

LIFE IN THE SUICIDE BELT:
INTERSECTIONS OF DEATH AND AGENCY IN AMERICA'S GILDED AGE, 1870-1910

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I have neither given or received, nor have I tolerated others' use of unauthorized aid.
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Part I:
The Suicide Belt

In 1872 the humor section of the fashion magazine *Harper's Bazaar* reprinted the suicide note of a man whose father married his stepdaughter, leading to his father becoming his son-in-law and his step-daughter becoming his 'mother.' When the man had a child it was "my father's brother-in-law and my uncle, for he was the brother of my step-mother" and later the father's child with the step-daughter became "my brother and at the same time my grandson." *Harper's* called it a "justifiable suicide."¹

In 1878 Catherine Punch, a sixteen-year-old German immigrant, had Christmas dinner in the New York House of Refuge, a reform school on Randall's Island New York. The following morning, Catherine was ordered to help clean up the mess left in the kitchen. Catherine cleaned the kitchen but refused to do any more work that day, to which the Chief Matron ordered her to her room. In the evening the Matron found Catherine's body hanging from a door frame in her room. Two weeks later a nationwide tabloid, *The National Police Gazette* ran an illustration dramatizing the moment the matron found Catherine's body (Appendix A).²

On the evening of May 19th, 1897 a man was seen walking around the wealthy Prairie Avenue neighborhood in Chicago, an environment of "affluence...presenting [perhaps] striking contrast to his own life environments." The man approached the residence of George Pullman and walked around the estate, looking at the home, the grounds, and the stables "as though a

¹ "A Justifiable Suicide," *Harper's Bazaar*, August 17, 1872.

² "A Young Magdalen's Suicide," *The National Police Gazette*, January 11, 1879.

menial in such an establishment were, by him, to be envied.” The man approached the Fort Dearborn Massacre Monument on Pullman’s property, stopped, and then moved into the monument’s shadow cast by the street lamps. There he pulled out a pistol, held it to his right temple and fired. The next day a graphic depiction of the moment of the man’s death appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* (Appendix B).³

The Suicide Belt

Why did late nineteenth-century Americans have a penchant for these sensationalist depictions of suicide? What compelled these newspapers to print such graphic images as well as reprinting suicide notes? Newspapers in the era regularly ran headlines on ‘sensational’ and ‘mysterious’ suicides that included these graphic drawings and notes, accompanied with wild speculation on the victim's family background, sexual history, intention, financial position, and fashion tastes. Tied into Americans' appetite for sensationalist suicide coverage was growing anxiety over a perceived proliferation of suicide in American cities. "Suicide Mania Strikes Gotham," "Suicide as a Mania," "Mania for Suicide" ran in the headlines to describe instances when five to ten people committed suicide in a short period of time. Articles would describe how the "suicidal mania became epidemic," as if there was consistent, concrete mania for suicide in society that broke free from time to time. Some newspapers would simply title a section that reported on individual suicides in different cities and states as "Suicide Mania." Even though these suicides occurred in disparate regions, the suicides were reported as a single phenomenon. Suicide ‘parties’ and ‘clubs’ came into use to describe group suicides.⁴

³ “Dies at Pullman’s Gate,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 20, 1897.

⁴ “Suicide Mania Strikes Gotham,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 4, 1898; “Suicide as a Mania,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 24, 1900; “Mania For Suicide,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 2nd, 1897; “The

In descriptions of acts of suicide, phrases such as "blow their brains out" or "put a bullet in the brain" become commonplace. This marked a divergence from the primarily religious language used to describe suicide. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century the primary term for suicide was 'self-murder.' Self-murder came into widespread use to condemn suicide as a sin after most European states decriminalized suicide in the eighteenth century. With the Gilded Age, Americans moved away from the religious language of suicide toward the language of insanity and sensationalism.⁵

