

**No Class, No Family:
Women's Resistance and the Occasional
Structure of Reproduction in Vancouver's Last
Brothel District, 1911-1914**

**by
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Abstract

Between 1911 and 1914, as Vancouver was in the final moments of its breakneck transformation from a resource industry town to a metropolitan city, a working-class rebellion was brewing. Poor white women were part of this rebellion, although their resistance did not always take the same form as men's strikes and demonstrations. Young white workingwomen survived their crushing poverty and resisted the pull of the "cult of domesticity" into marriage by working in "occasional prostitution," including in the city's largest and last brothel district. Using Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, this thesis examines the political economy of Vancouver's state-organized sex work districts from the perspective of the workingmen who lacked wives, the capitalist industries that demanded scores of low-wage transient workers, Canada's national project that depended on white settler families, and, most importantly, the poor white women who subsidized their starvation wages and resisted domesticity through the sex trade.

Keywords: Vancouver 1910s; sex work; labour studies; whiteness studies; gender studies; settler colonialism

... she should learn to know that there are two codes of morals which men hold. One set of morals for the protected girl who has social position and wealth. Another code for the working girl who has no protection, and who can therefore be exploited.

– Helen M. Todd, Factory Inspector, 1912

The workers as a class are homeless. Part of the men are forced into a migratory life, going from place to place in search of work and are 'hoboes'; while the women, those who should be the wives of the hoboes, are slaving in the mills or are in the districts. [W]orkers mate with no intention of marriage, now or later.

– Ernest Griffith, "On Free Love and the Home," *Industrial Worker*, June 5, 1913

The history of the subaltern classes is necessarily fragmented and episodic... Subaltern classes are subject to the initiatives of the dominant classes, even when they rebel; they are in a state of anxious defense. Every trace of autonomous initiative is therefore of inestimable value.

– Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks Vol. 2*

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I started university in my thirties, after an already long-feeling life of work and activist struggle, and during a time of political organizer burnout and heartbreak. It was Michael Barnholden who encouraged me to be so bold as to apply for an MA program way back in 2009, based on my extra-institutional education rather than a BA. And it was Elise Chenier who opened the door and welcomed me in. My education had been primarily in the trenches of community organizing, revolutionary organization building, independent publishing, and in punk and literary communities. These experiences only partly equipped me for the travails of grad school; it took a village to bridge the gap between my experience and what was required to complete this thesis.

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In the end, credit for anything useful in this thesis must be shared with my communities outside the university. Even people who have been my political opponents have helped me. James Johnstone shared his research notes on the Shore Street brothel district from the 1911 census with me even though we were on opposing side of a fight about gentrification and I’m sure he wanted nothing more than to throw me out of the Strathcona Residents Association. I’ll never forget the integrity and generosity of that gesture. And Jean Swanson and Wendy Pedersen, comrades with who I have since parted political ways, helped reintroduce me to the low-income community in the Downtown Eastside, and gave me time and space to work on this research even when it came at a cost to them.

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the world I wanted to do. My friend Nadine Chambers was always in my corner, refusing to throw in the towel, while encouraging me to read against the white supremacist grain for Black women in the Western Canadian archive. Natalie Knight told me my work has value on its own merit, not only when it is serving a direct community struggle. There is a political current below the surface of this work that asserts Indigenous communities have a parallel struggle against capitalism that is not reducible or common to class questions, and this insight is due to our intellectual collaboration. Cecily Nicholson would probably have preferred that I had been working for 10 years on poetic literary work, but that didn't stop her from insisting that I not allow my eye to wander from this thesis and that – at all costs – I keep my teaching job. I deeply appreciate and value the energy of encouragement that my friends held for me. I needed it and depended on it.

My comrades in and around Alliance Against Displacement deserve a special acknowledgement. Our work together in subaltern communities – similar in status and social role to those I write about here – informs, provides critical analytic and interpretive lenses, and affirms the relevance of this thesis. It is sometimes hard to understand historical dynamics in the thicket of our organizing struggles and if this thesis helps cast even a slight ray of light to illuminate the historical value of our work for my comrades, then I will feel proud.

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List of Acronyms and Publications

IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
LCW	Vancouver Local Council of Women
VTLC	Vancouver Trades and Labour Council
BC Federationist	Newspaper of the VTLC after 1910
Industrial Worker	Newspaper of the IWW, published in Spokane, Washington
Vancouver Daily Province	Major daily newspaper with political sympathies for the provincially governing Conservative Party
Vancouver Sun	Major daily newspaper with political sympathies for the provincial Liberal Party
Western Wage Earner	Newspaper of the VTLC before 1910

Preface

Silhouettes of the Subaltern: A note on archival sources

My impressions of the class dynamics of Vancouver's formation were influenced by the views from below that I found in the archives, as well as by the point of view I have developed through years of organizing in class struggle alongside poor working class and Indigenous people in community struggles in the same neighbourhood studied here, now called the Downtown Eastside, a century after the Alexander Street district. I am accustomed to reading against the grain of media and government reports that portray poor working class and Indigenous people as nuisances and social problems to be policed and otherwise regulated out of the way of hungry market forces, and out of public view and spaces. Although the archives are organized to maintain silences about the political existence and historical activity of subaltern people, it is possible to hear those silences speak through the hegemonic anxieties that are recorded.¹

State and civil society documents from city officials, police, and *The Province* newspaper portray a view of prostitution as a menace to be contained or prohibited. City Council minutes and correspondence did not include direct discussions about managing the sex trade, but in the activities of licensing officials and the public works department it was evident that making the city was a symbolic as well as a concrete process. I closely read *The Province* newspaper, which was one of three daily newspapers in Vancouver in 1911 to 1914. While I also accessed other papers, *The Sun* and the *Daily World*, I decided to focus on *The Province* because its editors were supportive of the Conservative Party and reflected the views of Premier Richard McBride and Attorney General William Bowser, who were important figures in the organization of the segregated brothel district.

¹ The reference to produced "silences" in the archive comes from Michel-Rolph Trouillot's comments on the production of hegemonic histories of the Haitian revolution. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1995), 26-27.

The meeting minutes, correspondence, and publications of the Local Council of Women, Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, and Industrial Workers of the World did not carry consistent discussions or voices of sex worker women, but they do expose the deep anxieties these groups held about clearly ambiguous and troubled sexuality and gender norms in Vancouver.

Working-class, criminalized, and racialized women appear in these records against a historical-social skyline that includes local as well as transnational dynamics of power and politics. When moral reformers in the Local Council of Women called for city bylaws to close movie theatres in order to stop women from socializing with men in public, it means that young women went to movie theatres at night after work to meet and have sexual interactions with men. When poor workingmen complained in their newspapers that they will never be able to marry, it means women refused to marry them. An important characteristic of poor women's resistance to death by poverty and control by patriarchal men and social structures is that these women did not have formal resistance organizations or publish newspapers or save meeting minutes that saved their thoughts and feelings in their own words. Their actions, however, are not lost. Archival silhouettes reveal the spaces occupied by poor white working-class women's actions, which are the result – in part – of their thoughts and feelings.² We know that poor women must have been central to major working-class events in the early twentieth century. Reading the archive for the silhouettes of their activity is a way to get a glimpse of how.

² I credit this historical method to Jean Barman, whose essay about Aboriginal women on Vancouver Island's navigation of patriarchies both of colonial power and on reserve serves as proof of how those disappeared from archives can be found in the responses of the powerful to their actions. Jean Barman, "Taming Aboriginal Sexuality: Gender, Power, and Race in British Columbia, 1850-1900," *BC Studies*, no. 115/116 (Autumn/Winter 1997/98): 237–66.

Introduction

Sex Work, Women, and Labour History: Vancouver's 1912 Rebellion Reconsidered

A drawing on the cover of the *Industrial Worker* newspaper in 1909 portrayed the poor white worker's dream of domestic bliss.¹ In this dream, a workingman of the future, with combed hair, clean clothing, and a humble necktie has interrupted his wife lounging in their garden, reading in the shade of ivy leaves. Her flaxen hair is drawn up on her head. Her dress, too long to be practical for work, suggests she is cared for. She is the picture of working-class womanhood: beautiful, white, intelligent, and – as his commanding pose and arm around her waist suggests – subordinate to her husband. The man is at ease in the garden of the yard of the home he owns. The garden itself symbolizes that he has won the high social status of land ownership within colonial society; he is the master of the wilderness.² He is landless and itinerant no longer, an outsider blanketstiff no more.³ The cartoon promises the poor workingman of 1900 that a workers revolution will make him the possessor of all the wealth of the world: the garden and the home, the past and the future, and the woman.

The woman in the cartoon is the man's wife, the principal object to his subject, and the most important of the symbols of security in the image. Without her, the man would be standing alone in a forest. Without her, he would not be a husband and would not have a

¹ Ed Grigware, "Untitled editorial cartoon" (Husband and wife in their garden), *Industrial Worker*, October 30, 1909. (See Figure 0.1 below)

² Deryck W. Holdsworth, "Cottages and Castles for Vancouver Home-Seekers," in *Vancouver Past: Essays in Social History*, ed. Robert A. J. McDonald and Jean Barman (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1986), 12, 24.

³ An article in the *Industrial Worker* newspaper explained, "'The 'blanket stiff' is what the casual, migratory working is called, and this is due to the fact that in many camps on construction and other work the men have to furnish their own bedding, which they pack in a roll and carry with them from job to job.'" See: *Industrial Worker*, "The Blanket Stiff," cited in "Unrest day for the IWW," *Vancouver Province*, May 1, 1912.

home. Her presence is the key that unlocks the door to domesticity. Ed Grigware's cartoon illustrated the frustration felt by tens of thousands of poor workingmen in British Columbia: their overwhelming poverty, the transience of their jobs, and the Anglo-centric social hierarchies that characterized working-class life in the province meant that – as a social group – they did not have wives, homes, or families, or a secure place in settler colonial society. It also shows that they, nevertheless, dreamed of restoring patriarchal domesticity as a central, organizing force in their lives on the other side of their struggle to abolish capitalist exploitation.

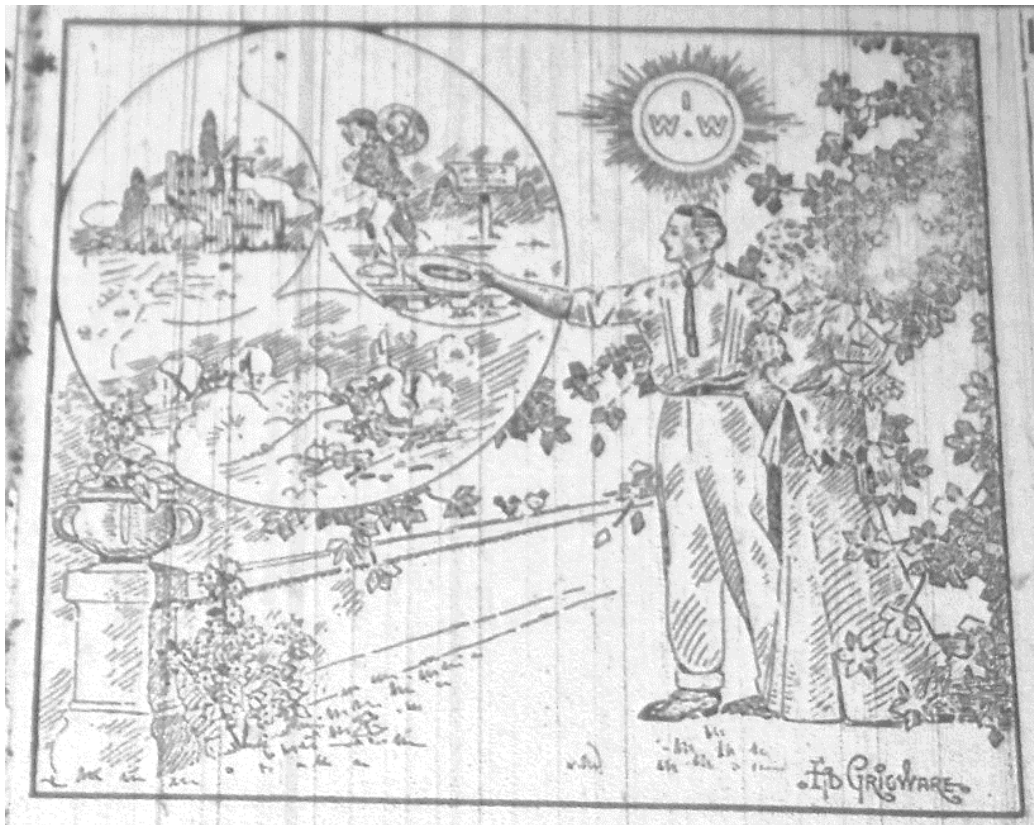


Figure 0.1. *Industrial Worker* editorial cartoon, October 30, 1909

But what about the women of these men's dreams? Poor, single, white workingwomen were also alienated from Vancouver civil society but, unlike male workers, they could not participate or find security in either their class organizations or the institution of the nuclear family. Labour historian Ross McCormack has argued that working class actors in the early twentieth century were divided into three camps: *reformers* in the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council (VTLC) unions, who believed in a "labourist"

reformism that “perceived the state as the basic vehicle for social change;” *rebels* in the Industrial Workers of the World who were committed to “direct action” to take control over industry by workers organized in industrial unions, and; *revolutionaries* in the Socialist Party who wanted to overthrow the capitalist order through parliamentary political action that they believed would lead them to take control over the state.⁴ McCormack’s story of the 1912 rebellion paints a male-centric portrait of working-class struggle and organizations and a historiographic framework of class struggle that makes women workers visible only when they were organizing like men.

But the organizational form of poor women’s resistance did not look like men’s. Firstly, women were excluded from full participation and leadership in male-dominant unions. And secondly, rather than unions with elected leaderships, organizing staff, constitutions, legal status, and publications, women drew from their community practices to organize an independent economy and survival resources in a total community of women.⁵ Workingwomen’s politics also manifested differently than men’s – and middle-class women’s, for that matter. There were women involved in the Wobblies in the US, and there were feminist union activists in the VTLC, but women activists in British Columbia for the most part stayed within the patriarchal frameworks of an emergent working-class domesticity ideal. I argue that during the high water mark of radical political activity that was the 1912 workers rebellion in Vancouver, the form that working women’s political rebellion took was their improvised, survival-based resistance in the sex trade.

This is not to suggest that poor women worked in the sex trade as a conscious political project. As historian Julia Laite explains, in nineteenth and early twentieth century resource extraction economies in North America, sex work sometimes played “a subtle or explicit role in the reproduction of male labour,” sometimes was a “necessary evil” of

⁴ A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 15-17.

⁵ Feminist historians Judith Walkowitz and Christine Stansell argue that the organizing structures working-class women use in struggle come from informal structures of women’s communities and cooperation before the liberal dismantling of working-class communities and the insertion of the nuclear family. See: Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 192-95; Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

women's survival, and sometimes was a form of resistance.⁶ While city and provincial government "tolerance" of the brothel district on Alexander Street between 1911 and 1914 was motivated by capital's demand for women's sexual and emotional labour to reproduce men's labour power, it was also a concession to women's survival needs. Women's survival is not a politically neutral problem. Rather than depend on domestic relationships in unfulfilling marriages, or on paternalistic, reform-based charity programs, young women resisted and refused these hegemonic solutions to their poverty and organized instead in illicit sexual economies.

The city and provincial government's "necessary evil" of tolerating brothel districts was only necessary in the context of their crisis of authority. A "crisis of authority," is defined by communist theorist Antonio Gramsci as a moment when "the ruling class has lost consensus... it no longer 'leads' but only 'rules'," with "sheer coercive power."⁷ Gramsci's theory usefully describes class dynamics in British Columbia during this moment of militant labour strikes that included instances such as a miner's strike that was put down by government troops, and a "Free Speech Fight" that erupted into a police riot.⁸ Gramsci argues that when "incurable contradictions have come to light within the structure" of capitalist society and a "crisis of authority" like that of 1912 Vancouver results, the ruling group is driven to give concessions to subaltern groups. Gramsci calls these concessions an "occasional structure."⁹ He warns, in his brief meditations on this dynamic, that the occasional structure is not a puppet master trick from above – subaltern people experiencing the worst effects of capitalist crisis are the most knowledgeable innovators of occasional structures. Gramsci says that while "positively working to pressure the structure itself [workers are] nevertheless striving to heal these contradictions."¹⁰ This thesis argues that the Alexander Street brothel district, the coaxial outcome of these

⁶ Julia Ann Laite, "Historical Perspectives on Industrial Development, Mining and Prostitution," *The Historical Journal* 52, no. 3 (2009): 742-43.

⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 2, ed. Joseph A. Buttigieg, vol. 2, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 32.

⁸ Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia*, 3rd ed (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 228-9; Mark Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows: The Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1990), 74-75.

⁹ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 2, 177.

¹⁰ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 2, 177.

myriad crises, was such an “occasional structure;” a space that the ruling powers conceded to subaltern groups that functioned to temporarily hold together Vancouver’s bourgeois settler colonial order. For men without wives, and for capital, the brothel district organized the contracting of wifely sexual and intimate reproductive work through the entrepreneurial initiative of petty bourgeois brothel owners and working women. For young white women resisting both poverty and domesticity, the brothel district made it possible to survive their poverty without ceding their independence to men, their desires to reformers, or their futures to the stigma of total criminalization.

As an occasional structure, the Alexander Street brothel district tells us a lot about whose alienation from civil society mattered enough to hegemonic power to offer concessions to “heal” the gap separating them. Indigenous, Black, and Asian women and men suffered a terrible poverty and violent social exclusion, but their disappointment was understood as a necessary, planned, and even constitutive aspect of the settler colonial bourgeois order.¹¹ Patching and healing the crisis of authority was a problem of managing the masses of poor whites at the edges of hegemony. It was a project of reorganizing the position of white people in the working class, not of ending discriminations and exclusions.

Homemaking for Vancouver’s labour aristocracy

The first decade of the twentieth century was a time of massive urban development and sweeping social transformation in southern British Columbia. By 1911 a massive population boom had made Vancouver the economic and metropolitan centre of western Canada, and drove the construction industry to rival resource extraction as British

¹¹ On the constitutive character of racial exclusion in the liberal political order see: Renisa Mawani, *Colonial Proximities: Crossracial Encounters and Juridical Truths in British Columbia, 1871-1921* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009); Keith D. Smith, *Liberalism, Surveillance and Resistance: Indigenous Communities in Western Canada, 1877-1927*, (Edmonton: AU Press, 2009); Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997).

Columbia's principle economic driver.¹² As Vancouver's new bourgeoisie poured fortunes into industrializing the province's remote extraction and export-based economy, a British-dominated civil society undertook a parallel cultural and social project of making the city a white man's settler-capitalist society. A permanent local government and business administration elite reassembled in Vancouver as Toronto and London investors moved west.¹³ They were attracted by the prospects of private profit after decades of public investment in infrastructure, including a sophisticated shipping and transportation capacity kick-started with Dominion government spending on railways and ports.¹⁴ Vancouver's fortunes were also economically tied to US coastal cities, together developing the beginnings of a Pacific Rim trade economy. Premier McBride staked his 1909 and 1912 election campaigns on promises of trade wealth. His excitement shows in a poem he wrote in his own notebook in 1912 celebrating the construction of the Panama Canal called "For the Great Future of Greater Vancouver this Greatest Harbour is Planned:"¹⁵

Half a Million People Will Soon Comprise the Population of This City
Half the Millions of Bushels of Western Canadian Wheat Will Pass
Through This Port --- Half the Trade of Western Canada
Will Centre Here --- Industrial Enterprises on
Large Scale Will be Located Here ---
Commerce and Manufacture Will
Demand All the Space Which
Can Be Allotted
To It.

McBride's poem rings with hyperbolic capitalist glee, but it was not fantastic – wealth accumulated by investors and capitalists grew like cancer cells.

¹² Between 1900 and the beginning of World War I the population of British Columbia quadrupled in Vancouver. See: Barman, *The West beyond the West*, 190-91; Robert AJ McDonald, *Making Vancouver: Class, Status, and Social Boundaries, 1863-1913* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996), 93; "Building permits of over \$2,000,000," *Vancouver Province*, July 25, 1912; "Point Grey breaks building record," *Vancouver Province*, August 1, 1912; "Vancouver leads whole of Canada," *Vancouver Province*, November 18, 1912; "The dawn of a Greater Vancouver," *Vancouver Province*, January 7, 1913.

¹³ The size of the city's professional class doubled between 1891 and 1911. McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 125, 160.

¹⁴ McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 128-29.

¹⁵ Poem, "For the great future of Greater Vancouver this greatest harbour is planned," Premier's Papers (McBride), Inward official correspondence 1912, BC Archives.

There was a more than 150 percent increase in real estate and investment wealth in Vancouver between 1909 and 1913 but the disparity between wages and the cost of living steadily grew even faster.¹⁶ The massive accumulation of wealth by city elites increased the cost of living and cultural expectations of consumer spending for the poor working class, and particularly women workers. An article in the *Vancouver Province* claimed that between 1900 and 1913 the working class cost of living in Canada rose 51 percent, the most extreme increase in the world.¹⁷ Within Canada, the new provinces west of Ontario had the starkest gap between workers' wages and the cost of living, and amongst workers in the West, none had lower wages than labouring women.¹⁸ Settler colonialism, gender, race, and class each and all together determined who benefited from Vancouver's massive economic growth, who suffered, and who revolted.

The working-class revolt of 1911 to 1914 was more than a moment. The 1911 construction strike in Vancouver brought together trades workers and labourers in an industry-wide strike that, while unsuccessful, marked the end of decade-long building boom and the beginning of the period of revolt.¹⁹ The free speech fight followed on the heels of the construction industry strike and brought Wobbly revolutionaries into temporary and partial coalition with the labourist leadership of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council Unions as they fought for working-class access to public space in the East End of the city.²⁰ The revolt reverberated in the streets of Vancouver even when its front lines were outside the city. The IWW-led railway workers' strikes of 1912, and the militant coal miner's strike on Vancouver Island in 1913 were far more than job-actions, they were opposed by employers as well as the Provincial government and their police and soldiers,

¹⁶ "Prices show higher cost of living," *Vancouver Province*, April 18, 1913; "Personal wealth shows gain of 150 percent," *Vancouver Province*, April 25, 1913.

¹⁷ "Cost of living has increased one half," *Vancouver Province*, September 3, 1913.

¹⁸ For the sake of this thesis I am limiting the sphere of wages and working conditions under consideration to those in city limits. As Renisa Mawani points out, the race and gender hierarchies of working conditions and wages outside the city were distinct. In salmon canneries on the Fraser River, for example, Indigenous women (and their children) were lowest paid, but in this case colonial power was inseparable from gender considerations of this power dynamic. Mawani, *Colonial Proximities*, 48.

¹⁹ James Conley, "'Open Shop' Means Closed to Union Men': Carpenters and the 1911 Vancouver Building Trades General Strike," *BC Studies* 0, no. 91/92 (1991): 127–51.

²⁰ Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows*, 74-75.

and challenged political structures in Vancouver through solidarity movements like the multi-union Miner's Liberation League.²¹ While partial and temporary, these struggles set the stage for revolutionary workers movements like the Vancouver general strikes of 1918 and 1919 that picked up after the hiatus imposed by the Great War.²² It was in the context of this revolt that feminist unionists like Helena Gutteridge formed a short-lived women's union that helped establish women as permanent part of the paid workplace and through which workingwomen took political action for reforms to benefit workingwomen as women, at the ballot box through the working class BC Women's Suffrage League, and in fights for women's housing and childcare.²³ Most importantly for this study is the significance of this period for the creation of imperial gender and sexuality roles and norms for the subaltern white working class. The Alexander Street brothel district represents the height, and the end, not only of the BC government's policy of "toleration" of the open sex trade, but of the period when commercial sex was an expected and even normalized part of poor, white, working class communities. Sex worker women's resistance against poverty and domesticity in the Alexander Street brothel district was a vibrant and essential part of the working-class revolt and, therefore, of the formation of the Vancouver working class. This study focuses on 1911 to 1914 as years of settler-capitalist expansion and of a working-class revolt that, while not pre-revolutionary, were critical to the formation of class structures and processes in Vancouver and western Canada, and the revolutionary political movements to come.

