancy, astrology and palmistry. Newspapers grouped together advertisements of seers using these methods under headings that either specified the particular method or under the more generic term "clairvoyants."

Two other terms have been of significant use in telling the story of images of seers in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries: "cultural capital," and "symbolic capital." Pierre Bourdieu conceives of power in terms of capital, which is more than simply a reference to money, goods, or relation to means of production. Capital also serves to explain symbols and language, with different groups having access to different kinds of power based on the ways in which they conceive of language (and, in the case of this dissertation, the symbol of the occult worker). Bourdieu defines symbolic capital as prestige and cultural capital as talents or knowledge. Those outside the dominant modes of gaining capital will use the concepts they share with

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⁴See Pierre
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dominant groups to construct their own capital, i.e. "others" will appropriate selected dominant ideologies and assign significance to them to turn them to their benefit. Dominant groups then respond in turn by altering the symbol or ideology to keep their social position.⁴ This system of exchange is the "symbolic marketplace." Occult workers drew on dominant ideologies such as professionalism and science and reworked them according to their own cultural capital, their status as "outsiders" according to gender, class, race, or ethnicity. As seers turned this cultural capital to symbolic capital, many non-seers were forced to renegotiate what they meant by such things as professionalism and scientific positivism (which they did in this case through an increasing reliance on formal education and professional societies). Bourdieu's theories of power are particularly applicable to a study of the meaning of the seer as a symbol in a time when power was intricately linked with gender, race, ethnicity and work.

For this study I have compiled a database of 1,431 advertisements between 1850 and 1930 (the bulk of which came from between 1880 and 1910) taken out by occult workers from five cities (New York, San Francisco, Boston, St. Louis, and Chicago) and seven newspapers, five of which were produced primarily by whites (*The San Francisco Examiner*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and

⁴See Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (Cambridge, 1984) and Language and Symbolic Power (Cambridge, 1991).

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The New York World) and two of which were produced by and for African-Americans (*The Amsterdam News* and *The Chicago Defender*) to examine the ways in which seers presented themselves. I chose these cities because their newspapers were readily available and took advertising from seers. These cities experienced a great deal of growth between 1870 and 1900, and became major business centers for their regions. They were also cities named by contemporaneous writers that had active and highly visible populations of seers. In addition, I wanted a large sample of advertisements in order to get an idea of the dominant and unusual symbols and claims seers used in presenting themselves and their profession.⁵

Well-read works of literature also played an important part in the negotiation of the terms through which seers worked. If the production of the occult worker in literature is any indication, the middle-class needed this "other" to define itself as rational or sentimental, charitable, industrious and consuming of respectable goods, mindful of

⁵I entered the ads according to several criteria: name, sex, race, nation, specializations, class, title, methods of divination, location, whether they teach the trade or not, age, restrictions, and scientific claims. From this database I was able to ascertain whether advertising seers lived and worked near one another, how they may have thought their audience would read racial, gendered, nationalized, scientific, and classed signifiers, what types of divination most often accompanied the assertion of a particular race, ethnicity, class, or sex. While the sampling is nowhere near an exact total of the complete number of seers advertising (and it is certainly not the total of numbers of seers given that a seer would have had to have been literate or have access to someone who would compose the ad), it does give enough information to determine some of the most popular themes of the ads and be able to situate some of the claims and the activities these claims represented amidst the changes taking place in US urban cultures of the late nineteenth-century.

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"proper" sex roles, and, (most of the time) less explicitly but no less powerfully, white. Whether authors catering to a mostly white, educated, Northeastern readership saw the occult worker as romantic or degraded or in need of charity or in need of confinement to a jail cell, their characterizations were inextricably linked to their own ambivalences over what it was that constituted middle-classness. As Stuart Blumin has shown, the middle-class was not self-referential; it depended on myths of the "other" (in Blumin's case, the "lower classes") to negotiate its own meaning.⁶ Mediums, fortunetellers, and conjurers provided the "other"--in vocational, racialized, and gendered as well as classed terms--who was so inextricably linked to the "self." The occult worker was particularly connected to three areas of thought engaged by the lower-middle, the middle, and the upper-middle classes: the obligation of the middle class to be a guide of morality in a world becoming less rural and more urban, the ideology of "self-made" men, and the roles of women in community prosperity.

Nine works of this period were particularly indicative of the ways in which the middle-class conceived of seers: Irving's Bracebridge Hall, Sedgwick's The Linwoods, Hawthorne's The Blithedale Romance, Thomson's The Witches of New York, Barnum's Humbugs of the World, Frederick Douglass's autobiographies, Davis's Vera, The Medium, James's The

⁶See Stuart Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900 (Cambridge, 1989).

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Bostonians, and Chesnutt's The Conjure Woman. These works represent a variety of genres, including "local color" and travel narratives, historical romance, "high" and "low" fiction, autobiography, and exposé, and they all feature a seer (or seers) as a central character, in a pivotal role, or as an example of a main theme.

Literary images are important in determining the client preconceptions to which occult workers had to respond. When performing their work, professional seers responded to meet the needs they perceived in individual clients, who came from a variety of cultural and economic groups. The seer's success depended on a deep familiarity with the values and beliefs of the clientele and on his or her ability to meet the demands of those values and beliefs. Middle-class literature had a great deal of power to inform the expectations of possible occult worker clients (of any class), and exploring the ways in which this literature imagined the occult worker will help illustrate how these views informed meetings between occult workers and clients. Richard Brodhead has suggested that the past of American letters "needs to be understood not only as the history of literary works but also as the history of literature's working conditions. . . a history not of texts or contexts but of the multiform transactions that have taken place between them."⁷ This approach to literature as historical

⁷Richard Brodhead, Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America. (Chicago, 1993): 8.

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artifact begs two questions on the role of literature in the performance of occult work. First, how did authors, writing in different rhetorical situations, use similar thematic approaches with regard to occult workers? Second, why were occult workers evoked in discussions of middle-class social roles and functions? Given the power of literature to perform social and cultural work, these questions must be explored in the context of the meanings and functions of the professional seer.

All of the authors I discuss saw the occult worker as an "other" through various means: more ignorant or dirty, or differently-hued or nationalized, or less educated than we-as-writer-and-readers. Yet this does not mean all authors villified the occult worker. In fact, some authors--particularly those restricted by race or sex in the literary marketplace--viewed occult workers less fearfully than white and male authors. This could be due in part to similarities between literary work and occult work. Charles Chesnutt found himself gaining entrance to the literary marketplace through the "local color" genre, a genre which allowed African-American authors a measure of validity as exotics. Similarly, Sedgwick entered literary work through domestic fiction, even though her work drew on supposedly masculine history and promoted republicanism. Douglass accessed the market through the slave narrative. These authors sold well if they stayed within the confines of "type": local color, domestic, slave narrative.

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Occult workers presented themselves in their market system in similar ways by exploiting racialized, national, and gendered conscriptions. Marketing oneself as a gypsy, a scientist, an Egyptian, or even young, beautiful, and willing to "reveal all secrets" was an act of adopting a persona that would sell. These acts are similar to authors adopting (and yet profoundly reworking) the genres thought to be more particularly adapted to a certain race or gender. What sympathy, or even glory in Chesnutt's case, these authors extended to occult workers emanated from a similar position in the political economy.

Yet, all of the works in the chapters specifically on literature were written by professional authors and not professional seers, and are necessarily depictions of the vocational "other." Even though these works can give us little indication of how occult workers felt personally about their work or how they structured their work according to their own concepts of gender, race, and class, literary texts nonetheless represent an important aspect of occult work: how many non-seers viewed seers and worked their visions into already existing notions of social structure. Literature is significant evidence of the processes through which myriad connected self-identities were intricately woven into as many other-identities. Until the second decade of the twentieth-century, when film began to play a large part in public opinion and new printing technologies made original graphics

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⁸Howard Kerr, Mediums, Spiritualism in America

easier to produce, print culture reigned as the dominant mass media.

Spiritualism, the movement begun by the Fox sisters in New York in 1848, was an issues many authors took up. But while the topic of spiritualism engaged a great number of middle-class Americans during this period, and indeed their literature reflected this, I will not deal with the movement specifically as it affected literary production. Howard Kerr in Mediums, Spirit Rappers, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Literature, 1850-1900 shows that literature dealing with spiritualism focused on the movement's implications for Christianity or science or used spiritualism as proof of the ridiculousness of reform movements.⁸ Much of this huge body of writing focused on the spiritualist movement itself rather than the profession of medium, and instead of trying to cover all writings on spiritualism, I chose several that look more specifically at the work of the medium. These I placed in the context of presentations of other types of occults workers such as the fortuneteller and the conjurer. The works in the chapters on literature in particular represent a large body of writings on the work of the occult, and they are indicative of various and shifting views the mostly white middle-class created of itself and its position in American society and culture in reference to the occult worker.

⁸Howard Kerr, Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Literature, 1850-1900 (Urbana, 1972).

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Similarly, the chapters that deal with seer-produced artifacts indicate the views the lower-classes had of themselves. Occult work became more visible during a time in which workers began to see themselves as workers, and class identification became stronger as the century came to a close. Seer ads, by declaring seers as those who were willing to deal with "delicate" issues, represented the working class' more fluid definitions of morality. They also represented the carnivalesque by making fun of nobility and encouraging belief in magic and its powers to transform lives.

Since occult workers brought age-old methods of magic into mass culture, their methods need to be defined. Mediums were the earliest of the popularized occult workers, and they specialized in "channeling" spirits from the dead. While in a trance, the medium could write, speak, or create physical phenomena (such as furniture moving, instruments playing or knocks sounding) which would then be interpreted as messages from the dead. Palm-readers used the lines of the hand to tell various personality traits as well as the past, present, and future of the querent. A tea-leaf reader served the customer a cup of tea, and while drinking engaged the customer in conversation. When the tea was finished, the reader swirled the leaves in the cup and dumped them in the saucer. She then told the stories evoked by the designs made by the leaves. Card-readers used playing-cards or specially-designed cards that could be laid on the table in various

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combinations designed to give the querent an answer to any question. The generic "fortuneteller" gave any of these kinds of readings or used what we would now call "psychic" powers, and what seers then called "second sight," the ability to see things others cannot. Conjurors, particularly in ads by African-Americans, used a variety of these methods and also specialized in the uses of herbs. A customer could buy an herbal mixture for use in rituals pertaining specifically to his or her own problems. All methods had in common the fact that the occult worker had to come up with a satisfying, full, relevant answer to the problems of customers. Like their literary counterparts, they needed audience.

The public discourse through literature and occult work had three overlapping chronological phases. The first, which emerged between 1820 and 1860, was a moment in which seers and authors tenuously agreed that the occult was a valid way of knowing. Chapter One, which looks at social order and the fear of urbanization in depictions of seers by Catharine Sedgwick, Washington Irving, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Chapter Two, which engages issues of white working-class identification in seven autobiographies of famous mediums, cover this period. Authors in this period romanticized seers as part of a useful social order. Mediums, cashing in on the spiritualist movement, saw occult work as a way to diminish the effects of an unequal class system. Despite their disagreements, to varying degrees authors and occult workers

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The second phase in public dialogue on the meaning of occult work, from 1850 to 1890, was marked by disagreement over the idea of rationalism as a marker of respectability. Chapter Three, which looks at empiricism and masculinity in occult worker images authored by Mortimer Thomson, P.T. Barnum, and Frederick Douglass and Chapter Four, which looks at the way seer advertisements responded to empiricism by claiming the validity of alternate ways of knowing, represent this second phase of public discourse on occult workers. These two chapters show that both authors and seers viewed occult work as marking the differences between higher- and lower-class values. Rationalism as a way of interpreting the world stood out as residing within the jurisdiction of white, middle-class males, while the practice of magic evidenced lower-class status--subcategorized as the province of women and minorities.

Between 1890 and 1930 this taxonomy reached strained proportions and had devastating consequences for seers in the third period of public discussion of occult workers. In this period, seers became more vocal about their "otherness" qualifying them for professional status while at the same time authors became more guarded about professionalism as the mark of the middle-class. They also worried more specifically about the effects of professionalism on the bourgeois woman. Chapter Five, which asserts that

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professional authors, to varying degrees, viewed occult workers as evidence of the negative effects female professionalism had on middle-class interests. Images of seers in works by Richard Harding Davis, Henry James, and Charles Chesnutt, characterize this period. Likewise, Chapter Six, which explores the criminalization of occult work and the marginal assimilation of seers into professional status, shows these as the results of a long tradition of seers advertising their "otherness" in conjunction with their claims on professional status.

As a whole, these three periods of public discussion of the occult worker, negotiated by seers and non-seers alike provides evidence of competing groups using a single symbol through which to define themselves and one another. While groups may have had differing views and interests, they produced meanings of the occult worker in the same symbolic marketplace: the discursive arena of public print. While differently-defined groups may have used print according to different social circumstances, their characterizations of the occult worker tell a great deal about the power relations surrounding the act of definition itself, with one characterizatoin intricately linked to another produced in different social circumstances. This work is a story of one portion in the long history of the difficulty inherent in the process of self-referentiality, and stands as evidence of working- and under-class people's abilities to voice

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Writer Joanna Kadi asserts that the perception of the "stupidity" of the working- and under-classes serves the system of capitalism which depends on cheap labor:

Capitalism needs simple explanations about why poor people with lousy jobs take orders from men in suits. Lack of brains fits the bill. . . Any noticeable class divisions stem from difference in intellectual capacity. Connected to this is the touting of "American ingenuity" as the doorway to upward mobility. It's as untrue as the existence of a whole class of stupid people . . .⁹

During the latter half of the nineteenth-century, when professionalism became the measure of worth in the dominant classes, non-formally-educated people were increasingly labeled "stupid." The story of fortunetellers' uses of the rhetoric of professionalism shows that, like stories of organization and labor protest, that many lower-class people knew full well of the ways in which they were losing in the capitalist game. And more importantly, this story shows that the same seers, widely seen as part of the "stupid" lower class, publicly protested by printing their alternate world-views in what lines they could afford in the daily newspaper.

⁹Joanna Kadi, Thinking Class: Sketches from a Cultural Worker (Boston, 1996): 44.

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Chapter One:

The Occult Worker as a Middle-Class Symbol of Rural Innocence in Irving, Sedgwick and Hawthorne, 1822-1852

Early fictional presentations of occult workers were less critical of occult work than those that came later. At this point in literary history both men and women were writing extensively on the issue of emotion and "feeling" as a way of knowing the world. Romance writers, domestic fiction writers, and transcendentalists dealt with feeling, albeit in different terms. Occult workers, as persons who dealt primarily in the realm of emotion, did not seem as terrible to writers struggling with the issue of emotion as they seemed to later writers who saw rationality as the appropriate method with which to understand the human condition.¹ Yet authors, as cultural arbiters to the middle-class, also approved of seers when seers supported a stable social hierarchy. They located the model of hierarchy in what they conceived to be the "pure" and "simple" rural world.² The occult worker, presented as either a product of

¹See Joanne Dobson, "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature," American Literature, 69(2), June 1997: 263-288; Jane P. Tompkins, "Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History," Glyph 9(1981); Ann Douglass, The Feminization of American Culture (New York, 1977); Mary Kelly, "The Sentimentalists: Promise and Betrayal in the Home," Signs, 4(Spring 1979): 434-446, and Cathy Davidson, Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America (New York, 1986).

²Henry Nash Smith maintained that the myth of America as the "garden for the world" was the defining principle of American national consciousness, while Leo Marx has stated that the tensions and collusions between nature and technology have been more integral to an American sense of self than simply the pastoral/agrarian ideal alone. The novels discussed here glorify the pastoral ideal but definitely grapple with industrialization and urbanization in ways similar to Marx's thesis. See Henry Nash Smith, The Virgin Land, (Cambridge, 1970, c1950) and Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technologies and the Pastoral Ideal in America, (New York, 1964).

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⁵Irving, 458.

the arcadian rural past or the city slums, represented the anxieties middle-class men and women struggled with as self-appointed guardians of all that was morally pure. Authors saw this "purity" as emanating from the proper social orders of an imagined rural world.³

Washington Irving wrote about these issues in the early nineteenth-century as an attempt to provide connections between the young republic and England. Bracebridge Hall, Or The Humorists, A Medley (1822) by "Geoffrey Crayon, Gent." is a sequel of sorts to Washington Irving's highly successful The Sketch Book, which contained an account of a Christmas visit to Bracebridge Hall, the seat of a country squire who draws "almost feudal homage" from the neighboring village.⁴ The aristocratic family prides itself on keeping quaint rural traditions, evidenced by their sponsorship of a May-day festival, their tolerance for roving Gypsies, and their pride in such sports as horsemanship and falconry. Bracebridge Hall consists of vignettes of every aspect of the household to the explicit end of capturing "some traces. . . of old English character" before that rural-identified character inevitably falls prey to industrialization and urbanization.⁵

³Karen Halttunen has shown that the emerging urban middle class romanticized rural life as more innocent and sincere than urban life. As young rural men and women came to cities looking for work, middle class urbanites became transfixed on the idea of the rural innocent falling prey to the urban confidence man. See Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture in America, (New Haven and London, 1982).

⁴Washington Irving, Bracebridge Hall, Or the Humorists (New York, 1865; rev. from 1822 ed.): 17.

⁵Irving, 458.

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At first glance, the work appears to be an anecdotal collection by a gentleman-bachelor who has little else with which to occupy his time other than "sketching" quaint households in foreign lands. However, when considered in the context of the anxiousness of the American middle-class to distinguish itself from social "inferiors" by cultivating manners, Bracebridge Hall becomes a witty instruction manual on the ways of the benevolent and proper, if not at times slightly ridiculous, aristoi. Crayon's writings show a rural aristocracy that practices benevolence and provides a model of "genteel performance."⁶

Nowhere is this benevolence more apparent than in its extension to occult workers and the superstitions of the lower classes. The gentry of Bracebridge use the occult as an entertainment, which has the effect of making lower-class "superstitions" appear reconcilable with upper-class interests. The gentry pay for the privilege of a palm or card reading (supposedly seeing it as an entertainment), and in turn this payment allows the occult worker to stay near the gentry, providing them with the colorful pastoral background that makes those of the upper class feel like landed gentry.

The people of Bracebridge are isolated from the bustle of industrialization, and therefore take a great deal of time for life's "simpler" pleasures, such as romance. Crayon's

⁶Haltunnen uses the phrase "genteel performance" to represent the cultivation of fashion and manners that the antebellum middle-class used to differentiate itself from the lower-class of "social inferiors."

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purpose in visiting the Hall is to witness the wedding of the "fair Julia Templeton," an orphan in the Squire's care, to the Squire's son Guy, "a fine, spirited young captain in the army."⁷ Opening with a reference to a wedding, the work rarely leaves the theme of romance, offering commentary on Guy and Julia, the servant-girl Phoebe and the son of the yeoman, the General and Lady Lillycraft, "Old Christy" the huntsman and the Lady's dressing-maid, and of course, Crayon's own bachelorhood. One fifth of the chapters of Bracebridge Hall consist of topics on romance and courtship (or lack thereof). The emphasis on courtship is significant, for this area of social interaction between the sexes was highly governed by rules, regulations, and proper codes of conduct. Yet despite these rules, or perhaps because of them, courtship was also a highly unstable social interaction. Readers interested in aristocratic style and manners needed to look no further than Bracebridge Hall to find a model of conduct in which the instability of romance is tempered by the stability of gentility itself.

Irving's vision of an ideal rural past shows that a true aristocracy is a system in which symbols link the different groups in webs of "reciprocal" relationships.⁸ Crayon's

⁷Irving, 16.

⁸The world of Bracebridge embodies Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, in which ruling classes and ruled classes share symbols. This sharing then has the effect of making lower-class interests appear to be compatible with higher-class interests. See The Prison Notebooks, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Jeffrey Nowell Smith (New York, 1971). T.J. Jackson Lears has used this concept in explaining the educated elite's attraction to mysticism in the Gilded Age. See No Place of Grace: Anti-Modernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920 (Chicago, 1983).

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encounter with "the gipsey girl," on an evening walk with three of his male acquaintances, reveals the role of the occult worker in the rules governing courtship in the genteel performance. During a stroll with his gentlemen friends, Crayon comes upon an encampment of gypsies. While he describes the rest of the area with scenes like "children sleeping on the straw with which the tents were littered" next to a "thievish-looking dog" and other scraggy oddities, he finds the fortuneteller, the "gipsey girl," marked by a "slattern elegance":

Her long black silken hair was curiously plaited in numerous small braids, and negligently put up in a picturesque style that a painter might have been proud to have devised. Her dress was of figured chintz, rather ragged, and not over clean, but of a variety of most harmonious and agreeable colors; for these beings have a singularly fine eye for colors.⁹

Crayon views her much as an actress, as an exotic character in a play to be gazed upon for enjoyment, a view that reflects Irving's ambivalence on the roles of women in social life.

As Jenifer Banks has shown, Irving's writings and life reveal "an unresolved tension between fantasy and reality" in regards to women, for, even though he enjoyed interacting with women, he "preferred. . . to remain an uncommitted observer, maintaining carefully circumscribed relationships with women--usually considerably younger than he or 'safely'

⁹Irving, 140.

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¹⁰Jennifer Banks, "American Bachelor," *Criticism*, (Boston, 1990)
¹¹Banks, 254.

married."¹⁰ To further complicate his views of women, he was, as the young man on whom Crayon was built, torn between distaste for the European women he saw as extravagant and immoral and the "unworldly American ladies who, in their apparrant simplicity, seemed harmless."¹¹ Crayon's view of the gypsy girl as an exotic "other"--one of "these beings"--reflects this ambivalence in ethnicized terms. As an "other," the gypsy girl could be caught in Crayon's gaze, as entertainment, without threatening him with the "claustrophobia" Banks identifies in Irving's fears of domestic commitment with white women. The gypsy girl's occultishness further provides Crayon with the distance that allows him to enjoy her without being trapped by her; her profession is at odds with Crayon's self-sufficiency as expressed through his role as romantic observer.

Crayon's romantic observations are tempered by his sense of business. He admires the gypsy girl's business acumen, as he watches her sell not fortunes but wish-fulfillment to the general and Master Simon. She is rational about the way to get money and is clear-headed and unemotional in her perception of other people's needs. Her unscrupulousness appeals to Crayon as a man "masculine" enough to dismiss fortunetelling as the activity of women. The Oxonian draws the girl to the side, where he provides her with information

¹⁰Jenifer Banks, "Washington Irving, the Nineteenth-Century American Bachelor," Critical Essays on Washington Irving, ed. Ralph Aderman, (Boston, 1990): 254, 261-262.

¹¹Banks, 254.

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13 Irving, 141.

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about the general and Master Simon, both of whom have interests in particular women. He returns to the group exclaiming the wonders of the art of fortunetelling: "this girl has told me some things that I thought no one knew but myself!"¹² Crayon relates that the "girl now assailed the general" with broad hints at his fortune. The general, who had been cultivating a courtship with Lady Lillycraft (who was visiting Bracebridge for the wedding) hesitates when the girl mentions payment, but she reels him in with "Come, sir, old love burns strong; there's many a one comes to see weddings that go away brides themselves."¹³ She delivers all that he had hoped for: Lady Lillycraft and the monetary "fortune" she brings with her. The general "paid her half-a-crown with the air of a man that has got the worth of his money."¹⁴ The girl tried the same tactic with Master Simon, but in referring to his failed romance she touches a nerve, and Master Simon feels he does not receive the good fortune the general received. She loses his hire. She makes up for it with Crayon, though, who admits to having "a weakness of spirit where there is a pretty face concerned," and he receives an amusing fortune "which, if prove true, and I am determined to believe it, will make me one of the luckiest men in the chronicles of Cupid."¹⁵

¹²Irving, 140.

¹³Irving, 141.

¹⁴Irving, 141.

¹⁵Irving, 140-142.

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Crayon's approval of the Gypsy woman as a fortune teller lies in the fact that she makes no challenge to the existing social order. Her "knowledge" is only that which the gentlemen give her in order to dupe one another. She is enough of an exotic "other" to provide the gentlemen with someone interesting upon whom to gaze. Even as she uses their own fantasies to procure money from them, her status is clearly defined geographically and economically. The gentlemen are walking near a Gypsy camp, which is outside the grounds of Bracebridge. The fortuneteller loses money when she tells her client what he does not want to hear. Therefore, even though she plays with the feelings of the men, she does not threaten their superior social position.

For women the consultation with the fortuneteller is much more serious. The "fair" Julia's marriage is a sure thing and she has no use for the fortuneteller, but Julia's lower-class counterpart, Pheobe Wilkins, finds herself in dire need of magic. Crayon often amuses himself with the troubles of "simple" Pheobe Wilkins, the niece of the head housekeeper. In love with the son of a yeoman farmer, but caught in a fight between his mother and her aunt over status, Phoebe is separated from her lover and despairs of ever seeing him again. Since her aunt considers Phoebe too high-quality to marry the son of a yeoman farmer and the farmer's wife considers her son too proud to marry a servant-girl, the match does seem impossible. Crayon reports that as Julia's wedding approaches, members of the household--mainly

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women and servants--become preoccupied with romance, which is "a harvest time for gipsies." He finds Gypsies "hovering about the grounds, telling the servant girls' fortunes, or getting smuggled in to the young ladies."¹⁶ Phoebe is the most vulnerable, and the Oxonian and Master Simon waste no time in hiring the Gypsies to manipulate her moods. As a young woman whose social status is precarious despite her pretensions, Phoebe (as Crayon sees her) is the ultimate in female silliness, for she is willing to believe every fortune read to her, and, significantly, she wants to raise her social status rather than accept the status into which she was born. "Ready-Money Jack"--the sensible yeoman--ends Phoebe's misery at the hands of the gentry-Gypsy collusion by expressing his desire for her to marry his son. Crayon is amused by the class feud, presumably because he thinks no one beyond the "real" aristoi and their guests can claim any status that matters.

Irving's message about gentility and the occult is clear: the genteel must only utilize the occult as recreation. Crayon shows that a real belief in the occult may be quaint, but it also demonstrates desperation and excessive emotion, which he equates with women, the white lower class, and ethnic "others." Used as a sport, however, as Crayon, the Oxonian, and later Master Simon utilize the occult, is to extend benevolence to the occult worker--a person who contributes to the "old-time" feeling of the Hall-

¹⁶Irving, 256.

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-while also demonstrating one's own control over the situation. Unlike the world of the city where men and women can "pass" for genteel through the confidence game, the rural world of Bracebridge shows that hierarchies are stable, for women ("naturally" more emotional) and servants ("naturally" more credulous) lack rationality and control because they throw themselves wholeheartedly into superstition.

Indeed, the validity of occult practice, according to Crayon, seems to depend simply on the social status of the person practicing it. The "gipsey girl" was tolerated because she appeared to accept the social status of the gentlemen and seemed to recognize her role in perpetuating it. She is one of many persons Crayon describes who practice superstitions and rituals in and around Bracebridge Hall. Crayon praises such practices, saying that superstition "is often found existing in lofty natures, especially those that are poetical and inspiring."¹⁷ But while Crayon considers the parson, a bookish man who is a dependent at the hall but not a servant, and himself (Crayon spends several pages contemplating ghosts) to be "poetical and inspiring," he also says that superstitions in lower-class people are much more basic, although nonetheless romantic. Crayon regrets that "the peasantry [in general] have become expensive and artificial in their pleasures, and too knowing for simple enjoyment," but at Bracebridge, however, rituals such as May-day "infuse poetical feeling into the common people" which he

¹⁷Irving, 126.

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¹⁸Irving, 265.

¹⁹Irving, 340.

²⁰Irving, 257.

says will "sweeten and soften the rudeness of rustic manners, without destroying their simplicity."¹⁸

The same superstitions that "soften the rudeness" of the lower classes also temper the inherent rationality of the higher classes. Indeed, rationality in the higher classes, especially among men, is, in the world of Bracebridge, assumed by all, as the parson finds out when he encounters hesitation from peasants asked about superstitions: "they are rather shy of avowing them to strangers and particularly to 'the gentry,' who are apt to laugh at them."¹⁹ In his view of fortunetelling, Crayon shows that while he is the romantic observer, he also has limits on his emotional investment: "there is something strangely pleasing in these tamperings with the future, even where we are convinced of the fallacy of the prediction."²⁰

While the gentry use superstition to temper their rationality and servants and farmers use it to temper their rusticity, the "roving gypsies", according to Crayon, occupy a different relationship to the supernatural and hence to the world of Bracebridge and its social structure. Bracebridge residents see the gypsies as "roving" but this particular band never seems to rove far, and Crayon suspects that the squire supports them because they signify the feudal "old times." They are at once excluded from Crayon's views of the functions of superstition for Anglo-whites, yet they are

¹⁸Irving, 265.

¹⁹Irving, 340.

²⁰Irving, 257.

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crucial to creating the ideal social system of Bracebridge. Ethnically and culturally different from both the gentry and the servants, they are the people lingering on the outskirts. Yet both servants and gentry value the service of fortunetelling enough to overlook the regular theft of livestock.

Significantly, the yeoman farmer and the newly-rich industrialist neighbor are the only two wanting to hold gypsies accountable to law. These characters represent newer developments in the class structure (especially when one considers that Irving tries to evoke the era of pre-industrialization) and do not understand the "reciprocity" of the gentry/servant to gypsy relationship. The status of the gentry (and the status the servants glean from service to gentry) depends upon the existence of the "other." According to Crayon, the social glue of the ideal society of Bracebridge depends upon everyone knowing and staying in his or her place. In the world of Bracebridge the gypsies are content with lower status because the upper class is appropriately benevolent, especially the women, who plead for leniency for a gypsy caught theiving.

Catharine M. Sedgwick's 1835 The Linwoods: Or, "Sixty Years Since" in America also uses the fortuneteller to articulate an ideal society and system of conduct, but evidences a different vision from Bracebridge Hall. Rather than focusing on the positive aspects of aristocracy as Crayon does, Sedgwick targets the negative: fashion and

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insincerity. Her vision of the perfect social structure is undeniably republican, where virtues of honesty, simplicity and piety rather than manners and fashion admit one into proper society. As Gordon Wood has described the views that some portions of the young republic held of itself, America "seemed uniquely free of the constraining distinctions of social rank--a naturally egalitarian society, young, rustic, energetic, sometimes even frighteningly and fascinatingly barbarous, but at any rate without the stifling and corrupting refinement of the Old World."²¹ Jacksonians sought to perpetuate the notion that Americans--because of their simplicity--exuded the virtue Europeans lacked, even while the emerging middle-class looked to Europe for manners and fashion. Sedgwick's novel reflects the view that the developing middle-class needed to focus more on the virtuous yeoman past and less on the English aristocratic past, such as that described by Irving.

Rural culture, exemplified by the hardworking, independent, and virtuous Lee family in the novel, plays an important role in representing the yeoman past. Sedgwick's The Linwoods demonstrates that while this ideal existed in the rural past, its values can be transferred to the bustling and prosperous city.

The occult worker, as depicted by Sedgwick, represents conflicting views of what the young republic should strive to

²¹Gordon Wood, The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787, (New York, 1969), 98.

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be. Effie, the fortuneteller in novel, represents an appeal to aristocratic decadence, but she also represents the limits of the ideal social system based on virtue, democracy, and industrial capitalism. The Linwoods asserts that while the occult worker may be virtuous according to some republican standards, her profession recalls an irrationality best left to the decadence of aristocracy or the irrationality of racial/ethnic "others." The occult worker here represents a profound ambivalence on the part of the middle-class about the limits of a republican system. Significantly, Effie the fortuneteller has real authority. She is not over-emotional, as are some of the characters, yet she is open to feeling as a way of knowing. Most importantly, she tells the honest truth.

Sedgwick's story takes place in New York shortly before and during the American Revolution. The narrative centers on the family of Isabella and Herbert Linwood, New York City "quality" people with ample money and respect for the King. Herbert declares himself a "rebel" and leaves his father's home to fight for the American cause. Isabella remains at her father's home, professes loyalty to the King, but also doubts that loyalty.

The Linwoods are connected to the Lee family who, as the fortuneteller Effie says, are "well to do in the world, but not such quality as" the Linwoods. Bessie is a fragile, pious daughter of a farmer and friend to Isabella, and Eliot Lee is the noble yeoman son and courageous patriot. Jasper

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Meredith is also a friend to these families; he is a fashionable charmer, who hesitates taking sides in the war until he has to, and then sides with the British. After many narrow misses, intrigues, and other adventures of the war, Isabella sees the error of her loyalty to the crown and marries the hero Eliot, who values her for "what most men like not at all [in a woman]--. . . love of freedom and independence of control;"²² Bessie emerges from a fit of madness caused by Jasper's deceit. Herbert marries Jasper's fashionable cousin Lady Anne, who is cured of her aristocratic notions by contact with the young Linwoods. Jasper, as Effie predicted, marries a deceitful woman after losing Isabella's affection and returns to England to be dependent on his mother. The "fashionable" characters are either reformed by simplicity and egalitarianism or suffer the shameful fate of lifelong dependency. The values of the rural community of the Lees--frugality, honesty, egalitarianism--are spread to all favorable characters. The novel ends with a view of the defeated British vacating New York at the close of the war.

The opening scene reflects the tension of a transition in ideas about seers: the colonial notion of seers as witches and the victorian notion of seers as respectable only if sincere. At the opening of the narrative, four of the five principal characters visit a fortuneteller named Effie.

²²Catherine Sedgwick, The Linwoods, or "Sixty Years Since" in America, (New York, 1835) vol.2, 223.

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Isabella, an aristocratic girl who tends to sympathize with the King rather than rebels, takes her friend Bessie, a "simple" country girl, to the home of a fortuneteller.

In the ideally-virtuous world of The Linwoods, even the fortuneteller's house is evidence of hard work, tidiness, and good housekeeping:

. . . they reached Effie's door, which admitted them, not to any dark laboratory of magic, but to a snug little Dutch parlour, with a nicely-sanded floor--a fireplace gay with the flowers of the season, pionies and Guelder-roses, and ornamented with storied tiles, that, if not as classic, were, as we can vouch, far more entertaining than the sculptured marble of our own luxurious days.²³

The narrator deals with Effie more harshly than with her house, saying the "pythoness Effie turned her art to good account, producing substantial comforts by her mysterious science."²⁴ Sedgwick's use of the term "pythoness" is curious, for even if she meant simply to evoke the classical meaning of the term as a Greek prophetess, she must have known her readers (certainly not many of whom had access to classical educations) might conjure up images of a gigantic female snake.

Hinting that Effie's profession is indeed a less-than-proper one, the narrator nevertheless forgives this because of Effie's honest face, which in sentimental culture signifies an honest soul:

Even Bessie felt her horror of witchcraft diminished before this plump personage, with a round, good-humored face, looking far more like the good vrow of a Dutch

²³ Sedgwick, vol. 1, 20.

²⁴ Sedgwick, vol. 1, 20.

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Effie doesn't appear after this opening scene, but the fortunes she delivers resonate throughout the book, as many come true. In the culture of sincerity, this speaks more for her good than even her "physiognomy" and provides a device through which to begin the action of the novel.

As in Bracebridge Hall, the rural past in The Linwoods serves as a touchstone of moral example. The narrator's approval of the occult worker is begrudging. Favorable characters value family, community, and country (in that order). Even George Washington is praised more for his domestic sentiment than his deeds in war , for his "sympathies were alive to the charities of domestic life."²⁶ Unlike Bracebridge, however, the ideal world of the Linwoods romanticizes the rural past as a domain of democracy rather than aristocracy. As a result, Effie, who practices a profession of which the narrator does not wholly approve, is treated so ambivalently in the novel. Even though she is Dutch, and thus nationally different from both the Linwoods and the Lees (and hence an "other" to them), she is white and not excluded from full participation in (and the full rewards of) democratic capitalism. Her home is tasteful and beautiful instead of garish or fashionable, illustrating hard work. More importantly, Effie has earned the money to buy the home

²⁵Sedgwick, vol. 1, 20.

²⁶Sedgwick, vol. 2, 211.

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by herself and remains independent, just as Bessie's father, the yeoman farmer, had done before his untimely death. This independence of spirit is admirable in the ideal democratic world, and makes Effie's work more acceptable. Although her predictions are inaccurate in some of the particulars, overall her readings for Bessie, Isabella, Herbert and Jasper are correct. The narrator's approval of Effie, however, is limited, since the confident, virtuous, and strong-minded Eliot never consults her. Indeed, such varying descriptions of Effie as a dangerous asp, a classical prophetess, or a "good vrow of a Dutch picture" reveal both the promise and the limits of democratic capitalism.

Sedgwick used Effie's Dutch affiliation to evoke the tradition of colonial tensions that led to the English gaining control over New Amsterdam in 1664, tensions that emerge from English-Dutch racial sameness and national otherness. In the New Amsterdam of the 1650s and 60s, Dutch and English settlers repeatedly threatened to use the racial "other"--Native Americans--against one another, even though they often recognized their mutual interests in dealing with Dutch colonial powers in the Old World. Culturally, the Dutch preferred that no town held power over the outlying farms, while the English in general saw towns as strong centers of government and commerce. This difference between the groups resulted in the Anglo-Dutch War between 1652 and 1654, which increased suspicion between the two groups, as each side claimed they would use Native American allies

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against each other.²⁷ Effie reflects this tension, as she is white like the English colonists, and yet is nationally an outsider. Even though the tensions between English and Dutch were long gone by the time the novel was published, the fact that Effie is Dutch evokes a tradition of tension between urban- and rural-based power.

The occult theme also evidences racial relations. In walking to Effie's house for the card-readings that open the novel, Isabella wants the "black servant in livery" Jupiter to leave her so that she may hear her reading in private. She takes him past Gallows Hill, saying "Jupe, is not that the place where they hung the poor creatures who were concerned in the negro-plot?" Jupe answers that his grandmother and aunt were executed there, and when Isabella asks him if any ghosts have been seen there, he replies, "I dare say, Miss Belle. Them that's hung onjustly always travels." He doesn't want to travel farther because he'd have to cross the "ghost-track," so Isabella suggests she feels odd sensations, like hot pockets of air and a slight rumbling under her feet. When she remarks "I think I see a faint shadow of a man with a rope around his neck, and his head on one side--do you see, Jupe?," Jupe quits the scene abruptly, "leaving Isabella laughing."²⁸

This exchange represents several of the novel's themes about social structure and the occult. Isabella, the young

²⁷Jessica Kross, The Evolution of an American Town: Newtown, New York, 1642-1775, (Philadelphia, 1983).

²⁸Sedgwick, vol. 1, 13-19.

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lady just emerged from a "residence of unquestioned aristocracy," sees the affair as "a good lesson, on what our old schoolmaster would call the potentiality of mankind" and as a joke, which Herbert and Jasper find to be "a capital one." The exchange represents not only the cruelty and immaturity of the young aristocrats but their sense of their own rationality and racial superiority. Isabella, with "an eye. . . that looked as if she were born to empire," feels she has every right to taunt the servant.²⁹

Yet while she may be "born to empire," she is not born a heroine with ideally-democratic views. The narrator looks down on "royal favor and European fashions," and Isabella has both at this point, although the narrator still praises her "genius" in devising the plan to scare away Jupe. Bessie, the country girl "who had been bred in the strict school of New-England orthodoxy" and is herself fearful of ghosts, is the only one who sympathizes with Jupiter: "she did not in the least wonder that poor Jupe was scared," presumably because Isabella uses very particular ghosts--those hanged in a slave rebellion and the very relatives of Jupiter. Isabella restates the power she has over Jupiter's life by reminding him of the hangings, and thus racial hierarchy. Bessie's sympathy is significant, for not only is fearful of superstitions--"the Bible says, that sorcery, and divination, and everything of that kind, is wicked"--but she is also "of the earth's gentlest and finest mode--framed for all tender

²⁹Sedgwick, vol. 1, 13-19.