Americans accentuated their sensationalism by adopting non-English phrases for suicide. One telling example is nineteenth-century Americans' fascination with the Japanese phrase Hara-Kiri (切腹), "belly cutting." Hara-kiri is a form of ceremonial suicide typically practiced by dishonored samurai or high ranking politicians after losses in battle or political failures. Hara-kiri involved individuals disemboweling themselves with a long sword. Nineteenth-century Americans took a morbid, orientalist interest in the term. Detailed, in-depth analyses and descriptions of hara-kiri appeared in American newspapers throughout the Gilded Age. During the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, American newspapers printed graphic descriptions of episodes of hara-kiri among retreating Japanese troops, one article claiming that a mass suicide by captured sailors "thrilled the Nation" of Japan. When the Japanese tragedy "The Martyr," which included a scene in which a man commits hara-kiri ran in New York in 1907, a review of

Suicide Mania," *Daily Inter-Ocean*, December 16, 1878; "The Suicide Mania," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 20, 1883; "A Suicide Surprise Party," *The National Police Gazette*, October 7, 1882; Suicide clubs were generally seen as a European import into the US and were evoked in American media to legitimize nativist and later eugenicist rhetoric, see Kathleen M Brian, "Mythological Pedagogies, or Suicide Clubs as Eugenic Alibi" in Kathleen Brian and James Trent, eds., *Phallacies: Historical Intersections of Disability and Masculinity* (Oxford University Press 2017): 235-259.

⁵ Andreas Bähr, "Between 'Self Murder' and 'Suicide': The Modern Etymology of Self Killing," *Journal of Social History* Vol.46, No.3 (Spring 2013): 620-632.

the play described the scene as "more hideous in realism than any which Caucasian drama presumes to exhibit" labeling it a 'hideous thrill.' American medical journals even ran in-depth reports on hara-kiri. For example, a paper read before the Pennsylvania Academy of Surgery in 1898 recounted the hara-kiri of a Japanese military officer, as witnessed by a British diplomat. The paper included extensive detail on the cultural context of hara-kiri as well as drawings of the impact the sword made on the officer's intestines with photos of the officer's body.⁶

As an object of exotic, morbid curiosity, Hara-kiri became part of the vocabulary American newspapers and periodicals used to describe suicides by disemboweling or simply suicides which used knives. When actor Rankin Duval, who appeared in the Broadway musical "The Darling of the Gods" from 1903-04, stabbed himself just below the heart with a knife, the headline in the *Chicago Tribune* read "Actor Hara-Kiri Victim." Another article in the *Tribune* described a deserted husband who cut his throat as a 'hara-kiri.' It was also used in political rhetoric. A report on the Illinois state legislature described the Democratic minority at the time as committing 'hara-kiri' for slowing down the passage of several bills. In 1897 the Chicago city council "committed hara-kiri" after votes on several ordinances were shelved until local elections that year concluded.⁷

The merging of Hara-kiri into Americans' vocabulary was only one example of numerous places where Americans perceived suicide in increasingly sensationalist terms. Deeply

⁶ "Self Murder," *Baltimore Underwriter*, March 1, 1871; "Hara-Kiri as Practiced in Japan," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 23, 1896; "Suicide of Japs Thrills Nation," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 3, 1904; Franklin Fyles, "Hara-Kiri is Revealed in Calcium to New York," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 3, 1907; Richard Harte, "A Case of Hara-Kiri Which Terminated in Recovery," *Annals of Surgery*, Vol.27, No.6 (1898): 745-752, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1426842/>.

⁷ "Actor Hara Kiri Victim," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 14, 1906; "'Too Old' Says Girl Wife; Drink Then Hara-Kiri," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 19, 1919; "Will They Commit Hara-Kiri!" *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 15, 1898; "Last of Old Council," *The Daily Inter Ocean*, April 13, 1897.

intertwined into this sensationalist atmosphere was a connection between suicide and the rapid urbanization of American cities in the Gilded Age. Fueled by industrialization and immigration, American urban centers grew exponentially in the years following the Civil War. Chicago grew from a city of one-hundred-thousand in 1860 to a city of over two million by 1910; New York City's population tripled in the same period.