Historians of the complex moment of Vancouver's early industrialization have tended to sideline gender and sexuality when debating whether race or class were the

²¹ "Riots in Nanaimo render police powerless," *Vancouver Province*, August 12, 1913; "Only one man is shot in extension riot last night," *Vancouver Province*, August 14, 1913; "Highlanders sealed orders took them to Cumberland mines," *Vancouver Province*, August 15, 1913; Allen Seager and David Roth, "British Columbia and the Mining West: A Ghost of a Chance," in Craig Heron, ed., *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 250.

²² Mark Leier, *Rebel Life: The Life and Times of Robert Gosden, Revolutionary, Mystic, Labour Spy* (Vancouver BC: New Star Books, 2013), 81-87.

²³ Linda Kealey, "Canadian Socialism and the Woman Question, 1900-1914," *Labour / Le Travail* 13 (Spring 1984), 98; Star Rosenthal, "Union Maids: Organized Women Workers in Vancouver 1900-1915," *BC Studies*, no. 41 (1979): 56-58; Lindsey McMaster, *Working Girls in the West: Representations of Wage-Earning Women* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007).

ultimate determinant of belonging.²⁴ The consensus amongst historians is that Britishness brought a premium position in early-Vancouver's social status hierarchy, and the default assumption has been that the public expression of this powerful Britishness was gendered masculine.²⁵ Historian Jenea Tallentire has critiqued histories of bourgeois Vancouver as successfully mapping the city's elite society of men but disappearing the "complex female networks that were crucial to its functioning."²⁶ The problem, she says, is that public records of elite life tend to record the formal participation of men and not their wives, reproducing the domestic gender division of public life for men and the private realm of the home for women.²⁷ Such histories record the official face of white race and settler capitalist power, continuing to hide the power and social activity of bourgeois women.²⁸ But bourgeois and middle-class women *did* have official organizations of their own, and those organizations – the Vancouver Local Council of Women, for example – left records. Working class women present deeper problems of double and triple erasure: wrapped in class, gender, sex, and racial power, working-class women are remembered within workingmen's histories, according to the organizational and political forms developed by workingmen's struggle, or flattened out as a single, undifferentiated gender group. This male-centric labour historiography hides the problem that, like workingmen, communities of working-class women were also stratified by racialization, criminalization, gender role,

²⁴ Black British cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues the British empire was as deeply gendered as it was racialized and classed: "A free-born English person was clearly a free-born English *man*." Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 21.

²⁵ Illustrative of the race-primary group were: Peter Ward, "Class and Race in the Social Structure of British Columbia, 1870-1939," in *A History of British Columbia: Selected Readings*, ed. Patricia Roy. (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1989); Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991). In the class-primary group: Rennie Warburton. "Race and Class in British Columbia: A Comment." *BC Studies*, 49 (Spring 1981): 79-85; George Woodcock, *British Columbia: A history of the Province* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1990).

²⁶ Jenea Tallentire, "Everyday Athenas: Strategies of Survival and Identity for Ever-Single Women in British Columbia, 1880--1930" (Ph.D., The University of British Columbia (Canada), 2006), 94.

²⁷ Historian Adele Perry argues that "binary logic" of the gendered "'home' and the public-private split on which it was premised was constructed as both symbolic and constituent of Anglo-Saxon culture." Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 21.

²⁸ Tallentire, "Everyday Athenas," 94.

and sexual normativity within a heterogenous class that included a variegated aristocracy of labour and subaltern.

Vancouver labour historians have long argued that the majority-British “skilled” union workers in the VTLC fit within the sub-group of workers pejoratively defined by Marxists as an “aristocracy of labour.”²⁹ The term “aristocracy of labour” refers to an informal, relative, and fluxuating privileged sub-group within the working class that receive a portion of “superprofits” harvested from imperialist conquest and, in the context of British Columbia, settler colonialism. While the members of this “aristocracy of labour” were still structurally working class – like all workers they were still forced to sell their labour-power to survive – its members received enough financial and social privilege that they experienced cultural norms and standards of living closer to the petty bourgeoisie than to the majority of workers.³⁰ A British, urban-dwelling workingman who received relatively high wages and the best and most stable working conditions was able to own property, have a wife and children, maybe even own a small side business, and was likely to support a “labourist” reform of the capitalist order. Historian of the VTLC Mark Leier speculates that the labourist ideology reflected the class interests of the members of this aristocracy of labour “as their perceived them.”³¹ Many of these labour aristocrats felt enough social belonging and interacted with state power with a high enough degree of consent that they felt they were part of what Gramsci referred to as “civil society,” and even joined with the police against the Wobbly radicalism.³² Meanwhile, a single, white, homeless workingman received lower wages and was likely to support the revolutionary anti-capitalism of the Wobblies.³³

²⁹ Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows*, 103; Mark Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 102-106.

³⁰ See *Appendix 1*: “Approximate workforce wages by race, gender, and marital status.”

³¹ Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape*, 102.

³² Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 2, 91, 200; VTLC letter to Vancouver City Council, February 15, 1912, Vancouver and District Labour Council fonds, Minute book from regular VDLC meetings, 1908-1912; “Condemn IWW methods,” *Vancouver Province*, October 10, 1913; Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows*, 70-71.

³³ Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows*, 98-100.

This rough equivalence between financial security and social belonging means wage scales can be interpreted as a record of which workers were part of civil society, and which workers were shut out. Economic data alone, however, does not explain the historical drawing-up of membership of the labour aristocracy within the working class. Vancouver's lowest income earners – Asian workingmen, Indigenous and Black men and women, single white workingwomen, and, to a less jarring degree, single, resource-working white men – all received wage rates that were similar enough that wages alone do not explain their social status positions. Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian men, and Black and Indigenous women and men were shut out of Vancouver civil society by white race power.³⁴ For white working women and men, it was the nuances of culture and ideology that determined a particular proximity to civil society. Gramsci writes that “the fanatical granite solidity of common sense” can determine social relations with “the equivalence of material forces.”³⁵ Sorting white workers into a hierarchy was a more complex, individualized, and intimate process. Because “the undesirable type of British emigrant” were the majority of the working-class Britons drawn to BC, as in other colonial locales described by historian Philippa Levine, “class and gender worked to separate good from bad, and feckless from responsible” in conscripting the labour aristocracy.³⁶ The filter that sorted respectable workers into civil society was, in a word, the domestic home.

To say that civil society was organized through the metric of “the home” is not to say that gender was the primary problem of making Vancouver and that class and race were secondary. Feminist theorists of empire have shown that *the home* – and the “cult of domesticity” that assigns it – was a unity assembled out of imperialist race, gender, and class ideals.³⁷ During the 19th century, as historian Adele Perry argues, domesticity was women's work within the British colonial settlement project. Domesticity dictated “separate

³⁴ Mawani, *Colonial Proximities*, 40.

³⁵ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 2, 195.

³⁶ Sheffield, *A Vital Question*, 15-16; Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 6.

³⁷ On the “cult of domesticity” see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 167-69.

spheres for men and women” with “the family.”³⁸ Perry explains that, from that “frontier” foundation, the home took on fundamental meaning in Vancouver civil society. As historian Nayan Shah argues, the home was “a key regulative norm of modernity” that reconfigured the family from a kinship organization to a structure that “encompassed heterosexual marriage, children, and servants in a self-contained dwelling.”³⁹ The home as status symbol was a tautology. For white working-class women and men both, the domestic home was something achievable only if they lived proximate to the aristocracy of labour. And to have a domestic home meant the worker in question was white, English speaking, made enough money to own property or rent consistently and keep a wife and children, and had a steady, stable job. The home conferred social status on workingmen as husbands and men. For workingwomen, it meant they performed housework, which was both an economic value as a “key element in the process of reproduction of the labourer,” and a gendered cultural product where women were “mothers of the race and keepers of the home.”⁴⁰

More critical for this thesis are the poor white workers who could not become part of civil society. Sexuality was an aspirational field they hoped would open to them so they could challenge and prove their worth.

Reading Sex Work within the History of Capitalism

Well known amongst labour historians of the first decades of settler colonial Vancouver are the strike wave organized by the IWW in the forest industries and the “Free

³⁸ Adele Perry, “Metropolitan Knowledge, Colonial Practice, and Indigenous Womanhood: Missions in Nineteenth Century British Columbia,” in *Contact Zone: Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada’s Colonial Past*, ed. Katie Pickles and Myra Ruthford (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 112.

³⁹ Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 106.

⁴⁰ Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex,” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 37; Lisa Chilton, *Agents of Empire: British Female Migration to Canada and Australia, 1860s-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 5.

Speech Fight” in the heart of working-class Vancouver.⁴¹ Less well known is the workingwomen’s field of this rebellion that resulted in the creation of Vancouver’s first feminist trade union, and the resistant community of women in the Alexander Street brothel district. In an interview in late 1912, Mayor Findlay explained that simply getting rid of sex workers was not an option. “In a city such as Vancouver,” he said, “so geographically placed that at all times there is a large floating population,” prostitution, vice, and crime were “inevitable and had to be managed.”⁴² To save the city from being “drained... into a cesspool of iniquity,” *Province* editors, who championed the “vice segregation” policies of Mayor Findlay and Premier McBride, argued that these unfortunate masses of workingmen, and the sex workers who attracted them, must be contained and controlled in segregated districts.⁴³ Vancouver City Hall struck a deal with Premier McBride and Attorney General Bowser’s Provincial government to patch over the crisis of authority at the point of sex by using the “occasional structure” of the Alexander Street brothel district as an extra-civic space, symbolically outside urban civil society.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows*, 74-75; Mark Leier, “‘We Must Do Away with Racial Prejudice and Imaginary Boundary Lines’: British Columbia’s Wobblies before the First World War,” in *Wobblies of the World: A Global History of the IWW*, ed. Peter Cole, David Struthers, and Kenyon Zimmer (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 156; James R. Conley, “Frontier Labourers, Crafts in Crisis and the Western Labour Revolt: The Case of Vancouver, 1900-1919,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 1989, 35; McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 108.

⁴² “Mayor denies he ever had secret agreement,” *Vancouver Province*, December 4, 1912.

⁴³ “Mayor denies he ever had secret agreement;” Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 2, 32.

⁴⁴ Geographer Patrick Dunae makes a similar argument about the brothel district in 19th Century Victoria BC, but uses the term “prostitutional” space. Because I think this technique of urban regulation was not limited to sex work, I’m using a less specific term. Patrick A. Dunae, “Geographies of sexual commerce and the production of prostitutional space: Victoria, British Columbia, 1860–1914,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 19, no. 1 (2008): 3.

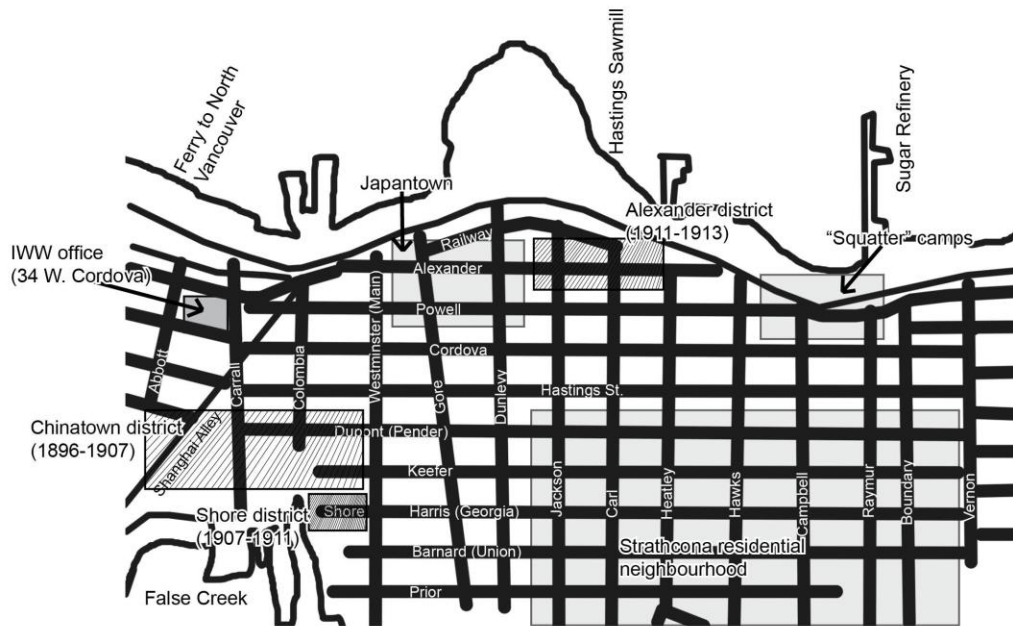


Figure 0.2. Vancouver’s Sex Districts, 1896-1914 in relation to racialized spaces

In Vancouver, similar spatial exemptions were also made for racialized Chinese, Black, and Japanese communities, the “Rancheries” of Indigenous people, and the “skid road” of poor workingmen.⁴⁵ The argument for segregating prostitution in one extra-civic space was an argument for a policy of prohibiting prostitution in Vancouver proper; for containing sex work outside the city’s symbolic limits, within and alongside other extra-civic spaces.

The Alexander Street brothel district was the most sophisticated of these extra-civic segregated sex spaces. In this three-block long district, police, health, and city officials could execute the available legal and institutional regulation of sex. Canada’s *Criminal Code* of 1892 integrated the language of the 1869 *Act Respecting Vagrants*,

⁴⁵ For examples of Vancouver using urban space to differentiate and contain communities racialized outside the symbolic cityspace, see: Kay Anderson, “The Idea of Chinatown: The Power of Place and Institutional Practice in the Making of a Racial Category,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77, no. 4 (1987): 586; Nicholas K. Blomley, *Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 149; Adam Julian Rudder, “A Black Community in Vancouver? A History of Invisibility” (Simon Fraser University, 2001), 4; Smith, *Liberalism, Surveillance, and Resistance*; Renisa Mawani, “‘The Iniquitous Practice of Women’: Prostitution and the Making of White Spaces in British Columbia, 1898-1905.,” in *Working through Whiteness: International Perspectives* (New York: SUNY Press, 2002), 43–68; Dunae, “Geographies of Sexual Commerce,” 115-142.

which criminalized women as “vagrant” prostitutes if they were in any public space and unable to “give a satisfactory account of themselves.”⁴⁶ These laws made the *status* of being a prostitute a crime, gendered “prostitute” as women, and meant women profiled as prostitutes faced the regular threat of arrest and prosecution in Vancouver. Like Vancouver, most cities in Western Canada and the United States did not enforce the law and instead employed “Continental” models of prostitution management in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, including allowing and keeping quasi-official brothel districts. Around 1910, most began to enforce the laws inherited from British legal models of repression and prohibition.⁴⁷ But as other cities and regions scattered their districts, cities in British Columbia broke sharply in the other direction and increased the size and scope of their brothel districts, particularly in Vancouver.

Beginning in mid-1911 and until the end of 1913, up to eight hundred women – approximately two-thirds of them poor white women – worked openly selling sex out of rooms in 44 buildings, ranging in size from three bedroom houses to rooming house apartment blocks, in Vancouver’s last city-condoned brothel district. Estimating the numbers of women working and living in this district was difficult because there was no government census during the years of the Alexander Street brothel district. The census of 1911 was conducted at the height of the smaller district on Shore Street, before it was displaced to Alexander Street. To track this displacement and estimate the number of

⁴⁶ The 1869 *Act Respecting Vagrants* defined *prostitutes* in Canada as: "all common prostitutes, or night walkers wandering in the fields, public streets or highways, lanes or places of public meetings or gathering of people, not giving a satisfactory account of themselves; 2) all keepers of bawdy houses and houses of ill-fame, or houses for the resort of prostitutes, and persons in the habit of frequenting such houses, not giving a satisfactory account of themselves, and; 3) all persons who have no peaceful profession or calling to maintain themselves by, but who do for the most part support themselves by the avails of prostitution." For summaries of Canada's prostitution laws see: Constance Backhouse, "Nineteenth-Century Canadian Prostitution Law: Reflection of a Discriminatory Society," *Social History* 18, no. 36 (November 1985): 387–423; John McLaren, "Chasing the Social Evil: Moral Fervour and the Evolution of Canada's Prostitution Laws, 1867-1917," *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* 1 (1986): 125–65; John McLaren and John Lowman, "Enforcing Canada's Prostitution Laws, 1892-1920: Rhetoric and Practice," in *Securing Compliance: Seven Case Studies*, ed. ML Friedland (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 21–87.

⁴⁷ Carolyn Strange, *Toronto's Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880-1930* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 80; Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991), 81.

people working on Alexander Street, I compared the names of women recorded in the 1911 census – which included names and information about stated occupation, race and nationality, and even religious belief – to the names recorded on Alexander Street in the *Henderson's City of Vancouver Directory* for the years of 1911 to 1915. The *Henderson's Directory* was a sort of phonebook by street address, collected by private enumerators who knocked on doors and collected the names of heads of households throughout Vancouver. I also checked names in the *Henderson's Directory* against the names of women that the *Vancouver Province* reported had been arrested on Vagrancy and Bawdy House offenses. The *Henderson's Directory* shows that the occupants of 44 buildings on the 500-800 blocks of Alexander Street switched from predominantly Japanese men to exclusively women between the years of 1911 and 1914, and cross references with the 1911 census and arrests recorded in the newspapers suggests that the women living on Alexander Street were working in the sex trade. I conclude that these 44 buildings were brothels.⁴⁸ There were 6,452 women in the Vancouver workforce overall, and 3,795 of them were low-wage workers.⁴⁹ Based on these numbers, I estimate that about one-third of low-waged white workingwomen moonlighted in directly paid sex work. About half of them worked in the Alexander Street district, and the others covertly in other parts of the East End. Sex work was an ordinary part of working-class public life in the east end of Vancouver and a normalized aspect of poor working-class sexuality – but organizing sex work openly, in an autonomous community of women, in women-owned buildings, was a break from patriarchal power in the rest of the city and the performances of domesticity

⁴⁸ LG Henderson, *Henderson's City of Vancouver Directory for 1890: Containing a Complete Street Directory and an Alphabetical Directory of the City of Victoria* (Vancouver: Henderson Directory Co, 1911-1923).

⁴⁹ Rosenthal, "Union Maids: Organized Women Workers in Vancouver 1900-1915," 40-41.

expected of all white women. The sex trade industry was part of what Marxist feminists call the “hidden abode” of capitalist reproduction, for the poor.⁵⁰

Histories of prostitution in early British Columbia have followed the arcs of local legal regulation but have tended to naturalize the existence and persistence of sex work, as well as the cycles of sex panics and police crackdowns. Deborah Nilsen’s much cited and valuable short essay on prostitution regulation in Vancouver is a good example of this trend. Her critical record of prostitution regulation in Vancouver names “public pressure,” politicians’ uneven local application of British and Dominion law and, shifts in policing attitudes as determining the status and security of sex workers. But beyond tying prostitution to women’s unemployment she does not interrogate the historical forces that precipitated the shift in local enforcement of prostitution law from a strategy of segregation to one of prohibition between 1907 and 1914.⁵¹ Criminologist Greg Marquis and historian Jenea Tallentire argue that early twentieth-century prostitution districts “fulfilled social needs,” including moderating class, race, and gender relations.⁵² But they do not analyze these “social needs” as a means of reproducing labour power in a society that lacked a permanent working class population sufficient to the needs of capitalist accumulation and reproduction. Historians Linda Eversole and Susan Johnston reveal tensions and collaborations in communities of women that pulled together to make this industry but do

⁵⁰ Marxist feminists have elaborated this observation into a critique of “social reproduction” and unwaged labour as continually reproducing the conditions for the production of capital. See: Karl Marx, *Capital, a Critique of Political Economy* (Harmondsworth, Eng: Penguin Books, 1976), 279-280; Rubin, “The Traffic in Women,” 33–65; Silvia Federici, “Wages Against Housework,” In Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 115-22; Nancy Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode,” *New Left Review*, II, no. 86 (2014): 55–72; Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*, (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London ; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed Books, 1986).

⁵¹ Deborah Nilsen, “The ‘Social Evil’: Prostitution in Vancouver, 1900-1920,” in *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women’s History*, ed. Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess (Victoria BC: Camosun College, 1980), 205-228.

⁵² Greg Marquis, “Vancouver Vice: The Police and the Negotiation of Morality, 1904-1935,” in *Essays in the History of Canadian Law*, ed. Hamar Foster and John McLaren, vol. 6 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Jenea Tallentire, “‘The Ordinary Needs of Life’: Strategies of Survival for Single Women in 1901 Victoria,” *BC Studies*, no. 159 (2008): 45–80.

not consider prostitution as an activity and point of regulation of working-class sexuality that organized race power within working-class societies, individuals, and families.⁵³

I continue from the body of work about the sex trade industry in Vancouver at the turn of the century by focusing on the social and historical function of the *activity* of sex work, as women's socially reproductive labour, and of the state *regulation* of prostitution, as an apparatus of what Foucault calls working class *sexuality*. Foucault says that after sexuality was developed as means of organizing bourgeois society, state and civil society agencies "deployed" sexuality against the working class, "penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way, and... controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way."⁵⁴ Taken together, the reproductive activity and state regulation of sex work plied the subjectivity of the white settler working class into a domestic – and therefore bourgeois – order at a time of incredible instability and plasticity, when tens of thousands of workingmen were swinging towards revolutionary anti-capitalist consciousness. It was the dream of domesticity harboured by poor, white workingmen that subverted and limited the development of the revolutionary anti-capitalist politics they espoused in their revolt of 1912. The temporary heterosocial and sexual fulfillment that poor white women sold and white men found in the brothels was unsatisfactory for everyone. Many, if not most, poor men dreamed of possessing wives and homes and many, if not most, poor women dreamed of being released from poverty and insecurity through marriage. The temporal limits of what Vancouver mayors and city officials thought of as "inevitable" sex work produced a resolution that reached beyond the realm of the immediate offer of sex into workers' impossible dreams that they could be included in imperial civil society.⁵⁵ Within the brothel district, poor white women maintained their "reformable" status in relationship to their criminalized and racialized sisters. Outside the district, white trade unionists developed a working-class politics of domesticity that used imperialist gender roles and

⁵³ Linda J. Eversole, *Stella: Unrepentant Madam* (Surrey, BC: TouchWood Editions, 2005); Susan Johnston, "Twice Slain: Female Sex-Trade Workers and Suicide in British Columbia, 1870-1920," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 5, no. 1 (1994): 147–66.

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, 3 vols. (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 107.

⁵⁵ "Mayor denies he ever had secret agreement," *Vancouver Province*, December 4, 1912.

white race power to keep single white women as innocent victims of circumstance in the moment, and as wives in the future.