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Bessie's womanhood--which ends up being a positive model of the spinster as social worker--allows her to assert Jupe "is a man, Isabella," while the "girl of empire" responds "He has the form of one. . . ." ³⁰ Bessie also deals with a bout of insanity later in the novel, as she pines for a man who does not love her. This emphasizes the theme, also developed in Irving, that only the highly-excitabile or nervous fear superstitions.

The closing scene, after Isabella's conversion to the cause of democracy, recasts her relationship to the servant in a different mode of racial superiority. When the British troops leave New York, and the whole town celebrates, Jupiter tells the Linwoods he is to dine with General Washington. Mr. Linwood is shocked, for he "was ready to believe almost any extravagance of the levelling Americans; but the agrarianism that made Jupiter a party at the festive board with the commander-in-chief rather astounded him." ³¹ Isabella quickly corrects Jupiter, instructing him that he is to serve Washington at dinner. Jupiter then appeals to Isabella for a coachman's job with Herbert's new wife, the former Lady Anne. As they discuss the position, both agree that New York will become a place of industry, of "bustle and racket," which Jupe sees as ungentleel. When he suggests leaving, Isabella

³⁰Sedgwick, vol. 1, 13-18.

³¹Sedgwick, vol. 2, 279.

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responds "That will be wisest Jupe; New York will no longer be a place for idlers of any degree."³² In reckoning the "idle" black servant with the ousted aristocracy, Isabella reveals her new republican self. The ideal society, in her view, now consists of the virtuous, who are industrious and honest. The black servant represents a plantation-style non-freedom, with the house slaves trying to imitate the decadence of the owners. Her "new" New York expels them both, and leaves society to Isabella and her future husband, the patriot-yeoman Eliot Lee.

Like Jupe, the occult worker represents the limits of this new society. As a white nationalized "other" who practices independence and good housekeeping, Effie can be assimilated into the ideal republican city. As an occult worker, she signifies at best irrationality and at worst sin, which will in the emerging democratic world of The Linwoods require constant renegotiation to gain approval in a rational urban world governed by the "sincerity" of rural virtue. Effie indicates that approval is possible, for her skill is real, and from it she gains authority. This renegotiation allows her the admittance to full participation in a democracy not granted to Jupiter, who is the racial "other," unless he remains in a marginalized role as a dependent servant.

By the 1852 publication of Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Blithedale Romance, the theme of egalitarianism was strained.

³²Sedgwick, vol. 2, 279-280.

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With this novel, Hawthorne asserts that the ideal worlds with set limits and clear hierarchies, such as those depicted by Irving and Sedgwick, have broken down. The Blithedale Romance criticizes middle-class romanticization of rural culture while asserting that the breakdown of the rural/urban dichotomy threatens male and middle-class claims to privilege. The Blithedale Romance shows that middle-class survival depends, in large part, upon turning debased women (represented here by the occult worker) into proper bourgeois women governed by "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity."³³

Of the novels that deal with the notion of rural innocence in middle-class cultural ideals, none is more explicit in rendering the central role of the occult worker than The Blithedale Romance. Hawthorne places his poet-narrator Miles Coverdale at Blithedale, a farm evoking Brook Farm, where middle- and upper-class reformers gather to share labor and live in a communitarian experiment. Coverdale reveals the difficulties inherent in constructing an egalitarian society from members of a non-egalitarian one. He represents prevalent anxieties that social forms such as public spectacle needed to be further controlled by the genteel, or else these displays would compromise bourgeois femininity with public consumption. If the bourgeois female becomes a show for the public instead of a private one for

³³Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," American Quarterly, 18(2), Summer 1966: 152.

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the family, both middle-class and male privilege are compromised.

Priscilla, a "slim and unsubstantial girl," appears one snowy midnight at the main house of the newly-formed utopian community of Blithedale. Miles Coverdale, the poet-narrator, immediately imbues the girl with an other-worldliness, while Zenobia, the wealthy writer and women's rights reformer, insists Priscilla "has probably no more transcendental purpose than to do my miscellaneous sewing."³⁴ Still, Zenobia allows for the existence of the myth of the working-girl medium even as she derides it as a fantasy of the romantically minded:

Poor thing! She has been stifled with the heat of a salamander-stove, in a small, close room, and has drunk coffee, and fed upon dough-nuts, raisins, candy, and all such trash, till she is scarcely half-alive; and so, as she has hardly any physique, a poet. . . may be allowed to think her spiritual.³⁵

The supernatural romance the Blithedale utopians find in Priscilla supports their perceived responsibility toward her: "Let us warm her poor shivering body with this good fire. . . Let us feed her and make her one of us. . . And in good time, whatever is desirable for us to know will be melted out of her."³⁶ Priscilla occupies a liminal position; the upper middle-class utopians of Blithedale admit her partly as an entertainment (albeit in a more subtle form than her role as "The Veiled Lady" clairvoyant platform worker) and partly as

³⁴Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Blithedale Romance. ed. Seymour Gross and Rosalie Murphy (New York, 1978 [rpt. 1852]): 25, 31.

³⁵Hawthorne, 32.

³⁶Hawthorne, 32.

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an object of reform.³⁷ As the novel turns out, Priscilla did have the gift of second-sight but had been entrapped by an unscrupulous mesmerist, letting the reader know that she is not truly an occult worker, and so she is deserving of a modicum of sympathy.

Despite his professed disgust at the public spectacle of trance-speaking, Coverdale twice attends a demonstration of the powers of The Veiled Lady and mentions her to harken back to the days before spiritualism, when mediumship was a spiritual show rather than a scientific one:

. . . the Veiled Lady. . . was a phenomenon in the mesmeric line, one of the earliest that had indicated the birth of a new science or the revival of an old humbug. Since those times, her sisterhood have grown too numerous to attract much individual notice; nor, in fact, has any one of them ever come before the public under such skilfully contrived circumstances of stage-effect, as those which at once mystified and illuminated the remarkable performances of the lady in question.³⁸

"Now-a-days," Coverdale continues, ". . . the exhibitor effects the simplicity and openness of scientific experiment." Like the inhabitants of Bracebridge, Coverdale finds these new theatrical entertainments to be the bane of a romantic practice of magic; rationality has merged with romance. The second time Coverdale sees the veiled lady, late in the novel, he knows she is Priscilla. This time he

³⁷Hawthorne, 28. Several contemporaneous works have dealt with the connection between spiritualism and reform movements. See particularly Fred Folio's Lucy Boston: Or, Women's Rights and Spiritualism. Illustrating the Follies and Delusions of the Nineteenth-Century (Auburn, New York, 1855) and Bayard Taylor's Hannah Thurston: A Story of American Life (London, 1863). Howard Kerr provides a useful discussion of the spiritualism-reform connection as well in Mediums, and Spirit Rappers, and Roaring Radicals, (Urbana, 1972)

³⁸Hawthorne, 5.

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directs readers away from the spectacle proper and toward the spectacle of the audience, which represents to him the crumbling of established order, since the role of the spectator was one he had claimed for the genteel author. He finds, among some, "a type of womanhood in which a bold intellectual development seems to be keeping pace with the progressive delicacy of the physical constitution" and among others those of "a generally decent and respectable character." However, "all [were] looking rather suburban than rural," for which Coverdale finds reason to regret that "these days, there is absolutely no rusticity, except when the actual labor of the soil leaves its earth-mold on the person."³⁹ He finds in this audience a group of people who represent the crumbling of social order: rural people looking fashionable and artificial and women evidencing bold intellect. He finds the whole "epoch of rapping spirits" to be a degraded one after he hears audience members tell stories of religious and familial orders upset by mediums and mesmerists.

In The Blithedale Romance we see the downfall of the ideal worlds of Bracebridge Hall and The Linwoods. The ideal societies of both depend on hierarchies of male and female, white and black, Amero-English and ethnic "other," and gentility and lower class. Coverdale finds these to be sadly breaking down to form a degraded culture instead of a utopian

³⁹Hawthorne, 181-182.

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Blithedale, (which turns out to be disutopian as well).⁴⁰

While such hierarchies do indeed exist and function predictably in the novel, Coverdale observes that the boundaries--rural folk looking as if they want to follow fashion, women exercising intellect--hinder the "purity" of the middle-class male experience, especially when trying to find inspiration in rusticity, which is supposed to clarify traditional gender roles and class expression.

Zenobia's grotesque suicide from heartbreak and the spectacle of The Veiled Lady reflect the dangers of crossing boundaries between men and women, genteel and rustic, and even science and religion. But Hawthorne also has Coverdale reveal some glimpses into the feelings of the less-privileged members of these hierarchies, as when the neighboring farmers laugh at the Blithedale farmers. Coverdale notes that the neighbors gossip about the Blithedaleans "that the cows laughed at our awkwardness at milking time. . . that we had hoed up whole acres of Indian corn. . . and drew the earth carefully about the weeds." Coverdale disagrees, saying that the farming was successful, but the artistic and humanitarian impulses suffered under hard labor. He insists that "Intellectual activity is incompatible with any large amount of bodily exercise" and therefore the "yeoman and the scholar. . . are two distinct individuals, and can never be

⁴⁰Roy R. Male explains the whole utopia-gone-awry theme of The Blithedale Romance well when he says "What the inhabitants hope will be a May Day--a warm, 'hearty' purification--turns out to be a winter's tale told in retrospect by a frosty bachelor." Hawthorne's Tragic Vision (Austin, 1957): 140.

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melted or welded into one substance."⁴¹ Coverdale's diatribe is more than an insult to the laboring neighbors who mock him; it is an attempt to re-order the world into the mutually exclusive categories upon which social order (not to mention white, male, higher-class privilege) rests.

Priscilla represents a transgression of boundaries that is acceptable to the maintenance of middle-class and male privilege. Having been born sensitive and strange in an urban slum to a fallen aristocrat and a ghostly seamstress, Priscilla became the victim of the mesmerist Professor Westervelt, who veiled her and sold tickets to the demonstrations of her clairvoyant powers. It seems Westervelt's control over Priscilla was just the latest in a long history of harassment at the hands of others. As a child in the urban slums, her delicacy and whiteness were sources of persecution, as the "big, red, Irish matrons, whose innumerable progeny swarmed out of the adjacent doors, used to mock at the pale Western child."⁴² This story, and her father's revelation that Priscilla was actually an aristocrat, makes the girl more attractive to Coverdale:

Poor maiden! How strangely had she been betrayed!
Blazoned abroad as a wonder of the world, and performing
what were adjudged as miracles--in the faith of many, a
seeress and a prophetess--in the harsher judgment of
others, a mountebank--she had kept, as I religiously
believe, her virgin reserve and sanctity of soul,
throughout it all.⁴³

⁴¹Hawthorne, 60-61

⁴²Hawthorne, 172.

⁴³Hawthorne, 187.

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The story awakens a sense of benevolence in both Coverdale and Hollingsworth, who realize they can be rescuers by redeeming the medium from her trade, but because of her newly-found wealth and aristocratic geneology, neither has to fall in love with a "real" poor girl.

The fate of the medium is significant, for Priscilla's marriage signifies her containment by a "proper" social form rather than containment by the occult. Hollingsworth, the former blacksmith and rich philanthropist intent upon erecting a compound for criminal reformation, hears Zenobia's fortune may be in jeopardy and rejects her as a mate, taking instead the newly-rich and always complacent Priscilla. When Blithedale fails, Hollingsworth and Priscilla remain but never work toward Hollingsworth's philanthropic goal. Instead, Hollingsworth is ruined by the guilty knowledge that he caused Zenobia's suicide. The man who, finding out Priscilla could be rich, rescued her from the mesmerist's entrapment, had become dependent upon her. Coverdale found Priscilla standing near Hollingsworth "as if she felt herself the guardian of her companion, but likewise a deep, submissive, unquestioning reverence, and also a veiled happiness in her fair and quiet countenance."⁴⁴

Reforming the occult worker from a product of the city's slums into the devoted bourgeois wife is the only real social change the residents of Blithedale effect. However, the utopians find themselves, like their city clothes under the

⁴⁴Hawthorne, 223.

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stress of labor, looking like "gentility in tatters." The infusion of the occult worker, and the urban decay she initially represents, aids in the implosion of the rural utopia of the middle-class, but in her conversion to devoted wife, the middle-class and its ethos of the sanctity of private womanhood lives on.

The differences in the portrayals of occult workers by Irving, Sedgwick and Hawthorne reveal that writers dealing with the identity of the middle-class as guardian of morality (in these works typified by a perceived rural innocence) tolerated occult work only if it did not question established orders of race, gender, and class. Bracebridge Hall and The Linwoods demonstrate a belief in the perceived role of bourgeois whites as moral guardians, which allowed them (in the narratives) to exert control--either by benevolence or manipulation--over those characterized by excessive emotion: African-Americans, ethnic "others," people of lower classes, and some women. If, according to these narratives, occult workers do not question established hierarchies, they are then to be tolerated and even encouraged. The occult worker as character served to show that seers can serve society as a contained "other." The Gypsy palmist and the Dutch seer provide the genteel with the opportunity to show just how rational they are by amusing themselves with prophecy and not falling prey to a confidence game by actually believing the fortune.

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As the middle-class feared and imagined a transition from a rural-based to an urban-based culture, writers voiced anxieties about social distinctions they saw as products of the "simple" rural world. The occult worker held a central place in this part of the middle-class imagination. This movement represented not only the burgeoning of cities and increased daily contact between the middle- and lower-classes (as Haltunnen has shown) but also the difficult cultural and social questions entertained by the middle-class on the meanings of "middle-class." Middle-class definitions of self lurked somewhere among an aristocracy, a democracy of morally upright hard workers, and a dreaded "gentility in tatters." In the few years between Bracebridge Hall and The Blithedale Romance, the occult worker "other" had become perilously close to the middle-class "self."

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Chapter Two:
White Prophetesses and the Brotherhood of Mediums:
Mediumship as a Symbolic Response to Class Inequality

Writers of the early nineteenth-century such as Sedgwick, Irving, and Hawthorne saw occult workers through the lens of the middle-class idea of rural innocence. Famous mediums--or at least those who produced autobiographies--could have drawn heavily on the notion of mediums as rural innocents. However, they did not rely exclusively on middle-class notions of occult work. Instead they broadened their scope to encompass the class interests of both farm workers and industrial laborers. They did this by drawing on their class experiences as industrial laborers and "simple" country folk. The most visible occult workers of the mid-nineteenth-century were elite mediums, those who channeled spirits for an often wealthy clientele and held public platform demonstrations. Even though elite mediums served the wealthy, they also spoke forcefully of their class "roots" and/or their tenuous class status as occult workers. From this beginning of the mass popularization of occult work, seers placed their trade in the context of a class structure.

Their class experiences--served up as qualifications for mediumship--were gendered and racialized. Mediumship, as told by the mediums, evidenced the crossing of two prominent discourses in the mid-nineteenth-century: the notion of "separate spheres" for men and women and the white working-class attempt to distance themselves from African-Americans,

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The modern spiritualist movement propelled occult work into mass media and began a national discourse on the occult. In many ways the spiritualist movement provided mediums, palmists, clairvoyants and card-readers with a mass market. For the first time in the nineteenth-century, a large group of consumers was versed in the occult arts through coverage of and participation in this highly-visible movement. More importantly, early elite and famous occult workers attempted to minimize customer control of the meanings of the spiritualist movement or occult work. While their customers, usually white and ranging from comfortable to well-to-do, discussed the religious, scientific, and social implications of spiritualism as it applied to them, mediums, almost always emerging from "country" or "laboring" homes, took the opportunity of the autobiography or as-told-to biography to comment on class privilege as it pertained to white people. In distinctly gendered and racialized modes of telling, mediums contextualized their work against a backdrop of class inequality, sometimes perpetuating it and sometimes criticizing it. Nevertheless, mediums claimed the profession for those at the bottom of the economic ladder, linking occult work with lower-class cultural vitality. Women mediums asserted that their own suffering as laborers made

¹David R. Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, (London and New York, 1991).

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them more sensitive and susceptible to spirit communication, while male mediums emphasized physical vitality and the mental training that allowed them to see beyond the dominant theories of science espoused by the educated elite.

Spiritualist mediums were the first occult workers to participate in a broad public debate over the meanings of their work. They were the most famous (or notorious) of occult workers and hence more personalized accounts of them have survived. The autobiography in particular served as the mode through which mediums spoke intimately about their work and the meanings of work in their lives. Whether they wrote to support the movement, criticize religious orthodoxy, counter negative images of mediums, or to expose the vices of spiritualism or tricks of the trade, mediums used the published word to articulate a common understanding of mediumship. They demonstrated that mediumship rendered class lines more fluid by either showing the absurdity of class privilege or by demonstrating how labor qualified one for upward mobility. As a rhetorical strategy for criticizing class inequality, elite mediums drew on prevailing notions of racial and ethnic "others" as more attuned to the supernatural and of women as passive. While arguing for their own cultural capital based on their experiences of the inequalities of class, they drew on their existing capital: whiteness and/or maleness.

The humble beginnings of the spiritualist movement--in a farmhouse where two girls acted as mediums--served as an

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example, and indeed set the model, for the gender and class dynamics of the work of the medium. The movement was born in Hydesville, New York in 1848. Young Maggie and Katie Fox discovered the trick of making raps on the floor with their toe joints and turned this into a taunt aimed at their mother.² They made the noises in the night and told their frazzled mother the raps were caused by a ghost named "Mr. Splitfoot" who could communicate through the two girls. When Amy and Isaac Post, women's rights reformers and abolitionists, heard of the nearby Hydesville rappings, they requested interviews with the girls to investigate the phenomenon. Soon word had spread and an older Fox sister took over the management of the mediums. Other mediums--some who believed they channeled real spirits and some who were highly aware of their own trickery--came forward, and replaced the rapping with spirit-writing and later with speaking, usually in the voices of departed relatives or spirit guides.

Spiritualism's popularity can be explained in terms of its versatility. Practitioners looked for "scientific" proof of an afterlife, messages from departed loved ones, or just an interesting evening. Some sought a replacement for a rejected Christian orthodoxy, and spiritualism rested

²Reuben Briggs Davenport, The Death-Blow to Spiritualism: Being the True Story of the Fox Sisters, As Revealed by Authority of Margaret Fox Kane and Catherine Fox Jencken. (New York, 1888). Davenport reported that the girls were eight and six years old when their mediumship began, but others reported they were fourteen and twelve. See Ann Braude, Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America, (Boston, 1989): 10.

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epistemologically on the existence of an afterlife, providing a Christian connection without the burden of clergy. Mediums were willing to oblige most customers no matter what their reason. The movement gained wealthy patronage, which provided opportunities for women (considered naturally more passive to spirit manipulation) and for some men to leave frustrating jobs and secure fame and, sometimes, a livable income.³

Mediums, like many spiritualists, were part of a cultural climate of the early and mid-nineteenth-century that encouraged religious experimentation among both middle- and lower-classes. Evangelical religion provided an outlet for ecstatic expression, while communes sprang from the desire to create a perfect society. Finneyism (began by Charles Grandison Finney) appealed to middle-class Americans who began to conceive of poverty as the result of loose morality, and Finneyites set out to save the poor from destruction by helping them pray. Lower-class men emerged as prophets and religious leaders, such as Joseph Smith of the Mormons and Bert Matthews of the Kingdom of Matthias. Women, both black and white, such as Rebecca Cox Jackson and Mother Ann of the Shakers, also became religious leaders and spoke and wrote publicly about their conversions and other religious experiences. In such times, mediums from the lower-classes could rather easily step into the spiritualist movement to

³Ann Braude's Radical Spirits provides a fuller analysis of the birth and perpetuation of the movement. See also R. Laurence Moore, In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture (New York, 1977).

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⁵Emma Hardin
(London, 1900), 6

pursue a living, for Americans by 1850 were well-versed in the variety of religious expression and the diversity of religious leaders before the public eye.⁴

The nine mediums (depicted in seven autobiographies) highlighted in this chapter did most of their work between 1850 and 1880 and recalled that work in texts published between 1853 and 1900. The texts range in theme and scope. Samantha Mettler's 1853 autobiography tells story of overcoming poverty to become a great mesmerist healer and psychometrist. Emma Hardinge Britten recounts her triumph over the "sore temptations of a vicious aristocracy"⁵ she encountered as an entertainer to find fame as a medium.

Nettie Colburn wanted to explain the role spiritualism played in Lincoln's presidency. Cora Richmond sought to demonstrate the peace and beauty of spiritualism. Margaret Fox in her 1888 "as told to" biography intended to debunk spiritualism as a humbug of the powerful. Ira Davenport told his story to writer T.L. Nichols to recount the number of times he and his

⁴For the diversity of religious experiment, see Alice Felt Tyler, Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History from the Colonial Period to the Outbreak of the Civil War, (New York, 1944). Paul Johnson and Sean Wilentz in The Kingdom of Matthias (New York, 1994) do a good job discussing the class differences in religious experimentation in this work on Robert Matthews. On women and religious leadership, see Mary Farrell Bednarowski, "Outside the Mainstream: Women's Religion and Religious Leaders in Nineteenth-Century America" in Modern American Protestantism and Its World: 12 Women and Women's Issues, ed. Martin Marty, (New York, 1993) and Jualynne Dodson, "Nineteenth-Century A.M.E. Preaching Women: The Cutting Edge of Women's Inclusion in Church Polity," in Thomas and Kellerm, eds. Women in New World: Historical Perspectives in the Wesleyan Tradition, (Abingdon, 1981).

⁵Emma Hardinge Britten, Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten, (London, 1900), 6.

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With the exception of Semantha Mettler and A. Medium, all of the mediums began work between the ages of six and fourteen. All insisted they came from simple "country" people or from laborers, with the exception of Cora Richmond, who came from a lower-middle class family with an eye toward social mobility, and A. Medium, whose life before mediumship is unclear. They were like other mediums in that, whether or not they explicitly stated they channeled real spirits, they always put on a dramatic show. They were unlike other mediums because they attained such fame; they became the elite of spiritualist mediums.

The narratives began by focusing on early adversity.

The medium, according to the tales of the most famous spirit-workers, went through an apprenticeship called "development." Development included work with a more experienced medium and a stint as a "test medium." Test mediums usually worked in public lecture halls in which a panel of the community's distinguished thinkers chose a topic for the spirits. Cora Richmond took pride in the fact that her spirit guides outwitted the committees, which "were composed of the most scholarly men of the literary clubs" and "the best writers and thinkers of the time."⁶ When the committee of learned men

⁶H.D. Barrett, Life Work of Cora L. V. Richmond. (Chicago, 1895):

I am treating this work as an "as told to" biography because Barrett lists himself as compiler and editor and because Cora Richmond applied for the copyright in her name.

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²Ibid., 19

delivered the topic (often of a theological or scientific theme), the medium entered a trance state and then gave a spirit-directed address on the topic chosen. While this form of testing a medium's development was challenging to say the least, other tests could be downright degrading. Test mediums were regularly tied with ropes or gagged to prevent any sleight of hand or ventriloquism.

As mediums became more highly developed, they often gave up platform work for more congenial private sittings at the homes of their clients. Nettie Colburn realized she was valuable to her client--none other than Mary Todd Lincoln--when her channeling partner (another medium) gave orders to a Lincoln servant and "No one seemed to think she was stepping out of her place."⁷

Giving seances for a wealthy clientele had its advantages, such as access to the services of tailors and domestic workers, rides in beautiful carriages, and attendance at elegant balls. Margaret Fox said she was sent to school to be groomed for marriage by the famous explorer Elisha Kent Kane, and Nettie Colburn received an offer of adoption from a wealthy man but refused it, for "the ties of affection were not easily broken" despite the fact that "his was a home of affluence and my own that of a laboring man."⁸ Offers of adoption notwithstanding, pay was undependable at

⁷Mrs. Nettie Colburn Maynard, Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist?
Or, Curious Revelations from the Life of a Trance Medium.
(Philadelphia, 1891): 102

⁸Ibid., 19.

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best, and, depending on the medium, could come at some cost to self-respect, for as A. Medium noted of payment that ". . . since burying his conscience, [the medium] was of the opinion someone, other than himself, should pay the funeral expenses."⁹

Despite the irregularity of income, these mediums presented the work as highly preferable to other jobs. They even stated that sometimes only the spirit guides could keep the wolf from the door. Samantha Mettler's story, one of the earliest of the medium genre, an as-told-to biography written by a close friend, was a tale of extreme economic hardship relieved by mediumship. Samantha's father, having died insolvent after alienating the family from the Presbyterian Church "for playing the violin at balls,"¹⁰ left the family destitute and with little access to community support.

Samantha worked long hours trying to serve the boarders her mother took in, and marriage provided no relief, for Samantha's husband was consistently in and out of debtor's prison. As the biographer notes, "Mrs. Mettler's situation was trying in the extreme, not only for the severe labor, but for the anxiety, and sense of dependence, which it involved."¹¹ When Samantha saw a mesmerist about a medical problem, she found herself, at the dawn of the spiritualist

⁹A. Medium, Revelations of a Spirit Medium [reprint], New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1922: 85.

¹⁰Frances H. Green. Biography of Mrs. Samantha Mettler. The Clairvoyant: Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed Through Her Agency. (New York, 1853).

¹¹Green, 30.

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movement, an easy subject for the mesmeric trance, in which she could diagnose disease and effect miraculous cures. She gained a reputation for miracles, found homes willing to host her in her travels and garnered recommendations from the newly-famous Fox sisters. At the end of her narrative, she had bought her own house where she received clients who "know no bounds to their affections to [Semantha]. . . and there is nothing which they would leave undone to gratify her."¹²

Later famous mediums found equal success in staving off poverty. Nettie Colburn cites labor exploitation as one of the key inducements out of industrial work and into mediumship, in which the medium could have more control over her labor and her life. Colburn's early years were divided between daytime industrial work and night-time occult work.

She much preferred mediumship, for it "came to me in a sense unsought, and took me, an untaught child, from my humble home in the ranks of laboring people, and led me forth, a teacher of the sublime truth of immortality. . . until everywhere. .

- I found only words of welcome and kindly care."¹³ Margaret Fox reveals that mediumship "was the only refuge left her from the cruel pursuit of poverty and want."¹⁴ The father of the famous Davenport Brothers refused to take payment for the services of the boys (who before entering mediumship worked as newsboys) until he found "his business deranged." The biographer stressed that "Every labourer--every one who

¹²Green, 105.

¹³Colburn, 23.

¹⁴Davenport, 165.

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The most prevalent theme in the autobiographies and as-told-to biographies is that mediumship provided the economically disenfranchised with an opportunity to escape manual labor and poverty and replace it with challenging and often enjoyable work. This theme existed in distinctly gendered forms, however, and even though mediumship may not have been stylistically segregated (since women often performed physical manifestations and men trance spoke), mediums explained their work according to notions of men as active and women as passive. Yet while Nettie Colburn, Semantha Mettler, Margaret Fox, Emma Hardinge Britten and Cora Richmond presented themselves as nervous and passive, their exploits tell the reader otherwise. And while Ira Davenport and A. Medium presented true mediumship as the ability to manipulate physical surroundings, they still cultivated their customers' emotional investment in the idea of an afterlife. While criticizing the lowly status of laborers, they held to many gender prescriptions that did not always describe mediumship accurately. What is important here, however, is that they chose certain gendered beliefs they perceived in their potential audience (and perhaps beliefs they held themselves) as entrance to a "respectable" public discourse on spiritualism and mediumship. It was

¹⁵T.L. Nichols, A Biography of the Brothers Davenport, [reprint], New York: Arno Press, 1976: 32.

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within this discursive space that they delivered their critique of class inequality.

Similarly, these famous and successful mediums relied a great deal on racial privilege in its gendered forms. The men relied on customers seeing them as trustworthy gentlemen who were "respectable" enough to be admitted into private homes. Their whiteness helped them to cultivate this image in contrast to the perception of African-American men as dangerous.¹⁶ White women mediums stressed the whiteness shared by the medium and her affluent customers by channeling spirits of the racial/ethnic "other." This more romantically-racialized method allowed the "other" to bring spiritual messages to the homes of wealthy whites from those they considered prone to the supernatural without the actual physical presence of the "other." The passive white female body discursively negated the danger of the "other" by putting him or her into the service of whites. Stressing the whiteness shared by mediums and their clients allowed mediums to criticize class inequality by leaving racial inequality in place. With their positions in higher-class society as lower-class workers already precarious, they were not going to jeopardize their newly-found freedom in work by delivering criticism of racial beliefs, especially since they so easily identified with romantic racialism.

¹⁶See George Frederickson, The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914 (New York, 1971).

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Male mediumship eschewed romantic racialism to a greater extent than female mediumship, but replaced it with a belief in the superiority of masculine physical agility. The two most revealing accounts of male mediumship are notable for very different reasons. Biography of the Brothers Davenport recounts the work of the two most famous male mediums of the nineteenth-century: Ira Davenport, born in 1839, and William Davenport, born in 1841. Revelations of a Spirit Medium, or Spiritualistic Mysteries Exposed is more controversial, however, since it is the only book written by a medium that explains in detail the variety of methods used by mediums to detect spiritualistic phenomena. No one has ever definitively named the author of the book, but soon after its publication scholars and occultists alike agreed that Revelations was a rare book. Editors of the most recent edition (1975) state that it "was such a crushing exposé" that "mediums themselves bought every copy of the work they could find" to keep it from other readers, believing that "dead men tell no tales".¹⁷

While the works may have been written from two different perspectives (Biography neither claims nor refutes spiritual influence while Revelations outwardly denies it), both assert that physical manifestations are superior to trance speaking and that men are better at creating physical manifestations. More importantly, these works assert that masculine-style mediumship is more effective at ridiculing, tricking, ripping

¹⁷Price and Dingwall, xiv.

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or dumbfounding those who claim to be the intellectual, social, and cultural superiors of the medium and the rest of society. Since the men chosen to "test" the mediums were always the community's educated elite, tricking them meant inverting the privilege inherent in the status gleaned from formal education.

The Davenports and A. Medium conducted their seances similarly. Early in their careers they hosted small shows in the homes of their friends. Later they held large public meetings. A typical seance began with the manager or a friend conducting attendees to their seats. Several gentlemen from the audience or from a panel of skeptics (usually economic or religious leaders or men of learning) came forward to inspect the area in which the seance was to take place and to tie the mediums to their chairs (a sailor or other laborer was often enlisted to do the tying). Tying was a practice used with both male and female mediums to ensure that they could not move around enough to cause the manifestations, such as guitars playing or hands waving. The mediums then entered a "spirit cabinet," a device invented by the Davenports in which the mediums sat during the seance. The spirit cabinet was a large wooden box with two doors and a viewing hole placed high on one of them. A. Medium used a black cloth curtain hung in a corner or the cover of darkness (see Appendix, Figure 1). The inspection committee then placed several musical instruments in the cabinet and closed it up. The manager dimmed the lights and the manifestations began.

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The instruments played music (some tunes easier on the ears than others); ghostly hands appeared at the window; spirit voices spoke from within, and audience members could sometimes speak to the voices of their deceased relatives.

When all commotion ceased, the manager opened the cabinet to show the mediums fully tied to their chairs within. The Davenports loved to take a gentleman into the cabinet with them to see how he might emerge, which was usually dishevelled, frightened, annoyed, or once in awhile bruised from being smacked in the head with a musical instrument. The committee again inspected the cabinet and the mediums and either admitted they could not explain the phenomena or offered an explanation for it, usually a weak one according to the mediums' accounts. When the seance dispersed, the spin began. Those present offered their analyses in private conversations and public forums.

Both the Davenports and A. Medium relished hearing or reading about participants' explanations for what they saw in the seance, for they related with glee that they had stumped each community's educated elite: doctors, clergy, and the professoriate. While the author of The Brothers Davenport ended his name with "M.D.," the mediums themselves had "received the common school education free to every boy in America" and came from parents "in moderate circumstances" who had recently fallen on hard times.¹⁸ A. Medium made no explicit reference to his class background but related on the

¹⁸Nichols, 9.

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ing public how mediums work but also to give himself
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ctinued saying he "will exult in proving to such persons
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be, or are supposed to be, they have never yet offered an
lanation that would hold water. . . ¹⁹ The work that
lowed maintained this spirit of exposing a trick (some of
ch were highly clever in the uses of physics and
nistry) only to emphasize the intelligence of the medium
the silliness of the learned elite in trying to figure
the trick.

A. Medium hid his disdain for the pretentiousness of the
cated elite until the publication of the book (and then,
ned it only anonymously), for he had not yet retired and
ld only work if his customers believed he had their best
erests in mind when he worked for them. Yet sometimes he
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n chemical reactions and sleight of hand, several learned
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¹⁹A. Medium, iii.

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characterized by showing outward respect to class hierarchy yet inwardly laughing at the absurdity of privilege.

Political scientist James Scott has called this phenomenon the "hidden transcript," meaning the aggregate of behaviors lower-class people use to rebel against the dominant social order without explicitly showing that rebellion to their "superiors," whose anger or displeasure could be dangerous.²⁰ A. Medium made public the "hidden transcript" mediums found in debunking the privilege accorded those with higher formal education:

Think of the aggregate of intellect there on that evening, using their every faculty to discover the true source of the "manifestations," bringing in such a verdict. It is the opinion of the 'medium' of the occasion, that, in reality, they were convinced it was the work of the disembodied spirits, but it would never do to admit it; hence the ridiculous explanation was the only respectable way out of it. It is only the 'medium' who can enjoy these displays of brilliant ideas and profundity of the supposed profound men and women who undertake to unearth the true inwardness of our puzzling ism, for only the 'medium' is absolutely certain they are wrong, and he, alone, could tell just how simple were the operations that befuddled the brainy man of science.²¹

Over and over again A. Medium criticized the elitism of his customers and his would-be exposers. After describing the construction of a slate used to effect spirit-writing, A. Medium asked "In what way is the chemist better fitted to discover the defect in the slate just described than the ordinary clerk or day laborer?" since the chemist's training "in certain lines of scientific subjects" led him to overlook

²⁰James C. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts, (New Haven and London, 1990).

²¹A. Medium, 28-29.

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other possible ways of effecting the trick. A. Medium also noted that the more "highly educated" or sufficient in the managing of "great mercantile and other institutions of business" a customer was, the easier he was to swindle, for once having been duped he would not expose the medium for swindling him out of even large amounts of money because "He has the reputation of being a brainy individual by hundreds of persons, and would rather give up twice the amount he has been swindled out of than have his friends and business associates know what an ass he has made of himself."²²

Unlike A. Medium, the Davenport Brothers never claimed they channeled spirits. Instead, they merely stated "that certain manifestations of physical and intellectual power--force directed by intelligence--take place in their presence, which neither they nor any other living person actively or consciously produce," and they saw "every *séance* [as] a trial more or less perfectly conducted of this first question at issue."²³ This did not mean, however, that the mediums were never "tested" in the manner described by A. Medium, who allowed prominent members of the community to inspect him and his cabinet. As the most popular mediums of mid-century (short of the Fox sisters), they received very publicized tests conducted by the most prominent professors.

At Harvard (which Nichols calls "the Oxford of the New World") in Cambridge, "a suburb of Boston...the most

²²A. Medium, 131, 257.

²³Nichols, 82.

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intelligent and scientific city in America," the Davenports demonstrated the manifestations in front of a panel of professors intent not upon "finding and accepting the truth, or advancing the cause or increasing the domain of science, but that they might expose and authoritatively denounce what they believed to be a great imposture."²⁴ The mediums responded by bringing one of the professors into the cabinet with them, and after all of the usual manifestations occurred--"the phantom hand was shown; the instruments rattled..."--the doors opened to find the mediums securely tied, but now the professor had been tied around the neck with a rope as well. Nichols goes on to denounce the type of scientific investigation that approaches a topic with prejudice, but it seemed the Davenports showed their feelings about their would-be exposers during the actual seance by placing a rope around the gentleman's neck. The Harvard professor was not the first or last "social better" to enter the spirit cabinet and emerge with some evidence that someone had tampered with him.

That the Davenport Brothers highlighted the fact that they took men inside their cabinet to rough them up speaks to a specifically masculine style of telling about the ways mediums debunked class hierarchies. According to both Ira Davenport and A. Medium, they were masters of physical manifestations, and A. Medium stresses over and over that men were superior to women in this type of mediumship, despite

²⁴Nichols, 83-85.

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the better opportunities women had to hide the tools of the trade beneath their copious skirts. The Davenport Brothers made a name for themselves by "being present" when plates piled themselves on the table, when glowing hands appeared and even touseled customers, when furniture moved on its own, and when musical instruments played with no apparant player. Nichols reported no animosity between the famous brothers and the equally famous Fox sisters who specialized in answering questions put to them by customers, but he did imply that the Davenports were superior mediums since at the above-mentioned spiritual extravaganza at Harvard the professors saved the brothers for last, presumably as their greatest challenge.

A. Medium, however, makes repeated references to the duplicity and even stupidity of female mediums, making his jealousy quite obvious. He warns male mediums not to trust female mediums, saying they "are universally selfish and jealous, and will leave no stone unturned to do you an injury."²⁵ These sentiments emerged presumably because the female medium was "jealous of your powers to obtain 'physical manifestations,' and although she may not say anything against you in public, be sure that every individual she meets will have a 'bug in his or her ear' concerning the geniuneness of your 'manifestations.'"²⁶ Even though A. Medium described many successful female mediums performing physical manifestations, he reserves his highest praise for

²⁵A. Medium, 95.

²⁶A. Medium, 95-96.

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male mediums, asserting they make the bests "artists" when it comes to enacting a seance, for such shows are "always satisfactory for the reason that if a man feels sure that the 'medium' is a fraud, he has been so well entertained that he does not regret the money paid for the opportunity to witness it."²⁷ By contrast, "there are no really smooth, expert and finished female 'mediums' for 'physical manifestations. . . . They are universally bunglers (sic), which accounts for so many exposes. It is not the male 'medium' who had his 'materialization' exposed, one time in a hundred."²⁸

A. Medium also noted that women mediums were kept from the organization he considered the life-blood of the trade, the Brotherhood of Mediums, a secret national network which allowed a medium to have information on seance attendees even if he was new to the community. A. Medium described several ways in which his Brotherhood allowed its members to prosper. The "notebooks" were the most important tool of the trade, consisting of detailed notes on individuals across the country. During a seance, mediums remembered any information attendees revealed about themselves and their families (including the prices they were willing to pay for a seance) and recorded this information under their names, which were then grouped by city. Any medium in the Brotherhood then had access to this information. Members of the Brotherhood supplemented this information with copious research into

²⁷A. Medium, 286.

²⁸A. Medium, 106-107.

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graveyards, newspapers, and local libraries. Members also shared knowledge of chemistry, such as which combinations of substances could make a hand glow, or knowledge in the construction of spirit cabinets or "magic" slates or even, if the medium was not a traveller and owned his own home, trap doors and hidden storage units.