Within the new urban centers, Americans' experience changed radically. In the mid-1880s, the first skyscrapers went up, redefining the skyline of cities after hundreds of years of Americans never seeing a structure taller than five stories. They were constructed in Greek and Roman revivals styles that contrasted sharply with the simple, frank colonial styles that prevailed in American towns for the previous two hundred years. Americans lost their sense of self and moral accountability as they moved from small towns into cities of millions of people of myriad walks of life from cultures that were previously not encountered in American cities. The face of the nation changed as well. Railroads opened up the west and the frontier was declared closed in 1890. The federal government, with only nine-hundred employees before the Civil War, grew into a massive bureaucracy of tens of thousands of workers; this new bureaucracy was drawn into new ventures and scandals while also receiving persistent calls to take up the plight of the working class. Labor changed for all levels of society, with workers entering into perpetual wage work, regulated by the clock; middle class workers entered into modern office life. Meanwhile, the middle class became entangled in the new phenomena of incorporation; businesses became increasingly hierarchical and impersonal. Between the 1860s and 1880s the upper class shifted from an ethic of humility and thrift into a class defined by consumption and ostentatious displays

of wealth. Americans slowly began to accept principles of Darwinian evolution, seeing humans as driven largely by survival instincts, a view which further eroded moral responsibility.⁸

“Suicide in the Cities,” “suicide and civilization” were regular headlines in the Gilded Age press. Americans tied these purported suicide increases into the pace of life and moral turbulence of the modern city. An early, 1875, article in *Popular Science* claimed that urban Americans’ way of life was contributing to a rise in urban suicides that ran in tandem with European rates which had purportedly risen dramatically with industrialization:

The American people partake of the [suicidal] characteristics of their transatlantic brethren. They are impulsive, energetic, enterprising, emotional, liable to excessive mental depression or exaltation. We have all the different bloods of Europe in our veins... We live too fast; we make and lose fortunes in a day.⁹

City life was too fast for Americans. An 1880 article in *The National Police Gazette*, titled “The Suicidal Mania” claimed that rate of suicide was increasing ‘especially in large cities’ and was the result of Americans’ tendency to partake in speculative business practices, population density, and over-education.¹⁰ Another article in an 1891 periodical opened by stating that “the increasing frequency of suicide is one of the startling signs of the times” and that issues of ‘satiety,’ notably the demands of ‘tyrant fashion,’ referring to the dramatic growth of consumer culture in the final decades of the nineteenth century, were at the root of the problem. The author

⁸ Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 33; Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); Allen Guelzo, *Fateful Lightning: a New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 313; Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 258-259; Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 39.

⁹ Allan McLane Hamilton, “Suicide in Large Cities,” *Popular Science Monthly*, Vol.8 (November 1875): 88-96.

¹⁰ “The Suicidal Mania,” *The National Police Gazette*, December 4th, 1880.

wrote that the satiety that has come about since the Civil War made ‘simple pleasures no longer please.’ Another article published in 1893, wrote that the suicides were increased by “the drift of the country population into the cities.”¹¹

The image of suicide in the cities grew to the point that by the turn of the century the northern industrial cities of the United States were referred to as the “suicide belt.” “The Suicide Belt begins at Pittsburg and heads due west, leaving out Cincinnati and taking in Cleveland, Chicago, St. Paul, Davenport and Omaha” read an article that appeared nationwide in 1907. The term was used widely in the popular press in articles on individual suicides as well as clusters of suicide; the term was also recognized in medical and sociological periodicals.¹²

This rhetoric was usually tied to suicide statistics. When local and state authorities made suicide statistics public, reporters, sociologists, ministers, and reformers quickly fit the numbers to different polemics. In most cases these statistics were restricted to individual cities; national studies of suicide were rare in nineteenth-century America. American vital records and statistics in the nineteenth century were mostly local, and the country lacked a national death registration, precluding any serious or uniform attempts to analyze American suicide on a national level. European records, on the other hand, were nationally mandated and uniform. Several nineteenth-century statisticians in Europe, notably Enrico Henry Morselli, attempted to quantify the rates of suicide in their countries with a degree of success. Some American social scientists attempted to quantify nineteenth-century rates of suicide in relation to Morselli’s work, arguing that there was

¹¹ William Matthews, “Civilization and Suicide,” *North American Review*, No.152 (April 1891): 470-495, 478; Frederick Hoffman, “Suicides and Modern Civilization,” *The Arena*, No.XLII (May 1893): 680-696, 685.