This thesis is organized in two chapters. The first chapter asks why the Alexander Street brothel district formed at exactly the time when most other Pacific Coast cities had already turned towards prostitution prohibition policies. It situates the perceived “inevitability” of the sex trade as an “occasional structure” to strike a makeshift social equilibrium during the 1912 working class rebellion, at a time when the economic capacity and social needs of the growing urban population were contradictory. Conceiving of “the state” as consisting of all those who participate in developing and furthering dominant ideas and hegemonic power, the chapter examines the concessions given through the brothel district’s occasional structure by looking at the whole circle of those who participated in containing and regulating rebel occasional sex workers. Union men in the VTLC and IWW, feminist union women in the Home and Domestic Employees Union, moral reformers in the Local Council of Women, and city and provincial governments all failed to control poor workingwomen – who refused to dampen their desires for independence and public lives.

The second chapter asks why, after establishing and containing Vancouver’s vice in the Alexander Street district, did authorities break it up. Through 1912 and 1913, local governments proved too disunited and disorganized to scatter the district. But at the end of 1913, legal frameworks and administrative powers that had been developed at the highest state levels gave local officials the means to smash the district and the networks of counter-power that poor white workers developed with other subalterns outside of hegemonic society. Race and colonial frameworks established in the stratified internal worlds of the district worked to define which women were absorbed into Vancouver’s urban civil society, and who was deported, incarcerated, and killed.

Vancouver 1912 worker’s revolt was a massive, widespread cataclysm that shook the class, gender, sexual, and racial order of imperial Vancouver. It resulted from the fundamental contradictions of the development of Vancouver as an imperial centre in a settler society: white domination of the west required scores of white settlers, but the resource-extraction dependent economy could not accommodate them with the land and

families these settlers were promised. This thesis argues the crisis was resolved from above in late 1913 when local governments overcame their divisions and used new national *Criminal Code* and *Immigration Act* powers to deport and lock up whites it could criminalize as irreparably deviant. Those who could mimic imperial gender and sexual norms were able to adapt. By late-1913, the working-class revolt of 1912 swung into a whimpering compromise, and those who were white enough, young enough, and able, maneuvered into subordinate positions of quiet, miserable belonging within Vancouver civil society. Others were expelled, killed, or cowed. Those who fought back found themselves fighting alone.

Chapter 1

Making Working-Class Domesticity: Women's Resistance and Survival in Early Vancouver's Sex Trade

In the first decade of the twentieth century, thousands of white workingwomen were lured to British Columbia from overseas or the United States by the promise of a good life, opportunity, and a ready population of eligible bachelors. By 1912, the most common feeling amongst them must have been disappointment. Frustrated, poor, hungry, and feeling alienated from Vancouver's civil society, young white workingwomen turned away from the domestic life promised them by respectable civil society. Labour and moral reformers explained the social alienation of young white women as simply a problem of poverty. They had ample evidence for this belief. A decade of runaway inflation rates made income inequality an issue for all working people, and single women had been hit hardest of all. Women's wages had remained stagnant while the cost of living had nearly doubled.¹ Forty-two percent of Vancouver's 6,452 licit workingwomen worked in the lowest paid and most dangerous job in the city, as domestic workers.² Domestic workers had the dubious benefit of receiving room and board on top of their fifteen dollars a month pay. Any financial benefit from this arrangement was outweighed by the dangers of living with an employer.

¹ Jenea Tallentire estimates that, in 1901 Victoria saleswomen and clerks made about \$6-10/week and that the baseline cost of living was about \$6/week. Ten years later, women's wages were about the same (and in some cases *lower*) but, according to trade unionist estimates, the basic cost of living for single women had gone up to \$9/week. Tallentire, "The Ordinary Needs of Life," 60; JW Wilkinson, "Sex prostitution rampant: who and what's to blame?" *BC Federationist*, June 22, 1912.

² "Fixed hours for servant girls," *Vancouver Province*, October 30, 1913; Rosenthal, "Union Maids," 40-41; Tallentire, "The Ordinary Needs of Life," 57; L. Rotenberg, "The Wayward Worker: Toronto's Prostitute at the Turn of the Century," in *Women at Work, Ontario 1850-1930*, ed. J Acton, P Goldsmith, and B Shepherd (Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974), 39

Young women domestic workers were vulnerable to sexual and physical violence in the private households where they lived and worked,³ worked an average of one-hundred hours a week,⁴ and suffered surveillance and control over their leisure time.⁵

Young women who did not want to work as domestic help found jobs in retail shops, the third most common women's workplace after offices.⁶ Women working in shops were paid an average of ten dollars a week, which was four times as much as domestic workers, but still less than half of the wage commanded by the lowest paid white men.⁷ It was impossible to live on a "shopgirl's" paycheque alone. Rose Carson, labour correspondent to the Federal government on behalf of the VTLC, wrote a report on women's working conditions for the Federal government in 1913 and said, "a girl or woman could not support herself on less than \$7.50 a week. This sum to be expended over five dollars for board and room – a very small allowance – fifty cents for car fare, fifty cents for laundry, leaving \$1.50 a week to cover the cost of all necessary clothes."⁸ According to Carson, even well-paid women workers lived in poverty. Telephone operators made between seven and nine dollars a week, and waitresses received ten dollars a week for an eight-hour day and twelve dollars a week for a ten-hour week with board. Even teachers

³ More than half the recorded workplace assaults on women in Ontario, where the demands on domestic workers were comparable to British Columbia, between 1880 and 1929 were against domestic workers. Jenea Tallentire, "The Ordinary Needs of Life," 57.

⁴ A provincial commission held in 1913 found that domestic workers had an average of 100-hour workweeks and recommended a cap of 70-hour weeks. *Vancouver Province*, "Fixed hours for servant girls." October 30, 1913.

⁵ The Vancouver Trades and Labour Council claimed that Chinese men domestic workers charged \$30-\$50/month, while the Salvation Army brokered white women domestic workers at \$15/month. "Labor men decry Salvation Army schemes," *Vancouver Province*, March 12, 1913. Also see a letter from a Col. Gordon to Premier McBride complaining that "the only forms of domestic help are (1) Chinamen, who demand exorbitant (sic) wages, and even when getting such are very independent, and (2) such few English girls, lady helps or servants... [that] women are therefore burdened down with housework." Letter, "Col. Gordon to McBride." Premier's papers (McBride), Inward official correspondence, 1911, BC Archives; "Labor men decry Salvation Army schemes," *Vancouver Province*, March 12, 1913; "Home and Domestic Employees Union," *BC Federationist*, March 28, 1913; Rosenthal, "Union Maids," 50.

⁶ Rosenthal, "Union Maids," 40-41.

⁷ White men in so-called "unskilled" industries made about \$12 a week, and women in department stores, \$6. *Sixth Census of Canada*, 1911, Vol. 3; "Tribute to Women," *BC Federationist*, November 18, 1911; McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 125.

⁸ "Labor department appoints female correspondents," *BC Federationist*, April 25, 1913.

made only fifteen dollars a week, plus board.⁹ Radical unionist Jack Kavanaugh put the problem bluntly, “If the choice of a life of shame, in order to escape starvation, is the exception, what then is the rule? What choice have them? Death or prostitution.”¹⁰ There certainly was ample evidence that white workingwomen were impoverished, but the fact that they lived in poverty did not entirely explain why a woman made the decision to work in the Alexander Street brothel district.

Sex industries gave women access to a world outside domesticity, beyond the reach of bourgeois ultimatums, the scorn of imperial ladies’ respectability politics, and the direct domination and moral hypocrisy of men. Here, sex industries refers to a spectrum of activities that took place in early twentieth century North American cities that ranged from an early form of dating called “treating,” where women traded sexual favors for male attention, gifts, and access to recreation;¹¹ commissioned “taxi dance” or “tough dance” sessions at dance halls that simulated sex;¹² “occasional” prostitution where young women supplemented their low-wages of domestic or shop work when they needed it;¹³ and living and working in the brothel district, or owning or managing a brothel. Much of the public life of young white women in Vancouver occurred along this continuum of the sex trade because it provided these desperately poor workers with access to an increasingly heterosocial working class public culture that they did not have the disposable income to enter otherwise. What moral and labour reformers who explained prostitution through a poverty-lens alone did not understand was that while it was poverty that pushed women into the brothel district, sex work also provided a way to resist “the cult of domesticity,” the banal, humiliating, and unattainable remedy to poverty prescribed by these reformers. The “cult of domesticity” is a term developed by theorist of the culture of imperialism, Anne McClintock. While maintaining that domesticity was a bourgeois state and patriarchal framework that disavowed “the social and economic value of women’s manual and domestic work,” the cult of domesticity also provided space for the political activity of

⁹ “Labor department appoints female correspondents,” *BC Federationist*, April 25, 1913.

¹⁰ Jack Kavanaugh, “Vice and wages,” *BC Federationist*, September 15, 1913.

¹¹ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn of the Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 110.

¹² Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 101-102.

¹³ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 110.

women *within the home*. The cult of domesticity, McClintock argues, “became a crucial arena for rationalizing emergent middle-class identity and its presiding values” by offering middle class and bourgeois white women *the home* as a morally authoritative social position. From the experience of disciplining the behavior of husbands within the home, middle class white women imprisoned in the cult of domesticity were able to bring a domestic “liberal rationality” to bear against colonized and then deviant working-class peoples.¹⁴

By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century in British Columbia, the cult of domesticity had already had at least three iterations. In the mid-19th century, domesticity was a colonial force that missionary women used to invade the affective lives of Indigenous women, disrupt and disorganize Indigenous kinship relations and economies, and implant “the values of liberal rationality.”¹⁵ In its second life, the province of British Columbia commissioned church and imperial women’s organizations to import white women as potential wives to recruit bush-worker men into domesticity.¹⁶ The government funding and imperial organizations that founded and operated this “civilizing” project shows that domesticity and the home was not a private, intimate affair – it was an imperialist state project that became, through social exercise, a dominating ideology.¹⁷

¹⁴ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 167-169.

¹⁵ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 167-169; Perry, “Metropolitan Knowledge.”

¹⁶ Between 1884 and 1916, female emigration agencies in Britain organized more than twenty-two thousand emigrations to “imperial destinations.” The BC government hired the Salvation Army to arrange the immigration and training of white women settlers up until World War One. The province paid the Salvation Army \$10,000 for recruitment of women plus a bonus of \$3 a head for each woman migrant they brought to BC. On top of that, the Salvation Army had immigrants they brought under their programs repay the cost of their migration, with interest – deducting levies from their paycheques. Chilton, *Agents of Empire*, 10; “Report from Salvation Army Transportation and Immigration Offices,” Premier’s papers (McBride), Inward official correspondence, 1911. BC Archives; “Labor men decry Salvation Army schemes,” *Vancouver Province*, March 12, 1913.

¹⁷ There is a rich historiography on the “civilizing” role of white women in British settler colonial projects. See: Chilton, *Agents of Empire*; Julia Bush, *Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power* (London; New York: Leicester University Press, 2000); Perry, *On the Edge of Empire*; Katie Pickles, *Female Imperialism and National Identity: Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2002); Antionette Burton, “The White Woman’s Burden: British Feminists and the Indian Woman, 1865-1915,” in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, ed. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992), 137–57.

Historian Adele Perry argues that this second form of domesticity was meant to transform BC “from a rough, racially plural resource settlement into an orderly settler colony.”¹⁸ Finally, in the early twentieth century, the cult of domesticity took a third form as petty bourgeois and labour reformers strained to address a new gender and sex problem in the class foundations of Vancouver. Previous forms of domesticity had been outside interventions by middle class and state groups into the lives of working class and Indigenous peoples living in what would become Canada. The third form was more sophisticated and nuanced because it involved working-class men and women as actors who carried the bourgeois state ideology of domesticity into their communities and even into their rebellions. Union men in both the VTLC and the IWW felt that the prevalence of unmarried working women in Vancouver was an emasculating symptom of men’s poverty. For these men, the imperiled patriarchal social and gender order could be corrected by union-led class struggles that, when victorious, would lift men out of poverty with the “family wage” and restore them to their rightful positions as breadwinners.¹⁹ With their breadwinner masculinity restored, these union men could then rescue women out of the workforce and the brothel district and into the marriage bed and home as wives and mothers. As male labour reformers critiqued class structures of poverty through patriarchal gender frameworks, they formulated a working-class articulation of the bourgeois cult of domesticity as a project that would liberate white workingwomen from poverty and prostitution.

Many workingwomen resisted this “revolutionary” call to domestic order, but there were divisions among them. The heady days of the 1912 workers revolt did include the emergence of an inspiring feminist unionism that fought both the capitalist bosses and the patriarchal trade union leadership.²⁰ Feminist union leaders created the Home and Domestic Employee’s Union in 1913 and put forward a radical, feminist vision for unionism

¹⁸ Perry, *On the Edge of Empire*, 145-146.

¹⁹ In her history of women in the IWW and its successor group the One Big Union, Heather Mayer argues that although a goal of the IWW and OBU was a “family wage that would enable men to make enough money so their wives would not have to work,” Wobbly women believed women workers should remain at work and economically independent of husbands. Heather Mayer, *Beyond the Rebel Girl: Women and the Industrial Workers of the World in the Pacific Northwest, 1905-1924* (Corvallis: Oregon State University, 2018), 106.

²⁰ Rosenthal, “Union Maids;” McMaster, *Working Girls in the West*, 102.

that refused to see women as temporary, inappropriate wage workers.²¹ They fought for wages, work, and services for women that would increase their independence from husbands and the home. But their political vision did not go beyond reforming domesticity.²² A gender and sexuality gap – organized through white race power – remained between the Domestic Employee’s Union and the masses of poor workingwomen. Helena Gutteridge and Polly Brisbane, leaders of the Domestic Employees Union, were also involved in the imperialist-dominated suffrage movement and the moral reform focused Local Council of Women. Gutteridge’s columns in the *BC Federationist*²³ argued women were victims of both vicious men and poverty; women were to be saved and men were to be arrested.²⁴

Poor white workingwomen, for their part, did not waste time begging to be saved. Women who found themselves on the threshold of civil society survived by making alliances with subaltern women who were all the way outside of the white supremacist, patriarchal, settler colonial, liberal civic order of Vancouver. Together they earned their own survival money, created their own social communities, and resisted the cult of domesticity by making, not asking for, a working-class women’s public culture. As this chapter will show, this community of women ruled the streets and dance halls of the East End as the heart, soul, and bedroom, of the working-class rebellion of 1912.

This chapter considers the ideas and attitudes held by these three different working-class groups within the Alexander Street Brothel district – working class men who aspired to achieve bourgeois domesticity; the moral reform focused union women; and the

²¹ “Home and Domestic Employees Union,” *BC Federationist*, March 28, 1913.

²² Rosenthal, “Union Maids,” 50; “Home and Domestic Employees Union,” *BC Federationist*.

²³ For example: Helena Gutteridge, “Women’s unemployment is moral danger,” *BC Federationist*, September 14, 1914; Helena Gutteridge, “Commonsense and vice,” *BC Federationist*, October 13, 1913.

²⁴ On bourgeois and imperial anti-prostitution ideologies, see the histories of the moral reform movement in Canada, Britain, and the United States: McLaren, “Chasing the Social Evil;” Julia Laite, *Common Prostitutes and Ordinary Citizens: Commercial Sex in London, 1885-1960* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Chilton, *Agents of Empire*, 46-55; Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, 77-83; Marquis, “Vancouver Vice,” McMaster, *Working Girls in the West*, 91-118; Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 15-18.

working class women that supplemented their wages and asserted their autonomy through their engagement with the sex industry. It begins by looking at how labour aristocrats in VTLC trade unions, outcast Wobblies, and Vancouver's first feminist trade unionists articulated the cult of domesticity. Then it traces the consequences of these patriarchal gender ideals for sex workers focusing specifically on the 'rescuable' white women who occasionally engaged in sex work. The desires, ambitions, and resistance of these occasional sex workers is the heart of this chapter. Their resistance was contained by a paradox. If they restricted themselves to domestic worker or shopgirl jobs alone, they were doomed to a life of poverty and suffocating social isolation. But if they transgressed the "rescuable" realm of treating and occasional prostitution, they would become permanent outcasts, criminalized, socially stigmatized, and more vulnerable to police and male violence. Without a class to ally with or a family to find security within, young white workingwomen's resistance was limited to spontaneous self-expression and alliances of immediate survival. Although not explicitly political, young women's resistance took place in the streets, dance halls, and brothels of the East End, it filled out the cultural everyday life of the 1912 worker's revolt, and it overthrew – if for a moment – the cult of domesticity and the rule of men.

A working-class cult of domesticity: Labour aristocrats, Wobblies, and Feminist Unionists

Canadian trade union organizations officially supported women's equal rights at the workplace as early as 1882, when the Toronto Trades and Labour Council passed an "equal pay for equal work" resolution.²⁵ But the motivation underlying equal pay was the belief that "employers would never hire women if they were compelled to pay them the same wages as men."²⁶ The most common idea in the labour movement was that women workers should have rights, workplace protections, and join unions while the situation was such that they had to work, but in a just world, including under socialism, men would make

²⁵ Josie Bannerman, Kathy Chopik, and Ann Zurbrigg, "Cheap at Half the Price: The History of the Fight for Equal Pay in B.C.," in *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia*, ed. Barbara K. Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro (Victoria BC: Camosun College, 1984), 301.

²⁶ Bannerman et al, "Cheap at half the price," 301.

enough money that women could stay home and care for children.²⁷ So while the VTLC called for government intervention to protect women in the jobs they already had, they also campaigned for laws to block women from working in industrial labour jobs. For example, a resolution from the Dominion Trades and Labour Council, to which the VTLC belonged, passed in 1903 called for the "abolition of child labor by children under 14 years of age; and of female labor in all branches of industrial life, such as mines, workshops, factories, etc."²⁸ In 1913 the BC Federation of Labour passed resolutions calling for the Provincial Labour Commission to regulate young women out of "dangerous and unhealthy workshops;" out of working in foundries, which the VTLC considered "physically, mentally and in every way detrimental to the sex and consequently to the race."²⁹ While advocating minimum wages and rights for women to work in feminized jobs like in retail shops, VTLC unionists also fought for regulations that would block women from getting jobs in masculinized workplaces like mines and foundries. These policies were contradictory from a class perspective but perfectly consistent for a group that saw the workplace as a masculine space where women were visitors at best, and competitors at worst.

The VTLC did advocate for higher wages and improved working conditions for workingwomen because, as a Socialist Party newspaper explained, without legal protections like a minimum wage, many young women could choose only "between stealing and prostitution."³⁰ Following this premise, they pressed the government for policies to protect women's workplace safety and improve wages at the jobs they already had. These reforms were hardly radical. In 1912 and 1913 a coalition of social and labour reformers, including the BC Federation of Labour, the YWCA, and the Vancouver Medical Association pressured the city government into undertaking an investigation into women's working conditions in factories and department stores. They also pressed the provincial government for a labour commission inquiry on women's working conditions. This

²⁷ Kealey, "Canadian Socialism and the Woman Question, 1900-1914," 78.

²⁸ Rosenthal, "Union Maids," 37.

²⁹ Resolution against women working in foundries, Vancouver and District Labour Council fonds, Minute book from regular VDLC meetings, 1912-1916.

³⁰ "Small chance to be decent," *Western Clarion*, December 16, 1911, 1.

provincial commission, which did not include a single workingwoman,³¹ found that women working in shops were “not being paid a living wage” and speculated that such low wages led to “immorality among the girls.”³² The outcome of the city investigation was a call “to provide a statutory minimum wage” of twelve-dollars a week.³³ The demand appeared so reasonable that only employer’s associations opposed it.³⁴

As for unionizing workplaces, the working-class variant of the cult of domesticity meant that trade unionists thought of women’s labour organizing as transitory, a temporary measure until women could leave the workplace through marriage. Union men draped their idea of *the home* around workingwomen’s shoulders as a garment of respectability and strained to resuscitate women who were forced to work because of poverty by celebrating her domestic work despite her job. “She is a princess amongst the toilers,” went an “ode to the working girl” in the *BC Federationist* in 1912, “Her hands may be stained by dishwashing, sweeping or factory grease. But they are honest hands. They stay misfortune from the home, they support the invalid loved ones.”³⁵ Consequently, VTLC unions did not take women’s organizing seriously. For example, in the 1906 telephone operators strike in New Westminster, workingmen’s refusal to join a women-led walkout meant the strike was broken.³⁶ Although the VTLC’s idealized union woman might stray to the workplace because of the hardships of a particular situation, union justice –

³¹ Two middle class suffragist women’s organizations, the Pioneer Political Equality League and the Women’s Forum, wrote to Premier McBride and asked that he include two women on the Provincial Commission who were “acquainted with provincial conditions.” Premier McBride refused, saying, “While there are no ladies placed on the commission the Government feels that any grievance that women may have as to occupations they pursue will receive the fullest attention.” Correspondence between Margaret Sutherland, Corresponding Secretary of Pioneer Political Equality League; The Woman’s Forum; and Premier McBride. Premier’s Papers (McBride), Inward official correspondence 1912, BC Archives.

³² “Girls get a hearing,” *Vancouver Province*, October 28, 1913.

³³ “Exchange regarding Women’s Factory Inspector Demand,” July 17, 1912. Minutes, 1910-13, VTLC Fonds, UBC Rare Books and Special Collections; “Drop proposal for enquiry,” *Vancouver Province* August 24, 1912; “Woman wage workers’ problem,” *BC Federationist* April 25, 1913.

³⁴ “Drop proposal for enquiry,” *Vancouver Province* August 24, 1912.

³⁵ “The working girl,” *BC Federationist*, January 20, 1912.

³⁶ Marie Campbell, “Sexism in British Columbia Trade Unions, 1900-1920,” in *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women’s History in British Columbia*, ed. Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess (Victoria BC: Camosun College, 1980), 171.

won through union men's advocacy for government policy reform and winning collective agreements between unionized workplaces and employers – would return her to her rightful place in the home.

This domesticity gender narrative was less total in the IWW. As historian Heather Mayer has shown, in the June 1910 issue of the eastern IWW magazine *Solidarity*, working class men and women debated whether the goal of class struggle was to win “a 'family wage' that would enable men to make enough money so their wives would not have to work and could remain in the domestic sphere of the home,” or if “the best thing that ever happened to woman was when she was compelled to leave the narrow limits of the home and enter into the industrial life.”³⁷ An anonymous woman writer in the *Industrial Worker* was able to state categorically, “Women are in industry to stay. They cannot be driven back to the home. Their work left the home and they followed. They are part of the army of labor and must be organized and disciplined as such.” But even in an article that imagined that women as a whole group were stuck in the workforce, she still argued that men's husbandly power would be restored in the future if they could to this unfortunate reality in the present: “And the union factory girls of today is the helpful and encouraging wife of the union man of tomorrow. Mutual aid replaces suspicion and distrust in the home and the benefit of mutual effort between women and men workers and husbands and wives should not be underestimated.”³⁸ This anonymous Wobbly woman's article advocating for women's union organizing still deferred to working class domesticity and centred men as the default and protagonist worker. Her article said women workers should organize because they were in the workplace anyway, and because their experiences will serve men's interests once the patriarchal gender order can be restored, not because women workers could be automatically expected protagonists in class struggle.

The IWW did not have an official position for or against what communists like the Russian Bolsheviks – at about the same time – referred to as “the abolition of the family,” but articles and cartoons in their newspapers that romanticized bourgeois domesticity show that gender ideals upheld by moral and labour reformers were also carried by poor

³⁷ Mayer, *Beyond the Rebel Girl*, 106.

³⁸ “Women in industry should organize,” *Industrial Worker*, June 1, 1911.

white men – for whom the family home was far out of reach.³⁹ The difference between Wobbly and VTLC men was that members of VTLC unions might have had wives who worked wage jobs, but Wobbly men were chronically single.⁴⁰ Heather Mayer’s study of women in the IWW finds that there were married men, women, and families in IWW unions in Seattle, Spokane, and Portland, and that there were tensions in the organization about how to speak about families and single men.⁴¹ The IWW and its constituency north of the border was more uniformly built of single men. Fifty-three percent of the membership of the IWW never appeared in Vancouver city directories between 1909 and 1914 as residents in any way, and none were listed for all six years.⁴² They were transient, migrant workers – and IWW members would not have been worst off amongst their low caste of workers – who must have felt the possibility of having a home and family was impossibly remote, even utopian.