No other medium mentioned this organization by this name. One reason could be that the network was not as widespread as A. Medium claimed it to be. Another reason is that the network would only function properly if no member exposed it, as A. Medium did with the publication of his autobiography. What is more important, however, is the fact that A. Medium tells the Brotherhood's story in such gendered terms. Exageration or not, he used the Brotherhood (or the idea of a Brotherhood) to prove that men made more clever mediums than women. Exclusion from the Brotherhood, according to A. Medium, left female mediums "continually wondering how Mr. so-and-so, manages to give so many positive and undeniable 'tests'--full names, dates, incidents and places, instead of doves, 'conditions of prosperity' and symbols."²⁹

A. Medium's claim that women were alienated from the Brotherhood is misleading, however, as one of the most famous women clairvoyants of the nineteenth-century--women's rights reformer Victoria Woodhull--used the notebooks in her early career as a travelling clairvoyant, although through a male

²⁹A. Medium, 100.

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envoy. As her biographer Barbara Goldsmith notes, Victoria and her sister Tenie practiced their clairvoyancy with information from the notebooks gathered by their scheming father Buck Claflin. Claflin performed the research necessary to gain information on prospective clients, while his daughters conducted consultations. The sisters used this training well, and gained their first big largess from the wealthy Commodore Vanderbilt in New York by gathering information on the stock market from their contacts with elite prostitutes.³⁰ Goldsmith's findings on Woodhull reveal that while women may have been somewhat marginalized in the Brotherhood, they still accessed the service and created their own networks of information from women-oriented services like prostitution.

Marginalization in the Brotherhood (coupled with the fact that male mediums travelled more than all but the most famous female mediums) explains somewhat the perceived difference in male and female styles of mediumship. If women's messages tended to be more symbolic than those of men, it was because they may not have had full access to such detailed information in cities in which they did not live. Education could also have been a factor in effecting some of the illusions borne of the more exotic chemicals (ones that women would not have readily used in household tasks). The

³⁰Barbara Goldsmith, Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull, (New York, 1998). This work is particularly useful in its insight into the role of the occult in Woodhull's life and how the training Woodhull received as a clairvoyant served her in her activism.

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most compelling reason A. Medium justified female exclusion from the Brotherhood, however, was that women in the trade had the advantage of femininity.

While white male mediums saw themselves excelling at physical manifestations, famous white female mediums specialized in channeling characters, or spirit guides. These guides were usually a stereotyped version of a racial/ethnic "other," especially stock characters whites considered more attuned to the supernatural such as Indian princesses or medicine men or healers of African descent. The seance then, in the hands of some of the most famous white women mediums, became a feminized form of minstrelsy in which white privilege could be enacted in praising female spirituality over male rationality.

Even though they spent more time speaking of degrading work conditions before entering mediumship, women mediums were less confrontational in overtly criticizing class hierarchy, probably because they were invested in maintaining the appearance of femininity in order to keep working. The explicit narrative of works by famous white women mediums supported existing class hierarchy by asserting that through talent and hard work anyone could rise to the top. The main storyline showed a medium who climbs out of poverty and frustration into the delightful and fulfilling social world of the upper-middle class and sometimes the upper class. Given that the figure of the European "peasant mystic" was a romantic one for some of the educated elite, as explained by

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T. J. Jackson Lears in No Place of Grace,³¹ it is curious at first that the mediums did not explain their successes as having grown from their "country" roots. Instead, mediums relied on that which they had in common with clients: a whiteness that seance participants emphasized by constructing the "other" in their own terms. Elite mediums attributed their success to their spirit guides, who were most often spirits resembling romantic racial/ethnic stereotypes of the "other" as highly attuned to the supernatural.

The most extensive uses of racial/ethnic characters came in the 1860s, 70s, and 80s, when mediums repeatedly used and developed the characters of the same spirit guides, usually Native American women and African-American men. These repeat performances attempted to maintain white privilege during a time when whites perceived existing racial caste as threatened: after the demise of slavery, during periods of heavy immigration on both coasts, and during the campaign to exterminate Native Americans, who were "impeding" westward expansion.³² It was also an attempt to critique the hegemony of the scientific empiricism associated with men by focusing on the romance of the spirit.

³¹T. J. Jackson Lears, No Place of Grace: AntiModernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920. (Chicago, 1981).

³²See George Frederickson, The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914, (New York, 1971); John Higham, Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925, (New York, 1963) and Robert Berkhofer, The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present, (New York, 1979).

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This was especially true with the "Indian maiden" spirit guide. One of Cora Richmond's favorite and most popular spirit guides was Ouina, the Indian maiden, who "was a seeress among her people, and. . . was almost worshipped by those humble children of the forest."³³ Ouina dictated poems regretting the "vanishing" of her race, gave spiritual advice, travelled through the higher spheres in a canoe, and "always brings strength and takes away all sense of weariness from her medium, by coming in for a few moments after her deepest and most exhaustive lectures had been given."³⁴ Ouina reached celebrity proportions with a spiritualist society in Chicago, whose leader, in introducing Richmond, described the romantic figure of the "Pocahontas":³⁵

Whose canoe comes to us laden with beautiful flowers of sentiment and poesy? Who with her magic wand, banishes 'cobwebs' from 'think-boxes' and makes 'ezzery-body' happy? Who is this strange compound of maturity and childishness, of dignity and simplicity, of gravity and drollery, of wisdom and nonsense? . . . Ouina! Thrice welcome Ouina! Tell us not that this name, so dear to our hearts stands for a myth! If Ouina is not, then are we not, and chaos is come again.³⁶

Ouina's appeal emanated from "simplicity" and "childishness," which made her less an impediment to westward expansion and more a curiosity to be treasured and consulted when necessary. Richmond and her friend Sarah Brooks even dressed

³³Barrett, 93.

³⁴Barrett, 97.

³⁵Rayna Green asserts that white America has constructed Native American women in one of two ways: the Pocahontas, who is beautiful and admits to the superiority of whites, and the Squaw, who is an ugly licentious drudge. "The Pocahontas Perplex: the Image of Indian Women in American Culture," Massachusetts Review. 16 (Autumn 1975): 698-714.

³⁶Barrett, 445.

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in "Indian costumes made by the directions of the spirits" and gave "Indian seances" which, according to the biographer, "were always held at private residences" as specialties for special clients.³⁷ Nettie Colburn also repeatedly channeled an Indian maiden named "Pinkie," (a curious blend of red and white), who was one of Mary Todd Lincoln's favorite spirit companions.

While the Indian maiden spirit guide was most popular, the black male healer came in second. The use of the healer was complicated, for the respect clients had for magical healing powers was often mitigated by stereotypical comic relief. While the medium and clients appreciated the spirit's powers, they also assumed he would be a jolly prankster, barely capable of understanding the seriousness of the seance. Emma Hardinge's "darkie Spirit" once put an attending skeptic through what he called his "gyganks." Gyganks consisted of possessing the skeptic's body, shaking him, and making him leap back and forth across the seance table with the purpose of successfully restoring the gentleman's sight.³⁸

Mediums also used spirit guides as a way of validating their own powers, such as when Nettie Colburn's friend Parnie channeled the spirit of one of the Attorney General's former servants, "an old colored man. . . who identified himself with his old master by expressing his thanks that his request

³⁷Barrett, 135.

³⁸Emma Hardinge Britten, Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten. (London, 1900): 120-121.

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'to be buried under the tree where in his old age he used to sit. . . ' "³⁹ was granted. Parnie's use of the servant served her by validating her customer's sense of benevolence and by asserting the white privilege held in common by the lower-class medium and her higher-class client.

Channeling the spirits of those more easily forgotten by the client lent validity to the medium's power, but mediums also used spirit guides to pay them compliments in front of clients, such as the "darkie spirit" calling Britten the "Great Preacher" or "Spirits of great chiefs" returning "to do honor to the white prophetess."⁴⁰ Cora Richmond stated that she warranted special protection from a Native American spirit named "Omwah. . . who in earth life was a Cheyenne 'medicine man' [and who] always accompanied the medium when she was travelling; when she was going by train, he was always astride the 'fire-buffalo'."⁴¹

The drama of the spirit "other" became popular during a moment of transformation in white middle-class culture. Karen Halttunen in Confidence Men and Painted Women identifies this shift as one from sentimental to theatrical culture. During the Jacksonian period, white middle-class Americans distinguished themselves from the masses by a belief that outward appearance reflected inward morality, making the "sincerity" of manners and fashion important to upward mobility. Halttunen notes that around the 1850s, the

³⁹Maynard, 116.

⁴⁰Britten, 121, 140.

⁴¹Barrett, 404.

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American middle-class became increasingly aware of the theatrical elements of their culture. This awareness of the "genteel performance" spurred interest in home recreation such as parlour plays and masquerades.⁴² The medium deftly bridged both these cultures. By insisting she channeled real spirits the medium appealed to the "sincerity" of sentimental culture, but by channeling the "exotic" she appealed to theatrical culture.

In its dramaturgy, the parlour seance functioned for the middle-class in some of the same ways minstrelsy functioned in white working-class culture by expressing an attraction to the cultural forms of the "others" while still maintaining symbolic control over them.⁴³ The seance differs from minstrelsy in two ways. First, the parlour seance was organized and performed primarily by women and held in the private space of the home, whereas minstrelsy was a realm of masculinity enacted by males in public spaces. The mediumistic trance itself supported notions of white femininity as passive but powerful nonetheless. Mediums insisted that the channeling was genuine (except when writing to debunk spiritualism) because they did not have the knowledge base--due to lack of education--the spirits had. Explicitly, they channeled real voices; they did not interpret them. This worked to their advantage when bringing

⁴²Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870. (New Haven and London, 1982).

⁴³Eric Lott, Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class. (New York, 1993)

the racial/ethnic "other" to white clients. The white female body, symbolized as "pure" and non-threatening in its passive form, supposedly mitigated the danger of the racial/ethnic "other." The combination of the "naturally" more spiritual "other" and the "pure" white female body became a condescendingly romantic performance which used white notions of the "other" to question rational, male, bourgeois whiteness. Britten's "darkie spirit" is a good example of this dynamic. The medium amends the white configuration of black masculinity as dangerous by channeling a jolly trickster who ultimately works for the good of the client. The perceived danger of the "other" is placed under control through romanticization. Similarly, Cora Richmond's "medicine man," instead of impeding westward expansion, travels with the "fire-buffalo" (the train being a popular symbol of westward expansion) as a talisman of luck for the white woman.

Second, while minstrelsy, as Eric Lott states, had an "oft-remarked capacity to ridicule upward in class as well as downward in racial direction,"⁴⁴ mediumistic performances of the "other" rarely questioned class structure explicitly. In this way, the performance was one of collective and classed whiteness; the mediums from the working classes performed an idea of the racial/ethnic "other" to become (in their narratives) an upper class self; the "others" they produced were always in service to both the medium and her

⁴⁴Lott, 111-112.

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clients. Spirits may have materialized early on to debunk slavery, but they never showed up to debunk the romantic racism of the white bourgeoisie. While mediums presented class as somewhat permeable (since they found entrance to the upper classes) and whiteness as somewhat negotiable (between romance and rationality), they saw racial/ethnic "otherness" as so stable that it reproduced itself beyond the grave.

The autobiographies and as-told-to biographies did claim that economically-disenfranchised people had a special hold on mediumship by asserting that poverty and hardship created certain sensibilities that can be uniquely artful and helpful. However, the fierce competition--due undeniably in part to the stress of the work-- that led elite mediums to look "downward" in gender or create romanticized and condescending stereotypes of racial/ethnic "others" eventually undid the profession, for those seeking to outlaw prophecy-for-profit eventually used racial role-playing or notions of "deceitful" women to their own ends (this will be discussed at length in Chapter Six).

The fact that male mediums used primarily male privilege and female mediums used mainly white privilege speaks to a historical moment when intersections of gender and race discourses allowed mediums to work. Elite mediums found entrance into the higher classes when ideologies that valued white feminine youth and beauty or white male cleverness and "respectability" merged with notions of a lower class penchant for the supernatural. This was also a moment,

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elucidated by David Roediger in Wages of Whiteness, when the white working classes came to define themselves as white workers in order to distinguish themselves from African-Americans, who for them evoked slavery, dependence, and non-freedom.⁴⁵ While stressing white working-class capability, elite women mediums looked "downward" in race while the successful male mediums looked "downward" in gender, a mistake that eventually proved to be an almost fatal disruption of the cohesiveness of the profession.

⁴⁵David R. Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class. (New York, 1991).

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**Chapter Three:
Humbugs, Fifty-Cent Sybils, and "A Positive Aversion
to all Pretenders to 'Divination'": Occult Workers
and the "Self-Made Man" in Barnum, Thomson, and
Douglass**

The differences in male and female mediumship brought into focus by the writings of elite mediums were not simply rhetorical strategies limited to occult workers. Female passivity and emotion and male agility and rationalism were dominant public discourses of the nineteenth-century, on which the detractors of the occult drew as much as the practitioners. Non-fiction writers played an important role in negotiating the meanings of the occult worker in the late-middle nineteenth-century, especially works written within the discourse of manhood characterized by rationality, proper financial practice and professionalism. Non-fiction texts tended to see the occult worker, like Goeffrey Crayon had in Irving's Bracebridge Hall and Coverdale did in Hawthorne's Blithedale Romance, as affronts to rationality and hence male power. Yet while these characters struggled with emotion as a way of knowing the world, male non-fiction writers seemed more certain in dismissing much of "feeling" as female "silliness." They often directly contradicted the validity of the emotion that was the most crucial concept in female mediums' autobiographies and the way in which many seers claimed power.

The figure for which the occult worker served as a foil was the "self-made man," a symbol John Cawelti has said served powerfully as an American icon. He writes that

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"Americans have always been the world's most enthusiastic proponents of the self-made man."¹ Writings promoting the self-made man ideology are important in the history of occult because the self-made man stood in philosophical opposition to the carnivalesque type of shows seers enacted. Additionally, carnivalesque advertising, such as that used by seers (see chapter four), was the single most important cultural product of the late-nineteenth-century that kept the promise of magical transformation alive.² Self-made men, however, were supposed to prosper through hard work and dedication, not their own magic and fantasy, even if some, like P.T. Barnum profited from others' beliefs in magic and the fantastic.

When writers viewed white bourgeois culture as one governed by rationality, proper financial transaction, and professionalism, they imagined occult workers in harsher terms than writers who weren't willing to fully dismiss emotion as a way of knowing. "Rational" writers saw occult workers as comical at best and at worst criminal, indecent, and most offensively to them, disdainful of middle-class rationality.³ P.T. Barnum's Humbugs of the World, Mortimer Thomson's The Witches of New York, and Frederick Douglass's autobiographies, all written in the second half of the nineteenth-century, use occult workers as foils to show what

¹John Cawelti, Apostles of the Self-Made Man, (Chicago, 1965), 1.

²See Jackson Lears, Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America, (New York, 1994).

³Mark Twain also made comical use of spiritualism in Life on the Mississippi of 1883 and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn of 1885. See Howard Kerr's "Sperits Couln't a Done Better" in Mediums, and Spirit Rappers, and Roaring Radicals.

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the rational "self-made man" is not: superstitious and spurious of respectable capitalism.

That these writers chose non-fiction is significant since such writing stood in contrast to novels, which were often dismissed as romantic, sentimental, or frivolous. Also significant was the fact that these writers were not professional literary authors. Mortimer Thomson was, however, a journalist who made a living writing for dailies and publishing books based on his experiences as a journalist. P.T. Barnum wrote Humbugs of the World at the height of his fame as a promoter, showman, and museum organizer. Frederick Douglass was a successful speaker, travelling in the U.S. and abroad as an abolitionist and later as an anti-racism and woman suffrage activist. While each author faced different rhetorical situations, each of them was invested in the ideology of the self-made man and in some version of social change. Barnum sought to educate the public on how to be entertained and not deceived by imposters. Thomson sought to rid cities of "questionable" characters and make them places "respectable" people would want to live. Douglass initially set out to show the atrocities of slavery and racial caste and later to demonstrate the African-American potential for learning and achievement. The notion of the rational self-made man tied their works together, as well as the roles that occult workers played in their books as those standing in opposition to the rational man.

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Science, although not an explicit theme in any of the works discussed here, looms in the background as evidence of rationality of the self-made man. While evangelism in the nineteenth-century continued to be a major force in enacting social change, science--as practiced primarily by white, formally-educated males--took an increasingly important role in social authority and work toward "public good."⁴ As science gained more social authority through public health reform especially, science came increasingly to be seen as a masculine pursuit, as educators warned against the debilitating effects of intellectual activity for women.⁵ Americans in the latter half of the nineteenth-century looked more and more to science as a way to solve problems, and hence tended to even further glorify male rationality. Barnum, Thomson, and to a lesser extent Douglass, used the prevailing belief in scientific method as a way to truth and applied it to occult workers to show them as credulous, superstitious and therefore unfit for a modern world.

The "self-made" P. T. Barnum could hardly be considered sentimentally genteel, scientifically rational, or even respectable in the eyes of much of the middle-class. In fact, Barnum was proud of his ability to trick people. Yet no one in print seemed to hate fortunetellers and mediums

⁴Charles Rosenberg chronicles the ways in which science and evangelism worked together in public health movements in the nineteenth-century in No Other Gods: On Science and American Social Thought, (Baltimore, 1961).

⁵See Margaret W. Rossiter, Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940, (Baltimore, 1982).

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more than the King of Humbug himself. In his 1866 Humbugs of the World, Barnum calls fortunetelling "one of the most baseless, absurd, disgusting and silly of all the humbugs" which is "busily practiced by knaves and believed by fools all over the world."⁶ He concludes of mediums' skills that "An aptitude for deception is all the capital that a person requires in order to become a 'spirit medium',"⁷ and he offered five hundred dollars to the person who could prove to him that any medium could actually communicate with the dead. He was positive he would forever keep his money.

Barnum wrote Humbugs of the World to fulfill a promise he made in his 1855 Autobiography of P. T. Barnum to "expose several of the chief humbugs of the world." He also spends a great deal of time clarifying his position on confidence games and uses Humbugs of the World to delineate between the "honest" humbug and the charlatan. He identifies humbugs across time and space, such as scientific advancements in food preparation, withcraft trials, overzealous reformers, and "the greatest humbug of all. . . the man who believes--or pretends to believe--that everything and everybody are humbugs." He reserves special discussions for occult workers, who practice "whole sciences (falsely so called) which are unmingled humbugs from beginning to end. Such was Alchemy, such was Magic, such was and still is Astrology, and above all Fortune-telling." Barnum's particular

⁶P.T. Barnum, Humbugs of the World, (London, 1866): 230.

⁷Barnum, 61.

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complaint with occult workers is that they advertise and "create" a product that is--in his view--false. One of his purposes in exposing the fraud of mediums and fortunetellers was to protect the less astute from losing their money to these frauds: "It is high time that the credulous portion of our community should be saved from the deceptions, delusions, and swindles of these blasphemous mountebanks and imposters."⁸ While the occult workers may be "blasphemous," their real crime is taking the money of the innocents who are unwise in the use of the occult.

P.T. Barnum's philosophy of advertising is important in understanding his disgust with occult workers. First, he was the most famous practitioner of the type of advertising fortunetellers practiced: the carnivalesque, which promised, with all kinds of far-out claims, some kind of interaction with magic or fantasy. Second, while Barnum and seers both used the carnivalesque, Barnum did not approve of seers primarily because he thought women and people of color incapable of truly appreciating the market forces at work in advertising. Barnum believed that "advertising is to the genuine article what manure is to land--it largely increases the product."⁹ The important thing regarding this "manure" is that it adds to the quality of the product. When practiced appropriately, advertising was a positive "humbug," which to Barnum meant "putting on glittering appearances--outside

⁸Barnum, 1, 5, 71

⁹Barnum, 44.

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show--novel expedients, by which to suddenly arrest public attention, and attract the public eye and ear," and "a man may, by common usage, be deemed a 'humbug' without by any means impeaching his integrity." The honorable humbug is the entrepreneur who creates "outside show" to add to the value of a quality product.

Barnum further explains his view of the honorable humbug by referring to Monsieur Mangin, the pencil-peddler. To sell his lead pencils, Monsieur Mangin parks his outlandish coach and dons a "costly velvet tunic with gold fringes" and "a magnificent burnished helmet, mounted with rich plumes of various brilliant colors."¹⁰ Mangin's address to the gathering crowd reveals two things: producers respond to consumer needs, and good advertisers are conscious of their charlatanry:

Yes, gentlemen, I am a charlatan--a mountebank; it is my profession, not from choice, but from necessity. You, gentlemen, created that necessity! You would not patronize true, unpretending, honest merit, but you are attracted by my glittering casque, my sweeping crest, my waving plumes. You are captivated by din and glitter, and therein lies my strength. Years ago I hired a modest shop in the Rue Rivoli, but I could not sell pencils enough to pay my rent, whereas, by assuming this disguise--it is nothing else--I have succeeded in attracting general attention, and in selling literally millions of my pencils.¹¹

This honest humbug delivers several things. First, he delivers a show, and the cost of the pencil includes the show. Second, he delivers moral comment that mountebanks are created by consumers and should not be judged harshly for

¹⁰Barnum, 8-11, 16.

¹¹Barnum, 18.

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simply satisfying consumer needs. Third, and perhaps least important in this exchange, he delivers the product itself, the lead pencil. Mangin, as the humbug of integrity, admits he is a show and makes the potential customer aware of his "disguise." Barnum also notes that Mangin's pencils were of the highest quality, asserting that his show was backed by a tangible, usable product.

Barnum delivered his theory of advertising at the beginning of some important changes in cultural views of economic transaction. Alan Trachtenberg contends that between 1870 and 1900 the volume of advertising in America multiplied by over ten times. This "indicated not only an absolute expansion but a decisive change in the function of advertising" from the "older function to inform. . . to a mode in which information as such now fused with a message about the product, together with the message about the potential consumer, that he or she required the product in order to satisfy a need incited and articulated by the advertisement itself."¹² Trachtenberg sees this function as disassociating the production of goods from their consumption because advertising emphasized the abstract values (morality, beauty, goodness) products would supposedly give the potential consumers.

While Trachtenberg locates this shift beginning after 1870, bourgeois culture had begun to find the evidence of production distasteful as early as 1830 by separating the

¹²Trachtenberg, 136-137.

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home into spaces of labor and spaces of leisure (the latter providing space for "genteel performance," the show of respectability and distance from labor).¹³ Barnum's "manure" philosophy of advertising reflects the tendency to obscure the labor of a product by almost allowing the advertising to eclipse the product. Barnum believed that the "outside show" doesn't just *inform* the potential customer of the product but *bettors* the product by providing positive associations.

Barnum's mermaid spectacle typifies this. He had acquired a "Feegee Mermaid" consisting of a monkey's torso sewn to the body of a fish, but orchestrated a media campaign which presented the mermaid as a beautiful underwater enchantress. As his biographer notes, Barnum had New York in a mermaid "fever" by the time he exhibited the piece at Concert Hall for one week and then at his American Museum. The exhibit was further publicized by Barnum's public "debate" with naturalists over the authenticity of the creature. The difference between Barnum's advertising and the actual object did not enrage the public, however, who could not get enough of the creature, a fact Barnum's biographer attributes to "the time-honored tradition of sublimating one's own sense of outrage into the innocent delight that comes from seeing one's own friends and neighbors humbugged as well."¹⁴ Barnum saw his "genuine

¹³Halltunen, 102-114.

¹⁴Saxon, P. T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man, (New York, 1989): 119-123. For more on Barnum's autobiographies (which are deemphasized here to examine the neglected Humbugs of the World more fully) and life history, see Neil Harris, Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum, (Boston,

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article" not only as the shriveled piece of taxidermy but as the attendant show of the advertising itself and the jokes the spectacle allowed repeat visitors to play on their friends. He had put on a show with a media blitz and a public debate with naturalists, and felt he had delivered a quality product, despite the fact that the advertising itself had overtaken the product in importance.

In Barnum's view of social hierarchies, occult workers as gendered, classed, and racial/ethnic "others" simply could not present themselves as "honest" humbugs, as he presented himself and Monsieur Mangin. While Barnum was willing to blur the lines between advertising and product for the Feegee Mermaid, he was not willing to admit that occult workers might be orchestrating their work similarly. His attacks on occult workers fall into two categories: those on mediums who make a show of femininity and nervousness and those on urban "witches" who, he finds, do not attempt to hide the evidence of their domestic labors when they told fortunes, therefore lacking a "genteel performance" of any kind. Barnum criticizes mediums for overacting prescriptions for middle-class white women and fortunetellers for not subscribing to these same prescriptions. The former advertised too much and the latter advertised too little.

How did Barnum know that there was no "geniune article" in the seance or consultation? Why couldn't the seance be

1973) and Eric Fretz, "Performing Selves and the Theatrical Imagination in Antebellum America: The Examples of Anna Cora Mowatt, P.T. Barnum, and Nathaniel Hawthorne," Michigan State University Ph.D Dissertation, (East Lansing, MI, 1995).

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explained as he had explained the mermaid showing? Barnum's one key distinction between occult workers and his own work is that he admits to being a showman. When the customer views Barnum's splendid mermaid advertisements, he knows (according to Barnum) that the ad is part of the show, and when he comes to the American Museum to see the mermaid, he is not only treated to the joke but to all the other exhibits. The occult worker, on the other hand, insists she delivers real spirits or real prophecy, and stands by her ability to deliver these rather than admitting she puts on a show. Barnum's sense of his own rationality will not allow him to believe in prophecy, and therefore, he sees the occult worker's product as false.

Barnum blasts female mediums in particular for feigning femininity in the form of passivity and illness in order to bolster their validity as mediums. Victorian belief in the frailty of the white bourgeois female nervous system allowed mediums to portray themselves as more susceptible to spirit contact.¹⁵ Barnum's sixty-page section on spiritualists centers on the credulousness of spiritualists and the trickery of mediums. He takes special interest in detailing the ways in which mediums produce various "spirit phenomena," such as making spiritual "letters on the arm" by flexing an

¹⁵For a discussion of Victorian female "nervousness," see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in the Nineteenth-Century" in Women and Health in America, ed. Judith Walzer Leavitt, (Madison, Wisconsin, 1984). See also R. Laurence Moore, "The Medium and Her Message: A Case of Female Professionalism" in In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology and American Culture, (New York, 1977).

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arm muscle and scratching the surface of the skin with a blunt point or answering unopened letters by folding them in such ways that enable them to be seen through the paper. He also uncovers the mystery of spirit photography by explaining the use of old negatives on new prints, and spends time debunking various "physical manifestations": instruments played by spirits, tables rising, hands grabbing seance participants, etc. He dedicates one chapter to three female mediums who use the trappings of femininity--"delicate" health and full skirts--to convince seance participants they produce physical manifestations. One is "rather tall and muscular" while "her general manner and expression" evoke "innocence and simplicity." Under cover of her skirts, however, she--using only her feet and legs--displays feats worthy of the Samson she channels. Barnum charges another that "her health is not so delicate, however, as to prevent her from labouring hard to humbug people with 'physical demonstrations'."¹⁶ To Barnum, true femininity is irreconcilable with mediumship.

The parlour seances described above were a cultural form practiced mainly by the middle-class. A hostess hired the medium who visited in the evening with other guests, to whom the medium channeled messages from the dead. The working- and under-class occultists practiced a different style: the clairvoyant consultation in which individual customers visited the homes of the clairvoyants where they could, for a

¹⁶Barnum, 72-76.

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price between ten cents and a dollar, receive a private card- or palm-reading, an astrological prediction, or other form of divination. While Barnum's complaint of the medium was that she played the middle-class lady too well, his poor estimation of the lower-class fortuneteller rested on her not playing the lady at all.

Barnum at first seems ambivalent as to the racial/ethnic identification of fortunetellers, but in the end concludes that they are either white and poor or racially/ethnically "other," regardless of class. He begins his discussion of fortunetelling in racial/ethnic terms, offering divination as evidence of established social hierarchies:

Witches and wizards operate and prosper among the Hottentots and negroes and barbarous Indians, among the Siberians and Kirgishes and Lapps of course. Everybody knows that --but are the French, and Germans, and English, and Americans poor ignorant creatures too? They are, if the belief and practice of witchcraft among them is any test; for in all those countries there are witches.¹⁷

Barnum goes on to remark on the high number of fortunetellers advertising in the morning's newspaper, where he finds "sixteen witches and two wizards" and further comments that "one of these wizards was a black man; a very proper style of person to deal with the black art."¹⁸

Barnum introduces readers to the profession of prophecy by reminding them that white seers make whites seem too much like racial and ethnic "others." Despite this opening association with "others," he proceeds to trace prophecy

¹⁷Barnum, 230.

¹⁸Barnum, 231.

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through Judeo-Christian history, relating that "the Jewish witch was a mere diviner, or at the most a raiser of the dead, and the Gentile witch was a poisoner, a maker of philtres, and a vulgar sort of magician. The devil part of the business did not begin until a good while after Christ." The present incarnation of this history is the fortuneteller, who according to Barnum, "has degenerated into a very vulgar and poverty-stricken sort of conjuring woman."¹⁹ Barnum's presentation of the present witch embodies the classed "other," who, despite being white, refuses the aesthetic standards of the white middle-class:

[Fortunetellers] live in cheap and dirty houses that smell bad; their houses are in the same style, infected with a strong odor of cabbage, onions, washing-day, old dinners, and other merely sublunary smells. Their rooms are ill-furnished, and often beset with wash-tubs, swill-pails, mops, and soiled clothes, their personal appearance is commonly unclean, homely, vulgar, coarse and ignorant, and often rummy.²⁰

Here Barnum asserts that the fortuneteller, as one of the "unworthy" poor, represents a blending of public and private which was offensive to middle-class sensibilities. While the bourgeois held to "polite social geography" in which the victorian home was divided into regions of the "genteel performance" like the parlour, and regions of preparation for the performance, like the kitchen,²¹ the fortuneteller allowed the evidence of her labor, such as wash-tubs and mops, to be seen. With this, Barnum completes his invocation of the

¹⁹Barnum, 231.

²⁰Barnum, 231.

²¹Halttunen, 102-114.

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fortuneteller as "other" by asserting the lack of gentility reflected in her home. Here he equates the white lower-class "other" with the racial/ethnic "other."

As seen by Barnum, the product sold by the fortuneteller is not a good one. The "advertising" she effects is nothing more than "sublunary": the evidence of domestic labor. As Trachtenberg asserts, Victorian Americans came to use advertising as a way of validating the respectability of consumer choices, and, given Barnum's description of dirt and squalor, the fortuneteller's services are not respectable products. In other words, fortunetelling is not a respectable service because it does not come with a respectable "outside show." Barnum's view of the fortuneteller's lack of advertisement predicts later views of advertising which, according to Trachtenberg, blurred the product's connection to labor by focusing on its consumption. While Barnum criticized mediums serving the middle-class for disingenuous advertising, he faults the fortuneteller, whether lower-class "other" or belonging to "negroes and barbarous Indians," for not advertising to suit the tastes of the middle-class. This, he shows, is disrespectful to the market culture that produces "self-made" men such as himself.

Barnum's double standard can be partially explained in his attitude toward women and the occult. Throughout his discussions of superstitions, spiritualism, and urban fortunetelling, Barnum associates the supernatural with female incredulity and irrationality. From the white ladies

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of the South who used to consult enslaved root-workers to the "femification" of men in spiritualism to the nervous mediums and prophecying washerwomen, he thoroughly mingles superstition with femininity. Even though he admits everyone has "an inherent love of the marvelous" and remarks that the "most learned and the greatest men have been the deepest believers in ingeniously-contrived machines for running human reason off the track," he provides examples that more harshly judge women for superstitious silliness.²² He supports his view with a belief in the inability of women to be fully educated in rationality, best indicated by his denomination of the ancient Sybils as humbug. He says the "Sybils were women, supposed to be inspired by some divinity, who prophesied the future. . . These ladies lived in caves, and among them are said to have composed the Sibylline books, which contained the mysteries of religion," but Barnum asserts, in a confused temporal moment, that the books were probably plagiarized from the "Old and New Testaments." He completes his diatribe against female learning and religious leadership by doubting the existence of the Sybils, saying "if there were any, they were probably ill-natured and desperate old maids, who turned so sour-tempered that their friends had to drive them off to live by themselves, and who, under these circumstances, went to work and wrote books."²³

²²Barnum, 304-307, 87, 220.

²³Barnum, 303.

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In this flourish on women, learning, and prophecy, Barnum adds learned (presumably middle-class) women to his characterization of the occult worker as the racial, classed, ethnic, gendered "other," compiling a group of people who, unlike Mangin and himself, are alienated from the professionalism of the independent entrepreneur. They create no "genuine" product and reflect poorly on their customers. This makes them deviants to the rules of proper market culture and hence outcasts from middle-class status.

Barnum's description of "New York City witches" owes much to Mortimer Thomson's 1858 The Witches of New York, as encountered by O.K. Philander Doesticks, P.B. Thomson's work is more focused on a specific "humbug" than Barnum's, describing nineteen visits with fortunetellers whose advertisements he found in New York dailies. The Witches of New York portrays professional prophecy as an urban problem, and asserts that over a thousand customers a week from all social classes lose their money to the charlatans, many of whom use fortunetelling as a "screen" for such activities as abortion, prostitution, and counterfeiting. The tome demonstrates the full extent to which views of morality mingled with views of money, for while the narrator expresses outrage that fortunetellers lure young women into prostitution and practice abortion (which may have been the case in rare occasions), their primary crime is selling a worthless product. While prostitution is "the most terrible truth connected with this whole subject," the swindle takes

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the main focus of the book. The narrator finds the number of swindles alarming enough to look forward to the time when fortunetellers "will be no longer classed with harmless mountebanks but with dangerous criminals."²⁴

Thomson wrote under the pseudonym of Q.K. Philander Doesticks, P.B., a character of almost limitless naiveté in regards to urban life. While Thomson's literary reputation has been eclipsed by later humor writers using a similar personae, such as Twain in Innocents Abroad, Thomson did achieve popularity in the 1850s with sketches of New York at its least glamorous, like Doesticks: What He Says and The History and Records of the Elephant Club. He also published Plu-ri-bus-tah, A Song That's By-No-Author, an extended parody of Longfellow's "Hiawatha."²⁵ The Witches of New York, his last work, focused on the fortunetellers initially identified in Doesticks: What He Says.

In Witches, Doesticks visits nineteen fortunetellers, claiming he hopes to find a wife from that profession whose witchcraft might relieve him from the burdens of debt. This motif follows him through each visit, even one in which he disguised himself as a woman to "catch a glimpse of his future husband." The structure in which Doesticks ponders on

²⁴Mortimer Thomson, The Witches of New York, (New York, 1859, reproduced 1969): 18-20.

²⁵Thomson's work has received little attention from literary critics. Two notable exceptions are Edward J. Piacentino's "'Seeing the Elephant': Doesticks' Satires of Nineteenth-Century Gotham." Studies in American Humor. 5 (2 and 3): 134-144 and David E. E. Sloane's "The Humor of the Old Northeast: Barnum, Burnham, and the Hen Fever." Studies in American Humor 6: 154-162.

his hopes for a "witch-wife" only to be disillusioned by his visit to each fortuneteller is significant not only in developing the humor of Doesticks' gullibility but also because it is charged with the language of commerce:

The "Individual," modestly speaking of himself in the third person, admits that, being then a single man of some respectability, he was at that very period looking out for a profitable partner of his bosom, sorrows, joys, and expenses. He naturally preferred one who could do something towards making a share of the expensive responsibility of a family off his hands, and was not disposed to object to one who was even afflicted with money;--next to that woman, who he had not yet discovered, a lady with a "natural gift" for money-making was evidently the most eligible of matrimonial speculations.²⁶

While Doesticks says he has "respectability" or the gentility to give him middle-class status, he still searches for the money to ensure that status.

Doesticks recognizes that status does not come from manners alone, and sets out to "speculate" on marriage: "What a treasure. . . would such an accomplished wife be in republican America,--how exceedingly useful in the case of her husband's rivals for Custom-house honors, and how invaluable when creditors become clamorous."²⁷ While Thomson pokes fun here at the monetary fixation of the middle-class, he also strongly validates it by having Doesticks describe the fortunetellers as those who do not respect the rules of propriety governing the use of ready-money.

Doesticks recounts his visits in the third person, sometimes as "the Individual" but mostly as "Cash Customer,"

²⁶Thomson, 58.

²⁷Thomson, 61.

emphasizing the importance of his consumer status in the exchanges. Doesticks describes a world--always geographically set apart from his own community--in which those around him can only see him in terms of the money in this pocket. He describes one neighborhood with the warning that "Sunshine is the only protection for a well-dressed man against the population of this part of town," and insists the neighborhood is a place that raises thieves, and is home to the "boldest and most desperate burglars," "fathers who teach their children the thief's profession, and mothers who carry pickpockets at the breast." He sees the fortuneteller as a prominent feature of this "nest of crime," where she "has her home, and here she thrives."²⁸ Doesticks describes himself as the respectable outsider in the communities of fortunetellers, where he is subjected to suspicious glances and rude behavior. In turn, he allies himself with the respectable reader by describing not only the crime associated with fortunetellers--presumed only on the basis of his assessment of their neighborhoods--but the illogic of their readings and the squalor in which they live.

The aesthetic sensibilities of the respectable "Cash Customer" are offended by what he perceives to be squalor, and the monetary sensibilities are offended by his belief that in certain neighborhoods people raise their children with the sole purpose of teaching them how to take the money of the "well-dressed" man. Each visit in which Doesticks

²⁸Thomson, 137

undergoes these assaults on his respectability is characterized by an encounter with a disagreeable person who is racially or ethnically distinct from the Cash Customer.

In twelve of his nineteen visits, he encounters people--the fortuneteller's neighbors, customers, boarders, or the fortunetellers themselves--he describes as racially or ethnically different from himself. He is let into the houses by "a grizzly Gaul" speaking bad English, a husband speaking cockneyed English, Irish girls, and a "quiet colored girl." He describes neighbors and customers like "sharp-featured restless Jews" and "delegates from Africa, and from the Green Isle of the Sea" and encounters seers like the "Spanish Lady," the "Brazilian Astrologist," an "ancient" Frenchwoman, the drunken "Gipsey Girl," Madame de Bellini the Dutchwoman, an overburdened mother "of the Irish breed. . . red-haired, freckled, and dirty to a degree," and Mr. Grommer, who Doesticks calls "the Cullud Seer," and Mrs. Grommer, "the sable sorceress." While four of these seers advertise themselves as ethnically distinct--"The Spanish Lady," "The Gipsey Girl," the "Brazilian Astrologist" and the Frenchwoman "from Paris"--Doesticks clearly points out the racial/ethnic orientation of the rest of the seers and their neighbors and customers.

One implicit message of the book is that an overwhelming number of the people who don't respect middle-class aesthetic sensibilities or the proper uses of cash are ethnically or racially "other." And since all but two of the seers

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Doesticks encounters are female, he demonstrates that lower-class women of all races and ethnicities are ill-instructed in proper housekeeping, manners, and the honest uses of cash.

For his forays into "dangerous" neighborhoods and for his money (usually twenty-five cents to a dollar), Doesticks receives what he considers to be ridiculous nonsense: warnings about enemies, advice about love, the doings of relatives far away (relatives the Cash Customer made up), and lucky numbers and days. Doesticks, introduced immediately as a man making his own luck by seeking a rich wife, finds no use for the fortunes. In conclusion, he recounts the sum of what he received:

A recapitulation of the various prophecies made to the Cash Customer would show that he has been promised thirty-three wives, and something over ninety children--that he was brought into the world between 1820 and 1833--. . . under nearly all the planets known to astronomers--that he has more birth-places than he has fingers and toes. . . he has so many future fortunes marked out for him that at three hundred and fifty years old his work will not be half done.²⁹

He hopes that after readers discover the vulgarity of fortunetellers, they will not "be willing to pay money for any personal experience with" the seers. According to Thomson, seers, who in many ways practice much like other independent entrepreneurs, are not worth the good consumers' money because they are dirty, silly, and ethnically or racially "other." In a class system in which the genteel use their purchases to reflect their respectability, Thomson has

²⁹Thomson, 405.

exposed the fortuneteller industry as peddling a product that reflects poorly on the consumer.