¹² “Center of the Suicide Belt,” *The Daily Independent*, December 14, 1893, article goes into detail on a ‘suicide belt’ in Germany; George Kennan, “The Problems of Suicide,” *McClure’s Magazine*, Vol.31 (1908): 218-229; “Must Make Good,” *New York Tribune*, January 19, 1910; “Tough on Suicide Belt,” *The Mahoning Dispatch*, January 21, 1910.

a dramatic increase in suicides in the late nineteenth century, but these studies only involved comparing statistics for individual cities against one another.¹³

Consequently, historians have found difficulty verifying the conclusions of these nineteenth-century American studies. The definition of suicide in nineteenth-century American vital records was inconsistent across cities and counties, making the city to city comparisons by the nineteenth-century statisticians unreliable. Some studies would put death by suicide into categories of accidental death or murder. Class also played into the unreliability of vital records; for example, suicides of members of prominent families were routinely marked as other types of death. Reliable estimates have only been possible in small regions with vital records modeled after the European system such as Massachusetts. Given these irregularities and difficulties, some sociologists estimate that the actual suicide rate in the United States was at least three to four times higher than what nineteenth-century statisticians claimed, but no definitive conclusion can be drawn.¹⁴

Some nineteenth-century American statisticians were aware of these issues. In an 1881 report on suicide in New York City, the compiler lamented several cases that in which it was

¹³ Henry, Morselli, *Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics* (New York: D. Appleton and Co. 1884); George Kennan, "The Problems of Suicide," *McClure's Magazine*, Vol.31 (1908): 218-229. Kennan's article summarized the work done on quantifying suicide in nineteenth-century America and proposed several environmental causes of American suicide.

¹⁴ Larry Logue, "Elephants and Epistemology: Evidence of Suicide in the Gilded Age," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 49, No.2 (Winter 2015): 374-386; *ibid.*, 375; *ibid.*, 376; Roger Lane's 1979 monograph *Violent Death in the City: Suicide, Accident, and Murder in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) represents one of the most in-depth approaches taken to nineteenth-century American suicide. The bulk of Lane's monograph consists of graphs and tables painstakingly reconstructed from the vital records for Philadelphia; Lane concluded that suicide rates increased in 1870s Philadelphia, Lane then interpreted the increase in the context of the occupation of the victims, many of whom were transient laborers. Lane and Logue's works highlight how any social study of American suicide requires a severely restricted domain; Howard Kushner, *American Suicide: A Psychocultural Exploration* 2nd Edition (Rutgers University Press, 1991), 184.

impossible to know if the deceased possessed intention to commit suicide. But the compiler specifically chose to include several deaths from botched abortions in his report because the women were well aware of the “bungling manner” in which abortions were performed.

Similarly, a 1902 report on suicide in Chicago that was reprinted in the *British Medical Journal* noted that Chicago authorities claimed the city’s high suicide rate was actually due to misinterpreted cases of influenza.¹⁵

Even if vital statistics were uniform in America, forming a causal account of suicide increase is a difficult task. While most of the articles in the era took ease in blaming the city and modernity for the increase in suicide, contemporary historians have found attaching any rise in nineteenth-century suicide rates to urbanization or industrialization to be an exceedingly difficult task. No study has explicitly attempted this for Gilded Age America, but work has been done on suicide and industrialization in Europe, where even though records are more reliable, roadblocks persist. One extensive 1980 study of suicide records in Victorian England could not conclude that suicide rates had increased with industrialization. The study instead only found that suicide rates in the cities were distinctly different from small towns and rural areas, but no definitive conclusion could be reached on suicide's correlation with industrialization.¹⁶

Since historians cannot adequately analyze the historical realities behind the suicide sensationalism, the question of suicide sensationalism can be approached as a cultural phenomenon. Most historians of American suicide have shunned social history in favor of cultural history when approaching their subject. The subject of inquiry in cultural history is the

¹⁵ John T. Nagle, “Suicides in New York,” *Public Health Papers Report*, No.7 (1881): 247-265, 247; “Suicide in Chicago” *British Medical Journal* Vol.324, No. 7350 (orig. 1902, reprinted June 8, 2002).