Articles appearing in the *Industrial Worker* expressed poor workingmen’s failed domestic ideal bitterly, as a potent symbol and painful reminder of their subalterneity. When Ernest Griffith wrote, in 1913, “workers as a class are homeless,” his definition of “homelessness” centered on a man lacking a wife. He argued, “A life of constant change is not conducive to homemaking; and even if it were [blanketstiffs] are too poorly paid or the jobs of too short duration for them to think of even marrying, much less of supporting a home.” Under capitalism, Griffith claimed, marriage for men and women workers is not about making a home based on love, but on a “cold blooded business deal,” where women must make a deal with “a provider for herself and child, which leads her to give herself to one of the opposite sex for economic reasons. A woman does not choose a man, but a

³⁹ The Bolshevik position for the abolition of the family is well known and discussed in many socialist and feminist texts that are beyond the scope of this thesis. For a brief overview see, Clara Zetkin, *Lenin on the Woman Question*. (New York: International Publishers, 1934), 20; and for a helpful contrast with China’s approach to family and gender power, see: Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

⁴⁰ Fifty-three percent of recorded IWW members were never listed in the city directories of 1909-14, and only one Wobbly was listed for four years in a row. This suggests that they were part of the unmarried group of poor, itinerant workers that the reformers and politicians considered a scourge of the city. Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows*, 99.

⁴¹ Mayer, *Beyond the Rebel Girl*, 7.

⁴² I am grateful to Wobbly historian Mark Leier for his demographic research on the IWW membership of this period. Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows*, 99.

bank account, she marries a meal ticket, a storehouse of food and clothing.” Griffith explained that, like “men forced into a migratory life” as hoboes, women “who should be the wives of the hoboes” were denied their destiny, “slaving in the mills or [...] in the [brothel] districts.”⁴³ Griffith’s expectations had been built up by ads like the one published in the *BC Federationist* in 1914, which called out, “Canada: millions of acres available” and offered a giveaway of eighty acres per man at a cost of three-dollars per acre.⁴⁴ This was the settler capitalism that – in a knotty contradiction that needed both white settlers and cheap labour that foreclosed the possibility settlement – promised white men land and family, and denied poor, transient white workingmen like Ernest Griffith the ability to secure the shelter of a house and the wives whose labour was supposed to make these houses into homes.

“Sex subsidized industry”: The political economy of the brothel district

An article written by a Wobbly but published by both the IWW and VTLC newspapers in 1913, argued that prostitution functioned as a subsidy to capitalist industry by contracting out the wifely work of sexual-social reproduction. The argument went like this: Women were forced, by “the relation of low wages to production,” down a “beaten path from their doors to the Brothel District.”⁴⁵ Likewise, wages too low to support a family forced men to buy sex. On both sides, workingmen and women’s commercial sex exchange provided a “subsidy” to industry. The motivation for this exchange, however, was not to be found in the system of capitalist production. The anonymous writer explained, “a man does not leave sexual needs behind when he is forced to become a ‘blanket-stiff’.” He began from the expectation that men buy sex because of an extra-historical, biological impulse. Presumably, the natural direction to this impulse should be the marital family. But “hiring men at wages that will not allow supporting a wife, or under conditions that do not allow of the maintenance of even a pretense of a home,” leaves

⁴³ Ernest Griffith, “On free love and the home,” *Industrial Worker*, June 5, 1913.

⁴⁴ WD Scott, Superintendent of Immigration, “Canada: Millions of acres of land available,” *BC Federationist*, February 20, 1914.

⁴⁵ “Sex subsidized industries,” *Industrial Worker*, June 12, 1913; “Sex subsidized industries,” *BC Federationist*, June 20, 1913.

men no outlet for their sex needs than buying sex from women who have no choice but to sell.⁴⁶

To make the argument that both women and men were structurally exploited by the Brothel District, the IWW writer equated the survival needs of poor white women for food and shelter to the biological sexual needs of poor white men. The “Sex Subsidized Industries” article directly addressed a problem that most labour critiques of prostitution avoided – that men readers of the paper were likely buying sex.⁴⁷ At first look, this seems like a false equivalency that reads men’s sex needs as a vital, natural, and ahistorical force as urgent as the need to consume food. But as a more general critique, this approach frames sex and emotional intimacy as within the same catalogue of bodily and spiritual need and desire as historically situated needs for food and shelter. After all, when we think of the food needs of workingwomen we are not thinking simply of a certain essential caloric intake but also of a broad set of social and recreational activities that take place around the consumption of food, which give the experience of eating social meaning besides caloric replenishment. “Sex Subsidized Industries” addressed sex, desire and emotional connection as an aspect of social reproduction by critiquing the modality of social reproduction that compelled men to pay for sex and intimacy rather than have it delivered to them gratis through the unwaged sexual and emotional labour of wives. But while the article broke from some patriarchal assumptions by considering prostitution part of the political economy of social reproduction and not simply about meeting men’s “needs” outside of history and divorced from capitalist production, it did not draw a conclusion that class struggle should include ending the gendered exploitation of socially reproductive labour. The implicit demand in the article was for the return of a patriarchal gender and sexual order where men would have access to women’s sexual and intimate labour as wives, that is – without having to negotiate and pay for it.

⁴⁶ “Sex subsidized industries”.

⁴⁷ Besides the references in the “Sex subsidized industries” article to men buying sex, other articles in the *Western Wage Earner*, *BC Federationist*, and *Industrial Worker* made similarly offhand references to the “inevitability” of poor workingmen paying for sex. See, for example, “Woman, again,” *Western Clarion*, July 16, 1912, and the note from IWW historian Melvyn Dubofsky who reported that IWW men “lived together, drank together, slept together, whored together, and fought together.” Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 129.

When writing directly about sex, labour movement thinkers could not seem to get past the domestic, marital framework as natural and desirable. The “sexual desires” of men who lived with low wages and homelessness were “intensified by lack of opportunity for legitimate activity” in the marriage bed, wrote VTLC president Wilkinson in 1912. Such men “go to the loose women for casual satisfaction.”⁴⁸ This, Wilkinson said, “is only natural because the desire is there, and if the desire is there it is also natural that it should seek its own satisfaction.” He claimed, “the average man is generally ready to exchange the pleasures of intercourse with women who are disposed that way.”⁴⁹ Because he was discussing women’s use in relation to workingmen and not to capitalists, sex workers appeared to Wilkinson in this context as “disposed that way,” not driven by poverty to the districts. Wilkinson’s class politics were focused on male workers as class actors; he saw women in the world as existing in the ways they were useful to men. Another 1912 labour article called for women to tolerate men’s sexual impropriety in order to unite against capitalism on men’s terms. The article in the *Western Clarion* said, “as men we are ready to take you in our arms any time you happen along. This we cannot help, being men. But as slaves let us work together for our emancipation.”⁵⁰ Another article, published in the VTLC’s *Western Wage Earner* a year earlier provides some guidance of what that “work together for our emancipation” might have looked like. Arguing from the premise that prostitution “cannot be stamped out under the present industrial system,” the *Wage Earner* proclaimed that “until woman is crowned with economic freedom, the evil will spread until the very homes of a nation will become threatened with the moral leprosy that has stolen the blush of shame from the cheek of womanhood.”⁵¹ Paradoxically, “economic freedom” for women depended on winning higher wages for men, which would open the door to women’s entry into the domestic home and dependency on husbands, where they would be freed from the economic compulsion to find jobs of their own.

⁴⁸ “Sex prostitution rampant: Who and what’s to blame?” *BC Federationist*, June 22, 1912.

⁴⁹ “Sex prostitution rampant,” *BC Federationist*, June 22, 1912.

⁵⁰ “Woman, again,” *Western Clarion*, July 16, 1912.

⁵¹ “Strike at the root,” *Western Wage Earner*, January 1911.

Feminist unionism and the incomplete struggle against domesticity

Women union leaders in the VTLC did take militant positions against the secondary status of women in the workplace and union movement, but their challenges to domesticity were limited by imperialist and social reformer ideologies that they picked up in the suffrage movement. Helena Gutteridge was the most influential woman unionist during this period. She acted as a connection between the male dominated union movement and the middle-class dominated women's suffrage movement. Gutteridge sat on the Labour Council as a delegate from the Tailor's Union, which she had joined soon after arriving in Vancouver in late 1911. She was also an executive member of the Vancouver Local Council of Women (LCW) and the Women's Social and Political Union, a suffrage organization with chapters throughout the British empire, which she described as "not a national association, but an imperial one."⁵² Gutteridge treated these two commitments as related: she advocated for the LCW to adopt policies to benefit workingwomen, and for the VTLC to support the women's suffrage movement – not a foregone conclusion amongst Socialists or trade union labourists.⁵³ In October 1913 she started a women's suffrage column in the *BC Federationist* that ran in almost every issue and covered women's fight for the vote, sexual harassment, workplace safety, married couple's issues, and prostitution.⁵⁴ As an unmarried, employed, working-class women in her thirties, it is unlikely that Gutteridge could have played such an influential role in both the Local Council of Women and the Labour Council anywhere but in western Canada, where a "gendered

⁵² Irene Howard, *The Struggle for Social Justice in British Columbia: Helena Gutteridge, the Unknown Reformer* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992), 46.

⁵³ Socialists argued against suffrage from both the left and the right. From the left, the International Socialist Women's Conference of 1907 found against the suffrage movement because it "emancipates the woman not as an individual but as the carrier of property and income." From the right, the Socialist Party of Canada published an editorial in 1908 saying, "a woman who is a socialist is a socialist because some man is." International Socialist Women's Conference, 1907, "International Socialist Women's Conference Resolution on Women's Suffrage, 1907," in *Women, the Family, and Freedom: The Debate in Documents*, ed. Susan G. Bell and Karen M. Offen (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1983), 232; Kealey, "Canadian socialism and the woman question," 89.

⁵⁴ Gutteridge's first "Woman Suffrage" column ran in the *BC Federationist* on October 3, 1913 as a regular feature. Helena Gutteridge, "Woman Suffrage," *BC Federationist*, October 3, 1913; Susan Wade, "Helena Gutteridge: Votes for Women and Trade Unions," in *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History*, ed. Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess (Victoria BC: Camosun College, 1980), 187–203.

class ambiguity” meant she could work and still belong in respectable society.⁵⁵ But Gutteridge’s own challenges to Vancouver’s gender rules did not mean she actively opposed marital domesticity as a theatre of women’s oppression. She brought labour-reform politics into the Local Council of Women, and she also carried the LCW’s imperialist social and moral reform politics in the labour movement.

Superseding the politics of their leaders, when single workingwomen took protagonist roles in the struggles for their interests, they discarded gender binaries and even refused the cult of domesticity. Workingwomen’s permanence in the Vancouver workforce was demonstrated with the founding of the Home and Domestic Employee’s Union in 1913. An exceptional union effort, the Domestic Union was initiated by women trade union activists who mobilized low-wage women workers through social and educational events.⁵⁶ Gutteridge, as part of her work with the Pioneer Political Equality League, and later the BC Women’s Suffrage League, initiated an “Evening Work Committee” to bring workingwomen together in an environment free of both middle class social reformers and male trade unionists.⁵⁷ These weekly meetings generated a workingwomen’s suffrage group as well as the Home and Domestic Employee’s Union, a feminist union that, although affiliated to the VTLC, was not subordinated to a larger men’s union.⁵⁸ The Home and Domestic Employee’s Union rejected the idea that the position of women in the workplace and the union movement was temporary. At the union’s inaugural meeting, the *BC Federationist* reported that a man stood and challenged the union, asking

⁵⁵ Historian Jeanea Tallentire suggests the cut-off line for women to be considered “ever-single” was about thirty years old. Tallentire, “The Ordinary Needs of Life,” 51; Chilton, *Agents of Empire*, 85.

⁵⁶ In 1910 the VTLC incorporated its first union of workingwomen, the Waitresses Union. Its delegate Rose Gardiner was the first woman to be elected to the VTLC executive as statistician, a position gendered female. Rose Gardiner was succeeded as statistician by Polly Brisbane, who was also a Waitress Union delegate. “First woman chosen,” *Western Wage Earner*, December, 1910; “Portrait of Polly Brisbane,” *BC Federationist*, January 23, 1913. For an overall outline of the drive to organize women workers in early Vancouver, see Rosenthal, “Union Maids,” 49.

⁵⁷ Wade, “Helena Gutteridge: Votes for Women and Trade Unions,” 187–203.

⁵⁸ Rosenthal, “Union maids,” 50. Lara Campbell’s insights helped me sort out the development of suffrage movement groups as Vancouver separated from the BC Political Equality League, forming the Pioneer Political Equality League in 1913, and Gutteridge’s formation of the BC Women’s Suffrage League as a distinct working class women’s suffrage group in 1913.

whether “the girls might not eventually marry and thus leave the union.” Feminist unionists replied that women were already continuing to work after marriage and that even the government was recognizing this fact by building daycares – lobbing a critique at male unionists in the room who were behind even the state in recognizing the permanence of women’s wage labour.⁵⁹ Alongside standard union demands around wages and recognition, the Domestic Employee’s Union demanded reforms outside of the workplace like public childcare for working mothers and a cooperative rooming house where workingwomen could live with their children outside the patriarchal family.⁶⁰ The Domestic Employee’s Union echoed the emergent trend of multiple-income working families in other cities, organizing women to continue working whether or not they married.⁶¹

Gutteridge and the Domestic Union carved out space in the union movement apart from the dominance of male unionists and middle-class women, where workingwomen could lead their own class struggles and represent their own needs and desires. The union’s demands for child care spaces and housing for women with children are far outside the patriarchal frameworks that men-led unions generated. The Domestic Union only existed for a short time, but its initial efforts reached beyond the point of production and specific jobsites to address workingwomen’s unwaged work of social reproduction outside the formal workplace, raising children and providing emotional and social care to people in their intimate lives and family and friendship groups.

Given the likelihood that their members shared community with sex workers or participated in sex work, at least at some point on the continuum, it should not have been surprising to find that the Domestic Union also addressed the rights and safety of sex workers. A government survey conducted in Ontario at this time found that nearly half of sex workers surveyed worked, or had worked, as domestic servants as well as

⁵⁹ “Home and Domestic Employee’s Union,” *BC Federationist*, March 28, 1913.

⁶⁰ Rosenthal, “Union Maids,” 50; “Home and Domestic Employees Union,” *BC Federationist*, March 28, 1913.

⁶¹ A 1914 study in New York found that *most* working-class households included three wage earners. Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 67; “Home and Domestic Employee’s Union,” *BC Federationist*, March 28, 1913.

prostitutes.⁶² Although no such survey was conducted in Vancouver, it is likely that women in the domestic workers union supplemented their low wages with work somewhere on the spectrum of commercial sex. It is possible that meetings and education groups organized by the Domestic Worker's Union included discussions about sex work, led by sex worker women, that went beyond the prostitution prohibition frameworks Gutteridge used in her columns and public statements. Unfortunately, there is no archive of minutes from the Domestic Union. Helena Gutteridge's "women suffrage" columns in the *BC Federationist* are, however, preserved. And they show that the leadership of the Domestic Union maintained a steadfast prostitution prohibitionist position. In a column titled "Commonsense and Vice," Gutteridge pointed her scorn past the women on Alexander Street and at the politicians in Victoria who collected property taxes on the brothels and refused to break up and outlaw prostitution districts. Her concern, however, was not primarily for the wellbeing of sex workers. In the fashion of British suffragist Christabel Pankhurst,⁶³ Gutteridge polemicized, "What do they care if hundreds of young men contract a disease which they pass on to their wives and children? What do they care if children are born dead or blind or diseased?"⁶⁴ And in the same column a month later, a guest writer Amy Campbell Johnson wrote, "The majority, and the large majority, of young girls, who become prostitutes are not immoral but unmoral."⁶⁵ As low-wage women workers, poor white workingwomen found organizational power in the Domestic Worker's Union, and with it a politics that helped them understand and express themselves as a social group. But the message to sex workers from their union was that they were not workers at all, that they were helpless victims, or worse, vectors of disease and a danger to respectable women.

⁶² Rotenberg, "The wayward worker," 38-39.

⁶³ In 1913, Pankhurst wrote an article for a suffragist newspaper in London where she argued that only votes for women would outlaw prostitution and protect wives from the danger that diseases like "syphilis and gonorrhoea" could be transmitted to them from sex workers, causing "sterility and race suicide." The themes in the Pankhurst article are very close to Gutteridge's article. Christabel Pankhurst, "A Woman's Question (London 1913)," in *Women, the Family, and Freedom: The Debate in Documents*, ed. Susan G. Bell and Karen M. Offen (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1983), 219-20.

⁶⁴ Helena Gutteridge, "Commonsense and vice," *BC Federationist*, October 31, 1913.

⁶⁵ Amy Campbell Johnson, "White slavery," *BC Federationist*, December 12, 1913.

In revolutionary labour circles outside Vancouver, critiques of male-centred class struggle included understanding sexual labour – whether waged or unwaged – as part of the gendered labour of working-class women. Anarchist leader Emma Goldman, who the Vancouver IWW hosted as a lecturer in 1912, did not consider prostitution an exceptional condition external to class society.⁶⁶ She believed prostitution was only one form of sexual barter on a continuum that included marriage. For Goldman, the cult of domesticity was a bigger political problem than sex work; she argued that the idea that women were only workers until marriage was why it was “infinitely harder to organize women than men.”⁶⁷ In Germany just a few years later, a Party then affiliated to the same international socialist movement as the Socialist Party of Canada, published a newspaper in support of a union organizing drive for sex workers in Hamburg.⁶⁸ And Luisa Capetillo, an anarchist, feminist and leader in the IWW in Puerto Rico, argued that all “individual men, as well as social institutions and economic structures, oppressed women.” Workingwomen, therefore, must work for their liberation independent of workingmen.⁶⁹ These revolutionary women considered sex workers to be political actors whose labour took place in the same world of class struggle as men at machines, and in some cases, there are documents of their efforts to include sex workers in anti-capitalist organizing. The archives of the Vancouver labour and women’s movements do record women unionist activity against the cult of domesticity, though not with such clear articulations and never inclusive of sex workers.

Occasional freedom from domesticity: The social continuum of sex work and the self-activity of poor women

Women responded to the imperatives of labour-feminist domesticity with resistance. They took to the streets and dancehalls of the East End in pursuit of models

⁶⁶ Emma Goldman visited and spoke in Vancouver in 1912 following the Free Speech Fights. “Shall women be given the rights of citizenship?” *Western Clarion*, August 10, 1912.

⁶⁷ Emma Goldman, *The Traffic in Women and Other Essays on Feminism* (New York: Times Change Press, 1970), 25, 42.

⁶⁸ VI Lenin mentions this newspaper in passing in an interview conducted by Clara Zetkin in 1920. Zetkin, *Lenin on the Woman Question*, 5; David Akers, “Rebel or Revolutionary? Jack Kavanagh and the Early Years of the Communist Movement in Vancouver, 1920-1925.” *Labour / Le Travail* 30 (October 1, 1992): 9–44.

⁶⁹ Eileen J. Suarez Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 161.

of survival and kinship besides marriage and family. Unable to find political or union support for the sex work that was often part of these non-domestic communities and spaces, women divided their social beings into licit work and formal trade unionism, and illicit work and informal political and social organization. Young white workingwomen were uniquely enabled by their multiple and contradictory social subjectivities to perform such double lives. They were single working-class women, which meant they were doubly exploited with gendered low wages and insecure and dangerous employment in the licit labour market. These characteristics also made young white women morally suspect in the eyes of police, church leaders, and the Local Council of Women, who saw them as “smart-bad” girls who skirted dangerously close to the underworld of vice.⁷⁰ But their whiteness meant that they could participate in the heterosocial spaces of treating, dance halls, working class public culture, and “occasional” prostitution without being criminalized and excluded from the charitable supports of civil society as “fallen” women.

Young women’s activity in an emergent heterosocial working class public culture and work along a continuum of sex work was indistinguishable to middle class civil society. Historian Kristen Schachtel argues that the “working girl problem” and the “white slave” was a sort of a cultural double helix that “represented young women workers as uncontrollable, ambiguous, and exhibitionist in ways that implicated them in moral deviancy, sexual impropriety, and social downfall.”⁷¹ There was an economic logic to this twinned problem. In 1912 Vancouver, the breakneck growth of a well-off professional and consumer class meant that women working in customer service jobs were expected to spend more on clothes and appearance in order to keep their jobs, and also influenced the appearance and fashion demands of workingwomen’s public culture.⁷² As Kathy Peiss argues was the case in New York, and as was evident in Vancouver from the moral reformer alarm about young women’s socializing, social life for single young women in the

⁷⁰ McMaster, *Working Girls in the West*, 117-118; Kristen Michelle Schachtel, “Kitty Malloys and Rebel Girls: Representations of the Woman Worker in Vancouver’s Early 20th Century Mainstream and Radical Labour Newspapers” (Simon Fraser University, 2010), 27.

⁷¹ Schachtel, “Kitty Malloys and Rebel Girls,” 23.

⁷² McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 125.

city included spending money recreationally.⁷³ In order to meet workplace and social fashion expectations and take part in a recreation-focused community, a phenomenon called “treating” developed in the newly heterosocial leisure spaces of the city and was an assumed part of workingwomen’s public culture. As historian Elizabeth Clement has shown, treating was a form of courtship or casual sexual exchange practiced during the emergence of a gender-mixed public culture. More explicit than dating, treating involved young women trading sex acts with men in exchange for gifts, spending money, or a night out at the dance hall or movies.⁷⁴ By 1913 Vancouver had eight movie theatres and underground dance halls that were all monitored and regulated by city licensing officials and police. Anti-treating rhetoric, common among moral reformers in Toronto, was pushed by moral reformers in Vancouver but met with skepticism in the media, which published editorials mocking the reformers who “rave inarticulately about the iniquity of the tango and its allied gyrations.”⁷⁵

For young women who used different forms of sex work to survive and resist, the lines that demarcated criminalized sex work must have appeared arbitrary. In 1911 a live-in domestic bragged that she and her friends snuck out of their attic room windows at night to seek respite from work.⁷⁶ During these late night forays they found men to pay for their tickets to dances, restaurants, pool halls, and movie theatres.⁷⁷ One of the most popular treating sites was the movie theatre. The Local Council of Women called theatres – with alarm – “places of appointment between young women and men of questionable character.”⁷⁸ They were also places of appointment between sex workers and their

⁷³ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 6, 184; “Reforms outlined by women’s council,” *Vancouver Province*, May 28, 1912; “Vice question is discussed,” *Vancouver Province*, June 13, 1912.

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 3; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 110;

⁷⁵ Patricia Roy, *Vancouver: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1980); License Inspector Files, 1910, 1911, 1913, City of Vancouver Archives; “Reforms outlined by women’s council,” *Vancouver Province*, May 29, 1912; “The moral craze,” *Vancouver Province*, September 5, 1913.

⁷⁶ “Supports Mayor Findlay,” *Vancouver Province*, June 8, 1912.

⁷⁷ Minutes, LCW, May 11, 1911, UBC Rare Books and Special Collections.