Barnum and Thomson reflected a changing sense of what it was that constituted middle-classness. While Irving, Sedgwick, and even Hawthorne saw the ideal middle-class in terms of virtue first and economic progress second, Barnum and Thomson reversed the order of importance, with economic progress first with virtue and morality naturally following. While concerned about gentility in manners and aesthetic concerns like housekeeping and grooming, they were more concerned that those who didn't express gentility were after the money (and hence the status) of the middle-class man. At the end of Barnum's and Thomson's logic was a fear that the "unworthy" poor, who were ethnically and racially "other," were much like the middle-class in their quest for status through cash. By advertising "falsely" and delivering a nonsensical product, fortunetellers mocked the system through which entrepreneurial white men "made" themselves. This is what made occult workers threatening to the men benefitting from this system.

Unlike images in Barnum and Thomson, the occult worker in Frederick Douglass's autobiographies is not the real deceiver in market culture. Instead, the slaveowner and the northern racist are the absurd and disgusting mountebanks. Looking at the autobiographies as evidence of middle-class views on economy is much more complicated than in the cases of Barnum and Thomson, even though Douglass evokes many

middle-class signifiers. The class status of Douglass himself can be debated. First, he was born a slave, but then he learned manual trades that he embraced as honorable work after his escape from enslavement. He went on to become a writer, orator, foreign consul and man of comfortable means. Yet even at his peak of fame, he received second-class treatment as an African-American. Douglass's own class status can be argued to lie anywhere from underclass to black elite, but his writings were addressed to a largely white and middle-class readership. The first autobiography sold thirty thousand copies, and catapulted Douglass from a position as a protégé of famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison to a powerful figure in his own right. To reform-minded white readers trying to fend off fears that the polished Douglass had never really been enslaved, the Narrative set at ease fears that the eloquent, cultivated speaker had not been enslaved.³⁰

The themes of the autobiographies appealed to readers for different reasons. In Middle-Class Providence, 1820-1940, John Gilkeson locates reform movements as a staple of nineteenth-century middle-class identity. He notes that "antebellum moral reform societies. . . propagated a new social order resting on self-discipline rather than deference to external authority," and the catchwords describing this

³⁰See Peter Ripley, "The Autobiographical Writings of Frederick Douglass," Southern Studies. 24(1): 5-29.

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new middle-class became "stable, industrious, sober."³¹ Douglass's life story was a pristine model of self-discipline.³² Against almost overwhelming odds, Douglass taught himself to read and write. He wrote movingly and passionately of the hypocrisy of southern religious institutions that perpetuated slavery and of northern churches that barred African-Americans from full participation. As a free man he put himself to any trade he could find, whether he saw it beneath his skills or not. And he constantly sought new knowledge through prolific reading. Douglass realized that his readership was intent on seeing African-Americans as unlearned and lazy, and he cast part of his story in terms of hard work, honesty and discipline, which spoke directly to his readers' prejudices.

Some readers specifically named the occult worker as the opposite of Douglass's self-made man. Douglass's accomplishments inspired George Ruffin, African-American lawyer and Harvard graduate who penned the introduction to the 1893 Life and Times, to call Douglass "in every sense of the word. . . a self-made man." To Ruffin this meant Douglass "was poor [and] has by honest toil and industry become rich and independent." From his inauspicious beginnings, he has become noted as a "writer of power" and "a

³¹John S. Gilkeson, Jr. Middle-Class Providence, 1820-1940, (Princeton, New Jersey, 1986): 12-13.

³²Rafia Zafar provides a useful discussion of Douglass's use of self-made man ideology in "Franklinian Douglass: The Afro-American as Representative Man" in Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Cambridge, 1990).

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thinker whose views are potent in controlling and shaping public opinion" and finally "a cultivated gentleman whose virtues as a husband, father, and citizen are the highest honor a man can have."³³ Ruffin contrasts these with the slave south he envisions in Douglass's narrative:

Here was the great house and the cabins, the old Aunties and patriarchal Uncles, little picanninies and picanninies not so little. . . ; mules, overseers, and broken down fences. Here was the negro Doctor learned in the science of roots and herbs; also the black conjurer with his divination. Here was slave-breeding and slave-selling, whipping, torturing and beating to death.³⁴

Ruffin continues, stating "Little did the overseer on this plantation think that he had in his gang a man of superior order" in Douglass, who had "undaunted spirit" and "whose mind, far above the minds of the grovelling creatures about him, was at that time plotting schemes for his liberty."³⁵ His commendation of Douglass as a self-made man lies in making distinctions between Douglass, a rational, intelligent man, and his fellow slaves, who consisted of "grovelling creatures," "picanninies not so little," and of course "the black conjurer with his divination." A black professional himself who was highly aware of white views of blacks as irrational and irresponsible, Ruffin emphasizes Douglass's difference from the "brutes" made by enslavement. In order to see Douglass as a self-made man (and much like the strategies of self-presentation by Barnum), Ruffin needed to

³³George Ruffin in Douglass, 467.

³⁴George Ruffin in Douglass, 467-470.

³⁵George Ruffin in Douglass, 467.

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distinguish him from underachievement and irrationality, characteristics he attributes to African-Americans--other than himself--who were "broken" by slavery. To Ruffin, the occult worker is Douglass's irrational and unintellectual opposite.

While Ruffin's introduction provides one way Douglass's story was read, the narrative itself does not fully follow through Ruffin's system of logic. Douglass is much more ambivalent about Sandy, the conjure man, because his sense of himself as a rational and self-determined man is much more complicated than Ruffin's reading of him. One central concern of the autobiographies that informs Douglass's view of the conjure man is that of deception. On the surface this theme could be interpreted by nineteenth-century readers as evidence of "right feeling" and hence middle-class respectability. It can even be related to the market-focused distaste for deception of Barnum and Thomson. Yet Douglass's focus is not the excluding of the "unrespectable" through manners or the placing of limits on market culture but instead the dismantling of racial caste. With the autobiographies, especially the 1855 My Bondage and My Freedom, Douglass asked the white middle-class to fully extend its aversion to deception to its own racism.

In this schema, the conjurer who helped Douglass to defeat Covey and his own fears seemed honest and truthful compared to whites who practiced everything from terrorism to condescension in their attempts to control black labor and

privilege their own whiteness. Yet Douglass, in presenting himself as a sober, rational, industrious man, could not fully embrace the practice of divination, and in the years between the first and second editions of his life-story, Douglass became compelled to further explain his relationship to conjure as a connection to the support network of African-American communities.

In the 1845 Narrative of the Life, Douglass recounts his first meeting with Sandy Jenkins and the ensuing fight with Covey with less comment than he provided later. His only comment on conjure was a rare footnote (perhaps added through editorial suggestion) that while conjure was common among slaves, he himself did not believe in it. Despite the footnote, conjure plays an important role in symbolizing the community support Douglass used to escape from slavery. He begins the story by saying "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man." Douglass relates the story of how he runs from Covey after he had beaten him savagely for falling down to illness. After enduring a beating by the overseer Covey, Douglass seeks shelter in the woods. It is here that Douglass meets Sandy Jenkins, an enslaved man on his way to his free wife's house. Jenkins took him home, fed him, and shared with him the secret of not getting beaten by white men: "a certain root, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it *always on my right side*, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip" him. Douglass says he

doubts the efficacy of the root, but to appease Sandy, he wears the root in his right pocket. He returns to Covey's on a Sunday, and Covey does not beat him, which Douglass attributes not to the root but to his own timely return on a Sunday. On Monday morning, Douglass narrates, "the virtue of the root was fully tested" and Douglass fights Covey and is never successfully whipped again by anyone. He says the "battle with Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood." Douglass does not mention the root again except in reference to Sandy, who appears later relating a foreboding dream (accurate as it turned out) about Douglass's escape attempt. Douglass also speaks of Sandy in a rare footnote:

This is the same man who gave me the roots to prevent my being whipped by Mr. Covey. He was "a clever soul." We used frequently to talk about the fight with Covey, and as often as we did so, he would claim my success as the result of the roots he gave me. This superstition is very common among the more ignorant slaves.³⁶

Other than at first doubting the efficacy of the roots, this footnote is the only comment Douglass provides on conjuring in the 1845 version. As an afterthought (or an editorial suggestion) he clarified his relationship to conjure, restating that it was an act of superstition in which he did not believe. Nevertheless, conjure serves as a bond between the two men who share the horror of slavery, and symbolizes

³⁶Douglass, 60-70.

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community cohesion even though Douglass feels compelled to distance himself from it in a footnote.

In the 1855 telling of the fight with Covey, Douglass provides much more comment on Sandy Jenkins as well as the roots, revealing the struggle Douglass had over narrating the incident as one of community effort (symbolized by conjure) and the efforts of the self-made man. This time, after stating he "found Sandy an old adviser," Douglass explains that Sandy "professed to believe in a system for which I have no name. He was a genuine African, and had inherited some of the so called magical powers, said to be possessed by African and eastern nations." Douglass also locates his feelings toward conjure in the realms of rationality as well as Christianity, saying "all this talk about the root, was, to me, very absurd and ridiculous, if not positively sinful. . . and I was, therefore, not disposed to cumber my pocket with it. I had a positive aversion to all pretenders to 'divination.' . . . It was beneath one of my intelligence to countenance such dealings with the devil, as this power implied." When he returns to Covey's and Monday morning comes around, Douglass says he "forgot my roots and remembered my pledge to *stand up for my own defense*."³⁷ In this second version, Douglass draws a further contrast between superstition and self-determination, saying he is wary of "pretenders" and finds use of the root to be sinful.

³⁷Douglass, 280-283.

Yet while he explains that the fight with Covey is an act of independence, rationality, and manhood rather than a result of magic, Douglass refuses to see Sandy as a fraud or a fool. John Sekora asserts that the 1855 My Bondage and My Freedom is a more accurate rendering of the Covey incident than the 1845 Narrative, since Douglass had by 1855 shed the editorial constraints of the Garrisonians. He further interprets the fuller re-telling of the Covey scene as Douglass's assertion that he, instead of being the self-made man of white myth, was a man whose turning points came as a result of the support of other workers and African-Americans.³⁸ As Sekora also demonstrates, Douglass's 1855 telling fills in the scene more fully with more emphasis on the fight with Covey as a collective effort of Sandy the "adviser," Sandy's wife, who provided him with shelter and "the meal, of all my life, most sweet to my taste and vivid to my memory," and Bill and Caroline, who both refuse Covey's order to help him whip Douglass: "In the space of a few hundred words, Douglass has transformed what had been a solitary victory in the Narrative, impossible to share with anyone, to communal triumph ten years later"³⁹ Yet Sekora asserts that "the root is diminished to a piece of precipitating stage property" in this new emphasis on

³⁸John Sekora, "'Mr. Editor, If You Please': Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom and the End of the Abolitionist Imprint." Callaloo 17 (2): 608-626. Sekora provides a useful history of Douglass's relations to white abolitionists and the production of the autobiographies.

³⁹Sekora, 625.

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community. I would assert that Douglass's important revisions in the 1855 version make the root all the more important in revealing Douglass's view that "self-made" men are produced through community support.

While Douglass saw Sandy and the incident with Covey as part of a collective resistance, he also valued individual expression through labor. He was attracted to the notion of the self-made man, for immediately after his escape from enslavement he praised free enterprise for allowing men self-determination through labor. In the north, "Every man appeared to understand his work, and went at it with a sober, yet cheerful earnestness, which betokened the deep interest which he felt in what he was doing, as well as a sense of his own dignity as a man." He notes that "the people looked more able, stronger, healthier, and happier. . . I was for once made glad by a view of extreme wealth, without being saddened by seeing extreme poverty."⁴⁰ While he later finds northern free enterprise to be more complicated than his first impression when he is denied work because of race, he nevertheless continues a belief that the best labor is done pridefully, freely, and soberly.

Significantly, Douglass does not take his praise of free enterprise to the same place Barnum and Thomson do. While Douglass sees Sandy as perhaps "ignorant," he does not see him as deceitful. First, Sandy took no money for the advice. Even though he was known as "the root-man," Sandy probably

⁴⁰Douglass, 94.

received no payment other than respect for his advice (Douglass does not delve into the particulars of conjure work). Second, Sandy's beliefs have "no name;" they are removed from white forms of market, society and culture, and Sandy uses them in opposition to the slave system. Third, Douglass saw Sandy's forays into the occult as much less of a sin than the religious hypocrisy of whites, who professed to be upstanding Christians yet practiced slavery, brutality, and prejudice. Douglass added an appendix to the first edition of the autobiography to explain that his diatribes against religion were aimed at "the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no reference to Christianity proper. . . . Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity."⁴¹ Douglass is unwilling to see the adviser Sandy as a mountebank, when slaveholding "Christians" practice deceptions through supposedly more valid religious forms.

Douglass's theme of white deceit is rendered in his discussion of Covey, the embodiment of all that was disgusting, cruel and absurd about the institution of slavery; unlike Sandy, "Mr. Covey's forte consisted in his power to deceive. His life was devoted to planning and perpetrating the grossest deceptions. Every thing he possessed in the shape of learning or religion, he made to conform to his disposition to deceive."⁴² Covey was so sneaky that Douglass

⁴¹Douglass, 97.

⁴²Douglass, 57.

and his fellow slaves called him "the snake." Using his deceptions, Covey "broke" Douglass, for at a point he was "broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died" for "the dark night of slavery closed in upon me." The deceitful nature of white society had, previous to meeting Sandy Jenkins, "transformed [Douglass] into a brute!"⁴³ Next to the deceptions enacted by white society to secure power over blacks, Sandy's occult work seemed benign, and even honorable, for in the third edition, Douglass remembers him as "Sandy a conjuror as well as a Christian."⁴⁴

Like Thomson and Barnum, Douglass rejected the occult as irrational. But unlike Barnum and Thomson, who found middle-class manhood in a market culture through which men "made" themselves, Douglass found masculinity to reside in the self-determination borne of community support. Formerly enslaved, Douglass could not fully buy into a system that increasingly sought to blur the distinction between consumable goods from the labor that produced them. His attraction to free enterprise was that men could own their own labor. This is why he is unwilling to dismiss Sandy the man even though he is skeptical of the efficacy of the occult work Sandy performs. To Barnum and Thomson, occult workers are low-

⁴³Douglass, 58.

⁴⁴Douglass, 459.

quality products; to Douglass, occult workers are men first, and men who conjure second.

These versions of self-made man ideology reveal changes in both black and white middle-class identification. In the corporate culture that developed in the second half of the nineteenth-century, black and white middle-class Americans claimed white-collar work as a feature of respectability, but in each community that claim resonated differently. For much of the white middle-class, the successful man of enterprise stood as evidence of the American Dream as a justification for beliefs in white privilege and the power of (male) individualism. If the "sincere" man stood out as the embodiment of ideal middle-class masculinity in the first half of the nineteenth-century, the entrepreneurial man usurped him in the latter half. The African-American middle-class was equally proud of black professionals, but their existence proved "uplift of the race" more than individual glory (although the latter certainly existed).⁴⁵ The occult worker in each case, however, reflected the ways each group conceived of itself as middle-class. The occult worker to the white professional ethos symbolized what lurked outside appropriate economic practice, while to African-American professional ideologies this figure floated liminally between the ignorance born of oppression and the support networks developed in creative response to that oppression.

⁴⁵See Darlene Clark Hine, Speak Truth to Power: Black Professional Class in United States History, (Brooklyn, 1996).

**Chapter Four:
"Secret Workers" and Self-Made Women: Professionalism
and the Occult Workers' World, 1870-1910**

While some writers saw occult work as an affront to male-identified rationality, seers forwarded their own views on rationality in the form of the advertisement. Like books for writers, advertisements presented occult workers with a useful forum through which they articulated their views of themselves and the world in which they did their work. Palmists, astrologers, clairvoyants, card-readers and mediums used their access to print culture--the classified ads--to advertise their services, and in turn these advertisements reflected a distinct view of society, culture and economy.

Advertisements made several important assertions. By declaring identities and using symbols in combinations that seemed incongruent to the dominant culture, they asserted that identity was infinitely negotiable. By claiming professional functions for non-educated people, they declared their disagreement with the notion that formal education was the most reliable evidence of talents and skills. They also provided competition for the formally-educated professionals in matters of finance, health, and domestic counselling. Their willingness to deal with "delicate" matters openly spoke to a sense that working-class morality was more realistic to the human condition than the more stringent set of beliefs prevalent in the middle-class. Finally, their very presence spoke to a critique of American culture's increasing reliance on science as the privileged way of

knowing. These assertions showed that even though they were alienated from dominant methods of social distinction, seers had created their own meaningful system through which they highlighted and validated their talents and skills.

Like the elite mediums who discussed their craft with a careful sense of their audience and possible customers, lesser-known occult workers, those who advertised in the classified sections of urban dailies, demonstrated an acute sensitivity to the demands of the marketplace economy as well as to dominant late nineteenth-century identity codes. But because the lesser-known seers sought a more diverse clientele than the elite seers did, they appeared not to be invested in perpetuating the racial, classed, and gendered hierarchies elite workers often felt compelled to uphold.

Occult workers were truly on the margins of social respectability, and from that vantage point, they utilized the classified advertisement to play freely with and often invert dominant notions of gender, race, class, age, ableness, and nation. Even though most of the ads had four lines or fewer, together they presented a world in which dominant hierarchies were backward or negated. Lower-class women began their names with "Queen" or "Lady"; being "colored" meant being especially qualified. Immigrant status meant exotic knowledge rather than foreign threat. People with little or no formal education claimed fields of knowledge also seen as property of the new class of educated professionals such as business, counselling, and health

services. Fortunetellers exercised their creativity by utilizing fantasy in ads at the same time professional admen, as Jackson Lears writes, tried to distance ad-making from its roots in the carnivalesque.¹ In these ways, the fortuneteller ad represents working- and under-class appropriation of the symbols usually used to perpetuate their own inequality.

Pierre Bourdieu provides a useful way to look at this phenomenon of lower-class people appropriating the symbols of the dominant class and redefining them. Bourdieu looks at power in terms of three kinds of capital: economic (relationship to production), symbolic (prestige), and, most importantly to this study, cultural capital, meaning knowledge and talents. While occult workers held very little economic and symbolic capital, their capacity to use language, in the "utterances" of their ads, allowed their very existence as workers. Bourdieu writes:

Utterances receive their value (and their sense) only in their relation to a market, characterized by a particular law of price formation. The value of the utterance depends on the relation of power that is concretely established between the speakers' linguistic competences, understood both as their capacity for appropriation and appreciation; it depends, in other words, on the capacity of the various agents involved in the exchange to impose the criteria of appreciation most favourable to their own products.²

Prophecy could be turned into economic capital only through the occult workers' ability to convince potential customers of the value of their service. They did this with an acute

¹Jackson Lears, Fables of Abundance: A History of Advertising in America, (New York, 1994).

²Pierre Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Power, (Cambridge, 1991),

sensitivity to what their customers valued--money, love, family, health--but they also went further by claiming that social disenfranchisement by gender, race or nation made them particularly good at seeing into these areas of life. The seer ad worked only because it turned the knowledge of customers' values into (ideally) economic capital in the form of payment and symbolic capital in the form of turning disenfranchisement into its own prestige.

Fortunetellers advertised throughout the nineteenth-century, but the ads did not appear in abundance and with consistency until around 1870 when dailies had become more common and accessible. At their most minimal they included a name and a location, but more often they also included special qualifications of parentage or culture, lists of problems they were willing to cure, the method they used, prices, offers to teach others the craft, and sometimes restrictions such as "ladies only." They also listed their hours of operation and sometimes provided testimonials from satisfied customers. Even more rarely, they provided digs against their competitors. As competition grew more fierce in the first decade of the twentieth-century, the ads began to take up more and more space in the classified ads. From about 1880 to about 1910 the many ads promised seekers anything from advice on "female complaints" to magical self-transformation.

This study relies on 1,430 advertisements from seven newspapers (*The Boston Globe*, *The Chicago Defender*, *The St.*

Louis Post-Dispatch, The Chicago Tribune, The New York World, The New York Amsterdam News, and The San Francisco Examiner) from five cities (Chicago, New York, St. Louis, San Francisco, and Boston) to examine the ways in which seers presented themselves and their work. The sample includes 303 advertisements from the *New York World*, 22 from the *Chicago Defender*, 329 from *The Chicago Tribune*, 86 from the *Amsterdam News*, 267 from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 264 from the *San Francisco Examiner*, and 159 from the *Boston Globe*.

Each of these cities experienced intense growth between 1870 and 1900. They also were ethnically diverse because of immigration and became, if they were not already, major centers of business in their regions. A. Medium noted that it was Boston, New York and San Francisco where mediumship was "worked the finest."³ Chicago and St. Louis, however, outdid others in the sheer volume of ads and the large spaces allotted the promotion of seers in their newspapers.

There were other regional differences as well. Ads in the *Boston Globe* were much shorter than others, seemed to hint more than the others at prostitution, and failed to appear in large numbers after the 1890s. The *San Francisco Examiner* and *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* advertised fortunetellers in their classified sections up until the 1910s, while the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York World* quit offering ads when police began cracking down on seers around

³A. Medium, *Revelations of a Spirit Medium*, eds. Harry Price and Eric. J. Dingwall, (New York, 1975), 246.

1910. *The Amsterdam News* and *The Chicago Defender*, both African-American produced papers, are not available until the teens and twenties after prophecy laws were passed in their respective cities. However, they still carried ads for spiritual healers, mediums and fortunetellers in the religious announcements column and as regular advertising, such as the full ads for things like hairdressing or undertaking.

Even though occult practice differed somewhat regionally, seers across the nation had more similarities than differences. Most urban fortunetellers advertising were women, and all but a select few (and these were most often men) worked out of their homes. Later graphics placed them there often (see Appendix, Figure 3). Their stated hours were hardly ever less than twelve hours. This fact shows that fortunetelling fit into the work lives of married lower-class women quite easily. A woman with children could work as a clairvoyant in the course of her day while preparing food, washing, sewing, cleaning, gardening, and caring for her children.

The trade was also taken up by those engaged in outwork sewing. Mortimer Thomson called on one fortuneteller who lived in the Bowery district with her teenage sister, and the "two occupy themselves with plain sewing, except when the madame is overhauling the future and taking a look at the hereafter of some anxious inquirer, who pays her as much for the reliable information she imparts in three minutes, as she

would charge him for making three shirts."⁴ Used to a variety of tasks and many interruptions, the outworker or housewife may have welcomed a person calling for a fortune as a pleasant break.⁵ The fifty or twenty-five cents gleaned from the exchange may well have been an added bonus for taking ten or fifteen minutes to chat with a caller who was often willing to divulge more than a bit of personal or secret information.

Mortimer Thomson and A. Medium both comment that urban seers saw a diverse set of customers. While many customers in New York were to Thomson "ignorant servants," "unfortunate girls of the town," or "uneducated overgrown boys," he also noticed that "carriages, attended by liveried servants, not unfrequently stop at the nearest respectable corner adjoining the abode of the notorious Fortune-Teller, while some richly-dressed but closely-veiled woman stealthily glides into the habitation of the Witch." And upper-class women were not the only "social betters" who visited the seers, for "not a few men engaged in respectable and influential professions, and many merchants of good credit and repute. . . are actually governed by [a seer's] advice in business affairs of great moment."⁶ Thompson also noted that occult workers serviced a

⁴Mortimer N. Thomson, The Witches of New York, (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 1969 [rpt., 1859]), 227.

⁵See Glenna Matthews, "Just a Housewife": The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America. New York, 1987 and Christine Stansell, City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860. Urbana, 1987.

⁶Mortimer Thomson, 19. See also A. Medium, 213.

dozen seekers a day on average (although he does not say how he arrived at this number).

The seers were just as diverse except in terms of class. With the exception of elite mediums and possibly some highly successful fortunetellers, most urban seers were poor or working class. Thomson, in his visits to New York fortunetellers, noted that "It is probably a thorough conviction of the necessity of eating and drinking. . . that induces our modern witches to charge a specific sum for the exercise of their art."⁷ He went further to say that fortunetellers, with a few exceptions, inevitably live in the poorest sections of town, areas which offended his sense of cleanliness and made him look over his shoulder more than once:

Sunshine is the only protection for a well-dressed man against the population of this part of town. In the twilight or darkness he would be robbed, if not garroted and murdered. The boldest and most desperate burglars, and others of that stamp, have their homes about here--fathers who teach their children the thief's profession, and mothers who carry pickpockets at the breast. In the midst of this nest of crime the fortune-teller has her home, and here she thrives.⁸

Of course fortunetellers in their ads did not mention the reputation their neighborhoods had with the "well-dressed," although Madame Barrett in New York in 1903 knew the bad reputation fortunetellers had with this set and was willing to calm their fears. She advertised herself as a "scientific palmist and astrologer" who lived in a "good neighborhood."⁹

⁷Thomson, 24.

⁸Thomson, 137.

⁹New York World classified ad, March 7, 1903.

Seer ads reflected that, to some extent, certain areas of the city boasted higher numbers of fortunetellers than others, and these areas tended to be older sections characterized by diverse activity: residences, entertainment areas, and businesses. The popular addresses were much more likely to be near theaters and taverns than churches. They were also characterized by their proximity to the principal arteries of public transportation later in the century. Of all the ads sampled in the *New York World*, 22% mentioned an address on Sixth street, which was used by both rich and poor since it was considered to be part of the "lower depths" yet intersected the pride of nineteenth-century New York, Fifth Avenue. The *Amsterdam News* (available after 1920) advertised streets in the West 130s, with 10% of ads coming from 131st street in the center of African-American-dominated Harlem.¹⁰ Twenty-two percent of ads in the *Chicago Tribune* asked customers to come to an address on Madison, with another 15% requesting visits on Clark Street which bordered the financial district and was also known as an area for entertainment (theaters, bars, and houses of assignation) and working-class lodging.¹¹ In San Francisco, the popular addresses were on Market Street (16%), which was the site of commercial and entertainment activity.¹² Seers in Boston ads mentioned Tremont street in 15% of their ads, an area which

¹⁰Eric Homberger, Scenes From the Life of a City: Corruption and Conscience in Old New York, (New Haven, 1994).

¹¹Stephen Longstreet, Chicago: 1860-1919, (New York, 1973).

¹²Doris Muscatine, Old San Francisco: The Biography of a City From Early Days to the Earthquake, (New York, 1975).

was once the site of wealthy single-family homes but transformed into a street of lodging houses for new immigrants and other working-class people starting in the 1870s.¹³ In St. Louis, clients were likely to go to Olive Street (18% of ads sampled) or Franklin (14%), busy parts of the city characterized by entertainment and business.¹⁴ Writers like Mortimer Thomson, who were trying to equate prophecy-for-profit with urban decay, over-stressed seer concentration, however, and the advertisements demonstrate that while there were areas which housed a number of seers, most were dispersed across the city.

Mediums' autobiographies, as well as newspapers accounts and exposés such as Thomson's Witches and Barnum's Humbugs, describe the process of seer consultations in similar ways. Typically a customer would read a fortuneteller's advertisement and call at the address. Sometimes a seer would require a seeker to make an appointment for a later date (possibly allowing the seer to research particulars in the life of the seeker). Usually, the seeker entered the living area of the seer where a section of the room had been curtained off especially for prophecy. Sometimes this area would be a small room and sometimes not more than a small space in a bedroom with a table and two chairs. The seer sometimes asked for payment in advance, although many occult

¹³Walter Muir Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History, (Cambridge, Mass., 1968).

¹⁴James Neal Primm, Lion of the Valley: St. Louis, Missouri, (Boulder, Colo., 1981).

workers offered a "satisfaction or no pay" guarantee. A. Medium noted that sometimes "charges for these things are on the sliding plan. If the person wear diamonds and rich apparel, he is liable to name one hundred dollars. . . The man looking for work is 'touched' for from two to ten dollars, according to appearances of prosperity."¹⁵ Most seers charged much less according to their ads, and some offered free services to those who could not afford to pay, such as Mrs. Johnson's *Chicago Tribune* ad (published two years after the devastation of the city's fire) which said "those unable to pay treated free."¹⁶

A seer could use any number of divination methods such as cartomancy, channeling, crystal-gazing, palmistry, chiromancy, or the standard clairvoyancy. Even though newspapers placed seer ads under a heading such as "Clairvoyants" that let readers know what seers did, 78% of the ads further specified the method the seer used. The most popular was channeling, with 32% of the ads declaring mediumship, which meant that the seer could talk with the dead and obtain information known only to spirits. The second most popular method in the ads was palmistry (22%), which meant the seer could read the lines of the querant's hand to tell him or her of the future in love, luck, money, and other areas of life, (depending on the creativity of the palmist). Cartomancy (reading the past, present, and future

¹⁵A. Medium, 213.

¹⁶*Chicago Tribune* ad January 19, 1873.

with a pack of tarot or playing cards), astrology (seeing the past, present and future according to the placement of stars and planets on the client's birth date and in times to come), and the generic clairvoyancy (which meant something similar to what we would now call a psychic) were equally as popular yet less often evoked that channeling or palmistry.

The seeker would ask a specific question or simply ask for a personality analysis or a general hint of what the future had to bring. A. Medium noticed a distinct gender difference (as he was wont to do) between what women asked seers and what men did. Men, he said, were "after buried treasures, mining claims, luck at the gaming table, or to beat some man in a business transaction, or to obtain lottery numbers." Women, however, "usually want conditions that will straighten out their love affairs." Women could also be more aggressive by asking for "a 'condition' brought about that will cause the death of their husband or lover, or an 'influence' set to work that will result in certain ones giving to them money or jewels or remembering them in their wills."¹⁷ Seekers, then, asked about the areas of their lives that were least stable, a phenomenon consistent with divination in many cultures.¹⁸

¹⁷A. Medium, 212-213.

¹⁸Lawrence Levine's Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk thought from Slavery to Freedom. (Oxford, 1977) is an especially useful source on this point. See particularly 55-80. See also Alan Taylor, "The Early Republic's Supernatural Economy: Treasure-Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780-1830," American Quarterly, 38(Spring 1986): 6-34.

It is unclear from the evidence exactly what these fortunes meant to the people who paid for them, but some of their actions indicate that there could have been a range of responses. Some used fortunes as justification for behavior that would not be wholly acceptable, such as the young girl who "ran away with a good-for-nothing character of the Tenderloin" at the advice of a fortuneteller, much to her mother's chagrin.¹⁹ Commodore Vanderbilt used Tennessee Claflin and Victoria Woodhull to obtain financial insider information.²⁰

People also tended to go the fortunetellers because they felt they had no other option. One police matron told how she had visited a fortuneteller as a young working-girl. When one night she "came in tired and blue; something had gone wrong in my work," her best friend retorted, "'Let's go and have Madame Herman read our palms. It is only fifty cents. She will tell you how to get out of your trouble.'" Madame Herman ended up upsetting both the girls' lives because they both believed her.²¹ Miss Morris, a clairvoyant's assistant, was sure that most clients believed the information she put to them, and she had no qualms about tricking people because she truly believed that she and the clairvoyant were doing good. One day an obviously destitute

¹⁹"Mother Reveals New Graft Trail-Her Story of Daughter's Ruin by a Clairvoyant Shows Another Angle of Police Crookedness," *New York Times*, May 18, 1913, II, 10:5.

²⁰Barbara Goldsmith, Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull, (New York, 1998): 156-171.

²¹"How I Had 54 Persons Arrested And What I Found Out About Palm-Reading," *Ladies Home Journal* 28(7), August, 1911: 7.

woman entered the office, and the clairvoyant was so moved by her story that he pulled a con-game--making sure she went away with more money than she came in with. Miss Morris reported that repeat customers claimed they did not really believe, but she was "convinced that a majority of our educated people, while openly laughing at palmistry, fortune-telling, clairvoyance, and love-charms as relics of the Middle Ages, secretly believe in them."²² Lawrence Levine has shown the preponderance of ancient beliefs in charms, ghosts, and divination in nineteenth-century culture--beliefs that came from both African and European cultures, and people held to them even when it became unfashionable to do so.²³

The ad specialties are another clue as to the use of fortunes by customers. Seers' ads looked as if seers acted as information clearing-houses in all that was considered "trouble" by both "respectable" and lower-class urbanites. Ninety-three of the total ads used the very word "trouble" as a speciality, while others specified further such as "losses," "domestic strife," and other delicate issues such as in Madame Countess de London's 1888 ad which euphemistically offered "advice to young men on marriage."²⁴ This propensity to advertise their willingness to deal with delicate problems and matters not readily discussed with strangers (or even with family members) often drew scorn from

²²"Confessions of an Assistant Clairvoyant, " *The Outlook* 105 (September 6, 1913): 39.

²³Levine, 55-80.

²⁴*Chicago Tribune* classified ad, September 16, 1888

non-seers. Mortimer Thomson insisted that the fortuneteller "front" masked suspect businesses such as abortion services and prostitution.²⁵ Boston seers especially advertised more than prophecy, offering baths, magnetic treatments, or massage (services that sometimes required the medium to touch the client's body), and ads often contained the names of two women--perhaps as a measure of safety--such as that of "Miss Ida Phillips and Felicia--Clairvoyants, 408 Tremont St., up 2 flights; hot baths."²⁶ Such services could easily have been mistaken by Thomson as a front for prostitution (or perhaps were fronts for prostitution). Many specialized in "female complaints" such as "Mrs. Dupont, Clairvoyant and Ladies' confidential physician; diseases of a delicate nature successfully treated," which could have meant any problem from unwanted pregnancy to sexually-transmitted disease.²⁷ St. Louis's Madame La Veta was even more explicit in her 1888 ad: "Mme. Le Veta, the greatest fortune teller, is having good success; ladies in trouble call her at once; she can tell you more and in a plainer manner than any medium you ever met."²⁸ Seer ads promoted the notion that occult workers served as people with whom to discuss all sorts of problems (many less pressing than unwanted pregnancy) that the seeker may have been embarrassed to talk about with friends and

²⁵Thomson, 19-20.

²⁶Boston Globe classified ad, September 3, 1884.

²⁷Chicago Tribune classified ad, February 25, 1873.

²⁸St. Louis Post-Dispatch classified ad, August 12, 1888.

family members. Madame Irene, "woman of mystery" and St. Louis seer, even advertised herself as a "secret worker."²⁹

It is difficult to tell what the seeker actually got for his or her money. Many accounts come from persons seeking to discredit the profession, and so such reports are not necessarily indicative of a typical meeting between client and seer. Thomson reported that seers gave vague information, such as the fortune he received (and recorded without punctuation to stress the speed with which she read his fortune) from Madame Widger:

I see by looking in this stone that you was born under two planets one is the planet Mars you will die under the planet Jupiter but it won't be this year or next you have seen a great deal of trouble and misfortune in your past life but better days are surely in store for you you have passed through many things which if written in a book would make a most interesting volume I see by looking more closely in the stone that you are about to receive two letters. . . ³⁰

As a first-time customer, Thomson rarely received information more specific than that of Madame Widger's fortune, but as the seeker repeatedly went to the same teller, he or she found better counsel. Since visits were conducted orally, few records of private consultations are available excepting those in mediums' autobiographies, which were tailored for public consumption.

Yet limited archival evidence from a later period suggests the customer received more personal and specific information than that given to Thomson. Ellen Pinckney

²⁹St. Louis Post-Dispatch classified ad, February 5, 1911.

³⁰Thomson, 93.

Brown, a wealthy South Carolina woman in her thirties, received a five-dollar astrological reading twice in the 1930s from George W. Smallwood, M.D who resided in Pepperell, Massachusetts. Their correspondence suggested other contacts as well. Dr. Smallwood delivered a wealth of personal advice (based on the intimate information given him presumably by Brown) and some sorry news; in one instance the astrologer told her "the one whom you say you love" is not the right mate, for the stars have it that a union with this man "could only end in misery, divorce &c."³¹ Elite seers who focused closely on a select clientele had the advantage over seers who advertised in urban dailies because elite seers often found themselves immersed in the private lives of their clients and sometimes became extended house guests.³²

Occult workers held a unique place in the history of work at the turn of the century. While they controlled the means of production (their own bodies), may have had a professional association (however limited; see chapter two), and they advertised for themselves and controlled their own hours, they were maligned as associated with the underclass like no other type of business owner excepting sex workers. As Burton Bledstein has shown, middle-class Americans in the last quarter of the nineteenth-century increasingly looked to formal education as the qualifier for professionalism, creating a system of validation that developed into the most

³¹Ellen Pinckney Brown collection, letter from George Smallwood, Box 28-617, South Carolina Historical Society.

³²See Chapter Two.

unified feature in defining that which constituted middle-classness.³³ Professional societies with stringent membership qualifications that depended on formal education effectively excluded the lower classes from gaining symbolic capital, the power gleaned from meritocratic systems. Yet seers created their own symbolic capital by highlighting special qualifications of gender, ethnicity, race or nationality, and even class that were the basis for their claim on professional functions. The very experiences of their own disenfranchisement served as the qualifications for professionalism. They knew what Hawthorne knew when he showed the Blithedale reformers imbuing Priscilla with supernatural powers based on her perceived status as a gendered, aged, and above all, economic outcast: that the culture was wont to believe (in a hegemonically Christian way) that sufferers were more likely to have vaguely-conceived mystical insight.³⁴

In their ads, seers were not shy about claiming proficiency in the services in which the new professionals thought they only could perform: counselling in health, the family, law, and addiction, speculation and economics, and medical practice. Fifty-six percent of the total ads declared a specialization, and most of these ads claimed a number of them. The most popular specialization involved

³³Burton Bledstein, The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America, (New York, 1976).

³⁴See Chapters One and Two.

money issues. Seers, mainly women, claimed this specialization, traditionally governed by males, without mentioning the source of their knowledge. They could have chosen to say they had experience holding, selling, or buying stocks, or they could have mentioned work in banking. Instead, they let their magic validate their claims. Of the 802 ads which declared specialties, 329 offered help in financial matters such as banking, speculation, business, stocks. Mediums most often evoked business as a specialty, and the "business medium" was a stock figure in the classified columns. Mediums were also more likely to eschew the title "Madame" in favor of the more "respectable" and less exotic "Mrs.," signifying the mediums, and the business medium in particular, catered more to the no-nonsense business crowd. Mrs. Foster of New York was typical. She advertised herself as a "most celebrated ad reliable business medium" who had "no equal in professional skill and cannot be surpassed."³⁵

While finance was mainly a man's business, fortunetellers also provided competition for some of the new professional women who came to dominate counselling in marriage and family relations.³⁶ Many a "madame" said she could see any seeker's "future husband or wife" or tell if "the one you love if false or true." Another popular claim

³⁵New York World classified ad, February 8, 1891.

³⁶See Robyn Muncy, Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935, (New York, 1991) and Regina G. Kunzel, Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945, (New Haven, 1993).

was to be able to cause "speedy marriage," indicating seers may have dealt with women pregnant out of wedlock. Seers also promised to smooth over quarrels between husbands and wives, making "domestic troubles" disappear. Professor S. Indoo started his *Amsterdam News* ad by asking "Why do husbands and wives not agree?," implying a visit to the professor would reveal the answer.³⁷ Professor W. J. Martin's 1911 ad almost drowned other problems in domestic or romantic ones; he would tell a seeker "whether your husband, wife or sweetheart is true or false, how to win the love of the one you desire, marry the one of your choice, family troubles, business, journeys, speculation, social or domestic conditions, failures, successes, love, marriage."³⁸

Seers--both male and female--also claimed services that had been recently taken over by professional males. Such is the case of medicine. Healing or medical advice appeared in 22% of the ads declaring specialties, an area in which social reformers were taking a special interest in regulating. By the 1890s, the medical field in the United States had transformed itself into a professional body embracing what Robert Weibe has called "a scientific gospel." The American Medical Association modernized and local and state governing bodies were willing to help the AMA rid the field of (mainly non-formally educated) "quacks."³⁹ To fortunetellers, who

³⁷*Amsterdam News* advertisement, January 14, 1925.

³⁸*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* classified ad, February 5, 1911

³⁹Robert Weibe, *The Search For Order, 1877-1920*, (New York, 1967), 114-115. See also John S. Haller, Jr. *American Medicine in Transition, 1840-1910*, (Urbana, 1981).

often served populations either unable to afford "scientific" medicine, unwilling to trust the medical field, or requiring great secrecy, the professionalization of medicine meant little until it became an issue in their own regulation after the turn of the century (see Chapter Six).

Legal advice, which appeared significantly less often as a specialty than business or domestic advice (around 10% of ads declaring specialties), was another service claimed by both seers and the educated elite. The only specialty not claimed by the educated elite was advice on gambling, and this specialty occurred only in 3% of the ads declaring specialties.

Seers were very much a part of the newly emerging economic system that used advertising to create need, and showed themselves to be competent admakers (another field claimed more and more by those with formal education) according to some of the practices of the advertising profession. In fact, seers utilized both of the main methods of pitching a sale at the turn of the century. The most popular with seers was what Jackson Lears calls "vernacular"-advertising which offers magical transformation. Seers also used newer methods emerging from the admakers' desire to shed their carnivalesque image: realistic appeals to provable scientific facts and appeals to satisfied customer testimonials.

Jackson Lears calls the period from 1880 to 1906 a "golden age of commercial rhetoric, iconography, and

performance." He uses the example of the patent medicine ad to show that "health-related advertising" provided "a fantastic counterpoint to the official idioms of repression in late Victorian culture," and "promoted the persistent dream of bodily revitalization, and preserved the popular notion that life could be lived on multiple planes of meaning."⁴⁰ Seer ads, in addition to health-related ads, also took part in what Lears calls "vernacular advertising," for they promised magic itself, and gave seekers the sense that they were part of a multi-layered system beyond the mundane.

Seers claimed fantastic powers. Madame Fink of St. Louis, like 19% of sampled seer ads which declared specializations, promised she "unites lovers, brings separated together" through occult means. Mrs. Richardson, who advertised herself as a "colored medium" promised a clear view of the future, for "It was a colored medium who told Josephine she would be Empress of France, which was true."⁴¹ Like another 19% of sampled ads promising medical rejuvenation of some sort, Madame Z. Mozart of Chicago said she could help "ladies in trouble" as well as "cure corns and bunions."⁴² Even though many ads did not specifically declare specializations that promised magic results, their very presence spoke to the notion that "life could be lived on multiple planes of meaning," for the occult itself signifies secret forces that can be tapped for human use.

⁴⁰Lears, 141-142.

⁴¹St. Louis Post-Dispatch classified ads, April 4, 1907.

⁴²Chicago Tribune classified ad, August 6, 1893.

Less widely used (but used more by men than women) were the methods admakers usually employed to prove they indeed belonged among the new professionals: appeals to scientific logic and testimonials from "worthies." Despite being less popular with seers than ads that simply appealed to exoticism and magic, these ads were much more verbose and often took up more space than the others. Seers typically used these methods more after 1890 and often paired these methods with some declaration of distance between their "respectable" work and that practiced by other seers. St. Louis, where seers engaged in fierce competition between 1885 and 1911, saw much of this type of advertising. Professor W.J. Martin claimed he was "recognized by the press, medical fraternity and scientists generally as the foremost medium in the country, and should not be classed with card readers, fortune tellers, astrologers and similar humbugs." He further noted "he does not cater to the superstition of the ignorant, credulous people."⁴³ Professor D. Litten of Chicago offered "personal indorsements from prominent people not only as to his ability and superior power as a medium but also as to his honesty and reliability."⁴⁴ Rose Sabine not only offered newspaper testimonials but also claimed "some of the leading men on 'Change and members of the leading clubs are her regular patrons, and some of them have paid her enormous amounts for information. . . Her large and elegantly

⁴³St. Louis Post-Dispatch ad, February 5, 1911.

⁴⁴Chicago Tribune classified ad, March 19, 1899.

furnished parlors are always crowded with the leading ladies and gentlemen."⁴⁵

Seers' proficiency in writing the successful ad showed what was at this time a radical notion: that working-class and poor people could be artistically creative. Seers also extended this proficiency as well to performance. Fortunetellers used the body as a site of performance by dressing eccentrically, exaggerating motion, and using a variety of voices and props to effect the aura of mystery. Ann Braude notes that one of medium Ascha Sprague's customers took issue with the immodesty of her appearance saying her "outlandishness in hat, frock, wristbands and country girl flamishness" attracted the wrong kind of attention.⁴⁶ Other mediums banked on other eccentric images, such as Cora Richmond, who wore her hair loose in long wringlets, bared her neck and shoulders and hung a necklace with an oversize cross around her neck (see Appendix, Figure 2).⁴⁷ Seers also tried to evoke the exotic by advertising themselves as "born with a veil" or having a "second sight" or being the "seventh daughter." Between 1898 and 1916 Madame Porter changed her address four times and varied her specialties slightly but was always (in five ads anyway) "born with a double veil, second sight."⁴⁸

⁴⁵St. Louis Post-Dispatch classified ad, August 12, 1888

⁴⁶J.H. Crawford quoted by Ann Braude, 108.

⁴⁷Barrett frontispiece.

⁴⁸San Francisco Examiner classified ads, January 12, 1898, September 7, 1908, April 9, 1912, October 4, 1914 and March 5, 1916.

The most extensive use of performance (and the various art-forms inherent in performance) was of course the ethnic/racial exotic. Twenty percent of the total sample of seer ads declared the seer was of a particular national or racial origin, such as "Edith, celebrated colored clairvoyant," "The Noted Daughter of Rhineland, Mrs. Catherina, the German giantess and clairvoyant," or "Countess Zingara, wonderful famous Gypsy Palmist."⁴⁹ Other ads used ethnicity, race or nation by noting the seer used occult methods from faraway places, such as Professor Akpan Aga, who declared, next to a picture of him wearing a suit jacket and bow tie with his turban, that he practiced the "Magic and Occultism of Africa" (See Appendix, Figure 8).⁵⁰ The uses of racial, national, ethnic, or even religious signifiers was diverse. Seers evoked Gypsy, France, Egypt, Germany, England, the "East," "Oriental," Hindu, India, Indian, Europe, Africa, South America, Spain, West Africa, Congo, Eboe, Aden, Nigeria, England, the American west, "colored" (mainly in white papers), "white" (mainly in black papers), Persia, Hungary, Austria, Sweden, Greece, China, Turkey, and Japan. Some seers evoked the romance of cities such as New Orleans or Paris, while some evoked regional pride by saying they were from the South, Boston, Arkansas, Tennessee, Missouri, or New York. The most popular ethnic/national/racial signifier was "gypsy" or "gipsey;"

⁴⁹New York World classified ads, December 9, 1888 and April 22, 1909. Chicago Tribune classified ad, September 18, 1881.

⁵⁰Amsterdam News ad, November 29, 1922.

Nineteen percent of all seers who used a national or racial signifier used this term, and in several ads the very term was synonymous with fortunetelling, making "gypsy" a professional designation: "Mrs. Keever, well-known gypsy" and "WANTED--Everybody to know that the celebrated Gypsy Woman has returned to this city."⁵¹ The second most popular ethnic/racial designation was French or Parisian, which sought to play on customers' notions of the French as fashionable and romantic. German and Egyptian each took up 7% of those that declared a ethnic/racial affiliation. In African-American produced newspapers African was the most popular designation, and most often seers broke down Africa into regions or countries such as Congo, Eboe, Aden, or Nigeria. When African-Americans advertised in predominantly white-produced papers, they chose to use "colored" or Egyptian.

Gypsies, as David Mayall points out in his study of Gypsies in Great Britian, used fortune-telling primarily as a service to sell to *gadjo* or non-gypsies. They did, however, spend time perpetuating the image of gypsies as persons having particular talents in prophecy and when alone, made fun of the propensity of non-gypsies to believe the fortunes told them. Gypsies began to enter the United States in large numbers beginning in the 1880s primarily from Eastern Europe and Russia. Anthropologist Rena Gropper calls the years

⁵¹New York World classified ad, May 18, 1901 and Chicago Tribune classified ad, September 16, 1868.

between 1880 and 1925 the Camp Period of Gypsy history in the United States, during which they camped in the winter in rural areas but headed into more populated areas in the summer looking for work.⁵² Of the fifty-three ads that used "gypsy" or "Romany," twelve indicated the seer or seers were either coming from or leaving soon for a "tour" or trip.

Given the medium of the classified ad, which was supposed to be a temporary venue anyway, the mention of movement bolstered the image of Gypsy authenticity, since many Gypsy tribes were migrating in the U.S. at this period. One ad cleverly advertised the location of the "camp" in conjunction with a generic name, "Gypsy Fortune Teller" to allow any of the women present at any moment a customer arrived to sell the fortune. Some appeared to be settled, though, which also reflects the historical picture of Gypsies in the U.S. since "sedentary" tribes did settle in urban areas. Madame Zingara of New York took out at least seven ads in the *New York World* between 1886 and 1893 in both the summer and winter months, five of which mentioned the same address. In 1903 either she announced her "return" or someone took over her name at a different address.⁵³

Seers using French, France or Paris in their ads relied on their customers conjuring up an image with all the romance

⁵²David Mayall, Gypsy Travellers in Nineteenth-Century Society (Cambridge, 1988) and Rena D. Gropper, Gypsies in the City: Culture Patterns and Survival, (Princeton, 1975).

⁵³St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* classified ad, June 6, 1909; *New York World* classified ads, July 4, 1886, September 13, 1886, November 4, 1888, January 9, 1891, February 8, 1891, March 5, 1893, April 9, 1893 and March 7, 1903.

of the exotic Gypsy but none of the associations with poverty. Recognized as an ethnicity with a long and romantic history in the United States stemming from association with the exoticism of New Orleans, the French in America did not evoke the poor or itinerant but the fashionable and the well-established. Carl Wittke notes in his discussion of the "Older Immigrants" that nineteenth-century (middle-class white) society looked to France for lessons in mainly "manners, fashions, and cooking" and late in the century "the quest of American housewives" was to find "French cooks and butlers, gardeners, waiters, and dressmakers" and looked for Parisian ladies to teach their daughters French, the proficiency in which would demonstrate a refined femininity. Namely, the middle-class sought "cultured" servants. Even the Eastern disdain for the Quebecois immigrant worker in the late nineteenth-century could not dispel the connotation of French with high culture and manners.⁵⁴ Therefore, declarations such as that of Madame Le Normand (her name having been taken from a famous and fashionable eighteenth-century seer) that she "has the celebrated Parisian charms" took on double meaning.⁵⁵ Boston seers, perhaps working on their city's reputation as America's most "cultured," took out a disproportionate number of ads evoking France (43% of ads using France came out of the *Boston Globe*, while ads from this paper accounted for only 11% of the total sample).

⁵⁴Carl Wittke, He Who Built America: The Saga of the Immigrant. (Western Reserve University, 1939). 313-324

⁵⁵*Chicago Tribune* classified ad, September 18, 1881.

Seers such as "Nellie Evans, Best French clairvoyant in Boston" and "Mme. Willett, the only French clairvoyant from Paris in Boston," vied with one another to be not only the best seer in Boston but the best French seer .⁵⁶

The ads that evoked Germany seemed to do so because they had German communities as customers rather than to conjure up an image. Of the twenty-two ads that used German, only five said the seers were German. The rest indicated they spoke German. Only one, "Doctor Utz, the Great German Magnetic Doctor" tried to evoke the reputation Germany had as a leader in science. The seventeen that noted the seer could conduct a consultation in German did so to attract immigrant populations, and St. Louis, which had a large German immigrant population (although not as large as Chicago and New York by 1900), made up almost half of the ads evoking Germany. Seers seemed to want to keep Germany at a distance in their ads, since few of their customers would have found anything exotic in it with the exception of some hint of labor radicalism (which would have been more threatening and less romantic), for the native-born saw Germans as either sober, hard workers or fun-loving beer drinkers (whatever the rhetorical situation called for).⁵⁷ The propensity to avoid

⁵⁶Boston Globe classified ads, January 7, 1882 and April 13, 1880.

⁵⁷See James M. Bergquist, "German-America in the 1890s: Illusions and Realities" in McCormick, ed., Germans in America: Aspects of German-American Relations in the Nineteenth-Century. New York, 1983 for some of the particulars of German-American culture and economic status and John Higham, Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925, New York, 1971 for placement of Germans in the context of xenophobia directed at other immigrant groups.

being seen as a German was evidenced best by a *Post-Dispatch* ad which announced the services of "Mme. Zelmar, little French palmist" who spoke "German and English" but apparently no French.⁵⁸

Africa and African countries were also popular in both white- and black-produced newspapers, but the advertisements were different. In white-produced papers, Egyptian was the only African nationality used, while it was called upon little in black-produced newspapers. One seer in the *Amsterdam News* said he was a "native of Africa," but made a distinction between Egypt and Africa by saying "Egyptian and African formulae used."⁵⁹ West African countries like Nigeria, Congo, or simply "West African" were used only by seers in the *Amsterdam News* and the *Chicago Defender*. The difference was one of time and audience. The black-produced papers, available in the late teens and twenties, were targeted at an African-American audience who, at this time, had been familiar with the movement of pan-Africanism for at least twenty years. Seers exploited this interest in Africa by stressing their country or area of origin. Professor Thomas Ogunshola's 1925 ad was typical, and presented him as a "NATIVE OF WEST AFRICA, MASTER OF SCIENCE" who "guarantees to bring peace and happiness to your home. Advice and luck given on business."⁶⁰ Significantly, all of the seers

⁵⁸*Chicago Tribune* classified ad, June 1, 1862 and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* classified ad, June 6, 1909.

⁵⁹*Amsterdam News* ad, April 18, 1923.

⁶⁰*Amsterdam News* ad, April 1, 1925.

advertising themselves as Africans were men, and they claimed to be herbalists or scientists. Women in the black-produced newspapers used a different style by eschewing the use of ethnicity and aligning themselves (like many seers did after the passage of prophecy laws) with institutions or evoking beauty, such the *Amsterdam News* ad which read "Madame Hamilton will open 2nd Universal Spiritual church at 116 West 118th street. . . Floral Readings."⁶¹ ("Flower seances" had been popular with mediums from the beginning, and consisted of seances in which the only payment was flowers--a good visual effect behind a female medium--and from which the seer received publicity).

The ads in the primarily white-produced papers catered to a white readership, whose interest in Africa would not have extended much past the usual stereotypes given new life by social Darwinism, with the exception of Egypt, which would have evoked images of an advanced yet romantic society.⁶² The *San Francisco Examiner* and the *Chicago Tribune* ran the most ads evoking Egypt, yet they appeared in all white-produced newspapers with the exception of the *Boston Globe*, in which seers rarely evoked race or nation other than French. The ads evoking Egypt were usually more highly stylized than all but those evoking gypsies, and often coupled the evocation with exotic names or high titles such as "Princess Zoraida,

⁶¹*Amsterdam News* ad February 6, 1929.

⁶²For a discussion of the uses of social Darwinism by whites against black and a discussion of African-American interest in Africa from 1900 to 1919, see Milfred C. Fierce, The Pan-African Idea in the United States, 1900-1919, (New York, 1993).

Egyptian clairvoyant," "Ismar, the Egyptian gypsy," or "Prof. H. Cairo (known as Ragah), Egyptian palmist and astrologist."⁶³ Seers evoking Egypt rarely claimed to channel spirits, a method usually marketed to more wealthy and white clients, and instead preferred palmistry or astrology.

Seers not only asserted that maligned immigrant or native-born minorities held special powers, they tested the very notion of "authentic" identity. When Mortimer Thomson visited "Madame Carzo, the Brazilian Astrologist" he encountered a woman he thought was not Brazilian at all, but instead looked like "a transplanted Yankee school ma'am" who had taken up astrology because the wages for school teaching were so meager. According to Thomson's conjecture, she could not "depend exclusively on civilization and enlightenment for a living" and so turned to "superstition and ignorance" and the higher pay of the fortuneteller. Thomson felt her "Yankeeism" was further proven when he paid her and she "instantly produced a 'Thompson's Bank-note Detector' from under a pillow, and a one dollar note, issued by the President and Directors of the 'Quinnipiack Bank' of Connecticut" and carefully scrutinized the bill.⁶⁴

In Thomson's world, ethnic categories were so stable that anyone who was not dark-skinned but who did show a suspicion against being conned must inevitably be a Yankee. He passed snidely by the symbols that would "authenticate"

⁶³*San Francisco Examiner* classified ads, October 4, 1914, May 4, 1902, and March 5, 1916

⁶⁴Thomson, 232-233.

Madame Carzo as a Catholic Brazilian, such as pictures of Saints like "St. Somebody taking his ease on an X-shaped cross, St. Somebody Else comfortably cooking on a gridiron, and St. Somebody, different from either of these, impaled on a spear like a bug in an Entomological Museum"⁶⁵ Madame Carzo's "lady-like" appearance seemed at odds with his vision of her Brazilianness such as it was of "boa-constrictors, half-naked savages, dye-woods, Jesuit's bark, cockatoos, scorpions and ring-tailed monkeys."⁶⁶ We have no evidence of Madame Carzo's personal vision of what constituted meaningful identity for her, but we do know that Madame Carzo did not see incongruency between a "lady-like" appearance and Brazilianness.

Of course not all seers were likely to identify honestly with the ethnic labels they chose to use in their advertising. This leads to questions of the definition of identity itself. What would have made Madame Carzo "authentic" Brazilian? The usual signifiers would have been place of birth, place of parents' or grandparents' birth, a set of cultural practices, citizenship, or language. In the ads, in which play with symbols was not just tolerated but expected (how many "queens" spend time seeking to ward off "evil influences" for day-laborers or socialites?), identity as a definable term was even more problematic.

⁶⁵Thomson, 229.

⁶⁶Thomson, 222.

Such play with identity is apparent in the use of the term "Gypsy" and Gypsy signifiers. One scholar has noted that Gypsies, a tight-knit group whose world-view depended on strict separation between Gypsy insider and *gadjo* outsider, "dressed for the part" of Gypsy fortuneteller "by wearing colourful headscarves and droopy earrings."⁶⁷ They became more "Gypsy" specifically for fortunetelling. Given the close-knit grouping of Gypsies, few outsiders knew them well and so seers could take on this identity and fool many customers. Since ads that claim the seer to be "genuine" were fairly common, it was not impossible that some persons claiming to be "Gypsy" learned from books or other means how to dress and act accordingly. Likewise, in the late nineteenth-century, persons with any skin tone between light brown to very dark could have passed as Egyptian without causing suspicion. Any light-skinned African-American or white person could pass as French by simply knowing a bit of the language. Seers could have been engaged in a sort of minstrelsy, or they could have fully identified through birth, culture, or language, but given the ads were composed to sell a fortune and were based on what seers thought would validate them to their customers, the degree to which seers identified with their own personae is virtually impossible to substantiate.

Some seers chose to use differences in physical ability to market themselves as exotics in similar ways to the ads

⁶⁷Mayall, 49.

that used ethnicity. The numbers were much, much smaller. However, they were significant in that all of them chose to highlight blindness. The "blind seer" had been an archetype of western culture for centuries. Oedipus had said of Teiresias:

Teiresias: seer: student of mysteries,
Of all th'as taught and all that no man tells,
Secrets of Heaven and secrets of the earth:
Blind though you are, you know the city lies
Sick with plague; and from this plague, my lord
We find that you alone can guard or save us.⁶⁸

All nine of the seers who used differences in physical ability evoked blindness, and all of them remained nameless, using blindness as a name in itself, such as the four ads taken out in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* for the "American Blind Lady" clairvoyant.⁶⁹ Another typical ad read "BLIND Fortune Teller, 1519 Morgan St.; ladies, 25c; massage and magnetic treatment for nervous diseases."⁷⁰ In addition to the using the Teiresias symbol of the magical "blind seer," occult workers evoking blindness relied on the long-held stereotype identified by disability activists as the "supercrip," a person having a disability, tremendous talents, and courage that allowed them to achieve greatness. With their ads they also provided a public declaration that blind people could be self-sufficient, not a small assertion

⁶⁸Pudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, translators, "The Oedipus Rex of Sophocles," *Four Greek Plays* (Orlando, Fla., 1960): 88

⁶⁹*St. Louis Post Dispatch* classified ads, March 6, 1904, May 7, 1905, April 21, 1907, and June 6, 1909.

⁷⁰*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* classified ad, October 14, 1888.

in a society intent on institutionalizing those with disabilities.⁷¹

Seers also evoked other identity signifiers that were considered less exotic in dominant culture; the most significant set of symbols had to do with gender. Women seers usually chose one of two manners of self-presentation: the "respectable" (and presumably white) lady or the lower-class (and assumedly racial/ethnic/national "other") exotic. Of the total ads, 73% made obvious, through titles or pronouns, that they were female. Some tried to play up their "respectable" femininity by using the title "Mrs." (29% of women used this title) over the more exotic and more preferred (44%) "madame." Women using the title Mrs. were much more likely to declare channeling as a method, the more popular and accepted method among the higher classes. Palmistry was more popular with women calling themselves Madame.⁷² Forty-two women enacted a "ladies only" or "no gents" restriction for either the sake of safety, of distancing themselves from even the hint of a prostitution charge, or the preference for female company. To a lesser extent, women further distinguished themselves from one another based on the extremes of age (obviously since very young and very old women were in the minority against a

⁷¹Joseph P. Shapiro, No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement, (New York, 1993), 16-18, 63.

⁷²Seers often declared proficiency in more than one method. The correspondences between method and title are as follows: Channeling, 113 using Mrs. and 92 using Madame; Palmistry, 24 Mrs. and 120 Madame; Cartomancy, 26 Mrs. and 89 Madame; Astrology, 19 Mrs. and 30 Madame.

majority of mrs.'s and madames); forty-two of them declared that they were either old and experienced or young and gifted. One San Fransisco seer simply called herself the "Oldest lady palmist and card reader in the city"⁷³ and so joined thirty-two of her female colleagues who used advanced age or many years' of experience as a selling point. Ten ads used youth, with seers choosing one of two options: the attractive young woman or the child-savant. One Chicago ad relied on subtle hints of attractiveness, reading "Miss Norwood, Wonderful young clairvoyant. Satisfaction to all callers." Girls took another approach, such as that of "Zelma, little French wonder palmist, card reader," who presented themselves as gifted innocents.⁷⁴

The most popular image men chose was the scientific professor, whether white and "hailed by the press" or racial/ethnic "other" practicing "scientific herbalism." While men claimed the same professional functions as women did (family counselling, business, and health) and in the same proportions, men packaged themselves differently in terms of method. More men proportionately chose to use science than women (25% of men used science as a selling point compared to a 17% rate of use for the total sample), indicating male seers recognized the cultural capital males had in cleaving themselves to the supposed rationality of science. They also showed a slightly lower propensity to be

⁷³San Fransisco Examiner classified ad, March 12, 1904.

⁷⁴Chicago Tribune classified ad, July 5, 1885 and St. Louis Post-Dispatch ad, April 21, 1907.

a medium (27% of men compared to 32% of the total), higher numbers in terms of astrology and clairvoyancy and lower rates of palmistry and cartomancy, the two methods considered least "scientific." (Clairvoyancy and channeling could be and were expressed in terms of electricity, while astrology could be likened to astronomy). The scientific professorial image was not exclusively white, however, as men who claimed a nationality or ethnicity claimed science in ways similar to native-born white men.

Science was an important selling point in the ads, with 17% of ads evoking a particular science or simply calling a seer, for example, a "scientific palmist" or a "scientific astrologer." By 1900, science had taken a hold on the public imagination as a privileged way of knowing, a hold which had been building throughout the nineteenth-century.

Professional societies had formed and regrouped under newer more stringent membership policies based on formal education, professorship, and publication, deeply limiting official participation by those educationally and economically disenfranchised such as men of color, all women and working-class and poor people. At the same time government and big business took an interest in science that made it an even more prestigious field in which to work.⁷⁵

In such a cultural climate, one would expect that seers trying to appeal to the public would have made more far-

⁷⁵Margaret Rossiter, Women Scientists in America. (Baltimore, 1982.) See especially Chapters Three and Four.

ranging use of science (science was mentioned in only 17% of the total sample) since spiritualists had since 1848 made the connection between channeling, clairvoyance and electricity. That some seers chose to use science is less important than the fact that most did not. As a matter of fact, the lack of appeals to science paired with the presence of so much magical transformation speaks to the ways in which seers represented opposition to the strengthening of science as a way of knowing, and by extension objected to the privileging of its practitioners. While they did emphasize the ability of the (primarily lower-class female) body to know things which are not readily knowable, they did not wish to, in any scientific methodical way, explain how they could know the things they purported to know. It was enough to have been born a Gypsy or the seventh daughter of the seventh daughter.

The ads that do evoke science, however, are not insignificant. The most popular declaration of science was that of medicine, with 64% of the ads using science claiming healing powers or proficiency in matters of health. The percentage of those claiming science and an ethnic/national/racial signifier almost matched the total percentage of those using ethnic/national/racial symbols or identities (19% to 20%). There was, however, a disproportionate number of men using science. While men appeared in only 17% of the total ads, they were visible in 38% of the total of those claiming science as a selling point, which was congruent to the cultural perception at the

turn of the century that "'Prestige' and 'professionalism' were. . . concepts that . . . reshape[d] 'science' to make it seem even more masculine than it was."⁷⁶

Class stratification allowed seers another means of distinguishing themselves from their colleagues, and appeals to social distinction and respectability became more numerous as seers became more numerous (and more competitive with one another) in the last decade of the nineteenth-century. Only seven percent of the total sample (103 ads) evoked class explicitly, but the ones that did are telling. The majority (78) of those explicitly evoking class chose to appeal to some symbol of higher classness such as royalty or refinement. The seers who chose to evoke royalty did so in a playful way, discursively undermining the power inherent in the system of titled nobility, such as "Queen Stella, palmist and life reader, tells everything," "Countess Zingara (the only original gypsy Zingara) palmist, clairvoyant" or "Lady Frances Compton" who "never fails to reunite the separated; removes evil influences."⁷⁷ Such play with the meanings of nobility became more popular at the turn of the century when discussions of class polarized in the capitalist paradigm of capital and labor and freed the discourse of nobility from any seriousness.

⁷⁶Rossiter, 73.

⁷⁷*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* ad, April 21, 1907; *New York World* ads, April 7, 1903 and April 22, 1909. Bakhtin suggests the use of royal symbols by the lower classes was an important aspect of the carnivalesque. See Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, (Indianapolis, 1984)196-277.

Some seers who evoked upper-classness did so in a less playful way than those evoking royalty by specifying that they wished "not to be classed" with the social position of fortuneteller. Professor W. J. Martin was one such seer, and asked not to be mistaken for the average seer "either in a business, financial or social role."⁷⁸ Madame Althone of Chicago declared herself "a lady of unexcelled social standing and merits the consideration of the most intelligent and refined," while Professor Gladstone announced only "high-class patronage" was solicited by him.⁷⁹ Samri Ellis declared he was "ever ready to help those with capital."⁸⁰

At the other end of the spectrum, and especially in African-American produced newspapers, seers courted the masses or specifically the poor. While this is not the same as declaring oneself poor or lower-class, it does indicate interests. Additionally, seers would not have had to declare themselves lower-class because they were assumed by the dominant culture to belong to the lower-classes. What is significant here is that they played with class signifiers and therefore declared their interests as aligned with the "downtrodden." In opposition to "high-class patronage," Mrs. E. A. McAllister announced in the *Amsterdam News* that "all are welcome." Other seers bragged they had helped "thousands" without regard to social position, and some

⁷⁸St. Louis Post-Dispatch ad, September 8, 1901.

⁷⁹Chicago Tribune ad, June 28, 1896 and St. Louis Post-Dispatch ad, February 5, 1911.

⁸⁰New York World classified ad, April 2, 1910.

specialized in helping the poor by limiting price, such as Miss J. H. Dwyer who had a "reduced fee to the poor" and Mrs. Johnson who said "those unable to pay treated free."⁸¹

By 1890, seer self-presentation had begun to show some changes that would alter the course of occult work in the twentieth-century. By 1900, the new professionalism became so firmly entrenched as a symbol of the middle-class that educated men and women began to defend it vigorously with a plethora of reforms from child welfare systems to the regulation of the medical profession. At this same time, more and more seers began to advertise in the newspapers. Seers began to attack each other with less-than-polite remarks about their colleagues' lack of education, silliness, and in one case, even their poor grammar. They increased their advertisement of national/ethnic/racial exoticism and still claimed those professional functions the new middle-class now so vigorously guarded as a symbol of their own class status. Seers who declared sexual, racial/national, and classed disenfranchisement in conjunction with claims on professional functions could no longer be contained within the romantic visions of the "other" put forth earlier in the century. The "other," in the view of the new middle-class, had by 1900 played too fast and loose with the symbols of social order, and a few activists set about passing laws against prophecy-for-profit while some customers took steps

⁸¹ *Amsterdam News* classified ad, April 1, 1925; *San Francisco Examiner* ad, April 8, 1900 and *Chicago Tribune* ad, January 19, 1873.

toward keeping prophecy under their own control by turning it into a parlor game.

These changes in seer advertising should be seen in the context of the general tendency among professionals in this era to redefine their work and the qualifications it took to do that work. A comparison with two other professions is useful here: midwifery and psychiatry. As Charlotte G. Borst has shown, midwives--both rural and urban and of a variety of ethnicities--at the mid-nineteenth-century practiced childbirth attendance as a community service. They had little desire to mobilize and control the profession. As the usually white, male, and middle-class specialists began to make inroads into the profession, childbirth came more and more to be located in hospitals and away from the community, especially for the births of urban, middle-class white women. Alienated by systems of formal higher education, women midwives did not create networks of academic association but instead worked within community systems.⁸² Elizabeth Lunbeck describes a similar process in her work on the professionalization of psychiatry, showing that in the early twentieth-century the practice moved its emphasis from the insane to everyday life, in which psychiatrists created ideologies of "normalcy" through which to solidify and expand the profession. Again, this tendency

⁸²Charlotte G. Borst, Catching Babies: The Professionalization of Childbirth, 1870-1920, (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

alienated women by focusing on the pathology of femaleness, making the profession difficult to access for women.⁸³

Both of these examples show educated white males claiming a particular professional field, and in this way fortunetellers were similar. In print, they claimed the field for women and ethnic/racial "others," stating their "natural" affinities for the supernatural qualified them for fortunetelling the way the "natural" rationality of white, educated men qualified them in the sciences. Seers' increased advertising and increased emphasis on "otherness" in the 1910s represents a more forceful claim on the profession by those alienated from other professions. The difference, however, was that in the fields of obstetrics and psychiatry white educated men actually wanted the jobs. There were no major courses of study at major colleges in fortunetelling. By 1910, educated professionals, especially doctors, sought to eliminate the competition fortunetellers provided and some began to appeal to medical boards to penalize those who practiced medicine without licenses. This was to have a devastating effect on seer advertising that loudly declared the talents and skills of the non-formally-educated.

Despite the demise of seer-centered advertising after 1910 (which is examined in the Chapter Six), the voices of occult workers boomed from the classifieds between 1870 and

⁸³Elizabeth Lunbeck, The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern America, (Princeton, 1994).

1910. Groups of people considered inarticulate--poor people, immigrants, minorities, women, the non-formally educated--spoke loud and clear about the world around them. The boom in seer ads in this period demonstrated that seers--configured as lower class--asserted possession of as many talents as the more privileged classes. Barred from the venues of social distinction, they used their cultural capital to create their own system of prestige.

Chapter Five:
A Spooky Little Girl Like You and "A Cunjuh 'oman Lack
Me": The Occult and Female Professionalism in James,
Davis, and Chesnutt

As occult workers in the newspapers began to appropriate symbols of professionalism and claim professional status for themselves, the middle-class became embroiled in a dialogue over the meanings of female professionalism. The victorian "angel in the house" who protected the home from contamination from the public sphere was being slowly transformed into the twentieth-century "New Woman" who embraced higher education and even flirted with professionalism. But this transformation of the ideal white woman was never complete, and the meanings of each were contested through the figure of the Gibson Girl, the white college girl whose manners were socially proper and whose goals were modestly professional. Not surprisingly, this popular figure excluded a discussion of changing roles for black women, who were beginning to make inroads into professional careers but for the most part held low-paying service jobs.

The occult worker as a figure of literary imagination absorbed much of the Gibson Girl ideology except in the case of African-American women occult workers, who recalled both the worlds of slavery and the post-reconstruction South. In both cases, the occult worker represented a central figure in the discourse on women's work at the turn of the century. From the pens of some male authors, seers stood in for either the beauty or tragedy of the transition of women's roles from

antebellum to modern forms. The portrayal of the occult worker depended on whether the author saw female professionalism as a positive good or a negative influence on community stability. Henry James's The Bostonians, Richard Harding Davis's Vera, the Medium and Charles Chesnutt's The Conjure Woman reveal that middle-class attitudes toward occult work were conceived of in terms of womanhood and its different classed and racialized forms.

Women's historians have demonstrated that the figure of the Gibson Girl reflected great uncertainties about new roles for women. Purveyors of popular literature between 1890 and 1910 portrayed the "new" young woman as beautiful, feminine, socially fashionable and interested in higher education only insofar as it equipped her to become the loyal and sacrificing mother and wife. The literature stressed the function of the Gibson Girl as a consumer and not a producer. Popular magazines depicted professional women as selfish, bitter and unhappy. Lynn Gordon asserts that the Gibson Girl "represented, not so much acceptance of women's higher education, as a fear of its results and an attempt to deflect social change by warning educated women about their future."¹

Such anxieties about female higher education and professionalism were not the sole province of women's magazines, however. And educated professionals were not the only victims of these limitations; female occult workers also

¹Lynn Gordon, "The Gibson Girl Goes to College: Popular Culture and Women's Higher Education in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920" American Quarterly 39 (2): 211-230.

saw their profession being attacked as a misuse of femininity, albeit in different terms. Authors like the psychological realist Henry James as well as the "Gibson Boy" journalist-novelist Richard Harding Davis used the spiritualist medium to explore the hotly-contested issue of bourgeois womanhood.²

Both "high" literary authors and "popular" novelists engaged the issue of changes in women's roles between the victorian and modern periods, evidenced by James and Davis. Henry James took up the subject in his 1886 The Bostonians after several literary successes. The Bostonians is rare for James in that it is set in the United States, for he usually set his stories and novels abroad. Richard Harding Davis was a popular author in a different set. As one critic has noted, Davis has been unfairly dismissed as "that most despicable of American writers--the superficial purveyor of journalized fiction" who wrote nothing more than "servant girl romanticism."³ Just as much of a traveller and every bit the society man as James (Solensten notes that Davis was the prototype for Charles Dana Gibson's "Gibson Boy"⁴), his fiction was not received as well as James', and he never

²Both these works owe much to Hawthorne's portrayal of Priscilla as a medium whose femininity is assaulted by the public gaze in The Blithedale Romance. William Dean Howells presents a similar rendering of a medium's rescue from spiritualism in The Undiscovered Country. See Howard Kerr's "No Traveller Returns: William Dean Howells and The Undiscovered Country" in Mediums, and Spirit Rappers, and Roaring Radicals, (Urbana, 1972).

³John Solensten, "The Gibson Boy: A Reassessment," American Literary Realism, 4(4-Fall 1971): 304, 303.

⁴Solensten, 312.

became a darling of "high" literary society. Nevertheless, by the time he published Vera the Medium in 1908, Davis had worked as the editor of *Harper's Weekly* and had published numerous short stories and war accounts. While not his most popular work, Vera, the Medium did have its following, enough so that clairvoyant Eva Fay brought a lawsuit against Davis, charging she and her deceased husband "have been defamed by characerizations contained in Mr. Davis's recent novel 'Vera, the Medium'," portrayals that will "destroy the means of gaining her livelihood."⁵ While Davis sent a lawyer to Fay, who was in Columbus, Ohio at the time she declared her intent to sue, it is unclear whether the suit ever reached the New York courts. Despite the differences in their participation in the literary world, both James and Davis explored quite explicitly the occult worker as a symbol of the changing views of white, middle-class womanhood.

Spiritualist mediums, portrayed by Hawthorne, Barnum, and others as lower-class people (usually women) who cater to middle-class parlour seances, provided the focus for James and Davis to discuss the changes in middle-class womanhood. They were particularly interested in changes which did not disrupt white middle-class male access to social, economic, and political privilege. Cast as a lower-class aspirant to middle-upper-class society, the spiritualist medium served to instruct readers in the difficult process of upward mobility

⁵"Mrs. Fay to Sue Author. Declares She Will Ask \$20,000 Damages from Richard Harding Davis," *New York Times*, October 16, 1909, 1:4.

through femininity. Henry James's 1886 The Bostonians features the young, beautiful, and lower-class medium Verena Tarrant, who finds herself caught between Olive, the wealthy women's rights reformer, and Basil Ransom, the young lawyer and conservative Southerner. Twenty-two years later Richard Harding Davis published Vera the Medium, another story of an striking young working-class medium (see Appendix, Figure 4). Both works feature a working-class girl who makes her living channeling spirits and who is caught between her lower-class parents or associates and her upper-class clients. Both works feature a young man who "rescues" the medium from her conundrum by marrying her. More importantly, both works assert that occult work allowed the white female body to become a product to be consumed either by the vulgar masses or the decadent or too-powerful upper class.

The deliverance from this difficulty, according to these authors, resides in marriage to the white-collar man (although in The Bostonians the marriage is not necessarily the happy ending as it is in Vera the Medium). As a representative of passive Victorian womanhood, the medium in these novels represents the fate of respectable women in market culture when married to a professional. Marriage, for the upwardly mobile girl as well as for the educated professional woman, means a conversion from a producer to a consumer. Each work validates the notion that in order to obtain respectabilty through marriage to the white-collar man, occult workers must give up their profession, because it

is associated with the lower classes as a producer/servant role and also because female professionals could not (in this view) simultaneously be workers and wives. The white middle-class woman in bourgeois culture, according to James and Davis, could not be a producer (worker) and a consumer (wife) at the same time.

The topic of women's rights provided James the opportunity to look at women's status. In The Bostonians, he sought to take up a serious question, what he described as "the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf."⁶ He introduces Olive Chancellor as the eccentric upper-class woman fixated upon the idea of women's rights. Verena Tarrant, whose skills and companionship are sought by Olive, is the mediumistic daughter of Selah Tarrant, a mesmerist and fraud who lives for the possibility of public attention. Verena never makes the grand public debut as a women's rights speaker planned by Olive. Instead, the conservative Southerner and lawyer, Olive's cousin Basil Ransom, convinces Verena to escape from Olive and her parents by marrying him.