⁷⁸ “Reforms outlined by women’s council,” *Vancouver Province*, May 28, 1912.

clientele.⁷⁹ A correspondence involving the Premier, Mayor, and prominent moral reform groups outlined LCW fears that through such places – theatres, dance halls, and the streets of the East End – young women were “fast drifting” from good homes into “careless living.”⁸⁰ They called for amended business licensing to force early closing hours on “social places” that employed women “as so many young girls are out far too late because they were working.”⁸¹ They also wanted laws to raise the legal age of sexual consent to eighteen years in order to suppress “white slave traffic,” and to censor films and books and outlaw movie theatres.⁸² They claimed that fifteen thousand girls were “trafficked” into Canada and the United States annually for “immoral purposes” and that within Canada forty-five thousand more were “victims of the social evil” every year. As remedy they wanted meaner laws and “the supervision of boarding houses.”⁸³ Each LCW demand appealed to the state to more strictly regulate the urban environment outside of the District as a means of spatially influencing workingwomen’s sexuality. And each proposed reform maps a location of workingwomen’s survival and resistance.

For women navigating the continuum of sex work, “occasional” prostitution was a logical extension of “lesser” forms of sex work like treating and tough dancing. What distinguished “occasional” from “criminal” prostitution was a respectability matrix that drew on race, gender, sexuality, and class information to determine the status of a particular woman’s involvement in sex work and how she would be treated by police and courts. “Criminal” or “vicious women” prostitutes were, as Lisa Sanchez has put it, the symbolic “outer limit” of society, an “excluded exclusion.”⁸⁴ They were racialized Black, criminalized as deviant outsiders, and considered “human wrecks” by politicians and civil society.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ McMaster, *Working Girls in the West*, 102.

⁸⁰ Letter, “Girls Protective Home proposal,” Premier’s Papers (McBride), Inward official correspondence, 1912, BC Archives.

⁸¹ Minutes, LCW, May 11, 1911, UBC Rare Books and Special Collections.

⁸² “Reforms outlined by women’s council,” *Vancouver Province*, May 28, 1912.

⁸³ “Reforms outlined by women’s council,” *Vancouver Province*, May 28, 1912.

⁸⁴ Lisa E. Sanchez, “The Global E-Rotic Subject, the Ban, and the Prostitute-Free Zone: Sex Work and the Theory of Differential Exclusion,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 22, no. 6 (December 1, 2004): 862-3.

⁸⁵ Greg Marquis, “Vancouver Vice,” 254; “Letter from Rev. H. Shearer, Board of Social Service and Evangelism, Presbyterian Church in Canada to Premier McBride,” Premier’s Papers (McBride), Inward official correspondence 1912.

Those women who occasionally engaged in sex work were their “victims.” Rather than ‘human wrecks’ these occasional sex workers were referred to by politicians and in the press as victims and “white slaves.”⁸⁶ They were young, white, and had sources of income other than sex work. Typically, they moonlighted in sex work after their licit day-jobs.⁸⁷ Information about the wages of full-time sex workers helps explain the attraction of this moonlighting. Historians Jenea Tallentire and Linda Eversole estimated that in 1900 an average “parlour house” high-end sex worker made around \$1,000 a year; more than five-times as much as full-time domestic worker women made ten years later.⁸⁸ Women who kept licit jobs and only worked in the sex trade periodically would not have made that much money, but, according to JW Wilkinson, the president of the Labour Council, women made as much in one night as they would earn in a week as a domestic worker. In 1912 he wrote, “Supposing I were a girl, good-looking, young and full of the joy of life, and I found that by working in a department store I could only get from four dollars to ten dollars a week, and that by obliging my outwardly virtuous men friends from time to time I could make from fifty to two hundred dollars a week, which should I be likely to do?”⁸⁹ The costs of doing business in brothels – keeping up with fashionable dress and paying fines for breaking morality laws – were prohibitive, but such costs were not the exclusive burden of sex workers. Many of these expenses were simply the cost of being a young woman in the city.

Vancouver newspapers and civil society treated young women as deviant and dangerous to a respectable social order whether they were active in sex work, or just being in public. As Kristen Schachtel argues, “The moral, social, and sexual deviancies of women workers constituted the narratives of the working girl problem” that ranged from

⁸⁶ “Letter from E. Leslie Pidgeon to Rev. Shearer in Toronto, May 7, 1913,” Premier's Papers (McBride), Inward official correspondence 1912.

⁸⁷ Although I have found no direct statement from workingwomen declaring that they moonlighted in sex work, the problem is constantly referred to in labour and even press. “Sex subsidized industries,” *BC Federationist*, June 20, 1913; JW Wilkinson, “Sex prostitution rampant: who and what’s to blame?” *BC Federationist*, June 22, 1912; “No investigation to be made by city council this year. Working conditions of female labor of no concern to employer’s representatives,” *BC Federationist*, September 28, 1912.

⁸⁸ Tallentire, “The Ordinary Needs of Life,” 62; Eversole, *Stella*, 60.

⁸⁹ JW Wilkinson, “Sex prostitution rampant: who and what’s to blame?” *BC Federationist*, June 22, 1912.

the problem that working people could not afford families to the “social evil” of prostitution.⁹⁰ In the summer of 1913 a series of newspaper articles raised a moral panic about young women going astray by sexualizing the appearance of young women in public. One exclaimed, “a beautiful young woman appeared at Kitsilano Beach yesterday afternoon in the latest mode of bathing suits. Spinsters gasped and looked away. Men who had been dozing on the beach suddenly became quite wakeful.” Her suit, “what there was of it, was a vivid red in color, and fashioned in the Parisian style, and displayed to the best possible advantage the lady's shapely figure,” with “clinging material.”⁹¹ Another article, nearly medical in tone, declared, “muscles can be seen inside gown!” It carefully described “the flimsy sheath transparency now worn, through which every movement of the legs can be seen, and the slashings and liftings of the skirt, displaying nether limbs encased in diaphanous silk, not covered by anything but court shoes.”⁹² In November, a *Vancouver Province* article claimed a young woman named Sylvia Pendleton was the cause of “five thousand mill men quitting work, two freight train crews refusing to move a wheel and a near-riot... when she appeared in a 'slit skirt' and swept down Grant Street,” in the industrial East End, “exposing her shapely legs.”⁹³ These news articles, cast through a male gaze, reflected a civil society fascination with young women who were challenging Edwardian norms of public gender presentation through fashion and public behaviour. They illustrated a growing anxiety about “uncontrolled female sexuality by the unattached single woman.”⁹⁴

More severe, however, was the consequence of the panic about working girls and prostitution for young women who found themselves on the criminalized side of the sex work continuum. Emblematic of the dangers that threatened young women who struggled to survive poverty and resist patriarchal domesticity was the life and death of a young, mixed-race, working-class woman who went by the name Ruby Piper. Because she did not properly fit in anywhere in Vancouver's early civil society, Ruby Piper donned masks

⁹⁰ Schachtel, “Kitty Malloys and Rebel Girls,” 16.

⁹¹ “Bathing costume creates sensation,” *Vancouver Province*, July 18, 1913.

⁹² “Muscles can be seen inside gown,” *Vancouver Province*, July 22, 1913.

⁹³ “With slit skirt she wore socks,” *Vancouver Province*, November 7, 1913; “Woman's fashion now leave little to take off,” *Vancouver Province*, July 22, 1913.

⁹⁴ Johnston, “Twice Slain,” 165.

of many identities. She teetered identity boundary markers at the edges of Vancouver civil society as a young, working-class, sometimes single, sometimes white, sometimes Chinese woman without a dependable family. In order to make work, sex, intimacy, and living arrangements with either Chinese or white men, she adopted Chinese and white personas.⁹⁵ To keep her bed in the Winnipeg Rooms hotel at the edge of Chinatown she, a young woman who would have been labeled undesirable if suspected as a prostitute, posed as the Christian evangelist Esther Mitchell. To cross into the US during a time when a single white Canadian woman travelling with an Asian man would risk detention and deportation under the 1910 Mann Act for being “trafficked,” she married her travel partner and posed as Lim Toy, a Chinese woman from San Francisco.⁹⁶ And to navigate the most dangerous elements of Vancouver’s underground illicit economies, she donned the mask of Violet Newell, an “assassin” and “powerful influence” in the Italian “Black Hand” mafia.⁹⁷ Piper was all of these characters and she was none of them.

Ruby Piper was born in a rooming house on the edge of Chinatown in 1892, then Vancouver’s de facto Brothel District, and according to police she had “gone wrong very early in life.”⁹⁸ She was arrested for the first time at the age of ten and had been involved in the sex trade since the age of thirteen.⁹⁹ In the end, her shape shifting was not enough to save her life. In May 1913, at twenty-one years old, leaving behind a note that blamed the pain of her chronic tuberculosis, which gender historian Judith Walkowitz calls the “killer of overworked and undernourished women,” she committed suicide by inhaling gas in her hotel room.¹⁰⁰ Although extraordinary in her tactics, the problem Piper faced was common to many single working class women. Ruby Piper clung to the outer edge of the city’s inchoate civil society – unable to find a place to survive in the licit world of wage

⁹⁵ Johnston, “Twice Slain,” 163.

⁹⁶ “Girl suicide was born in Vancouver,” *Vancouver Province*, May 8, 1913.

⁹⁷ Johnston, “Twice Slain,” 163.

⁹⁸ “Girl suicide was born in Vancouver,” *Vancouver Province*, May 8, 1913.

⁹⁹ “Girl suicide was born in Vancouver;” Coroner’s Inquest records, 1889-1937, May 6, 1913. Province of British Columbia, Vital Statistics Agency.

¹⁰⁰ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 195; “Chinese girl took gas, ending life,” *Vancouver Province*, May 6, 1913.

labour and family, she was killed at twenty-one by the dangerous violence beyond the edge of that world.

Conclusion: Workingwomen's desire and the "occasional structure" of the Alexander Street Brothel District

When the sex trade was spread throughout the city in brothels, hotel rooms, and dance halls, white women could move in this liminal space between treating and more formal sex work with relative ease. Then, in the spring of 1911, Vancouver police closed the Shore Street Brothel District, evacuating and boarding-up the rooming houses in preparation for them to be removed to make space for the planned viaduct. Meanwhile, city officials demolished the cabin-brothels in the surrounding area and staged raids on rooming houses used by many occasional sex workers.¹⁰¹ Records from City business licensing officers track this block-by-block displacement effort with mundane detail.¹⁰² Statements from politicians running for office in subsequent years are more opaque, but suggest that the displacement was designed to push the brothel district to Alexander Street. In 1912, Police Commissioner Williamson said that Alexander Street had been "established and permitted by the previous board, and with their knowledge... prior to the trek from Shore street."¹⁰³ The City-organized displacement of the Shore Street District was part of a plan to make a larger, more contained, and more isolated Brothel District – an extra-civic space segregated from Vancouver civil society and, in the words of Mayor Findlay, "under absolute police control."¹⁰⁴

Many women who worked in the sex trade resisted the push to Alexander Street and scattered around the city, merging into the blurry spaces of women's working-class public culture and frustrating the city's goal to contain prostitution in one area.¹⁰⁵ As the summer approached their scattered efforts blossomed. Some women established small brothel areas on Richards Street, at the east edge of the downtown core, and on Gore

¹⁰¹ "Buildings to be ordered demolished, 1912," Old Buildings Folder, Mayor Findlay Fonds, City of Vancouver Archives.

¹⁰² City of Vancouver, Licence Inspector Files, Vol. 41, City of Vancouver Archives.

¹⁰³ "Mayor denies he ever had secret agreement," *Vancouver Province*, December 4, 1912.

¹⁰⁴ "Mayor denies he ever had secret agreement," *Vancouver Province*, December 4, 1912.

¹⁰⁵ "Lively was debate on subject of vice area," *Vancouver Province*, May 22, 1912.

Avenue, a few blocks south of the Alexander District. Others moved into rooming houses in the East End, where they worked alone or with one or two other workers in single rooms in otherwise residential buildings.¹⁰⁶ Some worked alone on the streets, walking the sidewalks of East Hastings Street through the night.¹⁰⁷ White sex workers were able to blend in and disappear in both the mainstream public culture of fashionable youth, and the criminalized underground of prostitution. There, in a community of women, poor workingwomen found the extra work and money that the licit wage labour economy denied them, and the community that they were denied in the domesticity-fetishizing labour movement. This community of women did not promise poor young workingwomen liberation, but it did offer them a break from crushing poverty and some freedom from the moralizing, stigmatizing handcuffs of domesticity. They found this community in the more laissez faire days when brothels were dispersed throughout the East End, but it was eventually institutionalized in the extra-civic space of the Alexander Street Brothel District where police managed to successfully contain most sex work by the dawn of the workers rebellion of 1912.

The government's rationale for maintaining the "vice district" was explained by Mayor Findlay as he defended the District while campaigning to keep the Mayor's chair in December 1912:

[O]wing to conditions that will always pertain in a city such as Vancouver, so geographically placed that at all times there is a large floating population... to my mind it is far safer that a restricted district be tolerated under complete police control than having this evil scattered throughout the city. Alexander Street was an isolated street and close to the police station and so was a suitable district.¹⁰⁸

Ultimately, the Alexander Street brothel district was an occasional structure, a temporary measure – a concession – to the needs and interests of workingwomen, not to men. Before, during, and after the District, men had access to sex workers. Alexander Street did not change the fact of patriarchy – of men's access to women's bodies and

¹⁰⁶ "Magistrate warns keepers of hotels," *Vancouver Province*, August 28, 1912.

¹⁰⁷ "Two months for women," *Vancouver Province*, August 26, 1912.

¹⁰⁸ "Mayor denies he ever had secret agreement," *Vancouver Province*, December 4, 1912.

labour. It was women who *led*, organized, and participated in the district thanks to the space afforded them by the policy of toleration. But this did not mean that women were happy with life in the district. Despite what it offered as a respite from stigma, poverty, and gendered dependency, the Alexander Street district was also a space of radical social exclusion, danger, and, for white women, a future limited by the spectre of being criminalized as a career prostitute, a “vicious woman.” The brothel district was sharply stratified by hierarchies of race, gender, sexual, and class power that originated in the outside world of Vancouver, but which the community of women in the district reflected and reproduced in its own way. The next chapter will show that these hierarchies in the community of women – particularly those of race – determined which brothel workers, when faced with expanded repressive state powers, would be absorbed into subordinate positions in civil society, who would be incarcerated, who would be deported, and who would be killed.

Chapter 2

Ending the Brothel Era: Reformability, State Power, and Making the “Wayward Girl” White

At the end of January 1914, a month after police raided and shut down the Alexander Street brothel district, a group of six Black women marched arm in arm with a white madam named Dollie Darlington to reopen a brothel in a house Darlington owned at 159 Shore Street. It was a contested site with a thick history. Darlington bought the house in 1910 and operated it as a brothel until police displaced the brothel district to the larger and more isolated Alexander Street in late 1911. When City Council temporarily closed the Alexander Street district in the fall of 1912, Darlington and a group of Black women reopened her house on Shore Street. The closure of Alexander Street produced an air of panic about brothels springing up throughout the city and three police detectives quickly “made a crusade” to arrest ten black women as “inmates and keepers” of the house.¹ The return of this group of seven rebels to Shore Street must have felt like just revenge for those two persecutions and displacements. They threw open the doors of Darlington’s house and declared it the beginning of a new restricted district. White women, who, under the cover of their whiteness, had melted into rooming houses throughout the East End, did not jump to join them. But the boldness of the Shore Street Seven did draw police attention. Deputy Police Chief McRae, a recent appointee specially charged to crack down on the visible prostitution tolerated by previous administrations, personally led the raid that foiled the attempt of the Shore Street Seven to re-open a brothel district. The seven

¹ “Colored woman is held,” *Vancouver Province*, September 6, 1912; Canada, *Fifth Census of Canada 1911*, Sub-districts 1-40; “Another alleged attempt to open a restricted district,” *Vancouver Province*, January 26, 1914.

“mostly coloured” women arrested that night were soon deported from Canada, punctuating the new anti-vice crackdown with an air of permanence.²

The Shore Street Seven could not have anticipated that they would have been so punished for re-opening Darlington’s old house. Vancouver’s brothel districts, while tolerated in an overall sense, were regularly harassed by police. The Christmas 1913 closure of Alexander Street was the fourth time in six years that police had closed Vancouver brothel districts. They closed the Chinatown district in 1907, Shore Street in 1911, and Alexander Street in 1912, and each time, after a short break they allowed women to set up shop again.³ Attentive to this pattern, the Shore Street Seven waited until the civic election season had passed, assuming that, as before, with it should have passed the anti-prostitution moral panic.⁴ But they found that this time, for them, the city had changed.

Why, in 1913, did Vancouver police close the “wide open town” and finally join other west coast cities in prostitution prohibition?⁵ The answer is both economic and military. As long as railway construction continued and British Columbia’s resource economies boomed, the industrial demands for cheap labour rang louder than the Canadian nation builder calls for British families and homes to make a “white man’s province.”⁶ This cheap labour power was necessarily delivered in the persons of single

² "Another alleged attempt to open a restricted district," *Vancouver Province*, January 26, 1914.

³ Nilsen, "The Social Evil," 208.

⁴ "Both ask support of women’s forum, focus on Alexander Street," *Vancouver Province*, January 7, 1914.

⁵ British Columbia was an exception amongst western States and Provinces where there were widespread crackdowns between 1910 and 1913; the last to organize sex work through a so-called “continental” model of “segregation” in brothel districts. See: Letter from Rev. Shearer to Premier McBride, May 30, 1913, Premier’s Papers (McBride), Incoming official correspondence, 1913, BC Archives; "Enforcement of law is urged," *Vancouver Province*, July 5, 1912; Jan MacKell, *Brothels, Bordellos, and Bad Girls: Prostitution in Colorado, 1860-1930* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 223; Eversole, *Stella*, 149.

⁶ For an illustration of this dynamic, see an opinion article in the VTLC newspaper that complained, “The cry 'A White Canada' has been the election dodge of every capitalist politician that ever attempted to gain his end by fooling the workingman,” but politicians use the “white BC” slogan dishonestly: appealing to the anti-Asian sentiment in the working class without implementing it because capitalists have too much money to make. "How the 'White BC' election slogan works out in practice," *BC Federationist*, June 22, 1912. Also see, “Patriotic hypocrisy exemplified by oriental population increase,” *BC Federationist*, May 23, 1913.

men – Chinese and non-British white, predominantly – with a liberalized sex trade as an “occasional structure” that substituted for unwaged wifely work to reproduce their energies.⁷ But by the end of 1913 the railway building in the interior was done, and a global recession had dried up the previous years’ booming demand from the United States and Britain for lumber, pulp, and minerals stolen from Indigenous lands in the west by Canadian extraction companies.⁸ Without the labour market demand for tens of thousands of blanketstiff workers, Premier McBride and Vancouver Mayor Baxter were finally able to cooperate and implement a new prostitution prohibitionist policy that ended the segregated district.

A year earlier, in September 1912, the Vancouver city council had tried to close the Alexander Street brothel district on its own, without the support and cooperation of the province. Premier McBride and Attorney General Bowser sabotaged this prohibitionist effort by instructing provincial jails “not to accept any of the Alexander street women committed from Vancouver.”⁹ Attorney General Bowser explained that he was keeping jail cells open for “the early winter months” when “when the nights are rainy and dark, the thieves and hold-up men start their work.” But more importantly, he said, was that he believed “all modern thought” has found that “reform and not punishment is the better method of treating these people.”¹⁰ *Vancouver Province* editor WC Nichol write an editorial defending the Attorney General’s policy, explaining that vice was inevitable in a city the size of Vancouver. Those conditions, he said, “must be met, not by continual suppression and a pious hope that the future will take care of itself, but by making provision for human beings to meet decently in public and allow them to eat and drink what they will, as long as they behave themselves.”¹¹ By the end of 1913, these “conditions” had changed. In a letter to a prominent moral reformer, Revered Shearer of the Presbyterian Church in

⁷ This dynamic was the topic of the first chapter of this thesis. On the concept of an “occasional structure” see: Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 2, 177.

⁸ McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 147.

⁹ “Refused to take women into jail,” *Vancouver Province*, September 17, 1912; “Says woman was refuse at jail,” *Vancouver Province*, October 29, 1912; “Refusal to accept women prisoners,” *Vancouver Province*, November 4, 1912.

¹⁰ “Cannot provide jail room for all women,” *Vancouver Province*, November 26, 1912.

¹¹ “Politics and vice,” *Vancouver Province*, November 5, 1912.

Toronto, Premier McBride explained that he had ordered the provincial jails to turn away convicted prostitutes only because “the accommodation was overcrowded it was considered that dangerous criminals should be incarcerated rather than the unfortunates referred to, but since then the gaol accommodation is being increased with a view to meeting the necessities of the Province.”¹² Armed with new and greater powers under *Criminal Code* and *Immigration Act* reforms, and equipped with improved infrastructure of enforceable borders, and more prisons and institutions, those governments that had organized a regime of prostitution “tolerance” cracked down with mass arrests, deportations, and the incarceration and institutionalization of “criminal women.”

This chapter will trace how the police break-up of the Alexander Street brothel district drew on race divisions to split the community of women, absorbing white, occasional sex workers into the bottom tiers of the urban working class, and driving Black, Indigenous, and “criminal prostitutes” further into a criminalized and stigmatized underground. During the tenure of the Alexander Street brothel district – white workingwomen’s occasional alliance with criminalized sex workers, Black and Indigenous women and Asian men created a space for poor women’s resistance and survival, just as white workingmen’s alliance with IWW militants created its revolutionary union movement. The fact that they cooperated together to survive and resist shared conditions of oppression, however, does not mean they developed a unified class identity or formed principled sustained solidarities with Black, Indigenous, and criminalized sex workers.¹³

Even while they worked together on Alexander Street, all sex workers were not treated equally by hegemonic power. All who transgressed imperial gender and sexual norms to work along the continuum of the sex trade were considered “fallen women,” but not all the fallen were considered lost.¹⁴ Moral reformers referred consistently to two groups of women, in the words of Reverend Shearer, the “criminal prostitutes,” who they

¹² Letter from Premier McBride to Reverend Shearer, April 21, 1913, Premier's Papers (McBride), Inward official correspondence 1912. BC Archives.

¹³ *Community of women* is a concept some gender historians have used, with varying language, to describe brothel districts in early, overtly male-dominated city spaces, including Vancouver. See: Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 200; McMaster, *Working Girls in the West*, 103.

¹⁴ Strange, *Toronto's Girl Problem*, 60-61.

regarded as “human wrecks” beyond saving, and the white slaves and “young girls who are beginning the downward course.”¹⁵ Because they were forced to perform victimhood and reformability in order to access charity services, women knew that charities and government program operators only considered white women to be reformable.¹⁶ I argue that reform, as championed by Attorney General Bowser and Premier McBride, and carried out by municipal government programs, police, and, moral reform groups, was an assimilation project that sought to bring white “wayward girls” into civil society through the use of bourgeois sexuality and the enforcement of domestic gender norms. When police closed the Alexander Street brothel district, signalling the end of Vancouver’s brothel era, white members of the poor working class who accessed the scarce supply of food, housing and education provided through reform program were absorbed into the margins of Vancouver civil society. Black, Indigenous, and criminalized women, on the other hand, received from the same agencies and the governments only prison, deportation, and death.

Race and social status within the community of women

Women owned, managed, and dominated the Alexander Street brothel district. There was no census taken during the years that the Alexander Street brothel district existed, but a census taken on Shore Street in 1911, just before that district’s displacement to Alexander Street, maps demographic dynamics that, according to the broader details

¹⁵ Letter from Reverend H Shearer, Board of Social Service and Evangelism, Presbyterian Church in Canada, to Premier McBride, May 30, 1913, and letter from E Leslie Pidgeon to Reverend Shearer, May 7, 1913, Premier’s Papers (McBride), Inward official correspondence 1912.