Davis's story is obviously based on The Bostonians, for like Verena, Vera is raised among spirit-rappers and represents their best. Vera also is sought after by the upper-class to satisfy their own needs. In Vera the Medium this class is represented by Mr. Hallowell, the dying old man

⁶F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock, eds. The Notebooks of Henry James, (New York, 1961): 47.

who made his fortune by scamming a patent from his brother-in-law. Hallowell wants Vera to prove to him that spirits can communicate with the living so that he may decide upon his will. Two of Hallowell's associates hire Vera to channel a message from the spirit of Hallowell's sister that will allow them to control the fortune after the old man's death. Vera, wishing to escape her profession but harboring deep loyalties to her associates, struggles to overcome the stigma of an earlier arrest for the theft she committed out of abject poverty. Like Verena, Vera never fulfills the desires of the upper-class and instead decides to marry the white-collar man. Davis presents Vera's marriage differently from James's ominous view of Verena's, however, for Vera is whisked away by Winthrop, the virile, caring, district attorney who is professionally successful yet despises the pretensions of "high" society. The closing scene shows Vera being taken from a scene of exploitation by the upper-class and degradation by the lower-class by a respectable citizen, who will marry her and defend her honor at the cost of his own professional reputation.

Each work reflects a fear that white middle-class womanhood has become a product to be consumed by the masses in the cultural changes from a producer to a consumer society. The medium, emerging from a working-class background and entering into the world of the bourgeoisie, possesses a "natural" passivity that typifies her as a possible candidate for genteel womanhood. But many middle

and upper-middle-class women, who found the "angel in the house" archetype constraining, found expression in a variety of reform activities.⁷ James acknowledges reform culture as an expression of middle- and upper-class womanhood, but negates its validity by demonstrating its attraction to spiritualism, which likens reform culture to the showiness of market culture. James portrays the struggle over Verena, from which Basil eventually "rescues" her, as a struggle between the decadence and silliness of middle- and upper-class reform culture and the vulgarity of mass culture.

James begins by doubting the efficacy of the "progress" proposed by reformers as it is expressed through occult practices. Basil Ransom's conversation with Olive's sister Mrs. Luna about Boston reform culture establishes not only the "oddness" of Olive Chancellor but also of reform culture:

Olive, too, was going somewhere after dinner, but he musn't mind that; perhaps he would like to go with her. It wasn't a party--Olive didn't like to go to parties; it was one of those weird meetings she was so fond of.

'What kind of meetings do you refer to? You speak as if it were a rendezvous of witches on the Brocken.'

'Well, so it is; they are all witches and wizards, mediums, and spirit-rappers and roaring radicals.'⁸

This oft-quoted passage reveals the historical connection between reform and spiritualism, and sets up James's critique of the elite women's movement as willing to stoop to any

⁷See Ellen Carol Dubois, Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of An Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869, (Ithaca, 1978) and Robyn Muncy, Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935, (New York, 1991).

⁸Henry James, The Bostonians, ed. Charles Anderson (New York, 1986 [rpt.1886]): 37

level to win adherents.⁹ James also evoked what was later to be called lesbianism in his portrayal of the relationship between Olive and Verena, saying that the "mesmerizing" of Verena by Olive had a sexual element. The connection between women's rights, spiritualism, and lesbianism had already been made in reference to Victoria Woodhull, the character on whom some surmised the character of Verena was partially based. When Woodhull had criticized the famous preacher Henry Ward Beecher for hypocrisy by making public a sexual affair Beecher had with a colleague's wife, Beecher's supporters attacked Woodhull's sexual practices. One testified before the church committee investigating the affair that Isabella Beecher Hooker had developed "an unnatural affection for Mrs. Woodhull"¹⁰ and this explained Hooker's support of Woodhull.

Another of James's critiques of the use of mediumship by reformers and mass culture alike is that mediumship degrades white femininity by allowing the medium, as a public speaker, to become a product to be consumed. The consumable good, in this case, is Verena. The reader is first introduced to Verena Tarrant at a women's rights meeting where the seasoned suffragist and reformer Mrs. Farrinder is scheduled to speak but is replaced by Verena, whose mesmeric father entrances her into a speech on the oppression of women. The narrator

⁹Ann Braude establishes the historical connection between reform and the occult in Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America, (Boston, 1989).

¹⁰Tommy Shearman quoted in Barbara Goldsmith, Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull, (New York, 1998): 402.

states that Verena is "naturally theatrical," while Basil Ransom notes that "if she had only had a goat she would have resembled Esmerelda."¹¹ While the elderly suffragist considers the possibility of Verena as a "mountebank," Ransom is attracted to the exoticism of this particular performer:

He had never seen such an odd mixture of elements; she had the sweetest, most unworldly face, and yet, with it, an air of being on exhibition, of belonging to a troupe, of living in the gaslight, which pervaded even the details of her dress, fashioned evidently with an attempt at the histrionic. If she had produced a pair of castanets or a tambourine, he felt that such accessories would have been quite in keeping.¹²

Olive Chancellor's attraction to her is much the same; Verena was "so strange. . . [she] seemed to belong to some queer gipsy-land or transcendental Bohemia. With her bright, vulgar clothes, her salient appearance, she might have been a rope-dancer or a fortune-teller." Verena represents to Olive a window into the lower classes; her histrionic appearance, "appeared to make her belong to the 'people,' " which gave Olive entrance "into the social dusk of that mysterious democracy," a realm from which her wealth precluded her.¹³ James introduces Verena as a product for market by demonstrating the various ways the audience members consume the mediumistic show and hence the medium herself: as an impostor to be exposed, as a person with whom to "slum," and as an actress to be gazed upon for pleasure. Each of the audience members may do with her what they will.

¹¹James, 77, 82.

¹²James, 82.

¹³James, 101.

That Verena's father is a mesmerist is significant. The character of Selah Tarrant seems to have been lifted out of Barnum's Humbugs of the World and also reflects an extension of the theatrical aspects of middle-class culture (see chapter one). The narrator presents Selah as a thoroughly public figure whose goal in life is to attract attention; the "vision of. . . publicity haunted his dreams, and he would gladly have sacrificed to it the innermost sanctities of the home. Human existence to him, indeed, was a huge publicity, in which the only fault was that it was sometimes not sufficiently effective." Selah thought that "if a diviner day was to come upon earth, it would be brought about by copious advertisement in the daily prints." Social activism is in fact secondary to him, for "receipts were what Selah Tarrant was, in his own parlance, after."¹⁴ This is what the elderly suffragist eyes critically in the Tarrants, whom she regards at first as a "company of mountebanks;" she warns "I'll speak after you, and if you're a humbug, I'll expose you!"¹⁵ Even Selah's wife recognizes her husband is a fraud, but he refuses to admit as much. Selah even continues the show in their private lives, for "he had phrases, excuses, explanations, ways of putting things, which, as she felt, were too sublime for just herself; they were pitched, as Selah's nature was pitched, altogether in the key of public life." It is this context that produces "the young

¹⁴James, 120-121.

¹⁵James, 81.

prophetess" Verena, who had been "nursed in darkened rooms, and suckled in the midst of manifestations. . . and had been passed from hand to hand by trance speakers."¹⁶ Verena is born into a culture of the masses, to be consumed as a product, as a show, whether she speaks in a magical trance or uses her charm to win adherents to the women's rights movement.

Vera's work is much less complicated than Verena's, for Vera needs only to satisfy the needs of market culture--in its upper- and lower-class forms--instead of both market and reform culture. She, nevertheless, is still in danger of being consumed by market forces. Vera the medium knows she is a cheat. When her guardian Mabel Vance asks her to wear an outfit which "suited. . . the priestess of the occult and mysterious," Vera replies that the outfit makes her "feel as mean as though I were picking pennies out of a blind man's hat."¹⁷ She has seen so much spiritual manifestation as a third-generation medium--her mother "worked with the Fox sisters before they were exposed"--that she cannot bring herself to believe in it. She jokingly tells Winthrop--the present D. A. and hometown hero who helped Vera out of the theft conviction--she was raised with spirits: "I used to play around the kitchen stove with Pocahontas and Alexander the Great, and Martin Luther lived in our china closet. You see, the neighbors wouldn't let their children come into our

¹⁶James, 95-96, 105.

¹⁷Richard Harding Davis, Vera, the Medium, (New York, 1908): 86-89.

house. . . ¹⁸ Orphaned by both her parents and later her aunt, and too ill to work long in the mills, Vera had written to Paul Vance, a famous mesmerist, to see if she could work for him as a medium, and he accepted.

Despite Vera's consciousness of the trickery of her profession, she still holds on to an innocent belief in spirits. When she shares her belief in spirits with Winthrop, he brings up her earlier confession of knowing her profession's frauds inside and out, but she replies that "in spite of all the tricks, sometimes I believe there's something in it":

She looked at Winthrop, her eyes open with inquiry. He shook his head.

"Yes," insisted the girl. "When these women come to me for advice, I don't invent what I say to them. It's as though something told me what to say. I have never met them before, but as soon as I pass into the trance state I seem to know all their troubles. And I seem to be half in this world and half in another world--carrying messages between them. Maybe," her voice had sunk to almost a whisper;. . . "I only *think* that. I don't know. I wonder."¹⁹

Winthrop is less charmed by Vera's open-mindedness than with her admission that as a girl she used to worship him for his baseball talents, and he talks "like a father" to her, instructing her to leave mediumship. She replies that the stigma of thievery keeps her from honest work. She sees her one-time infringement on the laws of the respectable economic system as a sentence to a lifetime of market frauds, which degrade her "natural" talents and abilities.

¹⁸Davis, 130.

¹⁹Davis, 131-132.

Vera's commendable qualities go beyond her persistent innocence. She is loyal enough to keep working for her friends and to keep one from giving in to his cocaine addiction. She is passive enough to channel spirits, and caring enough to help her clients with their troubles. Also important is her submission, for she sees herself as one who cannot "rise" above her situation, and so she embraces her profession with all its stigmata. When Hallowell's acerbic career-girl niece Helen threatens Vera with prosecution and public exposure as a thief and a fraud, Vera musters her defenses:

"Do you know who I am?" she asked. She spoke like one in a trance. "Do you know who you are threatening with your police and your laws? I am a priestess! I am a medium between the souls of this world and the next. I am Vera--the Truth! And, I mean--" the girl cried suddenly, harshly, flinging out her arm, "that you shall hear the truth! Tonight I will bring your mother from the grave to speak it to you!"

With a swift, sweeping gesture, she pointed to the door. "Take those people away!" she cried.²⁰

When all are out of sight, Vera bursts into tears. Paired with loyalty and innocence, this public self-composure makes Vera the perfect candidate for admission into the ranks of bourgeois womanhood, but her profession makes her part of the public domain, living a "life as open to the public as the life of an actress, as easy of access as that of the stenographer in the hotel lobby."²¹ In the world of Vera the Medium, being as accessible as a hotel lobby was definitely

²⁰Davis, 151.

²¹Davis, 51.

an unattractive alternative to the private confinement of domesticity.

In each novel, the professional man performs a "rescue" of the noble lower-class woman from her difficult position as product for the decadent upper-class and the degraded lower class. The professional white man is the knight errant of bourgeois femininity. James conducts Basil Ransom's introduction in republican and capitalist terminology, both of which make him a little suspicious; his clerk-like clothing leads Mrs. Luna to conclude he looked "poor--as poor as a young man could look who had such a fine head and such magnificent eyes" yet he also resembled a "column of figures." The narrator continues, noting that Basil's "head had a character of elevation which fairly added to his stature; it was a head to be seen above the level of a crowd, on some judicial bench or political platform, or even on a bronze medal," while his eyes, "with their smoldering fire, might have indicated that he was to be a great American statesman."²² Basil's young magnificence is matched by Winthrop, the hero of Vera the Medium. While Basil is a young man with potential to rise, Winthrop, in his later thirties, has already demonstrated his professional abilities. Like Basil, his statesman-like manner wins converts to his cause, for after a stint as a small-town prosecuting attorney and a legislator, he came to New York to practice law, "and in the cause of reform had fought so many

²²James, 35-36.

good fights that on an independent ticket, much to his surprise, he had been lifted to the high position he now held." But unlike Basil, Winthrop possesses modesty: "No more in his manner than in his appearance did Winthrop suggest the popular conception of his role. He was not professional, not mysterious" but was "sane, cheerful, tolerant. It was his philosophy to believe that the world was innocent, until it was proved guilty."²³ Winthrop is not the slick corporate confidence-man; he is the true statesman, serving the country when it calls upon his high ideals. While Basil's ideals are not as "pure" as Winthrop's, he does send checks home to his mother, who was living with the effects of the loss of the family's wealth in the Civil War. Instead of the northern statesman, he is the southern gentleman-democrat. These two characters, who eschew the work of the medium, represent the rationalism of the ideal middle-class male.

In The Bostonians, Basil saves Verena from two types of mesmerists: Olive, whose wealth and convictions entrance Verena, and Selah, who is the father figure, mesmerist proper and representative of mass culture. The public exposure called for by both Olive as a reformer and Selah as a showman of mass culture, while portrayed at opposite ends of the classed spectrum, both serve up Verena for public consumption. Like a magician, Olive puts Verena "completely under the charm" of

²³Davis, 33

women's rights. The narrator makes sure to explain this charm as magical:

The idea of Olive's charm will perhaps make the reader smile; but I use the word not in its derived, but in its literal sense. The fine web of authority, of dependence, that her strenuous companion had woven about her, was now as dense as a suit of golden mail; and Verena was thoroughly interested in their great undertaking; she saw it in the light of an active, enthusiastic faith.²⁴

Indeed, Verena "left to herself. . . was not always thinking of the unhappiness of women; but the touch of Olive's tone worked a spell, and she found something to which at least a portion of her nature turned with eagerness in her companion's wider knowledge, her elevation of view."²⁵ This "spell" is similar to the mesmeric trance into which Selah puts Verena. James further equates reform culture with mass culture when Verena explains to her mother her relationship with Olive and expresses herself in terms similar to those she uses in describing the mesmeric trance, that Olive ". . . doesn't want to speak herself; she only wants to call me out. Mother, if she doesn't attract attention to me there isn't any attention to be attracted."²⁶ Mrs. Farrinder's reaction to Verena is singularly cool; she "viewed with suspicion certain romantic, aesthetic elements which Olive and Verena seemed to be trying to introduce into" the women's rights movement, leaving Olive to wonder "what vulgar aspirants to notoriety" she confused with Verena.²⁷

²⁴James, 178.

²⁵James, 153.

²⁶James, 199

²⁷James, 174.

Olive competes with mass culture for Verena, evidenced by her dislike of Matthias Pardon, the obnoxious newspaperman who wants to offer Verena to crowds. Olive has ideas for showing Verena's talents, but she views them in opposition to Pardon's vulgar aspirations:

Olive had a standing quarrel with the levity, the good-nature, of the judgements of the day; many of them seemed to her weak to imbecility, losing sight of all measures and standards, lavishing superlatives, delighted to be fooled. The age seemed to her relaxed and demoralized, and I believe she looked to the influx of the great feminine element to make it feel and speak more sharply.²⁸

If women's rights speakers become sideshows, it would be the fault of the debased public, not the speaker. Her classist notions, however, are not strong enough to make her want to withdraw women from public view. Rather, according to Olive, women's rights speakers should be consumed for the political--not entertainment--benefit of society.

James makes the readers see the blurring between the type of public exposure suggested by Matthias Pardon and that suggested by Olive Chancellor. He also points out the similarities, in the character of Verena, between public and private exposure. Verena, like Selah Tarrant and Barnum's Monsieur Mangin, has been created by a consumer culture to satisfy the cravings of others. Indeed, this is as close as James ever gets to creating a psychological portrait of Verena Tarrant, and it is a portrait so incredible that the narrator notes "that I despair of presenting it to the reader

²⁸James, 141.

with the air of reality." As Verena feels herself drawn toward Basil Ransom, she discusses the subject with Olive, who is notably upset that her "spell" is being broken. It is in this context that the narrator reminds the reader that Verena is the trance maiden, that the wills of others are worked through her passive body. This passivity, developed by "her familiarity with the vocabulary of emotion, the mysteries of 'the spiritual life,'" was "an expression of her innermost preferences;" she yearned to "expose herself, give herself away, turn herself inside out, for the satisfaction of a person who made demands of her." Verena's "artlessly artful faculties," which when confined to the domestic sphere would have made her "ideal," make her a freak in the public arena.²⁹ Indeed, when Olive agrees Verena should be introduced to the public she hires Mr. Filer to orchestrate the debut. This gentleman, who is "in the lecture business," has "handled prima donnas. . . and natural curiosities" before promoting the pair of suffragists, a duo that leads him to declare "I've never seen anything up to this."³⁰ Even though Olive disapproves of mass culture, she ends up promoting women's rights the same as one would a "natural curiosity."

In the end Verena does not make her grand appearance before the public, but as Lynn Wardley points out, James hardly sees Basil Ransom's taking Verena from the spotlight

²⁹James, 370.

³⁰James, 423.

as an escape: "Far from rescuing Verena from a life spent as 'food' for women and men, the ending surprises us with a more graphic presentiment of just such a life."³¹ When Verena wondered aloud what would happen to her speaking career if she ever married Basil, he responds that "the dining-table itself shall be our platform, and you shall mount on top of that."³² Verena's public voice will be silenced; she becomes dinner to the individual man rather than food for the public. Verena Tarrant, as she is whisked away at the end, "was in tears." The narrator concludes that it "is to be feared that with the union. . . into which she was about to enter, these were not the last she was destined to shed."³³

Vera the medium is compelled to serve deluded upper-class clients as well as the gambling, drug-addicted, mountebank troupe of lower-class associates who depend on their star for a living. The character of Hallowell in Vera the Medium is the representative of the "old" nouveau-riche. Unlike Olive, whose "old-money" social status is secure, Hallowell's status is based only on his fortune, which was gained by a "patent coupling-pin, the invention of his brother-in-law," a stroke of luck and scheming that gave him the capital for other investments. The narrator points out that Hallowell learned how to be a business man from his dealings with railroad companies, the popular symbols of

³¹Lynn Wardley, "Woman's Voice, Democracy's Body and The Bostonians," ELH, 56 (3): 660.

³²James, 379.

³³James, 433.

corporate greed in the last decades of the nineteenth-century. The narrator also points out that by comparison, Hallowell's fortune, while substantial, does not give him the power it did back in the 1880s when Hallowell "was a national figure in the manoeuvres of the Eastern stock market." But "since then giants had arisen in the land; men whose wealth made the fortune of Stephen Hallowell appear a comfortable competence, his schemes and stratagems, which, in their day, had bewildered Wall Street, as simple as the trading across the counter of a cross-roads store."³⁴

Like Olive's social privilege, which James sees as rendering her a relic and odd to say the least, Hallowell's status is questioned as well in the more sophisticated market culture of the decade of the 1900s. His house, built in 1876 "in a burst of vanity," stands as a testament to the inroads mass culture has made into the world of the wealthy. In the 1870s "the house was a 'mansion,' and its front of brown sandstone the outward sign of wealth and fashion," but in recent years it became part of the mundane cityscape:

Now, on one side, it rubbed shoulders with the shop of a man milliner, and across the street the houses had been torn down, and replaced by a department store. Now, instead of a sombre jail-like façade, his outlook was a row of waxen ladies, who, before each change of season, appeared in new and gorgeous raiment, and across the Avenue, for his approval, smiled continually.³⁵

Like the inability of his house to convey status, Hallowell's mind has been made "feeble" due to "disuse and ill-health,"

³⁴Davis, 4.

³⁵Davis, 5.

which leaves him "suspicious, [and] at times childishly credulous." Hallowell's credulity makes him easy prey for mountebanks and confidence men. The sharpness that helped him to scheme in business is ruined by wealth and privilege, to the point at which he begins to "admit . . . mediums, palm-readers, or people of that sort" into his decaying mansion to help him decide that fate of his millions.³⁶

While Hallowell's wealth renders him ineffective, Vera's associates are willing--by swindling--to degrade themselves and Vera in the pursuit of Hallowell's wealth. Vera's guardian Paul Vance is all of Selah Tarrant and then some. The narrator describes him in singularly animalistic (and spiritualistic, give the origins of the movement) terms, a "fox" who "had red eyes, alert and cunning, a long, sharp-pointed nose, a pointed red beard, and red eyebrows that slanted upward." And like the trickiest of foxes, "no one had ever driven him into a corner from which, either pleasantly, or with raging indignation, he was not able to free himself."³⁷ Unlike Selah Tarrant, however, Vance is fully willing to admit that the occult amounts to a collection of properly staged tricks. Vance confronts the crooked doctor and judge who attempt to control Hallowell's fortune and are fearful that Hallowell may put Vera to a difficult test, with the assurance that "every test that ever was put to a medium--was invented by a medium."³⁸ Vance took

³⁶Davis, 5, 19.

³⁷Davis, 47-48.

³⁸Davis, 104.

Vera as a ward because "the girl brought in the money" and together they became "the aristocrats of their calling":

In their profession, in all of its branches, the man and the girl were past masters. They knew it from the A, B, C of the dream book to the post-graduate work of projecting from a cabinet the spirits of the dead. As the occasion offered and paid best, they were mind-readers, clairvoyants, materializing mediums, test mediums. . . to them that calling was as legitimate a business as is, to the roadside gypsy, the swapping of horses.³⁹

Mabel Vance completes the family. Mabel, whom Paul secretly calls "a dope" for believing in spiritualism, provides Vera with companionship and helps her cultivate her priestess image, gambles on horses, and above all, believes firmly in the occult: "Not even the intimate knowledge she had gained behind the scenes could persuade her that Paul. . . was not in constant communication with the spirit world" or that "he could not read the thoughts that moved slowly through her pretty head."⁴⁰ Vera's other associate, Mannie, has a gambling problem as well as a cocaine addiction. Winthrop is impressed with Vera's goodness when Mannie tells him that he quit the cocaine habit because Vera told him she would start if he did not stop. The thought of the beautiful Vera wasting away to the ravages of drug was too much for Mannie, and he overcame his vice.

Despite the undesirability of this cast of characters, Vera decides to align herself with them. She insists that she has tried to find different work five separate times, and

³⁹Davis, 46-47.

⁴⁰Davis, 48-49.

each time she is fired because someone said to her boss
"'That girl in your front office is a thief'." When Winthrop
tries to get Vera to leave the Vances and live with his
sisters "uptown," he insists she will be able to find
respectable work: "' . . . we fellow townsmen,' he smiled at
her appealingly, 'will talk this over, and we'll make you
come back to your own people'." But Vera, after swearing she
hates "this business," defends the practitioners of it,
saying "These are my people. . . And they are good people!
They've tried to be good friends to me; and they've been true
to me."⁴¹ But Vera tentatively agrees to live with his
sisters until she recants when Hallowell's niece attacks
Vera's virtue.

The closing scene of Vera the Medium mirrors somewhat
that of The Bostonians; it is the medium's big moment to gain
a great deal of attention, but instead she disappoints her
audience and turns to the lawyer who eschews the absurdity
and/or immorality of the medium's profession. Vera has been
hired by two men who pose as upright professionals to
impersonate the spirit of Hallowell's dead sister and
instruct him to give the money to The Hallowell Institute--
run by the con-men doctor and judge--instead of the niece
Helen, the daughter of the inventor of the coupling-pin.
This is no private seance, for, given the size of Hallowell's
estate, all interested parties plus members of the press and
spiritualist society worthies attend to see the spirit of

⁴¹Davis, 134-137.

Hallowell's sister. Vera, after patiently enduring the inspections of the audience and the tying of her arms, slips from the ropes inside the spirit cabinet and appears before the group as an old woman, but decides she cannot go through with the scheme, and ends up sobbing, begging Hallowell for forgiveness. Winthrop lifts Vera to her feet and helps her from the room as Hallowell screeches "You've tried to rob me!" All present think that Winthrop has taken the girl to prosecute her, but he actually finds himself desiring her for a bride:

The sobs that shook her tore at his heart; the touch of the sinking, trembling body in his arms filled him with fierce, jubilant thoughts of keeping the girl there always, of giving battle for her, of sheltering her against the world. In what she had done he only saw sacrifice. In her he beheld a penitent; who was self-accused and self-convicted.⁴²

When Hallowell screams "She plotted to get my money," Winthrop retorts "How did you plot to get it?. . . You know and I know," aligning the scheming of the mountebanks to the scheming of business. He then turns to everyone present to accuse them of falsity: "'You all plotted, and you all schemed--and to what end--what was the result'--he held before them the fainting figure of the girl--'that one poor child could prove she was honest!'. " This "child" (of twenty-one) leaves with Winthrop, presumably headed uptown. When he proposes marriage, Vera's face becomes a picture of "dawning happiness."⁴³

⁴²Davis, 214.

⁴³Davis, 214-216.

While Verena's career after marriage will be converted into a series of lectures delivered to a husband from the dining-room table, Vera's career will transform into the private performance of white bourgeois femininity. Happily, according to Davis, Vera has escaped her fate as a producer/product. Basil and Winthrop have rescued the embodiment of white womanhood--the passive, compliant and loyal medium--from degradation by both the decadent, ineffectual upper-class and the deceitful, money-grubbing lower-class, which in the case of Davis includes the con-men "passing" as a doctor and a judge. While Hallowell uses the medium to make up for the ineffectuality born of privilege, Olive uses the medium to access that "mysterious democracy"--made inaccessible by her wealth--to enlighten it of women's rights. At the other end of the social scale, Selah Tarrant and Paul Vance use the medium to swindle the exciteable public out of its money. The problem for the medium, then, is that all of this "use" allows her femininity to be marketed. According to Davis and James, the only option left for the white ideal woman is to avoid being consumed by becoming a middle-class consumer. Marrying the steady, rational professional breadwinner is the only retreat--happily or tragically--for the ideal woman from the degrading forces of the class system borne of market culture.

For Davis, the retreat of women to the private sphere is a happy journey, and he does not question the value of the role Vera will play after marriage, as the "uptown" sisters

groom her for the role for which she has already shown promise. Winthrop and Vera's first lengthy meeting foreshadows the roles each will play after marriage:

"I don't believe," she said doubtfully, "that I know much about afternoon calls. What would I do, if we were on Fifth Avenue? Would I give you tea?" she asked, "because," she added hastily, "there isn't any tea."

"In that case, it is not etiquette to offer any," said Winthrop gravely.

"Then," said Vera, "I'm doing it right, so far?"

They both laughed; Vera because she was in awe of him, and Winthrop because he was so happy.⁴⁴

She will maintain a charming innocence and an appreciation of him in exchange for knowledge of middle-class culture, a culture that would appreciate Vera's passivity and malleability. Like Verena, her role as a servant to the public pleasure has been privately contained for the pleasure of the husband. The professional medium, in these works, serves to represent the dangers for femininity in public life. Containment of femininity in marriage to the professional male preserves class status while allowing white middle-class male access to social and economic privilege. Davis further presented the marriage as a happy ending since Vera was excused from occult work but also from the drudgery of manual or clerical labor.

Whether the author sees marriage as a happy ending or not, the significance of the "rescue" through marriage is that it represents a singular act of self-definition for the middle-class. The middle-class professional is distinguished from both the upper- and lower-classes by his honesty,

⁴⁴Davis, 122.

adherence to republican principles of gentlemanly competition and rationalism, and his "protection" of white femininity. The upper-class, in these works, is downright freakish: obsessed with its own interests, disdainful of traditional family life, and rendered ineffectual or antiquated by the very wealth that gives them social privilege. The lower-class fares no better, for it appears willing to do anything--including allowing its most beautiful and sensitive women to be gawked at and tied up in ropes--to trick people out of their money. Both authors admit that the culture of market that creates the class system identifies the middle-class as hardworking enough to avoid being ineffectual and wealthy enough to not have to cheat or swindle. Regrettably or not, it is in the middle-class milieu, where occult workers--like Gibson Girls--give up professionalism and retreat to domesticity, that keeps white femininity safe from corruption.

While white writers like Davis and James focused on an increasingly complicated market culture and its implications for white female professionalism, African-American authors argued for economic and sometimes cultural access to the world of market in capacities other than low-paying service and factory jobs and barely subsistence-level farming. The occult worker as conjuror did not function for black authors the same way the spiritualist medium functioned for white

authors like Davis and James.⁴⁵ Charles Chesnutt's The Conjure Woman uses the character of the conjure woman to explore the meanings of work for black femininity by evoking a slave past in the turn-of-the-century present. In so doing, Chesnutt at once celebrates the work of women in the process of African-American community cohesion and at the same time regrets that their small victories in market culture are not extended to black male workers without compromising their masculinity.

Unlike James' and Davis' presentations of the white medium, Chesnutt imaged the black conjure-woman as a capable producer. Her wares--charms, advice, magic--rather than debasing her femininity instead glorified it and centralized women's work as a series of profound acts of beauty and survival. Set against a backdrop of problematic white womanhood, Chesnutt's conjure woman represents not the confinement of the home but its extension to community service, especially the service of women, making her Chesnutt's articulation of African-American feminisms of the late nineteenth-century. Even though Chesnutt was writing for much the same readership as James, Chesnutt's focus on African-American culture meant he was working with a different set of socio-economic realities, and hence produced a different view of womanhood.

⁴⁵See also William Wells Brown, My Southern Home, or the South and Its People, (New Jersey, 1968 [rpt.1880]).

One of Charles Chesnutt's motivations for writing The Conjure Woman, which appeared in 1899 as a collection of connected short stories dealing with slavery and antebellum society, was to respond to the condescending "plantation tales" written by white writers like Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris. Particularly, Chesnutt objected to the romanticization of slavery that allowed the Uncle Remus type character--the "sentimental and devoted negro who prefers kicks to half-pence"⁴⁶--to speak for all former slaves. Some scholars have examined the ways in which Chesnutt's Uncle Julius, the narrator of the stories, and John, the transplanted northerner who provides the frame tales, represent racialized interpretations of market culture, with the former depicting the marginalization of black men in that system and the latter embodying white Yankee capitalist enterprise. Annie, John's wife, stands as the fate of white women in market culture: privileged, bored, and "nervous."⁴⁷ Aunt Peggy, for whom The Conjure Woman is named, has received little critical attention in reference to her character's place in post-reconstruction market culture.⁴⁸ Yet Aunt Peggy, as a respected, professional, self-employed, free

⁴⁶Chesnutt in Valerie Babb, "Subversion and Repatriation in The Conjure Woman." Southern Quarterly 35(2): 69. Babb provides a good discussion of the different ways Joel Chandler Harris and Chesnutt utilized the genre of the plantation tale.

⁴⁷See especially Robert Schulman, Social Criticism and Nineteenth-Century American Fictions, (Columbia, MO, 1987) and Richard Brodhead's introduction to Charles Chesnutt, The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales, (Durham, SC, 1993).

⁴⁸Eric Selinger's "Aunts, Uncles, Audience: Gender and Genre in Charles Chesnutt's The Conjure Woman" in Black American Literature Forum 25 (4): 665-688 is one notable exception, and will be discussed later.

black woman in the plantation South, has important implications for a discussion of The Conjure Woman as a text employing race as an immediate issue in the post-reconstruction economy. While Uncle Julius may be the character "prefering" half-pence to kicks, Aunt Peggy is the only African-American character shown realizing any profit. Yet Peggy's financial success and power have limits, and Chesnutt is careful to assert that black power must be exercised carefully in a system that privileges white cultural and economic endeavors.

In this way Aunt Peggy, an occult worker who demands respect and remuneration for her work, represents Chesnutt's celebration of black women's work in post-reconstruction marketplace culture: integral to community cohesion despite being circumscribed by white employers. Blacks and whites alike utilize Peggy's services, but Peggy knows her customers come to her with different sources of power and hence command different treatment. She tries to undermine the effects of slavery the best she can, but she also realizes her power is limited, and she is careful to subvert the system when she can without incurring the wrath of whites. Peggy undermines white power in highly politic ways, which helps empower blacks while leaving them least vulnerable to white violence. But the ways in which she exercises power--through a special relationship to nature and careful observation of human behavior--speak to a worldview that, while being antithetical

to the economic system controlled by whites, must still exert power within it.

The Conjure Woman and the related tales are structured alike. John and Annie request a story of Uncle Julius, their African-American coachman, usually out of boredom or to pass the time while they are detained for some reason. Julius delivers the tale of the "old plantation days" in which he relates the brutality of slavery and the ways in which slaves survived it. Annie, as implied by John's narration, is drawn to the supernatural elements of the tale which are enacted by a conjure man or woman, usually Aunt Peggy. Julius relates fourteen tales (half of which appeared in the original publication of The Conjure Woman), and a professional conjure man or woman appears in nine (including all seven of the original publication). Aunt Peggy is the most fully developed as a conjurer, with Tenie appearing once in "Po' Sandy" as a former conjure woman, and Uncle Jobe, an unforgiving conjure man who finds religion at a camp meeting, appearing in "The Conjuror's Revenge" and as Peggy's rival in "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt."

John as narrator returns at the end of each story, convinced that Julius told his tale out of self-interest, such as telling "The Goophered Grapevine" to keep John from buying the plantation or "Po' Sandy" to keep John and Annie from tearing down a building he wishes to use for a church. Each time, John sees Annie as having been duped by Julius's stories, stories he relates to as pure fantasy and as fraught

with Julius's self-interest. John's arrogance blinds him to the elements of the story bespeaking a vital culture and philosophic world view--represented by the conjurer--that respects nature and the human role in it and seeks to balance unnatural power relations. While John's philosophy emanates from a belief in "progress" through mastery of nature (including humans), Julius describes a belief system in which humans are integral to and respectful of the natural world. The conjure woman is a person so attuned to natural laws that she can manipulate them to balance power and punish those who refuse to respect natural law.

Chesnutt's depiction of the conjure woman has some important differences from white-authored depictions of occult workers. While authors like James and Davis explored the gendered meanings of the white middle-class transition from a producer- to a consumer-oriented culture, Chesnutt used the occult worker to examine the implications of the changing market system for African-Americans and their roles in effecting that change. Unlike the white spiritualist mediums whose skills are honed by passivity, Aunt Peggy, Chesnutt's central conjure woman, is an active and independent woman, whose skills represent a lifetime of careful observation and interpretation of the natural world, including especially human behavior. While Vera and Verena represent the passive feminine counterpart to active male positivism, Aunt Peggy the conjure woman and Uncle Julius, the man who "conjures" through storytelling, indicate a

worldview deeply at odds with the "progressive" market worlds that produced the passive woman and rational man in Vera the Medium and The Bostonians. Black men and black women are active, but in a different sense than the male actors Winthrop and Basil Ransom. While Ransom and Winthrop seek to uphold traditional marriage, professional privilege, and by extension white privilege, Peggy and Julius act subversively to question both capitalism and white privilege. Chesnutt sets these two worlds at odds in The Conjure Woman by creating a frame tale, narrated by John, a capitalist white Yankee, which demonstrates that whites invested in capitalist rationalism are incapable of relating to and understanding the world of the conjure tale, and indeed the roots of black culture. The interaction between the two tales represents a constant negotiation of racialized and gendered power relations as enacted in a post-reconstruction market culture.

The tales and their frames also represent the constraints placed upon African-American authors at the turn of the century. As Richard Brodhead and others have shown, Chesnutt developed this collection in response to a difficult situation. At an editor's request, Chesnutt sent a number of works to Houghton-Mifflin. The publisher liked several of the "conjure tales" and requested more like them to publish as a single volume about conjure. Chesnutt wrote more, and the publishers chose which they wanted to include.⁴⁹ Even

⁴⁹For a full history of publication, see Brodhead, "Introduction," The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales, (Durham, 1993): 1-21.

though the publisher was the one who explicitly focused the collection around the issue of conjure, Chesnutt's goals in the creation of Aunt Peggy cannot be overshadowed by the publisher's meddling.

As noted above, Chesnutt wanted to respond to plantation tales written by whites, but he also wanted to break into the elite literary circles that from New York created a dynasty of genteel publishing⁵⁰ and circulated works geared primarily toward educated white Northerners. Chesnutt also believed in the power of literature to convince whites of the wrongness of their prejudices. He wanted to "accustom the public mind to the idea" of "recognition and equality" for blacks.⁵¹ These variables led him to the "local color" genre so popular at the time.⁵² This allowed him to publish in a form recognizable to Northern white readers, to recreate a plantation South distinct from the racist depictions of white writers, and also allowed him to instruct his white readers against the sentimentalization of slavery and for a critical interrogation of racism in post-reconstruction America.

Yet the marketability of Aunt Peggy to white audiences as a "colorful" character of by-gone days should not diminish the power of the character actually put forth by Chesnutt. Peggy is a talented professional who demands respect and

⁵⁰Schulman, 50-57

⁵¹Chesnutt in Babb, 70.

⁵²Brodhead notes that "local color" narratives gained popularity because they "performed a larger social work, the work of mourning the ways of life being eradicated at this time" by "a nationally organized cultural economy" (3).

compensation for her labor. In a culture that begrudgingly allowed white women a marginal respect for professionalism, Chesnutt created Aunt Peggy as a free black woman in the plantation South who owns her own labor. She is an entrepreneur, but willing only to profit if natural laws can be respected. Peggy provides hope and help in the community and her work recalls an African past distinct from an enslaved and capitalist present. Yet Peggy's power in the system of slavery is limited and she must reconcile survival in an enterprise system in which whites view black bodies as capital with the survival of a worldview that decentralizes human enterprise and constantly seeks a balance of power between all things, humans or not. Peggy works at several borders: enslaved and free, black and white, natural and supernatural, and economic survival and exploitation.

Both William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass had invoked the conjurer as an integral part of antebellum culture as a person, in the words of Brown, "who was regarded with more than common respect by his fellow-slaves."⁵³ Lawrence Levine contends that enslaved Africans, even after several generations in America and conversion to Christianity, sought conjurers to help them survive the brutalities of enslavement and maintain a culture apart from their enslavers. Levine notes that African religions saw humans as part of a system of nature rather than its masters.

⁵³Brown, 70.

He notes that enslaved Africans saw that "life was not random or accidental or haphazard" but "meaningful":

Human beings could "read" the phenomena surrounding and affecting them because Man was part of, not alien to, the Natural Order of things, attached to the Oneness that bound together all matter, animate and inanimate, all spirits, visible or not. It was crucially necessary to understand the world because one was part of it, inexorably linked to it.⁵⁴

It is this philosophy of linkage between humans and nature that made the conjurer so central, "for if the spirits that affected mankind had to be implored and propitiated constantly, they also allowed human beings to comprehend and exercise some control over forces which otherwise would have overwhelmed them."⁵⁵ The belief in human agency in the Natural Order also survived in European culture, especially among the lower classes. And, as Levine notes, slaves drew on these traditions, similar to African ones, and blended them with African retentions. This syncretism allowed them to sometimes draw whites into the world of conjure and, sometimes marginally and sometimes hugely, rework imbalances of power. It is at these crossroads that Aunt Peggy worked.

The power and limits of Aunt Peggy's work are especially poignant in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," published in the original Conjure Woman collection in 1899. Uncle Julius relates this story when Annie finds herself "the victim of a settled melancholy, attended with vague forebodings of impending fortune." As Annie and John are seated on the

⁵⁴Lawrence Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom, (Oxford, 1977): 58.