¹⁶ The meeting minutes from the Local Council of Women and correspondences between male moral reformers and the Premier make it clear that when reformers used the expression “white slave” they meant *white*, and that they imagined their rescue programs for “girls” to always mean *white* girls. See, for example: Letter from Premier McBride to Mrs. Thomas Scouler, March 8, 1911, Premier’s Papers, BC Archives; “Memorandum from the Local Councils of Women of British Columbia,” January 7, 1911, Premier’s papers, BC Archives; “Resolution on Hindu wives,” Local Council of Women Annual General Meeting, February 5, 1912, Vancouver Local Council of Women Collection, Minute Book, 1912-14; “Problem of caring for working women,” Local Council of Women meeting, February 3, 1912, Vancouver Local Council of Women Collection, Minute Book, 1912-14.

recorded by the private Henderson's Directory, continued on Alexander Street.¹⁷ The Shore Street district was populated entirely by women: three hundred and forty-two women were listed as lodgers, domestics, and heads of household.¹⁸ Remarkably, no men were registered as Shore Street residents. This was exceptional in the city as a whole, and even moreso in the male-dominated working-class East End. Other histories have pointed out that the gender ratio in Vancouver before World War One was three men to every two women.¹⁹ However this ratio did not map out evenly across the city: wealthy Anglo-Saxon neighbourhoods had something like gender parity. The three-to-one gender ratio was approximately true in working-class communities, starker amongst poor workers, and extreme among Asian workers where there were practically no women at all. In the racial ghetto and bachelor society of Chinatown the gender ratio was approximately twenty men to every woman.²⁰ In the more racially mixed but poor and transient rooming houses on few blocks surrounding Chinatown, the gender ratio was more than twelve men to every woman. This district that would come to be known as Skid Road, the census recorded 1,501 men and only 124 women.²¹ Within this city of men was a single street of women.

Those men who were found in the brothels – by census recorders or police doing raids – were likely customers, residents, security guards, boyfriends, or playing some role in the service or administration of the brothel because there was little evidence of male pimps playing a significant role in Vancouver's brothel districts. This was likely because Canadian prostitution law criminalized the repeated presence of men in brothels, pressuring them to stay out of the day-to-day operation of the business.²² Or it could be,

¹⁷ Canada, *Fifth Census of Canada 1911*, Sub-districts 1-40; LG Henderson, *Henderson's City of Vancouver Directory for 1890: Containing a Complete Street Directory and an Alphabetical Directory of the City of Victoria* (Vancouver: Henderson Directory Co, 1911-1923).

¹⁸ *Fifth Census of Canada 1911*.

¹⁹ McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 190.

²⁰ The 1900 census counted 2,053 men, twenty-seven women and twenty-six children in Chinatown. John Price, "'Orienting' the Empire: MacKenzie King and the Aftermath of the 1907 Race Riots," *BC Studies*, no. 156 (Winter 2007): 56.

²¹ *Fifth Census of Canada 1911*.

²² Under Canadian law it was not illegal to set foot in a "house of ill fame," but it was illegal for a man to be a "habitual frequenter." Men who were found repeatedly on the premises of a bawdy house, as bodyguards, bouncers, or piano players, were vulnerable to prosecution. Backhouse, "Nineteenth-Century Canadian Prostitution Law," 421; Eversole, *Stella*, 72.

as historian Julia Laite argues occurred in London England, that there was an internal momentum in the development of management and leadership in the sex industry as women moved up the ladder from working to managing to owning. Laite argues that “the pimp” was a feature of the highly criminalized, underground sex trade because anti-brothel laws stopped women from cohabitating and male managers helped women avoid public procuring charges, provided bail money, and protected women against client violence.²³ Whatever the reason, under British Columbia’s brothel district system of regulating the sex industry in Vancouver, women, seemingly exclusively, performed these owner and manager roles.

Who were these women who crafted a women-dominant space in a city so heavily characterized by men? The working class of the brothel was racially diverse. Arrest records show that sex worker communities included Black, Indigenous, and – outside of Vancouver – Chinese and Japanese women.²⁴ Managers of the brothels, however, were all European, British, and American white women. The 1911 census recorded that six of the eleven building managers on Shore Street were from the United States. All eleven were white – six British, three Irish, and two French.²⁵ Some infamous brothel managers were amongst those named in the census and Henderson’s directory as building managers, including Dollie Darlington. Others were consistently named between buildings on Shore and Alexander Street. This leads me to conclude that brothel managers tended to openly declare themselves to census takers – whether public or with the Henderson’s directory – to be building managers.²⁶ While the non-British whites among them would not have been recognizable as entirely white, for ethnic as well as gender and sex reasons,

²³ Laite, *Common Prostitutes and Ordinary Citizens*, 93-95.

²⁴ Although Japanese men ran some brothels in Vancouver, this research suggests Japanese women only worked in public brothels outside of the city. Following a survey of Japanese language newspapers, Julia Aoki and Ayaka Yoshimizu argue that this was because there were social prohibitions within the Japanese community against Japanese women sex workers serving Japanese men clients. Julia Aoki and Ayaka Yoshimizu, “Exploring the Devil Caves.” Presentation at Powell Street Festival, August 2014.

²⁵ Canada, *Fifth Census of Canada 1911*, Section 24.

²⁶ Canada, *Fifth Census of Canada 1911*; “Arrest woman again,” *Vancouver Province*, September 11, 1913;

they were also not entirely excluded from the family of whiteness.²⁷ There were at least 340 women living in rooming houses on the 100-block of Shore Street. Of the ninety-seven of them interviewed by census officials, all but one of these ninety-seven were white. The one Black woman recorded, Ada Glenn, was a 42-year-old woman who was listed as the building's housekeeper.²⁸ Who occupied the other 243 rooms on the block? Which of these rooms were rented by the hour as "houses of assignation?" Which were residences used as ad-hoc brothels, to "occasional prostitute" women and who were these renter-workers?²⁹

These gaps between the large household numbers and small numbers of individual inhabitants recorded by the census support the implications of police arrest records that there were two worlds of prostitution; one officially regulated and contained, and the other diffuse, hidden, and covert.³⁰ The covert sex trade was also divided in two, that of the occasional sex worker, who was closer to civil society, and that of the more criminalized and excluded, which was the furthest away. The clearest line separating these different worlds was race, but other social identifiers recorded in the 1911 Census map the hierarchical layers of status within the brothel district's illicit economy and society.

Citizenship played a crucial role. Just under half of the ninety-seven women interviewed said they were white Americans, and the other half said they were white Canadian.³¹ Those Americans had every reason to fear deportation. After all, in the aftermath of the 1907 "anti-Asiatic" riot, Dominion police organized a census and mass deportation of sex workers after conducting a census of the brothel district, then enmeshed on Dupont Street in Chinatown. Out of the 180 women this police census identified as

²⁷ Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics*, 6; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 8, 91.

²⁸ Canada, *Fifth Census of Canada 1911*. Thanks are due here to Vancouver local historian James Johnstone, who shared with me the tables of Shore Street brothel residents that he compiled from the 1911 census.

²⁹ Historian Lori Rotenberg describes these different forms of brothels. See: Rotenberg, "The Wayward Worker," 34.

³⁰ Nilsen, "The Social Evil," 224.

³¹ Canada, *Fifth Census of Canada 1911*.

prostitutes, all but five were US citizens.³² Yet on Shore Street, white American women freely reported their immigration status to the census taker. Other information collected also suggested the official inhabitants of the Shore Street district were “criminal” not “occasional” prostitutes. They also tended to be educated, independent-minded, non-conformists, and rebellious: all were literate, and under “religion” more than a quarter of them were listed as atheist, agnostic, free thinker, no church, infidel, or simply, “none.”³³ Diverse in other regards, the residents of Shore Street were recorded as non-British whites.³⁴

Criminal arrest records and media reports revealed that there were also Black, Asian, and Indigenous women working in and around the Shore and Alexander Street brothel districts. White women were a majority of those arrested, but, criminologist John McLaren estimates that Black women accounted for nearly thirty percent of women arrested on morality charges in Vancouver between 1912 and 1917.³⁵ That does not mean that thirty percent of women in the sex trade were Black. White race myths common in the US and Canada viewed Black women as innately sexual and therefore predisposed to prostitution. These myths combined with a distinctly white Canadian race idea that Black people were not “climatically suitable” for Canada, making Black women hyper-visible to police as likely American, suspect as possible prostitutes, and disproportionately targeted by police for prostitution arrests and charges.³⁶ We do know that Black women worked in the sex trade, but we don’t know why they did not show up in the official government record of the residents of the brothel district. Maybe Black women lived in Shore Street buildings in less accessible parts of the rooming houses, thereby avoiding the census taker, or maybe they were not permanent residents of the rooms. Maybe white workers

³² Char Smith, “Crossing the Line: American Prostitutes in Western Canada, 1895-1925,” in *One Step Over the Line: Toward a History of Women in the North American West*, ed. Elizabeth Jameson and Sheila McManus (Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press, 2008), 253; Eversole, *Stella*, 123.

³³ Canada, *Fifth Census of Canada 1911*.

³⁴ Specifically, 16 were listed as English; 15 French; 13 German; 24 Irish; 13 Scottish; 1 Jewish; 1 Norwegian; 3 Spanish; 1 Swedish, and; 1 Welsh. Canada, *Fifth Census of Canada 1911*.

³⁵ Marquis, “Vancouver Vice,” 254.

³⁶ McMaster, *Working Girls in the West*, 98; Sarah-Jane Mathieu, *North of the Color Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 6, 57; Marquis, “Vancouver Vice,” 254.

protected Black workers against police and government agents, hiding them during patrols, and maybe white enumerators avoided the less-accessible rooms in the brothel buildings. Maybe white and Black women shared the spaces, sometimes operating out of brothel district buildings and sometimes in unregulated areas throughout the East End, and maybe they worked manufacturing jobs nearby. What we can assume is that the absence of Black women from the census rolls means that, blocked from accessing a circle of legitimacy by their double jeopardy as neither white nor man, Black women occupied a second tier of sex work, frequenting those more perilous areas of the city prone to police crackdown, arrest, and deportation from the city or the country.³⁷

Women who lived in the district tended to be single, though the meaning of being unmarried changed with age. Being unmarried was characteristic of sex work, and, past a certain age, also a determinant. Historian Jenea Tallentire argues that single women over thirty were considered beyond marriage-able age. She dubbed them “ever single.”³⁸ The 1911 census shows that all eleven “heads of household” interviewed on Shore Street were single women. Also, brothel owners and managers tended to be older than workers. Only nine percent of the eighty-three “lodgers” on Shore Street were thirty-years-old and older, compared to sixty-four percent of the eleven women listed as heads of household.³⁹ There are some indications that aging was a contributing factor that decreased some sex workers’ social mobility and pushed some white women into more permanent brothel management positions as a matter of survival.⁴⁰

Nellie Foster, also known as Roma Grahame, worked in Stella Carroll’s brothel in Victoria in 1911. By 1913 she owned and ran her own brothel on Alexander Street.⁴¹ Such

³⁷ Matheiu, *North of the Color Line*, 41, 42. Mathieu’s chapter on Canada’s anti-Black immigration policies at the beginning of the Twentieth Century is a valuable critique of fundamental and distinctly Canadian racism. The insights in this paragraph are indebted to her work.

³⁸ Tallentire, “The ordinary needs of life,” 59.

³⁹ Canada, *Fifth Census of Canada 1911*.

⁴⁰ Historian of gender and sexuality Judith Walkowitz argues that, in Victorian London, “as long as prostitution represented a temporary stage in a woman’s career, as long as she could leave it at her discretion, she was not irrevocably... limited in her future choices.” Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 196.

⁴¹ Eversole, *Stella*, 138; *Henderson’s City Directory of Vancouver, 1913, 1914*.

a trajectory could have been due to being criminalized as a “habitual” prostitute.⁴² Foster may have felt trapped in the sex industry and decided to try to improve her status and fortunes within the subculture, or she may have seized an opportunity to invest her savings. Likely she felt a combination of these pressures and opportunities. During the two quick years from 1911 to 1913 Foster aged into her late twenties and past the average age of marriage.⁴³ She might have felt she had crossed over into deviant gender categories, from what Tallentire has characterized as the continuum from “unwanted spinster to the diseased prostitute to the dangerous lesbian.”⁴⁴ Owning and running a brothel meant more influence and wealth within the subculture, but in the dominant society, it meant transitioning from “occasional” to “criminal” prostitute. The achievement of the higher income that she would have won would have been significantly tempered by the increased social scorn, and the danger of losing everything to arrest and criminal prosecution. Such brothel management tended to be an activity of single, older, independent white women like Nellie Foster.

Terms of an occasional alliance

The brothel district on Alexander Street was a space where women could organize what historian Judith Walkowitz called a “distinct female subgroup,” where the economy, living arrangements, social and cultural life, and community and health supports could exist apart from male-dominant Vancouver society.⁴⁵ Julia Laite argues that in smaller “frontier” cities with labour-intensive resource extraction economies, officials allowed sex workers to create “satellite cities” outside city limits where they could organize sex industries.⁴⁶ Similarly, geographer Patrick Dunae calls the brothel district in Victoria at the end of the nineteenth century a “prostitutional” space that was governed by different sexual standards than the rest of the city.⁴⁷ These citybuilding methods are consistent with the principles of liberalism, where an enfranchised in-group and humanism is developed

⁴² McMaster, *Working Girls in the West*, 102; Clement, *Love for Sale*, 3.

⁴³ Canada, *Fifth Census of Canada 1911*.

⁴⁴ Tallentire, “The Ordinary Needs of Life,” 46, 51.

⁴⁵ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 200.

⁴⁶ Laite, “Historical Perspectives on Industrial Development,” 748-9.

⁴⁷ Dunae, “Geographies of sexual commerce,” 117.

through their cooperation to exclude undesirable others with geographic and symbolic borders.⁴⁸ The activity and maintenance of the female subgroup in Vancouver depended on such an extra-civic space, which was inside city limits but outside the symbolic idea of what made the city. The condition of “toleration” for the district by city hall and the police was that sex work be “contained” to this extra-civic space because, as Mayor Findlay explained in 1912, “it is far safer that a restricted district be tolerated under complete police control than having this evil scattered throughout the city.”⁴⁹

A benefit of joining this subgroup in Vancouver was that women in the Alexander Street brothel district pooled their resources to deal with city bureaucracy and to mount a collective defence against the constant threat of arrest and criminal convictions. Outside the district, individual women had to negotiate pay-offs directly with individual officers, while organized brothels had fixed arrangements, including elaborate business licensing payments. Despite losing the \$9,000 annual income from fire insurance in 1912, Vancouver City Hall still managed to increase licensing revenues overall by \$6,000 just by collecting business licensing fees and violation fines on vice industries. The business licensing inspector responsible was Chas Jones, a Socialist Party member who was zealous in his vice-regulation crusade.⁵⁰ In 1912 the city increased licensing fee amounts for a range of vice businesses including pool halls, laundries, tobacconists, and movie theatre, and Jones convinced them to hire him an assistant to step up enforcement. Licensing fees for businesses associated with vice netted a massive \$3,000 increase between 1911 and 1913. The business licensing fees collected from lodging houses were possibly fee increases that specifically targeted brothels. These dramatically increased during the height of the Alexander Street district, from \$251 in 1911 to \$3,245 in 1913.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Smith, *Liberalism, Surveillance and Resistance*, 26.

⁴⁹ “Mayor denies he ever had secret agreement,” *Vancouver Province*, December 4, 1912.

⁵⁰ Chas Jones, “Memorandum to Mayor Findlay on Vice Bylaws of the City of Winnipeg and Toronto,” August 1912, Mayor Findlay Fonds, City of Vancouver Archives; Chas Jones, “A ballade of uncommon law,” *Western Clarion*, January 13, 1912.

⁵¹ Fees collected from the following business licenses in 1911 and 1913: Billiards: \$7,233 / \$10,679; Tobacco: \$1141 / \$4,317; Restaurants: \$857 / \$2,362; Laundries: \$545 / \$1,662; Lodging houses: \$251 / \$3,245; Theatres: \$4,324 / \$6,700. “Business licensing finance report 1912,” and “Business licensing finance report 1913,” License inspector files, City of Vancouver Archives.

On top of City licensing fees, police graft was widespread. A moralizing poem published in the *BC Federationist* titled "Soliloquy of a Fallen Woman," while not a reliable document of the feelings or activities of sex worker women overall, is notable because its first stanza refers to police corruption as the most obvious hazard of sex work: "I have dodged the sergeant's grafty paw, have fought the cold, defied the law."⁵² The greatest cost of doing business was a legal form of graft: court fines. A single police sweep could yield hundreds of dollars in fines from a court magistrate the next morning.⁵³ When Vancouver's mayor and commissioners agreed to re-open the Alexander Street brothel district in November 1912, they tried to save face by claiming, "Alexander street should continue to exist, but under absolute control, and that the minds of the persons there should be disabused of any idea that we favored vice in any manner."⁵⁴ This meant that women in brothels were subject to occasional, enthusiastic, raids for selling alcohol. For example, in October 1913, thirty-two women from Alexander Street were charged with selling liquor without a license. They pled guilty and were fined \$100 each. Helena Gutteridge reported in her *BC Federationist* column that this process was carried out "in the most perfunctory manner. The impression conveyed was that this little piece of formalism was gone through for appearance's sake, and the \$100 fine was the tax the women paid on their profession."⁵⁵ Women who were part of the community of women on Alexander Street who were fined or arrested during police crackdowns were supported through organized legal defence networks run by brothel managers who treated fines, court costs, and bail as a collectively-considered cost of doing business.⁵⁶ Legal attorneys Frank Lyons of the law firm Russell and Russell and Dugald Donaghy appeared often

⁵² "Soliloquy of a fallen woman," *BC Federationist*, March 14, 1913.

⁵³ Smith, "Crossing the Line," 249; "Start raids on Alexander Street," *Vancouver Province*, August 30, 1912; Helena Gutteridge, "Women's Suffrage Column: Commonsense and Vice," *BC Federationist*, October 31, 1913.

⁵⁴ "Never intended to wipe out Alexander street," *Vancouver Province*, December 3, 1912.

⁵⁵ Helena Gutteridge, "Women Suffrage: Common Sense and Vice," *BC Federationist*, October 13, 1913.

⁵⁶ "Two score women are ordered out," *Vancouver Province*, September 3, 1912; "Women plead for time to vacate," *Vancouver Province*, September 7, 1912; "Women refused bail," *Vancouver Daily Province*, October 19, 1912.

enough on behalf of women arrested on vice charges that they must have had a standing agreement, or have been kept on a retainer by brothel managers in the Alexander district.⁵⁷

Women in the Alexander Street district also created or negotiated their own distinct health care since they were excluded from, or regulated by, the free health services that were run by moralizing charities. The Local Council of Women was concerned about tuberculosis in rooming houses, which they called the spread of the “white plague,” but rather than advocate for laws controlling conditions in rental housing, the LCW used the health crisis in the working class as an opportunity to build their organization’s infrastructure. The LCW took the opportunity to apply for municipal funding to develop “a free dispensary for small ailments,” a building for the poor who arrive and cannot afford to stay in a hotel, and booklets of charity coupons rather than money.⁵⁸ And while I have not found a sign of compulsory medical inspections of sex worker women in Vancouver, I think it is likely that doctors exercised a public health practice of inspection and treatment in the Vancouver districts. Moral reformers reported that in the brothel district of the town of Nelson BC, “medical examination of the women was required.”⁵⁹ On top of the inspections reported in Nelson, two other pieces of evidence point to this likelihood: San Francisco, with which Vancouver City Council communicated about prostitution-management strategies, opened a medical clinic for sex workers that was run from March 1913 to May 1915, and; Doctor Arthur Percival Proctor, who was Chief Medical Officer for the CPR and ran a tuberculosis hospital in Kamloops, gave a report to Local Council of Women meeting in 1913 that there were between six hundred and 1,200 cases of tuberculosis in East End rooming houses in 1912.⁶⁰ Given these practices in comparable communities and the

⁵⁷ "Women plead for time to vacate," *Vancouver Province*, September 7, 1912; "If guilty, all will go to jail," *Vancouver Province*, September 30, 1912;

⁵⁸ *Vancouver Province*, "Seek City aid in the fight against tuberculosis," June 1, 1912; Meeting Minutes, November 6, 1911, Vancouver Local Council of Women Collection, UBC Rare Books and Special Collections.

⁵⁹ At a moral reform meeting in November 1911, a letter was read from Mr. ES Logie in Nelson making this claim. I have not found additional records. "Had warned police board to limit district," *Vancouver Province*, November 26, 1911.

⁶⁰ Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 16-17; Meeting Minutes, "Meeting on the Housing Problem," February 3, 1913, Local Council of Women Minute Book, 1912-1914, UBC Rare Books and Special Collections; "Had warned police board to limit district," *Vancouver Province*, November 26, 1911.

near-epidemic of tuberculosis cases, it is likely that doctors offered health and medical services to women in the houses on Alexander Street.⁶¹ This health care would have been would have been the only health care many sex workers could access.

Other basic services and social supports for low-income women were delivered through municipal programs or, moreoften, through charities and moral reformer organizations like the Salvation Army and the Local Council of Women. Reformers considered the delivery of these services a critical part of their mission to “create and develop a true aristocracy in our new land.”⁶² Whether planning single women’s housing, a health “clinic for small ailments,” domesticity training programs, or forms of financial relief to the unemployed, when reformers talked about supporting “girls” or “women,” they always meant “white” women who could serve this aristocracy. The Local Council of Women applied for funding from the provincial and municipal governments in order to rescue white women from “large rooming houses” which they believed were having a negative impact “upon the home making and the upbringing of children” and “the moral and physical development of the race.”⁶³ They applied repeatedly for provincial contracts to recruit “suitable domestic servants from the British Isles and the Scandinavian countries, for British Columbia,” pledging that they would secure “the most desirable class of girls only.”⁶⁴ Premier McBride refused them, leaving provincial immigration contracts in the hands of the Salvation Army.⁶⁵ The LCW pursuit of these contracts may have been motivated by a desire to expand the influence of their organization, but in their meetings they said they believed the Salvation Army was mismanaging their program money.

⁶¹ *Vancouver Province*, March 12, 1913; Meeting Minutes, November 6, 1911, Vancouver Local Council of Women, UBC Rare Books and Special Collections; “Seek City aid in the fight against tuberculosis,” *Vancouver Province*, June 1, 1912; Premier’s papers, Inward official correspondence, 1911, BC Archives.

⁶² “Problem of caring for working women,” Local Council of Women meeting, February 3, 1912, Vancouver Local Council of Women Collection, Minute Book, 1912-14.

⁶³ “Resolutions on housing,” Local Council of Women meeting, February 3, 1912, Vancouver Local Council of Women Collection, Minute Book, 1912-14.

⁶⁴ “Memorandum from the Local Councils of Women of British Columbia,” January 7, 1911, Premier’s papers, BC Archives.

⁶⁵ Letter from Premier McBride to Miss. SR Crease, Local Council of Women immigration convener, January 16, 1911, Premier’s Papers. BC Archives.

The Local Council of Women complained that Salvation Army homes catered to too independent a life for women residents, leaving them to socialize with men. The LCW's "home for wayward girls" would provide more supervision and care because, they believed, "the girls need mothering."⁶⁶ Worse was that there was no "proper place for girls rescued from the White Slavers."⁶⁷ So-called "white slavery," a discourse that was fertile soil for a race and sex panic that benefited the prostitution prohibitionist and regulatory agenda of reformers like the LCW, was more of a myth than fact. Even the President of Canadian Police said in 1913, there was "little or no white slavery in the Dominion."⁶⁸ But, as the name suggests, the LCW did not have criminalized sex workers in mind as the residents of their "home for wayward girls." Such "criminal women" could be involuntarily condemned to jails. The LCW believed involuntary incarceration in institutions was an "urgent need... for erring young women who are found guilty of some misdemeanor in the eyes of the law."⁶⁹ Beginning in 1911, the LCW operated weekly domestic training classes for seven to eight hundred white women, teaching cooking and needlework.⁷⁰ There is no better example of what they meant by "mothering" workingwomen. Workers' groups were cynical about these programs, arguing even that the middle-class women in the LCW and Salvation Army were receiving public funding in order to import and train low-cost servants to work in their own homes.⁷¹

To access these services and supports – housing, health care, education – young women had to cede their independence, or at least play along and act reformable; and they also had to be white. The Local Council of Women was overt about their opposition to giving support to Asian women. In 1912, in response to a series of protests organized by Sikh men in New Westminster demanding Canada lift the ban on South Asian women's

⁶⁶ "Existing rescue homes," Local Council of Women meeting, February 3, 1912, Vancouver Local Council of Women Collection, Minute Book, 1912-14; City Council communications, February 13, 1911, City of Vancouver Archive, City Council meeting minutes, 1905.

⁶⁷ Local Council of Women meeting, March 8, 1913, Vancouver Local Council of Women Collection, Minute Book, 1912-14.

⁶⁸ "White slavery cases to be substantiated," *Vancouver Province*, July 9, 1913.

⁶⁹ Letter from Mrs. P Naughton of the Local Council of Women to Premier McBride, March 26, 1911, Premier's papers (McBride), Inward official correspondence, 1911, BC Archives.

⁷⁰ "Domestic service," LCW meeting minutes, February 6, 1911, Vancouver Local Council of Women Collection, Minute Book, April 1910 – January 1912.

⁷¹ "Labor men decry Salvation Army schemes." *Vancouver Province*, March 12, 1913.

passage across the border, the LCW passed a resolution saying “the admission of Hindu women cannot be regarded as a question affecting only a few broken households.” They argued that allowing South Asian women to enter Canada would establish “a permanent and growing Asiatic colony instead of one that is transient and diminishing and may establish a precedent rendering it difficult to protect the Dominion from the Social and economic consequence of a large and continuous immigration from Asia.”⁷² At one Local Council of Women meeting in 1914, a member named Mrs. McNaughton moved a motion that the LCW invite Asian women’s associations to incorporate into the Local Council in order to support Asian women being recruited into the sex trade. The motion passed at the meeting but the executive intervened and overruled and blocked it after the meeting.⁷³ The Local Council of Women’s reform programs gave a message to the women who accessed them, and to those that did not, that white women who could perform gendered domesticity were welcome in their Vancouver civil society, and that Black, Indigenous, Asian, and criminalized sex workers were not. Workingwomen who the LCW did not consider amongst their reformable clientele, for reasons of race, age, or criminality, would have had to find health care, housing, education, and financial support elsewhere.

It could appear as though the female subgroup in the Alexander Street district was a political expression of poor and sex worker women’s pan-racial solidarity and even group consciousness. But as feminist theorist bell hooks warns, such mutual support is not the same as solidarity. “Support,” hooks says, “can be occasional. It can be given and just as easily withdrawn.”⁷⁴ Alexander Street was characterized more by this occasional support than solidarity. The community of women was built by the common threats it faced from city regulators and licencing officers, police, the courts, and violent men. While women faced these threats together as a collective, the community nevertheless was stratified by

⁷² “Resolution on Hindu wives,” Local Council of Women Annual General Meeting, February 5, 1912, Vancouver Local Council of Women Collection, Minute Book, 1912-14.

⁷³ Local Council of Women meeting minutes, September 1, 1914, and Local Council of Women executive committee meeting minutes, September 17, 1914, Vancouver Local Council of Women Collection, Minute Book, 1914-15

⁷⁴ bell hooks, “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women,” in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 410.

race and respectability metrics similar to those in dominant society.⁷⁵ The motor force of the district was its illicit economy, which was no socialist utopia. The illicit economy of the brothel district was a mirror of the licit capitalist economy surrounding it. The sex trade was driven by a profit motive and organized through hierarchies of power structured between owners and producers. The working class of the brothels was the sex workers, who, while pushed into alliance with managers and owners, were also exploited by them as wage labourers whose labour in the brothels was profitable to this illicit small-time capitalist class. While there was occasional support between women that transgressed racial, citizenship, and classed lines, this support was not based on the sort of political principles that could have critiqued and overcome hierarchies of power inherited from dominant society. One consequence of this stratification was that racialized and criminalized women in the district were much more vulnerable to police and client violence than young, white women.

How Mayor Baxter shut down the Alexander Street brothel district

At Christmas 1913 the political tide turned against the Alexander Street brothel district. The change began with a downturn in the economic energy that had driven the City's population and real estate boom. Vancouver's building spree wound down at the same time that railway builders finished BC's railway lines, and both synched with a global economic recession that killed the speculative climate that had fuelled coal and logging extraction industries. Unemployment mushroomed.⁷⁶ Over 1,600 people registered for relief in the first three days of the City government's January 1914 opening of the "Free Labour Bureau."⁷⁷ The large, "floating cosmopolitan" population of poor men and women – in high demand for decades as an army of disposable workers – were suddenly little more than an economic and social hazard.⁷⁸ By the end of 1914, scores of IWW organizers

⁷⁵ Theorist Pierre Bourdieu refers to this reflection of power structures at the centre of society in its subaltern groups as "concentric circles" of power and notes they can manifest in symbols of power like social clout as well as the money form. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 30.

⁷⁶ McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 146-47.

⁷⁷ "Increase of land values in Vancouver despite recession," *Vancouver Province*, January 10, 1914; "City unemployed in serious problem," *BC Federationist*, January 30, 1914.

⁷⁸ Meeting Minutes, "Housing Problem," February 3, 1913, Local Council of Women Minute Book, 1912-14, UBC Rare Books and Special Collections.

were deported, many of their members were swept into the war, and many others just left the city because of the end of the construction boom.⁷⁹ A similar fate befell the women on Alexander Street. According to reports from the Central Mission Protective Agency, the women who lived and worked on Alexander Street had no intention of quitting sex work for licit wage labour jobs. After doing a police-escorted visit to the doorways of brothels, these moral reformers reported to the media that “[m]ost of them laughed at the idea of ‘reforming.’”⁸⁰ This discourse justified a heavy hand. Mayor Baxter presented the district as composed of undesirable women. The danger that “criminal prostitutes” could run out into residential neighbourhoods or rooming houses filled white Vancouverites with panic. They feared that the sex district would take over the city. But the presence of sex workers in the city was nothing new. What had changed was that recession foreclosed the labour market demand for tens of thousands of cheap, transient workers and resolved the crisis of authority that fitted the Alexander Street district as an occasional structure to manage and satiate the needs of poor white workers.

The winter campaign for Vancouver’s annual Mayoral election shook Premier McBride’s confidence that “the great majority of the people in the Province [were] satisfied” with his “vice containment” policies.⁸¹ Property-owning white women in Vancouver had won the franchise and were set to vote in the 1914 election for the first time. For many women who planned to exercise this franchise, closing the Alexander Street district registered high on their priority list, and both Mayoral candidates played themselves up as reformers.⁸² California had passed a bill enfranchising white women in 1911 and it led to a spike in prostitution prohibition activities including the State 1913 *Red Light Abatement Act*, which enabled a crackdown on San Francisco brothels.⁸³ LD Taylor, who had been

⁷⁹ Barbara Roberts, “Shovelling out the ‘Mutinous:’ Political Deportation from Canada before 1936,” *Labour / Le Travail* 18 (October 1, 1986): 77–110, 81; McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 148.

⁸⁰ “Declined offer to lead new life,” *Vancouver Daily Province*, November 26, 1913.

⁸¹ Premier McBride to Reverent Shearer, September 2, 1913, *Premier’s Papers (McBride)*, Inward official correspondence.

⁸² “Both ask support of women’s forum, focus on Alexander Street,” *Vancouver Province*, January 7, 1914; Anne Kloppenborg et al., eds., *Vancouver’s First Century: A City Album, 1860-1960* (Vancouver: JJ Douglas Ltd, 1977), 61.

⁸³ Eversole, *Stella*, 149.

mayor in 1910 and 1911, campaigned mostly on a jobs platform, promising better than the two dollar a day relief package the incumbent Baxter regime was distributing to unemployed married men. Mayor Baxter countered with an appeal to middle-class fears about the social disorder that threatened to accompany spreading joblessness. Baxter promised “the elimination of aliens” and that he would exclusively employ “white residents and citizens on city work.”⁸⁴ He bragged of having already cut the number of “aliens” on city work gangs nearly in half from the levels sustained by his opponent’s administration in 1911.⁸⁵ Hand in hand with his “anti-aliens” discourse was an attack on “moral disorder,” the closure of the brothel district and the deportation or incarceration of “criminal” women.

To show that he was serious about closing the district, Baxter used anti-prostitution provisions in the new *Criminal Code Amendment Act* to sweep and shut down the Alexander Street district during Christmas. In mid-November, with election campaigns in full swing and anxious to counteract his record of presiding over a functioning brothel district for his whole term in office, Mayor Baxter and the board of police commissioners ordered Alexander Street cleared out. Baxter claimed that through negotiations with Premier McBride, he had “obtained by persuasion” the cooperation of the Attorney General in jailing women for prostitution offenses.⁸⁶ He stumped on the issue, mobilizing the raid for his re-election campaign. In a campaign advertisement he placed in the *BC Federationist*, Baxter bragged, “For the first time recently, a house was raided and every one in it taken by the police.”⁸⁷ To a forum of women voters in January, days before the election, Baxter promised not only to keep Alexander Street closed, but also to use these new policing powers to stop any new district from opening. He asked that anyone with “the slightest suspicion that a house of ill fame was being conducted in any part of the city let the police department know and they would see that the resort was closed.”⁸⁸ The cultural and political shift to prohibition was clear enough by this point that Baxter’s challenger LD

⁸⁴ “LD Taylor for Mayor, TS Baxter for Mayor,” *BC Federationist*, January 2, 1914.

⁸⁵ “LD Taylor for Mayor, TS Baxter for Mayor,” *BC Federationist*, January 2, 1914.

⁸⁶ “Alexander Street not an ‘election dodge’ but permanent,” *Vancouver Province*, December 27, 1913.

⁸⁷ “LD Taylor for Mayor, TS Baxter for Mayor,” *BC Federationist*, January 2, 1913.

⁸⁸ “Both ask support of women’s forum, focus on Alexander Street,” *Vancouver Province*, January 7, 1914.

Taylor did not argue against closing the district. He even claimed that he had closed the district on Shore Street when he was mayor in 1911 and refused a \$30,000 bribe to allow it to reopen on Alexander Street.⁸⁹ Evidently the electorate preferred Baxter's actions to Taylor's memories. The fantasy of prostitution prohibition by police repression and displacement had replaced the previous segregation regime. On the strength of his actions against the Alexander Street district, Baxter was re-elected mayor in January 1914.

To shutter the Alexander Street brothel district, the City and Provincial government needed to muster repressive and disciplinary powers that they were unable to bring to bear when the Attorney General blocked the city's attempt to close the district in 1912.⁹⁰ With one constable for every 500 people, Vancouver already had the largest per-capita police department in North America.⁹¹ But police power was not enough. The City needed laws that those police could enforce and courts that would convict and incarcerate. By the end of 1913, a set of new *Criminal Code* and *Immigration Act* regulations sharpened the Canadian state's administrative capability to deport, incarcerate, or institutionalize these unwanted and inconvenient populations. Updates to the *Immigration Act* in 1906 had allowed Dominion police to detain and deport those convicted of vice offenses. But a lack of border enforcement power made these deportations mere inconveniences, not barriers, to "allowing these women and their followers to come across the line without molestation," as Vancouver's subsequent Mayor complained a few years later.⁹² Police used the 1906 *Immigration Act* updates to deport US citizen women found in Chinatown brothels after the 1907 white riot, but a follow-up search revealed that six months later, even more US citizens were living in the Chinatown brothels than before the deportations.⁹³ When Mayor Baxter ordered the police to close down the Alexander district, commissioners estimated

⁸⁹ "Both ask support of women's forum," *Vancouver Province*, January 7, 1914.

⁹⁰ "Politics and vice," *Vancouver Province*, November 5, 1912; "Had warned police board to limit district," *Vancouver Province*, November 26, 1912; "Never intended to wipe out Alexander street - Leek reveals secret agreement," *Vancouver Province*, December 3, 1912; "Mayor denies he ever had a secret agreement," *Vancouver Province*, December 3, 1912.

⁹¹ "Best policed Canadian City," *Vancouver Province*, May 9, 1912.

⁹² "No place for fallen women," *Vancouver Province*, November 8, 1912.

⁹³ Smith, "Crossing the Line," 253.

that, again, American women made up eighty percent of those who lived in the brothels.⁹⁴ After scattering the Alexander Street district, these women were targeted by a new *Immigration Act* amendment passed in Ottawa in July 1914 that closed the border to those convicted of "any crime involving moral turpitude; prostitutes, pimps, professional vagrants, or beggars."⁹⁵

More importantly, in 1913 the Dominion government passed the *Criminal Code Amendment Act*, which increased the criminalizing and policing powers of Cities to discipline and lock up women convicted of prostitution offences. The new *Act* mandated charges directly upon sex workers themselves rather than just their "keepers," waived the need for court warrants for raids on suspected brothels, made landlords vulnerable to prosecution if their property was used as a brothel, and gave police the power to charge women with obstruction if they stopped a police officer from entering a building the officer *suspected* was a bawdy house.⁹⁶ Before the *Criminal Code Amendment*, police could harass brothel operators to move to the district but could not drive them out of business altogether. In early 1912 the Mayor ordered police to "go after the blind pigs [unlicensed bars], the rooming houses, the Turkish baths, and other places."⁹⁷ In the three months after this order, police prosecuted eighty-one cases against sex workers found outside of the district, resulting in the concentration of sex work on that one street; according to a Pastor the population of Alexander Street grew during this time from thirty-five to 230 between March and June of 1912.⁹⁸ But armed with the new laws of 1913, Mayor Baxter's goal was the extermination of the openly-operating brothels, not their containment. In the fall of 1913 police closed the doors of places that might serve as a backup to Alexander Street. In one night police raided the Chatteau Rooms at Columbia and Hastings; ordered Mr. Margaret, the owner of the Okanagan rooms on the 200 block of Main Street to sell his business or appoint new management because "women of evil character had been

⁹⁴ Police Commissioner Williamson and Deputy Mayor Crowe made this claim before closing the District in 1912. "Alexander Street to go before new year," *Vancouver Province*, June 12, 1912.

⁹⁵ Smith, "Crossing the Line," 249.

⁹⁶ McLaren, "Chasing the Social Evil," 149.

⁹⁷ "Lively was debate on subject of vice area," *Vancouver Province*, May 22, 1912.

⁹⁸ "City is advertised as a haven for undesirables," *Vancouver Province*, June 7, 1912; "Pastor attacks all segregation," *Vancouver Province*, June 10, 1912.

seen around there," and; warned Mr. Lang, the owner of the Savoy Rooms at 129 E. Pender and the owner of the Benge Rooms on W. Pender Street "about women of ill-repute being in the house."⁹⁹ Police were then able to raid and close the brothels on Alexander Street, and, for the first time in Vancouver history, to stop another district from opening. Following the Christmastime police raid on Alexander Street, more than eighty percent of those charged with keeping a bawdy house were women. After the initial spike of arrests with the closure of the district, the majority were women operating out of single rooms, or with only one other woman.¹⁰⁰

The immediate impact of ending the city policy of "tolerance" for brothel district was the mass criminalization of women. The percentage of women compared to men arrested between 1906 and 1913 exploded from 2.9 percent to 26 percent.¹⁰¹ In the month of February 1914 there were forty-four percent more criminal convictions than the month of the year previous.¹⁰² "So many cases appear on the list in the women's court," said the police court Magistrate, "that I may find it necessary to set aside a whole morning once every week for the cases that cannot be heard in the half hour assigned to the hearing of charges against women each day."¹⁰³ The women's court was just one of the new technologies available to Vancouver authorities to police women. During the working-class revolt of 1912, Mayor Findlay honed Vancouver's gendered policing strategies and capacities to make police actions targeting women more individualized, pathologizing, and disciplinary. In May 1912, City Council approved funding to hire two women police officers specifically tasked with policing young, poor women who they profiled as being involved in prostitution. They were appointed as hybrid police officer-social workers whose main work was to identify reformable women who were sliding too far into disreputable activities, and to rescue them. In 1912 Mayor Baxter referred to them as "two women as police constables who are to act as morality officers."¹⁰⁴ The two women police officers were assigned to "pull" women who "come into town with gaudy clothes," in order to "help in the

⁹⁹ "Corrective measures in rooming houses," *Vancouver Province*, December 20, 1913.

¹⁰⁰ McLaren, "Chasing the Social Evil," 151.

¹⁰¹ McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 286, endnote 57.

¹⁰² "More crime in the Dominion," *Vancouver Province*, February 21, 1914.

¹⁰³ "So many cases appear on the list..." *Vancouver Province*, January 8, 1914.

¹⁰⁴ "City is advertised as a haven for undesirables," *Vancouver Province*, June 7, 1912.

reclamation of young girls of the underworld.”¹⁰⁵ They could make arrests, but that was not their primary assignment; these women officers were to build relationships with occasional sex worker women, and try to influence them using a soft power that offered them access to resources, while surveilling and gathering intelligence on the community around the brothel district for male police officers to execute with traditional coercive power. Police Commissioner Leek reasoned, “These unfortunates would speak to women and tell them things they would not say to men.”¹⁰⁶ An intimate, gendered knowledge of the dynamics in the brothel district armed women police officers with the power to define “occasional” and “criminal” prostitutes. Women police officers treated occasional prostitutes as reformable, and, when apprehended, funnelled them into the houses of reform that were state funded and run by the Salvation Army and the Vancouver Local Council of Women and, after 1914, the Provincial “Industrial Schools.”¹⁰⁷ Those who police and courts decided were not reformable were sent instead to the gendered institutions Attorney General Bowser added to the Province’s carceral apparatus. At the end of 1912 British Columbia began construction of a women’s prison, with women prison guards – an innovation demanded by the Local Council of Women.¹⁰⁸

Defining Reformability: Sex, Race, and Charity

Theorist Michel Foucault argues that sexuality was developed as a “dense transfer point of power” first amongst the bourgeoisie, and then only amongst the working class through a “whole technology of control which made it possible to keep that body and sexuality, finally conceded to them under surveillance.”¹⁰⁹ One pertinent example of how the province and city deployed sexuality to discipline young women was the story of Katie

¹⁰⁵ “Vancouver to have police women,” *Vancouver Province*, May 9, 1912; “Women police officers selected,” *Vancouver Province*, May 25, 1912.

¹⁰⁶ “Vancouver to have police women,” *Vancouver Province*, May 9, 1912.

¹⁰⁷ Indiana Matters, “Sinners or Sinned Against? Historical Aspects of Female Juvenile Delinquency in British Columbia,” in *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women’s Work in British Columbia*, ed. Barbara K. Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro (Victoria BC: Camosun College, 1984), 268.

¹⁰⁸ “Vancouver to have police women,” *Vancouver Province*, May 9, 1912; Meeting Minutes, June 1, 1914, Vancouver Local Council of Women, UBC Rare Books and Special Collections; *British Columbia Ministry of Justice*, “Women in Provincial Corrections.” Accessed October 9, 2015: <http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/corrections/histories/women/index.htm>

¹⁰⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 103, 107, 126.

Creamer, an eighteen-year old woman who relied on prostitution as a means of maintaining herself. During the citywide anti-vice crackdown in September 1912 she was arrested for a prostitution offence. The presiding judge shamed her, calling her a “problem child” who used “vile language,” which “would have made one’s blood curdle.”¹¹⁰ But rather than send her to jail – which, on order from Attorney General Bowser, was refusing to accept women prisoners on prostitution offenses – the judge sentenced Katie Creamer to a home for girls. Locked in a room and subjected to moral reformer education, she escaped out the fourth-floor window and ran away. Captured again on a warrant, the same judge – disappointed that Katie Creamer would not cooperate with her rescue – used the *Juvenile Delinquents Act* to sentence her to six-months imprisonment in a “home for fallen women and girls.”¹¹¹

In 1911, 433 young people like Katie Creamer were arrested and tried in the new juvenile court. Thirty-three of them were apprehended from their parents and incarcerated in the “detention home” housed in the same building as the juvenile court. Most of the children detained in the detention home were boys; the home had dormitory space for nineteen boys and six girls.¹¹² Girls were more likely to be sent to a less regulated, non-government reformer-run institution. Until the Provincial Industrial School was opened in 1914, the Salvation Army ran most of British Columbia’s “rescue homes” – funded with public dollars.¹¹³ The difference between the Salvation Army “homes” and the province’s Industrial School was, as the Local Council of Women complained at the beginning of 1913, the Salvation Army had “no legal right to detain them, or keep them against their wish” young women “rescued” by the agency.¹¹⁴ Approximately eighty-eight percent of those held in the Industrial Schools were held for “morals offenses,” which should be read as a code word for sex work.¹¹⁵ Records from the government institution show that tests

¹¹⁰ "Recreant girl sent to home," *Vancouver Province*, September 18, 1912.

¹¹¹ "Would amend act covering juveniles," *Vancouver Province*, September 17, 1912; "Recreant girl sent to home."

¹¹² "Saving erring boys and girls," *Vancouver Province*, August 31, 1912.

¹¹³ Letter from E. Leslie Pidgeon to Rev. Shearer, May 7, 1913, Premier's Papers (McBride), Inward official correspondence 1912, BC Archives.

¹¹⁴ Meeting Minutes, March 8, 1913, Vancouver Local Council of Women, *Minute Book*, 1912-14.

¹¹⁵ Matters, "Sinners or Sinned Against," 268, 270.

for venereal disease were performed on all new admissions, and between one and two-thirds of inmates were diagnosed with syphilis or gonorrhoea. The provincially-run Industrial School for Girls that opened in 1914 was dedicated primarily towards the incarceration of young white women arrested doing sex work and disciplining them to live by the keywords of “domesticity, femininity, and honest labour,” producing either willing wives or domestic servants.¹¹⁶ British Columbia’s Industrial School for Girls institutionalized the answer to cultural and social uncertainty about the fates of women suspected of “occasional prostitution.” Women police officers, a women’s prison, and a young women’s reformatory were weapons in the government’s hard power arsenal to repress the rebel workingwomen’s rebellion.

Sexual reform and gendered institutions did not offer relief to women suffering in poverty, and the combination of recession and the end of the brothel district meant that thousands of women were faced with deepening poverty. Mayor Baxter used city relief programs as a soft power lever to pressure women to accept domestic gender roles as a means of surviving unemployment and poverty. In the Free Labour Bureau and elsewhere, city officials used family-focused gender, race, and sexual scripts of respectability to administer relief in the form of preferential work contracts for married white men.¹¹⁷ The City-funded 106-room “Home for Girls” run out of a single resident occupancy hotel in the East End by the Local Council of Women had similar regulations.¹¹⁸ In February 1914, continuing his assault on independent women, Mayor Baxter’s administration withdrew

¹¹⁶ Joan Sangster, “Domesticating Girls: The Sexual Regulation of Aboriginal and Working-Class Girls in Twentieth Century Canada,” in *Contact Zone: Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada’s Colonial Past*, ed. Katie Pickles and Myra Ruthford (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 180; Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 64.