⁵⁵Levine, 59.

piazza, staring at the "somewhat monotonous scenery," Uncle Julius walks up carrying a rabbit's foot. John delivers a lecture aimed at both Julius and his nervous wife on the absurdity of superstition, admonishing that "your people will never rise in the world until they throw off these childish superstitions and learn to live by the light of reason and common sense." Julius proceeds to tell the story of Sis' Becky, a story that attests to the power of belief in forces outside oneself. Becky was enslaved by a Colonel Pendleton, a man who "didn' nebber hab no luck wid his hosses, ef he did keep hisse'f po' projeckin' wid em." When Pendleton found out about a particularly good race horse, his desire to win overcame his distaste for separating mothers from children, and he decided to trade Becky away from her baby Mose for a horse named Lightning Bug. The horse's owner insisted "I'll keep dat 'oman so busy she'll fergit de baby."⁵⁶

Both Becky and Mose did not forget, however, and both became ill and weak. Aunt Nancy, now caregiver to Mose, decided to consult Aunt Peggy, "de cunjuh 'oman down by de Wim'l'ton Road." Peggy, after haggling for more peas as payment--"fer you can't 'spec' me ter was'e my time diggin' roots en wukkin' cunj'ation fer nuffin."⁵⁷--turns Mose into a hummingbird so he could fly to the next plantation to visit Becky. The effect on both is temporary, however, and Peggy must transform him again--this time to a mawking bird--to

⁵⁶Chesnutt, 82-86.

⁵⁷Chesnutt, 87.

make a second trip. When the effect of this visit wears off, Nancy brings Peggy her "bes' Sunday head-hankercher" and asks her to enact something more permanent. Peggy asks a hornet to repeatedly sting Lightning Bug's knees, making them appear swollen, while she sends a sparrow to Pendleton's to bring back reports. In the mean time, she stops making visits possible between Becky and Mose, which makes Becky ill. At almost the same time, Pendleton and the horse-raiser, each feeling he'd been cheated by the deal, decided to undo to trade, and Becky and Mose are reunited.

Peggy does not have the power to abolish slavery, but she does (for a fee) make it more bearable for Becky and Mose. While she enlists the help of some roots (to effect Mose's transformation), a hornet, and a sparrow, most of the success of Becky and Mose's reunion depends on Peggy's ability to predict the actions of those around her. She knew that each man valued his property for what it could do for him, either work or win, and when each of those values was threatened, Peggy knew that, instead of putting the effort into saving the horse or the woman, each man would try to dupe the other into taking back his "damaged" merchandise. Peggy also knew how long Becky and Mose could last without one another, and offered Nancy a potion for Mose to forget Becky temporarily and timed the knee-stinging with Becky's worsening sickness (from which she recovered after reuniting with Mose). Peggy, though, does not work for free. Her influence is such that she can command her own price, which

in this case is a handkerchief and a little more than a "mess er peas." While she is outside the confines of the plantation system in some ways, such as her constantly-evoked geographic affiliation with "Wim'l'ton Road" rather than a plantation, racially she is very much confined to that system even though she herself is not enslaved. She must know, and know intimately, the values, cultures, and structures of her clients. Peggy's position is similar to Julius's after the war, for while he is a "free" person, he lives in a system that seeks to validate whiteness over blackness.

Peggy's liminal position is evoked as well in "Mars Jeems's Nightmare." In this story, an enslaved man named Solomon asked Aunt Peggy--this time introduced as "de free-nigger cunjuh 'oman down de Wim'l'ton Road"--to recover his sweetheart, who had been sold to another plantation, and "ter make Mars Jeems treat de darkies bettah." Peggy devises a mixture to effect both Solomon's wishes, but gives him careful instructions and a warning: "Fer I ain' done much er dis kin' er cunj'un er late yeahs, en I has ter kinder keep track un it ter see dat it doan 'complish no mo'd'n I 'lows fer it ter do." And as well she "has ter be kinder keerful 'bout cunj'un w'ite folks." As usual Peggy has the cooperation of others, and the cook administers the goopher to Mars Jeems. Jeems leaves the next day to attend to some business and leaves the plantation under the care of Mars Johnson, a man who carries the reputation of being especially cruel to slaves and is characterized by "one er dem grins

w'at show' all his snaggle teef, en make de niggers 'low he look lack de ole debbil."⁵⁸ Almost as soon as Jeems has left, a new slave arrives who refuses to submit to Johnson's ill-treatment. Of course Johnson whips and starves him, little knowing that he was actually Jeems under the influence of Peggy's goopher. Solomon forgets he is supposed to report to Peggy, and the new slave is sold to a speculator. When Peggy finds out, she works quickly and recovers Jeems, who returns to the plantation a reformed slave-owner, but a slave-owner nonetheless. Peggy recovers Jeems because she knows the limits imposed on her work: she can make the system more bearable but as an individual she cannot completely change the system.

Yet while the racial caste system favored whites and limited Peggy's work, the beneficiaries of that system also respected Peggy's abilities. In "Hot-Foot Hannibal," Mars McAdoo (Julius's former owner), finds out one of his house slaves had been goophered, and says "he would 'a' had ole Aun' Peggy whip' long ago, on'y Aun' Peggy wuz a free 'oman." But while McAdoo complains "Sump'n got ter be done ter l'arn dat old witch ter keep her hands off'n my niggers," he ends up trying to rectify the goopher himself because "he wuz 'feared she'd cunjuh him" even though he said "he didn' b'liebe in cunj'in' en sich, he 'peared ter 'low it wuz bes' ter be on de safe side, en let Aun' Peggy alone."⁵⁹ Likewise,

⁵⁸Chesnutt, 59-61.

⁵⁹Chesnutt, 116.

in "Tobe's Tribulations," when a mob of whites come to Peggy's cabin in search of a thieving fox (a slave she transformed to a fox to help him escape to the North), evidence of her profession makes their search of her cabin seem less pressing:

. . . en de dawgs run 'roun', en de w'ite folks come en inqui'ed, and w'en dey seed Aun' Peggy's roots en go'ds en snake-skins en yuther cunjuh-fixin's, en a big black cat wid yaller eyes, settin' on de h'a'th, dey 'lowed dey wuz wastin' dey time, so dey des cusst a little en run 'long back home widout de fox dey had come atter.⁶⁰

Their presence, however, is not taken lightly by Peggy, who is adept at predicting the violence of whites. The goopher meant to temporarily make Tobe a frog had been unknowingly mixed wrong by Peggy, who was nervous that a mob of whites were coming to her door. Tobe spends the rest of his life as a frog. Peggy rarely makes such mistakes, and only does so when characters, such as Tobe, have a flaw such as greed or laziness.

Peggy seems to have a specialty in punishing greed, whether she explicitly means to or not. When Mars McAdoo in "The Goophered Grapevine" hires her for ten dollars to devise a mixture to keep the slaves from stealing his grapes, he ends up being punished for his own greed. When Henry, a fairly elderly slave new to the plantation, eats the grapes without knowing they are cursed, the overseer sends Henry to Peggy to see if his property can be saved. Peggy, in addition to the chicken, pound cake, wine, and ten dollars

⁶⁰Chesnutt, 191

she received for the initial goopher, gained a ham from Henry to take off the goopher. She instructed him to anoint himself with the sap of the vines in the spring, which made him young and spry in the spring but old and withered in the fall and winter. McAdoo, who was so greedy it "ha' ter be a monst'us cloudy night when a dollar git by him in de dahkness,"⁶¹ decided to sell Henry in the spring for an exhorbitant amount and buy him back in the fall for a pittance. After a couple of summers of this, McAdoo hires a man to extract a better yield from his vines, but the scheming Yankee ended up killing the vines and, inadvertantly, Henry too.

In the related tale "A Victim of Heredity; Or, Why the Darky Loves Chicken," a story Julius tells to convince Annie to release a man caught stealing John's chickens, Peggy had given a slaveowner a goopher that would allow him to underfeed his slaves without making them ill. When he got greedy and overused it, Peggy instructed him to feed his slaves with all of his pigs, then all of his cows, and then finally with all the chickens in the area. He lost his plantation because Peggy had instructed a young man who had been wronged by the slaveowner to corner the chicken market. Despite Julius's (and Chesnutt's) willingness to exploit the stereotypes held by his listeners (readers), the lesson is as clear as it is in the other stories: "W'en you is foolin'

⁶¹Chesnutt, 40.

wid a cunjuh 'oman lack" Peggy, "you got ter min' yo' P's en Q's er dey'll be trouble sho' 'nuff'."62

Chesnutt's vision of Aunt Peggy has significant meaning in the historical context of the production of The Conjure Woman. Black women at the turn of the century faced the same obstacles as white women in trying to earn fair wages and respect for their labor. But while white women could capture a marginal respect, such as in the teaching, health care, and social work professions, very few black women found the professions hospitable to their presence and found wage labor hardly sufficient for support. White men and women were not willing to allow black women the same respectability accorded to white women for home-making, and low wages for black men made this white middle-class ideal virtually impossible when desired at all. Most rural black women in the South engaged in share-cropping and most urban black women labored as servants or washer-women, while both rural and urban black women took full responsibility for the domestic care of their families.⁶³ Despite the seemingly endless work day, black women found ways to create community cohesion, such as through charity clubs and church participation, and express themselves politically through suffrage and anti-lynching movements, and creatively, through art, music, and written

⁶²Chesnutt, 64.

⁶³See Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family From Slavery to the Present, (New York, 1985) and Darlene Clark Hine Speak Truth to Power: Black Professional Class in United States History, (Brooklyn, 1996), especially "Booker T. Washington and Madame C. J. Walker," 95-104.

and oral literature.⁶⁴ Even though Peggy's talents may be unique, such as the ability to converse with sparrows and hornets, she is still, as a worker, in a position similar to that of most black women of Chesnutt's time: caught between the needs of family/community and the necessity of making a living in a market society in which whites held a great deal of economic power. While Peggy has no family, she is still a vital part of the community, and she must constantly make choices that keep her community safe from white violence and still make enough money to survive in a system in which whites hold most goods and capital. Significantly, Peggy is not concerned with getting rich--like Selah Tarrant and Paul Vance--but is instead concerned with receiving respect and fair compensation for her work.

Peggy rises to the challenge of economic survival and community support by working to effect balance where she can. When people grasp for too much, such as McAdoo with his vines and Jeems with his slaves, or too little, such as Tobe's laziness in seeking freedom, Aunt Peggy's work restores a kind of balance (in which the greedy and those who don't seek freedom hard enough both suffer) to the system of slavery she is powerless individually to abolish altogether. Unlike James's Verena and Harding's Vera, Chesnutt's Peggy performs valuable and honest work. In the view of her author, she is

⁶⁴Evelyn Higginbotham provides a useful analysis of the ways in which African-American women were active in politics and theology in Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920, (Cambridge, MA, 1993).

not a mountebank but a person who (like Douglass's Sandy Jenkins) counters the effects of sham, thievery, and untruth. Julius is sure Peggy has "gone ter de good Marster" at the time of his telling of her. John sees her in different terms altogether, for he is unable to fully credit "the negro intellect" with a complicated worldview and instead sees the conjure stories as entertainment, "a never-failing source of novelty and interest."⁶⁵ Aunt Peggy, in John's view, belongs to a stage set for his benefit, much as other middle class whites viewed the labor and culture of blacks in post-reconstruction society and beyond.⁶⁶ By burlesquing John's inability to truly see Aunt Peggy's skills and labor--and indeed his inability to see her as existing at all, Chesnutt worked toward his purpose of publishing a work to educate whites into respecting black labor and culture.

This purpose, however, is double-edged in reference to Aunt Peggy and her role in the community. Eric Selinger asserts that, given the deeply-imbedded fears of black masculinity in his audience, Chesnutt could not extend the life-affirming portrayal of the conjure woman to the conjure man or Uncle Julius, a man who "conjures" through storytelling. Selinger rightly points out that Chesnutt's Jobe, the conjure man, is a destroyer, and represents

⁶⁵Chesnutt, 185.

⁶⁶Lower-class whites viewed black labor and culture in more aggressively competitive terms yet still remade African-American cultural forms into performances that asserted white superiority. See Eric Lott, Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class, (Oxford, 1995) and David Roedigger The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, (London and New York, 1991).

Chesnutt's dismissal of self-interested conjure work as "male, malicious, and destructive." Julius, the conjurer-storyteller "has refused the competitive, self-interested role of the conjure-man" but, unlike Aunt Peggy, he "comes too close to the role John hired him to play right from the start--helpful, amusing, a driver of sorts, but an invisible man" placing himself "on the altar of national reconciliation."⁶⁷ Certainly Julius's submission at the end of The Conjure Woman, which he put on as a show to reunite the northern woman (a relative of John's) with her southern lover, comes close to the sentimentalized portrayal Chesnutt sought to counteract, and Selinger asserts that "in this collection, Chesnutt allows white definitions of black sexuality to triumph."⁶⁸

Chesnutt's Julius, who conjures with his storytelling to restructure power at the beginning but who plays a submissive role in the sentimental ending, evidences a theme similar to the "rescued" female medium of James and Davis. Like Vera and Verena, who choose domesticity over independent careers, Julius retreats into a stock type while Aunt Peggy remains strong throughout. Femininity, even though it doesn't always overpower masculinity, definitely overshadows it in terms of social value. But, while Chesnutt (in Selinger's terms) "allows white definitions of black sexuality to triumph" in

⁶⁷Eric Selinger, "Aunts, Uncles, Audience: Gender and Genre in Charles Chesnutt's The Conjure Woman." Black American Literature Forum 25(4): 685.

⁶⁸Selinger, 686.

reference to masculinity, his rendering of black femininity is more complicated. Deborah Gray White has shown that out of the slave system, whites developed two distinct views of black womanhood: the maternal mammy who sacrifices her own selfhood for the good of whites, and the Jezebel, a licentious and animalistic woman controlled by her own lust.⁶⁹ Peggy resembles neither of these. Peggy has neither husband nor lover. She aids members of the community, but she is not particularly maternal or self-sacrificing in the sentimental sense. Even when she reunites Becky and Mose she asks for a fee, and displays little sentimentality in favor of shrewd analysis of the situation at hand.

At times Chesnutt comes close to predicting a later stereotype of black womanhood, but he does not fully develop it. White identifies the Sapphire in a much later period. The emasculating Sapphire was articulated most explicitly in the 1965 Moynihan-Frazier theory of black matriarchy which "found the black woman's role debilitating for black men, so much so that [Moynihan] advised black men to seek refuge in the armed forces."⁷⁰ Dialogue from Aunt Peggy such as "Aun' Peggy neber lack ter wuk fer nobody fer nuffin" and "W'en you is foolin' wid a cunjuh 'oman lack me, you got ter min'd yo' P's en Q's er dey'll be trouble sho' 'nuff" certainly wouldn't be heard coming from Annie, the genteel "lady."⁷¹

⁶⁹Deborah Gray White, Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York and London, 1985)

⁷⁰White, 166.

⁷¹Chesnutt, 112, 64.

Rather than attributing Peggy's shrewdness to a personal desire to dominate men, however, Chesnutt shows that Peggy functions, as Houston Baker notes of conjure, "to ensure survival, to operate changes, to acquire necessary resources for continuance, and to cure a sick world."⁷² If Chesnutt appealed to an audience slowly developing the black matriarchy thesis with a female character unmoved by masculine power, he constructed her in a way that undercut the stock type. Peggy tries to preserve a natural order--one in which workers get paid fairly, the greedy become consumed with their own wants, and loved ones remain together. She is less a desexualized spinster angry with men than a priestess administering to spiritual ills.

Henry James, Richard Harding Davis, and Charles Chesnutt could not use the occult worker to discuss femininity without investing themselves in the meanings of work. Significantly, the worlds of James and Davis required occult workers to give up their professions for the survival of the white bourgeois communal sense of self that depended on the consumption of goods and male professionalism. Chesnutt, dealing with a very different set of social circumstances that all but eliminated the ideal of domesticity for black women, located community survival in female professionalism. All three forwarded the occult worker to a receptive reading public as a figure highly charged with meanings of male and female,

⁷²Houston Baker, Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, (Chicago, 1987): 47.

black and white, higher class and lower class, and self and other.

In the 1860s, P.T. Barnum had criticized mediums for using femininity to cover up the trickery of occult work. In debunking mediumship he identified the performative nature of white femininity. This is consistent with Barnum's heralding of a new era of economic practice governed by advertising and a new commercial culture. It is also consistent with the breakdown of middle-class identification of itself as a "sincere" society. By the turn-of-the-century, the middle-class used the occult worker to basically assert that any buyer had better well beware because anyone could "play" at being sincere or honest. The sacred angel in the house had been co-opted by commercialism, and appearance could no longer be taken for reality. By 1910, middle-class Americans had settled for appearance AS reality and further embraced the consumerism being made possible by the burgeoning practice of mass production. As a worker whose products consisted only of appearance, the professional seer embodied for the white middle-class the tensions inherent in conspicuous consumption. This is one of the impetuses behind the move to outlaw occult work in the decade of the 1900s.

The African-American middle-class continued to identify more along lines of race than class and embraced mass consumption as a class signifier to a lesser extent than whites. This distinction played out in the image of the occult worker, for even after prophecy-for-profit was

outlawed, African-American newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* and the *New York Amsterdam News* ran (sometimes bold) advertisements for African-American seers and occult healers. Even though seers may have been on the margins of respectability, representations of occult workers, such as Chesnutt's Aunt Peggy, showed that the African-American middle-class continued to resist fully marginalizing them.

Chapter Six:
**"Wholesale Raids on Fortunetellers": Urban Myths and
the End of Seer-Centered Advertising, 1890-1930**

The discourse on working women in which occult workers and writers participated, came to be more heated in the two decades surrounding the turn of the century. Fortunetelling took on new meanings in a more heavily-charged urban atmosphere, an atmosphere the middle-class often saw as immoral. Like prostitution, fortunetelling could no longer be tolerated or safely contained in the urban landscape when so many young working people were entering the city without a stable system of direct parental control. The terms of the discourse on fortunetelling that had been present throughout the nineteenth-century took on new meanings, and the public dialogue on occult work changed forever in response. Most significantly, this period marked the end of occult worker advertising that emphasized the power of the marginalized self. Occult work continued, but it no longer had such powerful presence in mass media.

The period between 1890 and 1920 saw radical changes in the ways fortunetellers presented themselves and enacted their businesses. Seers were both outlawed and assimilated. Detractors of occult work used the languages of two social movements--social purity and nativism--to ask urbanites to re-think the roles of seers in urban life. Organized opposition, however, was fragmented. While journalists, public officials, and a few filmmakers--the newest, most novel of cultural producers--depicted occult workers as a threat to

the purity of young girls or part of the "foreign threat," other reformers and many more filmmakers failed to fully promote the criminalization of fortunetelling. Some states passed laws against prophecy, but these were not widely enforced. Additionally, the so-called "prophecy laws" often held such minimal penalties that they were ineffective. Even so, seer ads had changed drastically, no longer emphasizing the power of the self but instead concentrating on affiliations with institutions or the powers of the products they now increasingly sold. These changes were of course due partly to criminalization, but seers themselves were simply responding to different market demands. These were demands that, as Alan Trachtenberg has shown, emerged from a changed philosophy of consumption which held that products and not the people who make them were the most important elements of the American economy.¹

The period between 1890 and 1910 is crucial to understanding the ways in which prophets-for-profit participated in the passage of the more carnivalesque types (and more radical types) of advertising. Competition became fiercer, and so seers further emphasized their gendered and (especially) nationalized qualifications. With nativist sentiment gearing up toward its peak in the nineteen-teens, this was not a time that was particularly safe for testing the boundaries of identity (accounts of fortuneteller arrests

¹Alan Trachtenberg, The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age, (New York, 1982), 73-75.

repeatedly stress the ethnic affiliations of the "offenders"). The competition also made some seers attack their peers in their ads and distance themselves from the profession itself. Seers also used more visual imagery, which made prophecy loom large in the pages of the newspaper (with the exception of some elite mediums, occult workers had never been known for their discretion in self-presentation). Seers continued to advertise in the classifieds, despite the fact that their numbers and their new institutional affiliations made them look much more permanent than the other ads (implying they were not just Gypsies "passing through"). All of these changes taking place in the twenty years between 1890 and 1910 further enforced the fact to the reading public that these "fifty-cent sybils" were a powerful presence.

Seer ads around 1910 reflected the tensions surrounding the profession, and some seers agreed with seer detractors that the trade was hindered by the unscrupulous. White male seers, who could most convincingly align themselves with the new professionalism, could be particularly harsh toward their peers. In 1911, Professor W.L. Gladstone entreated possible customers with this plea: "If you have already made a mistake, thrown away your money and lost confidence through dealing with much-advertised and self-styled palmists and clairvoyants and their cheap, claptrap methods, start from the beginning and consult Gladstone."² Professor Garland,

²St. Louis Post-Dispatch classified ad, February 5, 1911.

whose motto "WORK AND WIN" made him look like the Carnegie of the underworld, went even further in dismissing other seers:

BEWARE of cheap and incompetent PRETENDERS. There are in this city at the present time a class of SO-CALLED clairvoyants who through incompetancy and misleading advice are naturally compelled to resort to almost any means to earn a living. They are driven around from pillar to post and in their efforts to keep their heads above water and to avoid justice and will not stop at any means to earn a dollar.³

One insider in the field working in New York said that such fierce competition was unique, and that seers as a group were especially congenial toward one another: "generous, jolly, warm-hearted, and very considerate" was how she summed them up in her "Confessions of an Assistant Clairvoyant" in 1913.⁴ Nevertheless, in public advertising some sought to capitalize on the current negative stereotypes of fortunetellers as seedy or fraudulent, and this, while it may have gained them some upscale customers, fed into anti-seer sentiment and eventually helped fuel prophecy's criminalization.

While white male seers strove toward "respectable" professionalism, male seers claiming national or ethnic affiliations--especially affiliations with India--worked on the images perpetuated by some of the occult movements currently in vogue with middle- and upper-class practioners, especially Theosophy. Peter Washington has chronicled the occult activities of middle- and upper-class westerners mainly in Theosophy, the movement began by Madame Blavatsky

³San Fransisco Examiner classified ads, October 4, 1914 and April 9. 1912.

⁴Anonymous, "Confessions of an Assistant Clairvoyant," The Outlook, 105 (September 6, 1913): 43.

at the turn of the century. Theosophy took a large interest in India, and westerners looked to that nation for personalities embodying the "pure" insight of the colonial "other." They found such in the young boy Krishnamurti, whom they brought to the U.S. as the New World Teacher.⁵ The movement was highly visible in the U.S. and Great Britain, mainly due to the popularity of Krishnamurti. Some urban seers had used the image of the Indian mystic to advertise their services even before his arrival, and some blended the image with western professional validation, such as in the ad of "O.N. ORLOW, PH.D. D., OF BOMBAY, INDIA. Psycho diagnoser of life and diseases. Pr. B. of the Brotherhood of Divine Humanity. Suite 702, 226-228 Lasalle st. Not a clairvoyant or a charlatan, but ONE who can READ your life from the cradle to the grave. . . ."⁶ Other ads used references to professionalism that were more subtle than the declaration of a Ph.D., such as Khiron's ad of 1904, which declared him "The Distinguished and Eminent Adept in Occultism--Clairvoyance--Hypnotism. Khiron the Great. The only Adept of Hindu Occult Mysteries Practicing in America at the Present Time."⁷

The cultural capital of professionalism and of the current vogue of the male mystic were largely out of the reach of women, who despite having made gains into the

⁵Peter Washington, Madame Blavatsky's Baboon: A History of the Mystics, Mediums and Misfits Who Brought Spiritualism to America, New York, 1993. See especially the chapter entitled "Boys and Gods," 126-144.

⁶Chicago Tribune classified ad, March 19, 1899.

⁷St. Louis Post-Dispatch classified ad, March 6, 1904.

professions, were still configured as consumers and not producers. Female seers continued to advertise much as they had done in 1880 except that with the more extravagant ads they, like the men, used visual images. Some banked on their readers' presumed love of youth and beauty. A beautiful face and bare shoulders were popular images used by women to gain patronage. One San Francisco seer, Pandora (a name interesting in itself), who "Stands Alone in Her Magnificent Power of Reading the Future of Humankind" and came "from a race of people who have been clairvoyants for thousands of years," included her picture in her ad, a photograph of a lovely woman with full hair drawn up in a headband, having bare shoulders, and wearing a beaded choker (see Appendix, Figure 5). Her colleague, medium Mrs. Dr. Clark, included a drawing of herself looking straight at the viewer with large soulful eyes with her bare shoulders turned to one side (see Appendix, Figure 6).⁸ Other women chose graphics meant to evoke exoticism, such as Martha Leon's *St. Louis Post Dispatch* ad, which pictured a woman's profile (the woman wearing a stylized scarf and headgear) within a thin crescent moon while a small star shone in the background, or Madam M. Martell's graphic of a hand with distinguishable lines and her picture posted on the palm. Men often used a distinguished head-and-shoulders pose or a graphic of a

⁸San Francisco Examiner classified ads, March 11, 1906 and April 8, 1900.

turbaned mystic. Stars, moons, and even angels abounded in the visual images used both by men and women.⁹

In the 1890s and 1900s, newspapers did not respond much to the changes in seer advertising except by granting them more space. For all their visual sophistication and new long lengths, seer ads remained in the classified ads with ads for temporary wants such as women seeking work, horses for sale, and even the occasional adoption. Many of the newer advertisements, however, resembled the fuller ads for such things as department stores and baking supplies. There is some indication that newspapers courted seer advertisements, which in 1905 cost the seer in St. Louis thirty cents for every fourteen words. One *New York Times* editorial criticized Connecticut newspapers who opposed the proposed prophecy laws in their state because "it would also shut off a considerable source of revenue now flowing into the business offices of papers willing to advertise the large promises of" seers.¹⁰ Yet even though some papers were willing to support the right of seers to advertise, only the *San Francisco Examiner* (produced in a city most congenial to seers) and later the *Amsterdam News* (which put seers all over the paper) allowed seers out from the back of the newspapers where they shared space with used wagons and lost jewelry. San Francisco had never outlawed prophecy (perhaps because urban reform never reached the pitch it had on the

⁹St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* classified ads, February 5, 1911.

¹⁰"Necromancy Warmly Defended," *New York Times*, April 2, 1915, 10:4.

East Coast), and the *News* catered to an African-American community that integrated seers into the community much more readily than did white native-born communities (which will be discussed later in the chapter). This points to the love-hate relationship many people had with seers, which was fairly common across the nation. This relationship can best be summed up by writer Olivia Howard Dunbar in *Harper's Weekly*, who said in 1912 that "There is always a beguiling friend who, while expressing the utmost horror for modern sorcerers as a class, can point the way to one stainless exception."¹¹

No one group--except perhaps the police and public officials, and they could easily switch sides (as the papers told it) with the right bribe--mobilized against fortunetellers in the 1910s. Journalists and some filmmakers depicted fortunetellers as a threat to the virtue of young girls or as a "foreign element," but no organized reform group took up the cause of ridding the city of seers with much enthusiasm. The fragmentation seems to have come from indecision about the occult worker, for as some reformers and/or nativists saw seers as a threat to social or ethnic purity, other reformers recognized the important roles seers played in their communities, and publicly stated that seers should be supported and not harassed. The fragmentation also came from the realization that seers could be contained in

¹¹Olivia Howard Dunbar, "The Survival of Sorcery," *Harper's Weekly*, 56: 12 (September 21, 1912): 12.

ways other than criminalization, as professional academics turned the anthropological gaze on the occult worker as subject and census takers counted seers as "semi-professionals." These venues assimilated the seer (albeit marginally) and provided a way for "respectable" people to monitor occult worker activities.

Folklore professionalized as an academic field shortly before the period in which state legislatures discussed seer criminalization.¹² Like the phenomenon of white dehistoricization and fetishization of Native Americans at the turn of the century, folkloric attention to fortunetellers indicated that some academics saw them as living relics of the past.¹³ While expressing their disdain for seers and their poverty, slovenliness and fraudulence, academics openly accepted them as subjects (and living relics) for publications and paper deliveries. This attention was also motivated by migration and immigration, as the nation looked to science and academia to support both racist and anti-racist, both nativist and non-nativist ideologies.¹⁴

¹²Marshall Hyatt credits Franz Boas as the person who, more than any other, made the field academically rigorous in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. He states Boas heightened "the standards of professional anthropological research and thus. . . eliminat[ed] untrained amateurs." Frans Boas, Social Activist: The Dynamics of Ethnicity, (New York, 1990): 44

¹³See Curtis M. Hinsley, "Zunis and Brahmins: Cultural Ambivalence in the Gilded Age," in George Stocking, jr., ed. Romantic Motives: Essays on Anthropological Sensibility, (Madison, 1989). Also useful in Curtis's Savages and Scientists: The Smithsonian Institution and the Development of American Anthropology, 1846-1910, (Washington, D.C., 1981).

¹⁴Hyatt provides a useful discussion of the uses of science in theories of race and ethnicity. See pages 83-122.

In 1895 Henry Carrington Bolton published in the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* a paper he had delivered to the Baltimore Branch of the American Folk-Lore Society called "Fortune-Telling in America To-Day: A Study of Advertisements." Bolton began his analysis by saying that fortune-tellers were simply a degraded version of more learned people who desire to study the supernatural "in these enlightened days" and "in this eminently practical country": "The intelligent and cultivated become students of psychology, hypnotism, and psychical phenomena, while the unlettered and credulous dabble in cheiromancy, clairvoyance, and astrology."¹⁵ He went on to some accurate observations about the gender, class, racial and ethnic make-up of the trade, and placed professional seers in the context of American superstition:

. . . the aristocratic merchant who carries in his pocket a horse-chesnut as a safeguard against rheumatism, and the fond mother who hangs on her infant's neck an amber necklace to ward off the croup, are giving countenance in a genteel way to superstitions which in a grosser form they condemn, when practiced by those of a lower social position.¹⁶

Bolton commits the same act at the end of his study by saying the lower-class counterparts to higher-class "students of psychology, hypnotism, and psychical phenomena" are burdens on society, for "financially and socially, these people who live by preying on credulity born of ignorance have no standing in this world, and in the next they are consigned by

¹⁵Henry Carrington Bolton, "Fortune-Telling in America To-Day: A Study of Advertisements," *Journal of American Folklore*, 8(1895): 299.

¹⁶Bolton, 307.

Dante to one of the lowest divisions of the Inferno,
'Malebolge'."¹⁷

Not all folklorists told seers they were going to hell, however, and one at least delivered a study of seers without passing judgement. Stewart Culin in 1895 in *Overland Monthly* wrote a detailed and much less condescending study of "Divination and Fortune-Telling Among the Chinese in America" that explored the mechanics of fortunetelling in a group he obviously considered "other," but still allowed prophecy as an activity that is not necessarily indicative of ignorance or malice.¹⁸ These academic products demonstrate the fascination non-seers had with seers when they could be contained either as observable exotic subjects or degraded "others."

Census counting also signalled the assimilation of occult workers under the gaze of authority. Seers were counted in the census for the first time since 1860, when all of eight astrologists appeared in the tables under "Authors and Literary and Scientific Persons." In 1910 the census listed seers under "Semi-Professional Pursuits" where they appeared as "Fortunetellers, hypnotists, spiritualists, etc" a full 1,600 (1,220 women and 380 men), an obvious undercount given that by this time police had started to arrest seers as "disorderly persons" and declaring oneself a professional seer meant legal jeopardy. Nevertheless, the fact that seers

¹⁷Bolton, 307.

¹⁸Stephen Culin. "Divination and Fortune-Telling Among the Chinese in America." *Overland Monthly*. 25 (February 1895): 165-172.

appeared in the census and appeared as "Semi-Professionals" meant the trade had received some recognition (however begrudgingly) in a culture in which the language of validation was caught up in professionalism.

While the federal government was content to count occult workers and academic professionals were content to study them, police, cheered on by journalists and local officials, attempted to contain seers physically. Given that seers dealt with "delicate" subjects and were often immigrants or African-Americans, local officials could create a public image of themselves as crusaders against both "dens of vice" and immigration/migration without much effort put forth in arresting occult workers. Seers were easy to catch: pay the fee, ask for a fortune, get one, make an arrest. In Boston, where seers advertised a great deal of magnetic healing and bathing services, police made fortunetelling a risky profession using either laws dealing with fraud, practicing medicine, prostitution, fortunetelling, or the catch-all "disorderly persons" category. The ads disappeared by 1890 and seers practiced without mass media exposure under their control. Chicago followed suit by 1917 and St. Louis and New York by 1911. While the ads reappeared in different forms (which will be treated later) after criminalization, their numbers were significantly reduced for a time.

Laws passed against prophecy show an acute awareness of fortuneteller self-presentation in advertisements and emphasized that seer advertising was objectionable. Detroit

seers presented themselves similarly to seers in New York, Chicago, St. Louis, and California. The Michigan Legislature approved a prophecy law in April of 1913. Public Act 38 provided that "any person who shall pretend for money or gain, to predict future events by cards, tokens, trances, the inspection of the hands of a person, mind-reading so-called, or by consulting the movements of the heavenly bodies" will be charged with a misdemeanor and subject to "a fine of not less than ten dollars nor more than one hundred dollars, or by imprisonment for not less than five days nor more than sixty days." Significantly, the text of the law reflected the most popular seer specialties, with the exception of practicing medicine (Michigan seers could be prosecuted with practicing medicine without a license beginning in 1897). The legislature specifically mentioned seers could not "enable any one to get or recover lost or stolen property, or to give success in business, enterprise, speculation or games of chance, or to make one person dispose of property, business or valuable thing in favor of another." Finally, Section 4 spoke directly to advertising: "If any person or persons shall publish by card, circular, sign, newspaper or any other means whatsoever, that he or she shall or will predict future events, the said publication may be given in evidence to sustain an indictment under this act."¹⁹

¹⁹Public Acts of the Legislature of the State of Michigan Passed at the Extra Sessions of 1912, (Lansing, 1912), Public Act Number 38, 57-58.

Illinois's House Bill Number 477, which became law in 1917, provided a similar restriction on advertising, except that it provided a fine for advertising alone (capped at \$200). It also differed from Michigan in that it allowed for "the practice of the belief known as Spiritualism or . . . attempted communication with the spirit world, by or through so-called mediums" as long as the practitioner asked no money for the services. Getting paid for "card-reading, palmistry, clairvoyancy, astrology, seership, spirit mediumship, or any crafty science," however, could result in a fine up to \$500.²⁰

Regional differences in prophecy-law enactment reveal the extent to which public officials and journalists (motivating forces behind the laws) associated the fortuneteller with urban decay, since less industrialized and more sparsely populated areas saw prophecy-for-profit as less threatening. As Rena Gropper reports, Southern states and California allowed seers to purchase fortunetelling licenses, and their freedom to conduct business was rarely interrupted. Seers were allowed to travel to private homes to tell fortunes or set up storefronts in business areas.²¹ Significantly fewer seers in the Southern states declared their main profession as fortunetelling, and this made them less offensive. In the 1910 census, eight seers were reported doing business in North Carolina, nine in Louisiana, twelve in West Virginia

²⁰Laws of the State of Illinois Enacted by the Fiftieth General Assembly, (Springfield, 1917): 352.

²¹Rena Gropper, Gypsies in the City: Culture Patterns and Survival, (Princeton, 1975): 41.

and twenty-two in Virginia. This is significantly less than the numbers reporting from Illinois (204), Massachusetts (134), and New York (200). Of course this does not mean that prophetic activity was less popular in Southern states; these numbers represent the fact that the midwest and northeast had stronger fixations on professional identity, and prophecy in the rural South was practiced by persons not necessarily taking the title of fortuneteller.²² Westerners also looked more tolerably on seers. San Francisco did not criminalize prophecy-for-profit, perhaps because the reform movement was not as strong as it was in the more heavily-industrialized East and Midwest. In other words, Westerners and Southerners could still romanticize seers as part of the rural, less-industrialized picturesque the way Easterners had done in the 1830s and 1840s.²³

The explicit motives behind the drive to criminalize prophecy--the fear of prostitution and the fear of immigrants and African-American migrants--were (quite ironically) not publicly expressed by organizations who were active in the social purity movement and the new round of nativism. Some reformers even saw occult workers as a positive good in urban

²²Although Bolton notes that he found advertisements in New Orleans papers, I found the phenomenon of seer advertising to be more practiced by seers in larger urban areas. In looking through papers available for Louisiana, Georgia, and North Carolina, I was unable to locate more than a few advertisements. See Bolton, 302-303. For the roles of magic and divination in rural life, see Carolyn Merchant, Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England, (Chapel Hill, 1989) and Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom, (Oxford, 1977), especially 55-80 on the syncretism of European and African magical practices.

²³See Chapter One, especially the sections on Sedgwick and Irving.

communities. The Women's Christian Temperance Union, which extended its activism from alcohol prohibition to domestic and sexual abuse was silent on the issue of fortunetelling. The YMCA and YWCA--formed during this time to provide a Christian and safe environment for newcomers to the city--did not publicly state that fortunetelling was a menace. The Immigration Restriction League ignored seers.²⁴ Some settlement house workers even supported seers, telling reporters that occult workers "are not always a menace, and that in many cases they are actually a power for good in their particular communities," and their support could have been partly responsible for other social workers' tolerance of seers since settlement houses worked most closely with poor and immigrant populations and would know best.²⁵

Social purity activists were also explicitly silent about seers, but implicitly they warned against the exoticism of immigrants the pleasures of the leisure world, a world that included fortunetellers. One of the most popular tomes meant to bring the problem of forced prostitution to the public eye warned parents and young girls away from

²⁴Ian Tyrrell, Woman's World, Woman's Empire: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union in International Perspective, 1880-1930 (Chapel Hill, 1991); Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt, eds., Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and the YWCA in the City (New York and London, 1997); John Higham, Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925, (New York, 1971).

²⁵"One Thousand Fortune Tellers Plying Their Trade in New York City," New York Times Magazine Section part 5, 7: 1. Settlement workers may have been most instrumental in setting an early example of tolerance for fortune tellers. Robyn Muncy states that settlement work was the first wave of the progressive-type reform that swept the midwest and northeast at the turn of the century. Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935 (New York, 1991): 3-37.

strangers, ice cream parlors, theaters, dance halls and any Jewish person, but missed naming occult workers explicitly.²⁶ Local public officials seem to have been the only group to organize specifically against fortunetellers, and this group tried hard to link their campaign with those of social purity activists and immigration restriction supporters by using some of the symbols prevalent in each campaign. Rounding up seers was one way in which local officials could look as if they were working in the interest of "progress" without really doing much of anything.