¹¹⁷ The government policy prior to 1914 was, according to a memo from the Provincial Ministry of Public Works, “The contractor shall not, directly or indirectly, employ Chinese, Japanese, or any other Asiatics upon, about, or in connection with the works; and in the event of his doing, the Government will not be responsible for the paying of his Contract.” With the beginning of the recession and civic relief administered through “works” programs, work was reserved for married white men. Memorandum, Premier’s Papers (McBride), Inward official correspondence, 1912, BC Archives; “Married men preferred,” *Vancouver Province*, August 15, 1913; Memorandum, “Report on conditions of unemployed in Vancouver,” December 18, 1914, Premier’s papers (McBride), Unemployed file, BC Archives; Letter from Mayor Baxter on the spirit of Vancouver workers, Mayor Baxter correspondence, 1914, City of Vancouver Archives.

¹¹⁸ Meeting Minutes, December 4, 1911 and January 3, 1912, Vancouver Local Council of Women, UBC Rare Books and Special Collections.

business licences from women working in cigar stands, driving twenty women out of a job that paid them above average-wages of twenty dollars a week. A delegation of women went to City Hall to protest for their jobs. Miss Burkhard, a spokesperson for the group demanded, "How are we to live? How are we to provide for our children, who are depending on us for their bread and butter?" Commissioner Pyke responded cynically, asking, "What did you do before?"¹¹⁹

Critiques of domesticity that had just begun to gain a toehold within the labour movement ran up hard against this wall of patriarchal reaction. The energies of Rose Gardiner, Polly Brisbane, and Helena Gutteridge, the first three women trade unionists on the board of the VTLC, who were also all founders of the Home and Domestic Workers' Union, were pulled towards the urgent material demands felt by of thousands of unemployed women.¹²⁰ In September 1914 Helena Gutteridge brought a motion to the VTLC to organize a women's employment committee to find work for women, including the wives of men who had gone to war.¹²¹ By winter this campaign had become a job creation effort. Women unionists in partnership with the Local Council of Women, which Gutteridge also mobilized, set up a small workshop where women made Christmas toys to sell for donations through Lowe's Department Store, and asked for government contracts to make uniforms for men who had shipped off to war from Vancouver.¹²² The state and civil society reassertion of the family, combined with recession, the end of the brothel district, and the beginning of World War One redirected the energies of the feminist unionist women who had organized the feminist Home and Domestic Employees Union

¹¹⁹ "City outlaws women cigar stand workers," *Vancouver Province*, February 19, 1914.

¹²⁰ "First Woman Chosen," *Western Wage Earner*, December 1910; "Polly Brisbane, VTLC statistician and Waitresses Union delegate," *BC Federationist*, January 23, 1913; "Portrait of Polly Brisbane, VTLC statistician and Waitresses Union delegate," *BC Federationist*, January 23, 1914; Regular meeting minutes, 1912-1916, VTLC Fonds; "First woman chosen," *Western Wage Earner*, December 1910; Rosenthal, "Union maids," 49.

¹²¹ Meeting Minutes, October 1, 1914, Vancouver Local Council of Women, UBC Rare Books and Special Collections; Howard, *The Struggle for Social Justice*, 106; Meeting Minutes, "Woman's Employment League of Vancouver forms," October 1, 1914, VTLC Fonds; Meeting Minutes, "Women's Employment League report to VTLC," December 17, 1917, VTLC Fonds.

¹²² Regular meeting minutes, 1912-1916, VTLC Fonds.

into organizing for charitable aid for women and children.¹²³ And as women unionists turned towards job creation schemes, they leveraged white race identity to win jobs for white women. In September 1914 Helena Gutteridge, representing both the Local Council of Women and the Trades and Labour Council, delivered a letter to the YWCA demanding that they fire the Chinese man they had working in their kitchen and “put a [white] woman in his place.”¹²⁴ Amid this economic crisis, on the precipice of global war, and in the aftermath of the brothel district displacement, working-class culture and politics in Vancouver was redirecting to emphasize white race power, the cult of domesticity, marital sex normativity, scarcity and charity.

Conclusion: Victims of the prohibitionist city

Part of the discourse on closing the Alexander Street brothel district that came from Mayor Baxter and the Local Council of Women was about women’s safety. It was a new turn on an old story. Until then part of the politicians’ scripted defence of maintaining the brothel district was that its existence increased women’s safety. To illustrate the impact of closing the Alexander Street district on sex worker women’s lives and safety, I want to look back at the City’s dress rehearsal of its closure in the fall of 1912 when Mayor Findlay tried to close the district. His effort failed because Attorney General Bowser refused to incarcerate women arrested for prostitution offences in the provincial jails. Mayor Findlay eventually re-opened the district with the Attorney General’s agreement to incarcerate women arrested for prostitution offenses in other parts of the city. Attorney General Bowser, the politician in charge of the exercise of law in BC, celebrated the re-opening of the district, claiming that sex crimes in British Columbia were below the rate of any other province because “the existence of segregated districts meant the absence of sex crimes.”¹²⁵ Three-quarters of all reported crime in Ontario were sex crimes, but thanks to

¹²³ Howard, *The Struggle for Social Justice*, 106; Meeting Minutes, “Woman’s Employment League of Vancouver forms,” October 1, 1914, VTLC Fonds; Meeting Minutes, “Women’s Employment League report to VTLC,” December 17, 1917, VTLC Fonds.

¹²⁴ Minutes, LCW, September 25, 1914. Box 6, File 3.

¹²⁵ “Had warned police board to limit district,” *Vancouver Province*, November 26, 1912.

the district, he claimed, in the last month of 1912 there was only one sex crime case in all of Vancouver.¹²⁶

Rather than representing a real decline in incidents of violence against women, Bowser's claims of a decline in sex crimes represents an offloading of sexual violence to women against whom violence had been normalized, who did not report violence committed against them, and whose reports the police ignored. The social casting of sex worker women as "unfortunate women" made violence against them expected.¹²⁷ Violence against sex workers was understood as not so much criminal as it was fated; women suspected of prostitution were unrecognizable as victims of incidents of criminal violence. Black feminist theorist Saidiya Hartman argues that the racialized and colonial gendering of Black and Indigenous women meant that white settler society could not recognize the violence they suffered as violence against women; they were "rape-able and genocide-able."¹²⁸ Historian Julia Laite argues that a similar paradigm was extended to women "known" by police as prostitutes.¹²⁹ This is not to suggest that some women were made immune to male violence. Respectable white women also had to dodge the threat of male and intimate-partner violence everywhere in Vancouver and would have hesitated to report assaults for many of the same reasons as sex workers. But the segregated sex district modified the degree of that threat; it shielded respectable white women, including "occasional" sex worker women when they were accessing respectable spaces, from male violence by providing a single location that made the bodies of sex worker women available to absorb that violence. Such maneuvering was not open to criminalized sex workers – or racialized men identified as clients. In the height of the district's operation, in

¹²⁶ "Had warned police board to limit district," *Vancouver Province*, November 26, 1912.

¹²⁷ In 1913, proponents of segregated brothel districts viewed sex workers as "unfortunate women" and victims. Proponents of prohibition tended to see sex workers as "vicious women" who should be expelled from the city or imprisoned, not reformed. See, for example, Correspondence between Premier McBride and Rev. Shearer of the Presbyterian Church in Toronto, January 29 to October 17, 1913, Premier's Papers (McBride), Inward Official Correspondence, 1912, BC Archives.

¹²⁸ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Tiffany Jeannette King, "In the Clearing: Black Female Bodies, Space and Settler Colonial Landscapes," (PhD Diss., University of Maryland College Park 2013), 61.

¹²⁹ Laite, *Common Prostitutes*, 87.

the fall of 1913, in a telling display of the utility of the new powers of regulation, the Vancouver Police's first use of Canada's expanded anti-prostitution legislation was against a Black man named Walter Scott and, in a separate incident on the same day, a Black woman named Ms. Thomas.¹³⁰ And after police closed the Alexander Street district the percentage of arrests of African Americans doubled.¹³¹ The end of the districts did not end the distribution of violence towards those exiled to Vancouver's periphery by race, gender, sex, and criminalized social status, but it did disarm women who dwelled there of the collective power to resist and defend themselves against it.

Some women disarmed of the female subgroup at Alexander Street were deported, others were incarcerated, and others still were killed. At 3am on Tuesday August 4th, 1914, twenty-one-year-old Laura Silva fell to her death from the window of her mother's room in a residential hotel on the 400 block of East Hastings Street.¹³² At the time, Laura Silva was married to a white man named Harris and had his home in Mount Pleasant registered as her address. But she was living with her thrice-married mother in a rooming house on Hastings Street. Neither the coroner nor newspapers cared that she was married; as an Indigenous woman (marked "halfbreed" on the coroner's death certificate) marriage did not elevate her social status.¹³³ It also did not matter that she was the daughter of the famous settler Portuguese Joe Silva, that her great grandfather Chief Joe Kiapolanough ventured to Ottawa and then to England to fight for recognition of Indigenous land and title in British Columbia, nor that her great grandmother, Mary Kiapolanough, was a matriarch of the Squamish nation and a vanguard emissary between the Squamish and the settler-explorers on the beaches of the new settlement-city.¹³⁴ The case was closed by sun-up of the morning of her death. The short newspaper article about

¹³⁰ "Two police court convictions," *Vancouver Province*, October 24, 1913.

¹³¹ McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 286, endnote 57.

¹³² "Fell to her death from open window: Mrs. L. Harris found dead upon Hastings Street early this morning," *Vancouver Province*, Tuesday August 4, 1914.

¹³³ Province of BC, Vital Statistics Agency. *Death registrations*.

¹³⁴ Province of BC, Vital Statistics Agency. *Death registrations*; Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, 174, 187.

her death read only that she “fell or jumped” from the window of a room in the Coral House Hotel and that a police officer found her lifeless body before daybreak.¹³⁵

Laura Silva did not have a life from violence or free of unjust treatment by police prior to the closure of the Alexander Street district. It is not even clear if or how she was involved in sex work. But the police closure of the district and repression of subaltern groups accelerated a political climate that was hostile to her existence. Laura Silva moved to Vancouver with her mother from their territory up Vancouver Island in 1906 because her mom had married her third husband. She was thirteen years old. Six years later, at nineteen, Laura was arrested for vagrancy in a downtown restaurant.¹³⁶ Women’s vagrancy charges were generally related to prostitution, although they do not mean she was necessarily engaged in prostitution. Laura was an Indigenous woman, so a police officer, finding her alone in a restaurant, may have assumed her to be a prostitute without any other evidence besides her race and gender.¹³⁷ While held on vagrancy charges, Laura was charged with helping her mother “abduct” her fourteen-year-old sister Irene from her mother’s third husband in New Westminster and taking her back to their home on Vancouver Island.¹³⁸ Arrested because she was Indigenous, the police and the courts enforced a white man’s control over the fate of his Indigenous daughter, attacked this familial community of women, and returned these three Indigenous women to the city they were trying, together, to escape. Laura’s court-ordered return to Vancouver had fatal consequences, but the same courts were not interested in the cause of her death.

The government’s disorganization of the community of women on Alexander Street affected the whole working class – which was disciplined through the “deployment of sexuality”, out of the streets, out of rowdy crowds, and out of occasional alliance with subaltern groups of revolutionaries, sex workers, and Indigenous and Black women. This disorganization brought some white women, broken off from their community, alone and dependent on either charity, private relationships with men, or miserable jobs, into

¹³⁵ “Fell to her death from open window,” *Vancouver Province*, Tuesday August 4, 1914.

¹³⁶ “Woman arrested in café,” *Vancouver Province*, October 16, 1912.

¹³⁷ Mawani, *Colonial Proximities*, 108.

¹³⁸ “Woman arrested in café,” *Vancouver Province*, October 16, 1912.

subordinate positions within Vancouver civil society. These women joined Helena Gutteridge's piecework relief programs, sat through the LCW domestic classes for a place to stay, and many continued to moonlight in sex work on the sly, out of rooms hidden in secret in the corridors of rooming houses or, increasingly, in alleyways far from the suspicious eyes that peered out from family homes. But what characterized them was that they managed to melt into the cauldron of the city. Laura Silvey died because she was not part of that group of white workingwomen. Black women in the Shore Street Seven suffered deportation. Katie Creamer suffered incarceration. Laura Silvey suffered death. It was through the violent devices of deportation, incarceration, and murder that sex worker, Black, and Indigenous women were shut out of Vancouver.

Conclusion

Domesticity and Anti-Capitalist Possibility

Some popular historians have used prostitution as a metonym for the pre-modern life of Vancouver.¹ In this narrative, the first businesses in Vancouver were Gassy Jack's saloon and Birdie Smith's neighbouring brothel. Vancouver elites were supposed to have inherited a Continental model of prostitution regulation from the wild frontier until around the First World War, when they grew tired of it and closed the Alexander Street brothel district to move on to a British regulatory model which has held ever since.² The teleological story of Vancouver's prostitution policy progress is appealing because it matches-up with a broader colonial narrative that poses modern development as inevitable, historically necessary, automatic, and universally desirable. Teleology wrenches working class sexuality out of its historical context by resting on an ahistorical, moralist framing of the sex trade. Instead of such teleology, this thesis has placed the political economy of the sex trade, and its regulation – whether “tolerance” or prohibition – within the history of capitalism in a settler colonial society.

In fact, there was never a time that the discourse of prostitution prohibition did not rule Vancouver; it only changed forms. Prostitution prohibitionists wield a powerful discourse. In early Vancouver they shaped the form of the criminalization of prostitution and the public dimensions of outwardly commercial sex. The segregated brothel district era was in fact a form of prohibition: the brothel district was an exceptional, extra-civic space outside Vancouver symbolically, which allowed city politicians, staffers, and civil society moral reformers to prohibit prostitution within its limits of respectability. The subjects of the segregated district were likewise segregated from belonging in Vancouver civil society. The district operated as a symbol of what liberal Vancouver was *not*,

¹ Daniel Francis, *Red Light Neon: A History of Vancouver's Sex Trade* (Vancouver: Subway, 2006).

² Historians of prostitution regulation explain that the “Continental” model of regulation was the state-operation of segregated brothel districts, and the “British” model, the reliance on state cooperation with moral reformers to criminalize and prohibit prostitution. Valverde, *Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, 80.

contributing to the construction of Vancouver by posing as a foil. The breakup of the segregated district, then, did not introduce the discourse or ideology of prostitution prohibition to Vancouver. Ending the segregated district only expanded the reach of Vancouver civil society over those few blocks; those who remained “known” as sex workers remained segregated, but by state power over their bodies rather than spatially. And if prostitution prohibition discourses were the norm of Vancouver’s respectable citizenship during the brothel district era, then prostitution segregation practices remained the norm for policing sex workers after the end of the segregated district era. But rather than segregating the sex trade in one particular area, the expanding normative power of the cult of domesticity and the mass deportation and incarceration of sex workers meant that those who remained were more isolated, less socially influential, and forced to act alone or in small groups. Their segregation became atomized and embodied, it wrapped around them as disreputable, individual foreign agents in the city. As long as prohibition discourses and segregation practices set the norms for managing the sex industry, so did these violently patriarchal, domestic, white supremacist, imperial determinants of urban citizenship.

This thesis has suggested that the historically determining force – the active thread – of the knot of social power relations in Vancouver’s urban status hierarchy for poor working-class people, was sexuality. Social tensions manifest in a knot of powerful identities, ideas and material forces that constitute social subjectivities. I imagine this subjective ensemble as a knot of entwined threads – gender, race, and sexual roles and norms, class structure and identity, citizenship status, language, nationality, ability, as well as local and global political, cultural, and economic forces – that cannot be disentangled without losing their multiple and dependent meanings or without disrupting their act of constituting a single subject.³ One guiding thread wrapped and disciplined the others in the production of new or amended subjectivity. The question of which thread guides in a

³ The idea that an individual personality is an “ensemble” of social relations comes from Marx’s sixth “Thesis on Feuerbach.” Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works, Vol. 5 Marx and Engels 1845-47* (Electric Book: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010), 4. Gramsci developed this idea further throughout his *Prison Notebooks*. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 352-353; Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Vol. 1*, ed. Joseph A. Buttigieg, vol. 1, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 62.

given locale, at a specific moment, for a particular subject, is a historical question. In inchoate Vancouver, the guiding thread that tightened the knot of the historic bloc – ratcheting complementarily with class, race, gender, and colonial interests of the powerful – was sexuality. I argue that working-class sexuality – a coercive force the state wielded through laws and policing powers beginning with closing the Alexander Street brothel district – organized race and class relations for poor workingwomen and restored equilibrium to bourgeois hegemony at a time of crisis.

There are implications for these historical findings that could be developed in subsequent studies. One, following historian Julia Laite's observations about sex work in London, could be to refuse the discourse that the end of brothel districts represented a final break of sex workers from the working-class structurally, or totally in terms of identity.⁴ Class society continued to include the shadows, alleys, and back rooms where sex workers laboured. As Rosa Luxemburg wrote from a German prison the same year the Alexander Street brothel district was broken up – illicit, affective, non-capitalist economies are essential to the cyclical expansion and continued existence of capitalism. We think of "imperialism" as taking place outside the borders of a powerful capitalist society, through the invasion and occupation of weaker countries. But social reproduction, Luxemburg wrote, was also a form of imperialist expansion that may be more usefully thought of as a swelling within the nation state; as bourgeois hegemonic power growing over and accumulating existing non-capitalist economies, pulling them into the circuit of capitalist production. She did not include illicit economies like prostitution in these considerations, but I think her methodological approach applies.

Social reproduction, Luxemburg said, is a technology of accumulation necessary to maintain capitalist production; a point, like colonial land theft, where capital confronts the "non-capitalist environment" of women's unwaged or illicit labour.⁵ Perhaps Luxemburg's most important addition to Marx's observations on imperialism is that accumulation is key to both what she calls "department one" of capitalist production, the process of production itself, and to "department two," the process of distribution and

⁴ Laite, *Common Prostitutes*, 218.

⁵ Rosa Luxemburg, *Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 335.

consumption.⁶ Men who paid for sexual and intimate labour in the brothel districts were paying for the reproduction of their labour power, and also making purchases that “merely refund to the capitalist class the amount of wages they have received.”⁷ Those wages spent in the Alexander Street district filtered back into the leviathan of licit capitalist production through irregular channels of business licensing and bylaw fines, of brothel owners’ investments in buying and improving properties, but eventually these monies found their way home regardless of route.⁸ In the *Grundrisse*, which Luxembourg would not have had the opportunity to study because it was not published until after her lifetime, Marx shows that differences between the “departments” of production and consumption is an exaggeration because “the act of production itself is... in all its moments also an act of consumption.”⁹ But Luxembourg’s point stands: accumulation, or theft, of non-capitalist land relations and gendered, non-commodified, and, by extension, illicitly waged labour is central to the circuit of capitalist production.¹⁰ This thesis has shown that “hidden abodes” of capitalist production include illicit and contracted forms of social reproduction like the occasional structure of the Alexander Street brothel district that operated in Vancouver from 1911 to 1914. Our analysis of capitalism should not relegate sex work to the shadows of production, where prohibitionist laws and reformer morality would banish it. Sex workers’ labour power is bound up in the social knot of production as a whole and their labour is therefore a potential site of interruption and workers’ power. Misunderstanding this dynamic led class-radical rebel and revolutionary men in 1912 to misidentify women sex workers as victims, not potential protagonists in class struggle.

⁶ Luxembourg, *Accumulation of Capital*, 333.

⁷ Luxembourg, *Accumulation of Capital*, 105.

⁸ In September 1912, when the city and police cleared the Alexander Street brothel district, a lawyer appearing on behalf of women brothel owners argued that they should be given more time to leave in order to secure and protect their buildings because, “these women have been put to expense amounting to thousands of dollars in some cases and have built houses and furnished them, with the knowledge of the authorities.” See chapter 2 for more about fines and fees collected by the city from brothel owners. “Women plead for time to vacate,” *Vancouver Province*, September 7, 1912.

⁹ Karl Marx, “The Grundrisse: Economic Works, 1857-1861,” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 28, 51 vols. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 28.

¹⁰ Luxembourg, *Accumulation of Capital*, 398.

By looking to the shadows at the edges of historical hegemonic blocs as potential sites for revolutionary alliances, a single, masculine narrative of urban class development, and a narrow, industrial jobsite vision of class struggle can be undone. Although provisional cross-racial alliances between “occasional prostitute” white women and Asian men and sex worker and Black women in the brothel districts were, for those whites, transitional on the road to auxiliary and subordinate belonging in class society, it could have been otherwise. White workingwomen found out that they belonged in Vancouver when they were *not* deported, *not* imprisoned, *not* institutionalized, and *not* murdered by strangers. This citizenship had few a benefits for those who won it, but more significant were its penalties for those Black, Asian, and Indigenous women and men who were denied it on grounds of white race and colonial power, and those sex worker white women denied it for deviating from imperial domestic gender and sex roles. The capacity for revolutionary class-consciousness to supersede race difference amongst these women, and to transcend patriarchal dreams amongst poor white workingmen was limited by the corrupting promises of the settler-colonial sex and gender system that offered meagre citizenship to poor white workers.¹¹

Today, again, those of us squeezed in between the hegemonic bloc and the immutably excluded again must choose our alliances. I believe the history told here shows that investing – even symbolically – in colonialism and the patriarchal family-form has stunted and misdirected working-class consciousness, power, and limited group formation. At the same time, this history gestures towards the individually transformative and socially revolutionary potential of a working-class identity that refuses its own stratification based on colonial, race, gender, or sexual power, which instead looks hopefully towards the edges of hegemony.

¹¹ Hall, “The Problem of Ideology,” 29.

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Appendix

Approximate workforce wages by race, gender, and marital status

<i>Job</i>	<i>Number of workers</i>	<i>Wage (weekly)</i>	<i>Wage (annual)</i>	<i>Union</i>	<i>Married or Single</i>	<i>Race and gender</i>
CPR rail worker	8,000	\$23	\$1,213	VTLC	Married	White men
Urban building trades	5,400	\$19	\$1,000	VTLC	Married	White men
Labourer	1,000	\$12	\$629	None	Single	White men
Domestic worker (Male)	(Uncertain)	\$11	\$600	None	Single	Asian men
Retail and wait staff	1,075	\$8	\$416	None or Waitress Union / VTLC	Single	White women
Rural construction & primary industry	2,531 (Vancouver) 50,000 (Transient)	\$8	\$350 seasonal	IWW (Not VTLC)	Single	Non-British white men
Rural manufacture (canning/mills)	(Uncertain)	\$4	\$100 70c/day seasonal	None or non-VTLC union	Single	Indigenous women & Asian men
Domestic worker (Female)	2,720	\$3.50	\$180	None or Domestic Union / VTLC	Single	White women

Figure: Approximate workforce wages by race, gender, and marital status.¹²

¹² James Conley, "'Open Shop' Means Closed to Union Men': Carpenters and the 1911 Vancouver Building Trades General Strike," *BC Studies* 0, no. 91/92 (1991): 129, 131; Robert AJ McDonald, "Working Class Vancouver, 1886-1914: Urbanism and Class in British Columbia," *BC Studies*, no. 69-70 (Spring-Summer 1986), 42; Eleanor A. Bartlett, "Real Wages and the Standard of Living in Vancouver, 1901-1929," *Urban History Review* 10, no. 3 (1982): 80; Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows*, 99; Tallentire, "Everyday Athenas; Mawani, *Colonial Proximities*, 48.