New York presents a well-documented example of the social processes at work in cracking down on prophecy-for-profit and the ways in which officials, cheered on by journalists, used seers to create their own public image as crusaders for a moral and "pure" city. A new round of annoyance with the city's seers was apparent in New York City by the 1890s, and the newspapers and magazines expressed some of the same reasons for disallowing it that Mortimer Thomson had declared in 1858. Occult workers were frauds; they compromised the silly young women naive enough to take their advice; they lived in "bad" neighborhoods; they were a less-than-positive "foreign element." One highly publicized event in late July of 1899 was a demonstration of the Boston

²⁶A good history of the social purity movement is Mary E. Odem, Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920, (Chapel Hill, 1995). For an example of the concerns about prostitution, see Ernest A. Bell, ed., Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls. Or, War on the White Slave Trade. The Greatest Crime in the World's History, (Place of Publication Unknown, 1910), which was introduced by Edwin W. Sims, the US District Attorney of Chicago.

medium William Frank's failure at Lyric Hall to channel the spirit promised; he was "exposed as a fraud." Another event that brought seership to the forefront of public discourse in New York was the appearance of European medium Madame Palladino, who submitted to tests and public scrutiny (most of the coverage doubted her ability to see the future) in 1910.²⁷

In 1909 an article appeared in the *Times* magazine section entitled "One Thousand Fortune Tellers Plying Their Trade in New York City," which accompanied pictures of a young woman on her knees reading the palm of a seated man, one of an obviously "foreign"-looking woman smoking a pipe and one of a circus-like tent outside of which a sign read "Gypsy Camp-Have Your Hand Read- 10¢." The article lists the dangers of visiting a seer, among them interaction with African-Americans, Italians, the "Hebrews from Germany and Russia," Slavs, Bohemians, Dalmations and Austrians. The author also listed the danger of receiving bad medical advice, although the "County Medical Society is constantly alert to this danger and is quick to prosecute offenders," and the possibility of blackmail. He emphasized that the seers "prey for the most part upon a densely ignorant class" who could not appropriately choose how to spend their money.²⁸

²⁷"Medium Calls Ingersoll," *New York Times*, July 31, 1899, 2:6. On the Palladino affair, see *New York Times* September 26, 1909, pt. 6: 9; May 12, 1910 1:7; May 12, 1910, 3:2; letters May 23, 1910, 18:1; May 27, 1910, 1:1.

²⁸"One Thousand Fortune Tellers Plying Their Trade in New York City," *New York Times*, December 12, 1909, part 5, 7:1

The set of photographs accompanying the article is significant in rendering the author's theme visually. The collage consists of three photos. In the center is a photo of a young girl on her knees at the feet of a young man, who is seated in a rocker. She looks bored, and he looks as if he is thinking of the girl rather than the fortune she is telling him. The left lower photo is of a gypsy woman smoking a pipe, dressed exotically and sitting on the ground with her knees spread. On the right is a photo of a fortuneteller's tent with a large sign and a multi-colored awning (see Appendix, Figure 7). The full effect, even if the reader skipped the article, was that seers inhabited a world of sexual license, immigrants, and carnival display.

The events that most revealed the tensions surrounding the trade, however, were the arrests of seers themselves. In 1910 police began to round up fortunetellers under Section 899 of the Code of Criminal Conduct (a "disorderly" section), part of which forbade anyone but a priest or minister to foretell the future. By 1911 a state law forbid the advertising of fortunetellers, signifying that the symbol of the fortuneteller as presented widely by those in the profession were objectionable (as the text of Michigan's Public Act Number 38 reflected one year later).²⁹

Public officials and journalists increasingly portrayed prophecy as a crime against morality, evidenced by the fact

²⁹"Latest Legislative Bills. Fortune-Telling Prohibited and Advance 'Phone Payments Barred," *New York Times*, February 17, 1911, 3:1.

that women were the primary law-enforcers that rounded up seers. Gathering the evidence against seers became the specialites of four women working for the police in New York City, Maude Leslie, Isabella Morrison, Isabella Goodwin and Adele Preiss, and headlines consistently stated that "Women Got the Evidence." That women were charged with gathering the evidence against seers indicates that police (and women's reform groups) saw prophecy as a moral crime, one that endangered the moral chracter of young people, and in the case of fortunetelling, young women. Mary Odem has shown in her study of female sexuality in this period that women played important roles in the legal battles over morality, with women detectives, police matrons, and social workers exercising what she calls "maternal justice" in using their roles as the guardians of moral health. Central to morality concerns was the white, working-class girl, whom reformers saw as particularly susceptible to temptations offered by the new freedoms of living and working away from their parents.³⁰ Seen as an innocent who was incapable of recognizing the dangers of urban life, the figure of the working-girl became important to the impetus to drive seers from the city.

A 1911 article in the *Ladies Home Journal* underscores the role women played as actors and as ideas in the drama of "cleaning up" the cities of fortunetellers. The editor notes

³⁰See Mary Odem, Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920, (Chapel Hill, 1995) and Joanne Meyerowitz, Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930, (Chicago, 1988).

in the preface to the anonymously written "How I Had 54 Persons Arrested And What I Found Out About Palm-Reading" that the names have been changed but that the story is true. The speaker began her narrative by answering the call from the Deputy Commissioner of Police who wanted her to gather evidence on palm-readers in order to make a broad sweep of arrests. Before she told about her visits, though, she told readers that one of the palmists, Madame Herman, was particularly odious to her, a woman she had met ten years ago when she was a "cashier in a hotel, living in a boarding house with a lot of girls--nice girls--young, jolly, sympathetic and hard-working." She related that her young female friends did not know "much about life, most of us were ignorant; but we were all decent girls, and honest."³¹ One night after work the speaker's best friend suggested they have their palms read, and the speaker obliged. While the speaker received a foreboding of illness and subsequently went to the doctor to confirm nothing was wrong, Madame Herman told the best friend that a "dark woman" would steal her boyfriend. The best friend suspected the brunette narrator and broke up their friendship. The fortuneteller had spoiled the innocent, youthful friendship between the two girls. As a police matron, the speaker had the pleasure of testifying against Madame Herman at the trial.

³¹"How I Had 54 Persons Arrested And What I Found Out About Palm-Reading," *Ladies Home Journal*, 28:7 (August, 1911): 7

While breaking up a friendship seemed a minor offense, the narrator declared that many more dangers faced the young women who consulted seers, dangers that not even a more mature police matron was immune to. During her time of gathering evidence, the speaker received all kinds of fortunes, but some had more effect on her than others. One seer predicted she would be held at gunpoint by a burglar and the speaker could not shake the prediction, for she, "like other women,. . . will listen to the foolish 'predictions' of palmists even when convinced by visible proof that the 'predictions' are absurd":

As a matter of fact, all through my investigations I found myself subject to the weak terrors of the foolish femininity on which these palmist fiends were preying. I can't explain it, for my reason told me I was silly, but that there is some superstition in the corner of every woman's heart there is no doubt, and it was that which was hauling me awry despite my sober senses.³²

The author, a mature, sensible police matron, feared for herself because it was inherently female to believe what people said, even the sayings of seers: "But so susceptible to all this rubbish is the feminine nature!"³³

It turns out in the narrative, however, that breaking up friendships and frightening innocent girls and mature women alike were only the smallest of dastardly deeds fortunetellers committed against womankind. The narrator has "reason to believe, . . . although of course it was not within my commission to prove this, that some of these old

³²Ibid, 38, 37.

³³Ibid, 37.

women also had arrangements with the dens in the underworld, and that girls who went to them, if they looked like likely victims, were recommended to places of ill fame." But the narrator relayed that those seers who held the most danger to young women were of course men, and she declared "With regard to the personal safety of young girls going to palmists I cannot cry out too loud the word of warning." The narrator relayed the insults of one particularly lascivious male seer, whom she left in fear: ". . . a fear was coming over me. He was so large, so powerful; I began to long desperately for the fresh air of the street." Then she told of yet another who seduced women and then blackmailed them. The narrator saw her revenge on all the insults she had suffered to her femininity when on one night fifty-four seers were arrested based on evidence she had procured, and "before midnight every one of them was under lock and key at headquarters."³⁴

Much of the *Ladies' Home Journal* story seemed to have been taken right from the headlines, including some of the fortunes seers gave to New York police matrons. The possibility of the ruin of young girls by seers also appeared in the New York papers. In 1913 a mother told the police the story of losing her "daughter's affections" due to the malice of fortunetellers and the corrupt police who protected them. As the report goes, five West Forty-Third street seers, all of whom were paying off police, would read the palms of young working girls, telling them of "brilliant prospects" and

³⁴Ibid, 41.

stringing them along until they found the "ideal man" to whom they would prescribe marriage. As it turned out the men were not "ideal" at all but instead were men "in the disorderly house business." The paper reported that it was "just such a trap that the young daughter. . . was led." The mother reported broken-heartedly that, following her daughter's visits to one of the fortunetellers on Forty-Third that "the girl ran away with a good-for-nothing character of the Tenderloin. Her life since then, it was said, had been one of degradation."³⁵

The classic story, told over and over again by those in the social purity movement, explained the sexual behavior of working-class young women in terms of victimization. According to the ideology of social purists, the girl was too ignorant to take part in her own degradation, a complete dupe of those around her who were more "knowing" in the ways of the world. The story also fits with what Mary Odem had found in her study of working-class sexual mores in that the mother attempted to use the police to control her daughter's sexual behavior, an act which was motivated as much by economic circumstance (such as the burden of treating sexually-transmitted disease or supporting children out of wedlock the fathers refuse to support) as by prudery.³⁶

³⁵"Mother Reveals New Graft Trail-Her Story of Daughter's Ruin by a Clairvoyant Shows Another Angle of Police Crookedness," *New York Times*, Sunday, May 18, 1913, II, 10:5.

³⁶See Odem and Regina Kunzel, Fallen Women. Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945 (New Haven and London, 1993).

In addition to highlighting female degradation and the work police women were doing to end it, headlines also emphasized the ethnicity of the "offender," renewing the connotation Thomson raised in 1858 of seers as poor immigrants. The 1909 *Times* magazine article emphasized prophecy-for-profit as a feature of the highly racialized and ethnicized underworld. While the author stated that a majority of seer clients came from a "densely ignorant class" who most likely "speak a foreign language and only one," he found that "some of the most picturesque of these occult practitioners are to be found among the negroes." He went on to note that "the negroes are strong believers in mysterious hoodoos, which they find can be controlled by their soothsayers on the payment of a reasonable fee," one of whom had been recently arrested and sent "to Blackwells Island on default of bail."³⁷ The author also listed Italians and Eastern Europeans as those both selling and buying fortunes. Reports of raids on seers also emphasized the racial and ethnic dynamics of seeing and its new illegality. References include quotes from the seers as to their affiliations such as Barrell Cannon's plea that "he was unable to help himself, as he was astrological only at Mohammed's bidding" and Mrs. Minnie Miller's defense that she was a reader for the First German Spiritualistic Church. Headlines also appeared that emphasized ethnic otherness such as "Arrests Hindu Seer,"

³⁷"One Thousand Fortune Tellers Plying Their Trade in New York City," December 12, 1909, V, 7:1.

"Arrest a Gypsy Princess," and "Japanese Seer in Court."³⁸

One telling story of arrests in Paterson, New Jersey revealed that some African-American seers were fairly successful in selling fortunes to wealthy whites. "Medium's Patrons Fined. Choir-Singer Among Prisoners of Raid on Paterson Negro Woman" tells the story of Mrs. Lida Conover, an African-American medium whose home was raided during a seance. The story focuses almost exclusively on the white women who were there and their social standing, such as the "singer in the choir of the First Presbyterian Church" who had "gone to the seance out of curiosity," "the wife of a well-to-do asbestos roofing contractor," and a former schoolteacher who was "now a law student."³⁹

These stories reflect some of the changes in the ethnic and racial make-up of cities in the early twentieth-century and the attendant renewed racism and xenophobia. African-Americans had been streaming into urban areas in the Northeast since emancipation, until World War I when labor shortages turned the stream into a river.⁴⁰ Nativism had been violent during the depression of 1893-97, but it was not

³⁸"Astrologer Loses \$1,000," *New York Times*, January 11, 1914, IV, 4:5; "Spiritualist in Court," *New York Times*, July 24, 1914, 9:6; "Arrests Hindu Seer," *New York Times* January 19, 1914, 7:1; "Arrest a Gypsy Princess," *New York Times* February 12, 1914, 18:2 and "Japanese Seer in Court," *New York Times*, March 20, 1915, 5:8.

³⁹"Medium's Patrons Fined. Choir Singer Among Prisoners of Raid on Paterson Negro Woman," *New York Times*, January 23, 1914, 2:7.

⁴⁰William Cohen in At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915, (Baton Rouge, 1991) shows that although African-American migration was restricted by the demand for African-American labor in the South before the Great Migration, African-American populations in cities between 1861 and 1915 rose steadily.

until the early twentieth-century that European immigrants joined African-Americans as victims of a clearly-defined philosophy of the role of race in nationalism. As John Higham notes, "Several generations of intellectuals took part in transforming the vague and somewhat benign racial concepts of romantic nationalism into doctrines that were precise, malicious, and plausibly applicable to European immigration."⁴¹ As the article "One Thousand Fortune Tellers Plying Their Trade in New York City" demonstrates, African-Americans and European immigrants could be ideologically configured as the same threat to social order, even more so when their religious practices differed from the white, native-born mainstream. Hans A. Baer demonstrates that the Black Spiritual Church developed in urban areas as a syncretic practice of spiritualism and slave religions (with strong African retentions) and integrated mediums into a course of religious practice acceptable to many lower-class and some middle-class African-Americans.⁴² Gypsy, Jewish, and Catholic immigrants were also targeted as threatening in terms of religious practice, and therefore the author of "One Thousand Fortune Tellers" could easily lump together European immigrants and African-Americans coming from the South as elements threatening to a sense of nationalism built on white protestantism. Fortune-telling, as reported by its

⁴¹John Higham, Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925, (New York, 1971): 131-132.

⁴²Hans A. Baer, The Black Spiritual Movement: A Religious Response to Racism, (Knoxville, 1984).

detractors, was just more evidence of the degradation immigrants and African-Americans brought to the modern city.

Police and local officials used the connections between nativism and racism, along with notions that seers posed a danger to young white women, to justify raids against seers. Such action must also be seen in the context of changing views of urban space. Upper and middle-class urban dwellers embarked on city beautification movements that not only created parks and recreation programs (the latter aimed primarily at the working-class and immigrants) but also pushed to remove vice districts. These districts of prostitution, gambling, and bawdy theater had been part of large city landscapes since the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries. Beginning in the 1870s, upper and middle-class urbanites could no longer reconcile their ideal of what came to be known as the "white city" (after the constructed city of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair) with the activities actually taking place in the city.⁴³ Police, judges, and lawmakers responded by cracking down on the sex trade, and (as we will see) the fortunetelling trade.

Even though relatively few seers were arrested, the arrests were significant enough to discourses on vice to attract the attention of reporters. Arrests were common from

⁴³For a useful discussion of the legal issues surrounding vice districts and prostitution, see Thomas Mackey, Red Lights Out: A Legal History of Prostitution, Disorderly Houses, and Vice Districts, 1870-1917, (New York, 1987). Alan Trachtenberg provides a good analysis of the white city movement in The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age, (New York, 1982).

1910 through 1914, and were still made until they tapered off in 1917. Between the first reported arrest in 1909 and the last in the decade of the teens in 1917, the *New York Times* reported sixty-nine different arrests, with thirty-eight of those coming in 1910 and 1911. Of the sixty-nine arrests, eighteen were men (26%) and twenty-six were women (37%), with twenty-five unknowns. The disproportionate number of men (they made up only seventeen percent of advertisements) reveals that the notion of male seers compromising young women seekers was at work (or perhaps the men were just more visible because they were more financially successful). Eight reports mentioned the seer's ethnic or religious affiliation: African-American (2), Muslim, Japanese, German Spiritualist, Hindu, Gypsy and Syrian. This also reflects a lower number than those claiming ethnic/national/racial/religious identities in their advertisements, which could have been due more to reporting than the actual number of arrests. The low number could also have reflected fewer arrests, since there was some implication (especially in the *Times* magazine section article) that ethnically or racially "other" seers were less harmful if they served only the communities with which they affiliated.

The city found it difficult to make a lasting impact with the arrests, however, as judges imposed fines and accepted promises of "non-prophetic behavior" for period of time (usually a mere year), and then the seers would simply

go back to work. The first thing most seers did when arrested would be to make some show of indignation. During the first large "Wholesale Raids on Fortune Tellers" in 1910, in which sixteen "Countesses, Professors, and Doctors" came under arrest, one upscale seer responded by saying "You might have called later for that . . . It is an outrage to disturb me at this ungodly hour. I have an engagement at a Broadway restaurant for dinner, and I simply won't let you interfere with it."⁴⁴ Others claimed they were simply paid advisors and some evoked their affiliations with wealthy clientele or churches.

Another striking aspect of the reports was the seeming hilarity with which law workers, mainly the matrons, judges and magistrates, conducted the proceedings or related the events, as if the seers were more an opportunity with which to amuse themselves than a serious threat to social order. Detective Hickson related on one occasion that he went into a parlor to arrest a seer and the seer prophesied he would be successful in his "present undertaking" (which turned out to be the arrest of the seer). Maud Leslie, a police matron, told a judge of her visit to Josephine Seliasco that "I could not help laughing, your Honor, . . . when she told me about my husband's coming death, because I never had one."⁴⁵

⁴⁴"Wholesale Raids on Fortune Tellers," *New York Times*, November 26, 1910, 1:3.

⁴⁵"Arrests Hindu Seer," *New York Times*, January 19, 1914, 7:1; "Fortune Teller Wrong," *New York Times*, December 6, 1914, IV, 4:2.

The efforts of police did not stop seers from performing their work. When eight women were arrested and sent to Far Rockaway Police Court (indicating they were working near amusement facilities and were probably Gypsies), "All of them were bailed out and then returned to their respective tents on the boardwalk." Edward Clark was arrested twice in 1913 and had to forfeit a \$500 bond he put up in a promise to not tell fortunes. The second time the magistrate told him "that if he became professionally prophetic again before the year was up he would have to put up a \$2,000 bond."⁴⁶ Usually the seers had to promise not to practice their trade for six or twelve months or forfeit money or months in a workhouse. Sometimes conviction was more tricky, for seers claimed to be entertainers or religious leaders, which sometimes allowed them to carry on business after paying a smaller fine or agreeing to a smaller bond than usual. Natall Elisa, a Syrian seer, was allowed to go free simply on his promise that he would "forsake the business."⁴⁷ Of the arrested seers identified as ethnic, Elisa was the exception, and magistrates and judges rarely allowed them to claim they were entertainers or ministers. Yet while white seers did tend to make this claim more often, sometimes it helped them and sometime it did not. The largest bond (\$2,000) was set for an elite white male medium, whose wealthy client bailed him

⁴⁶"Fortune Tellers Arrested," *New York Times*, July 17, 1911, 2:2; "Cost Him \$500 to Make \$1," *New York Times*, August 17, 1913, II, 7:3.

⁴⁷See "Mrs. Platt Told Fortunes," *New York Times*, April 22, 1911, 7:1; "Spiritualist in Court," *New York Times*, July 24, 1914, 9:6; "For Removing Cloud, \$152," *New York Times*, February 27, 1915 and "Dealt in Magnetic Control," *New York Times*, February 12, 1911, 16:7.

out and put up bond for his "good behavior for one year."⁴⁸ African-American seers were not extended this option, for Mrs. Lida Conover paid her own fine, while the seer mentioned only as "Solomon," an African-American, could not come up with the bail he defaulted on and was sent to Blackwells Island.⁴⁹

Some simply figured they were going to have to forfeit bonds and so they bribed the police. In 1913 one graft investigation revealed that some police not only allowed seers to continue, they also brought them business. The *Times* reported in May that "one well-known detective in the Tenderloin. . . got at least \$25,000 in graft. . . in eight months" by protecting fortunetellers. Five seers fled New York shortly before the story broke.⁵⁰ By November of 1913 a seer arrested on the charge of swindling brought down the whole system of collaboration between seers and police by confessing and naming names, one of which was an ex-captain, who would be indicted for "receiving protection money."⁵¹

New Yorkers' attitudes toward fortunetellers and the law came into relief in 1914 with the failure of a bill in the state legislature that mandated fining or imprisoning fortunetellers (the current disorderly law allowed them to

⁴⁸"Seize Spiritualist As Fortune Teller," *New York Times*, February 1, 1911, 1:1.

⁴⁹"Mediums Patrons Fined," *New York Times*, January 23, 1914, 2:7 and "one Thousand Fortune Tellers Plying Their Trade in New York City," *New York Times* magazine section, V, 7:1.

⁵⁰"Mother Reveals New Graft Trail," *New York Times*, May 18, 1913, II, 10:5.

⁵¹"Police Took Graft of Fortune Tellers," *New York Times*, November 29, 1913, 24:5; "To Inict Ex-Captain," November 30, 1913, II, 10:2.

imprison seers only if they forfeited bonds). Chief Magistrate William McAdoo was frustrated with the failure of the bill, and stated that "Some people think fortune telling is a joke, but really it is a very serious evil."⁵² Public sympathy was simply not behind the bill.

Perhaps one reason McAdoo could not drum up support was that film, emerging as a powerful force in shaping public opinion, presented an image of seers that was more fair than the images previously created by journalists and public officials. Between 1911 and 1930, forty-six films appeared that featured seers. Although many of these films no longer exist, the reviews can tell us how seers appeared in plots. Only two of the forty-six depicted seers as accomplices in sentencing young girls to a life of forced prostitution.⁵³ Twelve depicted occult workers as inhabiting the underworld, which did not necessarily mean a damning portrayal. Six featured seers with explicit ethnic identification, and these were usually sympathetic portrayals but required that the seer stay within his/her affiliated group unless they provided help to whites. One good example of this is Wang, a fortuneteller and lead character in "The Swamp" of 1921. Wang comes to the defense of an impoverished abandoned wife and her son, sees that the heroine is safely married to a

⁵²"Failure of Effort to Stop Fortune-Telling," *The Survey*, May 23, 1914: 213.

⁵³"A Phantom Husband" of 1917 and "The Knife" of 1918 portrayed seers as part of the traffic in girls. Their summaries are in The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States, Feature Films, 1911-1920, (Berkeley, 1988): 714 and 493.

provider type of man, and then the writers ship him happily back to China.⁵⁴

Films in this period showed seers involved in frauds, trying to escape poverty, initiating the action of the movie, helping to solve crime or find missing persons, as comic characters, and caught up in crime, but the overall picture showed well on occult workers. Sixteen can be positively identified as sympathetic characters, and one, "The Dream Lady" of 1918, even featured a seer who "sets up a fortune-telling establishment intended to make dreams come true."⁵⁵ Fortunetellers often appeared as a helper or guide to a sympathetic character. Such is the case in "What Happened to Rosa" in which a fortuneteller gives a working-class girl the confidence to pursue a rich doctor by telling her she was Spanish nobility in a former life. Madame Leclair in "Double Trouble" adjusts the personality of a young banker so that he may pursue the girl he wishes to marry. Being a fortuneteller also appeared in film as evidence of bad luck and poverty, such the fortuneteller Renee in "The Fortune Teller," who takes a job with a circus after a string of bad luck. She also uses her position as seer, however, to regain her former husband and win back her child. While some seers in film were unsympathetic, such as the easily bribable

⁵⁴The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States, Feature Films, 1921-1930, (New York and London, 1971): 780.

⁵⁵AFI Catalog, 1911-1920, 228.

Madame Kautsky in "The House of Mystery," the good outnumbered the bad.⁵⁶

These depictions must be seen in the context of film consumption in the first three decades of the twentieth-century. Film was a cultural product that had to respond to the tastes of a mass audience. In the late nineteenth-century, film emerged as a working-class form of leisure, and by 1920, the middle-class picked up the novelty. From its roots as a working-class entertainment, film tended to hold on to ideas of morality that were much more fluid than middle-class mores. As historians have shown, traditions of morality in working-class life allowed for contingencies of poverty. Women could fall back on prostitution when they needed to extra money, and yet could still marry without their reputations being tainted with an inherent sense of "ruin." Likewise, the lines were sometimes blurred between "prostitution" and "treating" like they were between "stealing" and "scavenging."⁵⁷ The variety in filmic depictions of fortunetellers was a result of the working class tendency to see moral issues in economic context. In

⁵⁶AFI Catalog. 1921-1930, 880; AFI Catalog. 1911-1920, 226, 301,428.

⁵⁷On traditions of working-class morality, see Christine Stansell, City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860, (Chicago, 1987), Kathy Peiss, Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York, (Philadelphia, 1986) and Joanne Meyerowitz, Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930, (Chicago, 1988). On film and the working-class, see Peiss; Roy Rosenzweig, Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920, (Cambridge, MA, 1983) and Larry May, Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry, (Chicago, 1980).

this view, if a seer was helpful, then the occult was not immoral.

Film helped in fragmenting the campaign against seers, but seers still had to respond to changing views of consumption. By 1920 both arrests and seer advertisements appeared in limited numbers in the dailies. That did not mean, however, that prophecy was dead; seers had simply changed their methods of visibility. In the 1870s, 80s and well into the 90s, seer ads emphasized the power of the self by evoking gender, race, ethnicity or nation. The power to help people with family problems, health, and money came directly from the seer's person. Starting in the first decade of the twentieth-century, but becoming full-blown by the mid-teens was the tendency to emphasize things not necessarily associated with the seer's body, such as institutional affiliations, education or lessons, or merchandise. The following were ads typical of New York seers during the time of police raids:

LESSONS taught in astrology. Prof. Gustave Meyer, famous astrologer, 725 Washington st., Hoboken, N.J. .

ATTENTION--Lessons taught in astrology. Mme. Lindauer, astrologer, 231 West 16th st., ground floor.

MADAME A. ONE, 125 East 126th; spiritual books, Occidental crystals, fortune telling cards (pictures), mailed, 50c.⁵⁸

With fortunetelling for a fee criminalized, the "Clairvoyants" column in the classified section disappeared, and ads such as these appeared in the "Personals" along with

⁵⁸New York World classified ads, November 3, 1912.

ads for products sold to remove "superfluous hair" and announcements such as "GIRL, 22 months, for adoption. . . " Seers advertising in the *Amsterdam News*, while still emphasizing their African connections, focused on the sale of herbs. Signifying a new desire on the part of occult workers to be aligned with institutions, the editors included seer ads in church notices under "Spiritualist."⁵⁹ This signified a fundamentally different approach to occult workers, which reflected seers serving a function integrated into a diverse socio-religious world, such as the creation of the Black Spiritual Church represents.⁶⁰

Styles of San Fransisco seers at this time show similar changes in advertising despite the fact that prophecy-for-profit was legal. By 1917 the numbers and size of ads in the *San Fransisco Examiner* had been significantly reduced (the same trend in Chicago had begun almost ten years before criminalization). Many ads reflected a focus on the newly-developed institutions of occult practice, such as the ads for the Society of Astrological and Astro-Mathematical Research which "relies on natural laws in establishing facts. We also observe professinal ethics and do not publish the identity of our clients." The First Temple and College of Astrology offered all the services seers had in the past, but

⁵⁹The *Amsterdam News* never relegated seers to the classified ads, and included seer ads among those for other goods and services or put them in the church notices. see D. Alexander ad, January 10, 1923 and church notices, April 1, 1925.

⁶⁰See Hans A. Baer, The Black Spiritual Movement: A Religious Response to Racism, (Knoxville, 1984)

no single astrologer appeared in the ad.⁶¹ These institutions could have existed as formalized churches or schools, or they could have been simply the room at the same address a seer had advertised previously without institutional affiliation. Regardless of the characteristics of the institution, the significance lies in the fact that seers now chose to highlight them in their ads. Rather than rely on the carnivalesque, they evoked the "respectable" form of school or church.

Criminalization and changes in economic culture had finally forced seers to change their ads in response to criticism they had ignored throughout the latter half of the nineteenth-century. As stated in chapter five, Alan Trachtenberg has shown that American culture in the late nineteenth-century began to privilege the importance of products over the people who produced them. Thomson and Barnum and to a lesser extent Douglass reflected this emerging ethos of "proper" consumption in the mid- to late nineteenth-century in their discussions of seers. At the same time, science had professionalized and Americans increasingly privileged science as a way of knowing, which alienated women from the most respected professional arena. James, Chesnutt, and Davis exemplified the ambivalence with which Americans embraced female professionalism by focusing on the occult worker.

⁶¹San Francisco Examiner classified ads, March 5, 1916.

Seers responded to these new social models by appropriating the idea of a professional society to their needs by establishing schools and professional "research" societies through which they told fortunes. They also organized into churches, which often had elements of "investigation." Seers discarded the strategy that emphasized the self, a strategy that could work in a culture which focused on producers and in which some remnant of the rural carnivalesque (such as that described by Sedgwick, Hawthorne and Irving) remained as a romantic. Seers had adapted their advertising to fit a more alienating model of production and consumption. However, this new strategy de-emphasized the role of the disenfranchised self as a means of knowing. By adapting to the new models, professional prophecy--as portrayed publicly by seers themselves--practitioners were assimilated into the dominant culture. Occult work had survived these changes, and seers would continue to sell fortunes and provide advice and services for low prices, but in the symbolic marketplace their own bodies were no longer a highly-publicized source of capital.

Conclusion: Occult Workers and Lower-Class History

Give them a quarter's worth of wonder.

--Dolly Parton, quoted in Pamela Fox, "Recycled 'Trash'," expressing her approval of her cousin's role as "Alligator Girl" in a local freak show.

Pamela Fox has argued that Dolly Parton's approach to self-presentation emerges from a gendered class system that seeks to erase or contain the artistic and cultural expressions of lower class women. Parton's presentation reveals that she relishes the carnivalesque as a method of countering the attempted erasure. Rather than judge her cousin's participation in a freak show negatively, Parton sees the show as method of escape and fulfillment.¹ As Fox's study shows, working-class appropriation of dominant notions of what constitutes respectability strongly persists as a feature of working-class cultures in America. As a study of a working-class declaration of talent and skill during the birth of the notion of professionalization as a measure of worth, the story of occult workers is similar to Fox's story of women country music singers. Occult workers' use of symbols, like Parton's, shows that lower-class people demonstrate their class identification in a variety of ways independent of higher-class values. This appropriation shows that "working-class culture" is, as Joanna Kadi notes, "not an oxymoron."²

¹Pamela Fox. "Recycled 'Trash': Gender and Authenticity in Country Music Autobiography." American Quarterly. 50 (2, June 1998): 260.

²Joanna Kadi, "Working Class Culture: Not an Oxymoron," in Thinking Class: Sketches From a Cultural Worker, (Boston, 1996): 17

From the beginning of the mass popularization of occult work, seers have appropriated higher-class symbols and reworked them as their own. Mediums took the "innocence" the middle-class so wanted to see in others and used it to justify their receiving money for channeling spirits. Additionally, they reworked the paradigm of "simplicity" to criticize class inequality, and unfortunately for later occult workers, used the same notions to justify their own privileged race or/and gender positions. Later occult workers adopted personae used by middle-class writers as foils to the "self-made man" and adapted them to their own claims on professional status. As the middle-class struggled with female professionalism, seers reworked their advertising to stress not the self but churches, schools, or products. This allowed them to continue their work in an environment which was becoming more and more hostile to their claims that disenfranchisement qualified them to be good doctors, financial advisors, and counsellors. As the history of occult work in the late nineteenth-century shows, this was not a group without agency.

Occult workers' appropriation of symbols shows the ways in which working-class people engaged in cultural debate. The significance of this participation lies in the fact that occult workers used this debate to help the communities in which they lived, to earn money independently of bosses or time clocks, and to express themselves artistically.

To a certain extent, the class dynamics of occult work remain. Even though the contemporary new age bookstore tends to focus on products, psychic hotlines offer services like those offered by seers in the nineteenth-century: help in love, health, and financial matters. The occult still means help for a relatively low fee. Seers also advertise femaleness and ethnic "otherness" as major qualifications for fortunetelling. Emphasis on ethnicity has been diminished, but most seers, when they indicate a gender, indicate femaleness. Of the fourteen seer ads in the 1998 Harris' Farmers Almanac, four picture females (face shot only), two African-Americans (LaToya Jackson and Mother Love) and two Euro-Americans (Brigitte Nielsen and Laura Bryan Birn, "Soap Opera Star"). One advertises "Native American Readings;" one offers dream interpretation, and others specialize in past life readings, psychics, astrology, and numerology. Brigitte Nielsen's picture appears beside the "Witches of Salem" graphic emblem. New age bookstores abound in books and products that evoke Eastern, ancient Celtic, or Native American philosophies. Many of the performative aspects of prophecy, such as these, are similar to those of the nineteenth-century, in which identity was at once static and dynamic, self-conscious and minstrellic. Fortunetelling survives in the twentieth-century as evidence that in "a quarter's worth of wonder" resides an immeasurable amount of political possibility.

APPENDIX



Figure 1-A. Medium reveals how he uses the cover of darkness to convince seance participants that spirits and not the medium play the instruments brought to the seance room. A. Medium, Revelations of a Spirit Medium, (New York, 1975 [reprint, 1922 edition]).



Cora L. V. Hatch

Figure 2-Cora L.V. Hatch-Scott-Richmond, frontispiece, H.D. Barrett, Life Work of Cora Richmond, (Chicago, 1895). Early elite mediums relied on their audiences' notions of beauty and innocence to ply the trade.



The sound, old-fashioned prescription of a blood gentleman

Figure 3-Artist's depiction of a visit to the seer's home, accompanying the article by Olivia Howard Dunbar, "The Survival of Sorcery," *Harper's Weekly*, September 21, 1912. Women seers made room for occult work in their daily household routines.



Vera, in a hushed and solemn voice, called for silence.

Figure 4-Artist's depiction of Vera, frontispiece, Richard Harding Davis, Vera, The Medium (New York, 1908). Authors from Hawthorne to James and Davis saw the medium as an enchanting yet malleable young woman who could easily become the victim of evil-minded manipulators.

THE WORLD'S GREATEST CLAIRVOYANT Pandora

She tells your
name, age
and occupa-
tion; your
mother's
maiden name.

She tells you
when and
whom you will
marry, and re-
unites the sepa-
rated.

Stands Alone in Her Magnificent Power of Reading
the Future of Humankind



Coming from a race of people who have been clairvoyants for thousands of years, her reading of your past and present, as well as your future life, will amaze you. She is acknowledged by press and public wherever she has been to be the greatest clairvoyant they have ever consulted.

Strange and fascinating are the words that come from the cultivated lips of this most in-

teresting woman, whose journey of life has already taken her through all the renowned psychic schools of Egypt, India and Europe. It seems, indeed, as if her knowledge must come from that mysterious world of which we all would know, yet, longing, cannot know. She looks as far away into the dim, mysterious future—the great beyond—across the dark chasm which separates the human body from the fitting soul—and that which is to be told. The separated are brought together, foes are made friends, lost property is recovered, the mist is brushed away from business ventures, the hand is so guided that failures are averted, the earth's surface is explored, its treasures laid bare to her mysterious perceptive mind, and while she gives names, dates, facts and figures, her visitor sits dumfounded at the revelations she makes to him. She is surely a woman of the passing time.

She will forfeit \$500 where she fails to teach you how to fascinate any one you desire, how to make your enemies your friends, causes a speedy marriage with the one of your choice, gives you good luck and makes you successful in your business, removes evil influences, reunites the separated, gives you lucky numbers, locates the earth's buried treasures, settles the old estates that time has placed beyond the lawyer's shrewdness.

Letters Answered—Containing Date and Place of Birth, Lock of Hair... Six Questions and Fee, \$1.

Special This Week.

\$5 Celebrated Life Reading, \$1.

Bring This Ad. and Save \$4.

1148—Market street—1148

Same floor Fowler's Studio, Opp. Hale Bros.

Figure 5—Pandora's ad, *San Francisco Examiner* advertisement, March 11, 1906. One of the few to use a photograph.

MEDIUM MRS. DR. CLARK



Well-Known Trance Medium
PERMANENTLY LOCATED AT
205 Turk Street

NO MATTER WHAT TROUBLE YOU MAY
have with yourself or others, come and she
will guide you. She affects you with a vibrating
higher than human power.

**IT'S NOT WHAT SHE HAS DONE FOR
OTHERS, BUT WHAT SHE
WILL DO FOR YOU.**

"She is a living connection between the unseen
spiritual and this world. She can read the future
and the past, and the present, and the future
as in a mirror, and her predictions never
fail to come true. She can tell you how to succeed in
business and obtain good fortune. She leaves nothing
and nothing to chance, and she will relieve your
troubles, etc."

READ HER CIRCULAR.

Send free an application with 2-cent stamp and learn more about the
power and the power of the power and
wonderful power than you have
ever known.

CONCERNING BUSINESS AFFAIRS.

She gives advice, facts and figures, reliable and
dependable, which are important to all matters
of interest to business transactions, law suits, etc.
She can tell you the future, and the past, and the future
as in a mirror, and her predictions never fail to come true.
She can tell you how to succeed in business and obtain good
fortune. She leaves nothing and nothing to chance, and she
will relieve your troubles, etc."

LOVE OR COURTSHIP.

If affairs of the heart or questions of love interest
you, she gives advice and reliable predictions of all
love affairs, within human capacity, enabling
you to win the respect and affection of your
choice. She can tell you the future, and the past, and the future
as in a mirror, and her predictions never fail to come true.
She can tell you how to succeed in business and obtain good
fortune. She leaves nothing and nothing to chance, and she
will relieve your troubles, etc."

Assistance for Troubled or Unfortunate.
If you are in trouble of any kind, distressed,
sorrowful, or are worried in life, she will help you
and give you the power to overcome all troubles. Your wish and desire is life
can be obtained. In 1912-13 you should have the
power to succeed.

ALWAYS CONSULT THE BEST.

For perfect satisfaction, however, for well, and
others for circular, with mental focus.
All business, social and commercial
Matters, etc.
From your reading at your request, where the story
is, and well told, will be given.

MRS. DR. F. CLARK

205 Turk Street, Near Jones.

Figure 6-The Medium Mrs. Dr. Clark's ad, San Francisco Examiner ad, April 8, 1900. Women seers often combined titles such as "Mrs. Dr." or "The Reverend Mrs."

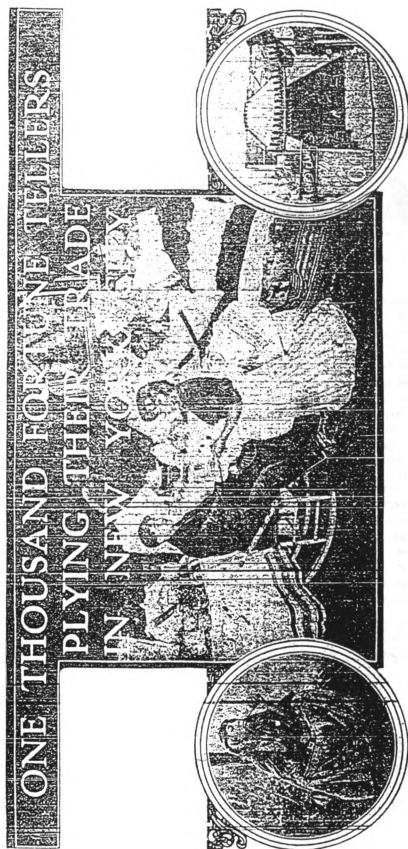



Figure 7-Graphic accompanying New York Times Magazine Section (Part 5) article, December 12, 1909, 7:1. The anonymous author condemned seers as unscrupulous immigrants or African-Americans who "prey for the most part upon a densely ignorant class."

Phone 10274 Main Office Hours 9 A. M. to 11 P. M.

Prof. Akpan Aga

WONDERFUL MAGICIAN AND SPIRITUALIST
BY ALCHEMY AND FIRE



Teacher of all sciences. Just arrived from Africa. Healing all manners of sickness in the name of God. Gives all luck. Change water into wine by the power of invisible force. Nothing is impossible, only move faith and believe in yourself. For a man is the living temple of God. Guaranteed to do all things but one. The Fool may doubt this, but it is not impossible. Reading future, present and past. Magic and Occultism of Africa.

Jesus the Master was not God, and was God's son in no other sense than that in which all men are the children of God. He was a man like us. Come now. My time is limited to a few months. Phone, write or call now! At once!

300 MARSON AVENUE BROOKLYN, N. Y.

Figure 8-Professor Akpan Aga's December 20, 1922 advertisement in the *Amsterdam News*.

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