¹⁶ Olive Anderson, “Did Suicide Increase with Industrialization in Victorian England?” *Past and Present*, No.86 (February 1980): 149-173, 160-161.

meaning cultural practices, and symbols pervasive within a culture have for historical agents. American cultural historians generally approach culture as a system in which symbols and meaning are manipulated to different by cultural groups. Cultural historians of American suicide have likewise focused in on the meaning suicide had for different social groups and how groups have contended with one another over the public meaning of suicide. In the following study, I use the methods of cultural history to approach the suicide sensationalism of the Gilded Age.¹⁷

Cultural History and American Suicide

The bulk of the scholarship on the cultural history of American suicide involves suicide in the Early Republic (roughly 1780-1830). The central scholar in this corner of the scholarship is Richard Bell. Bell's monograph *We Shall Be No More: Suicide and Self-Government in the Newly United States* (Harvard University Press 2012) covers several spheres of public discourse that fostered a growing reaction to suicide in the early United States. Immediately after the close of the American Revolution, American newspapers extensively reported on instances of suicides, claiming them to be indicative of the chaos of the newly independent nation. Bell interpreted the media's use of a rash of suicides connected to Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* as taking on a cultural force over sympathy, arguing that the young people who committed suicide after reading the novella mirrored the irrationality of the young United States. In another chapter, Bell detailed Americans' use of suicide in responses to Unitarianism, abolitionism, and other cultural discourses. In a 2017 article, Bell highlighted the role of Benjamin Rush, a Philadelphia physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, in creating a moral discourse on

¹⁷ James Cook, Lawrence Glickman, Michael O'Malley, eds., *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, and Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 10-14.

suicide. Bell argued that Rush's moral discourse on suicide worked to create bonds of empathy in Early America that served to create a form of social control. Bell has also written on the cultural significance of the use of suicide as a metaphor in anti-dueling rhetoric, arguing that anti-dueling reformers' description of dueling as a form of suicide was a powerful indicator of the cultural significance and power of suicide rhetoric in Early America. Across his works, Bell has formed a broad argument that suicide was used as a metaphor of critique by Americans anxious about the uncertain future of the new United States.¹⁸

While the bulk of the scholarship is on the Early Republic, two scholars have specifically approached suicide in the Gilded Age through the methods of cultural history. The first is Howard Kushner's *Self-Destruction in the Promised Land: A Psychocultural Biology of American Suicide* (1989; retitled *American Suicide* in the 1991 2nd Edition). Kushner's cultural history approaches how Americans' cultural perception of suicide changed in the nineteenth century from primarily moral language to the medicalized language of "insanity" in the later nineteenth century.¹⁹

¹⁸ The historiography of suicide in the Early Republic is closely tied in with the large body of scholarship on early modern suicide, see Terri Snyder, "What Historians Mean When They Talk About Suicide: The View from Early Modern North America," *History Compass* Vol.5, No.2 (2007): 658-674; Richard Bell, *We Shall Be No More: Suicide and Self-Government in the Newly United States* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); *ibid.*, 37; *ibid.*, 67, also see Bell's article "In Werther's Thrall: Suicide and the Power of Sentimental Reading in Early National America," *Early American Literature* Vol.46, No.1 (2011): 93-120; See Katherine Gaudet, "Liberty and Death: Fictions of Suicide in the Early Republic" *Early American Literature* Vol.47, No.3 (2012): 591-622; Richard Bell, "The Moral Thermometer: Rush Republicanism, and Suicide," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* Vol.15, No.2 (2017): 308-331; Richard Bell, "The Double Guilt of Dueling: The Stain of Suicide in Anti-Dueling Rhetoric in the Early Republic," *Early American Studies* Vol.29, No.2 (2009): 383-410, 390; Bell, *We Shall Be No More*, 9; There are also several works on the meaning of slave suicide in the antebellum United States, see Terri Snyder, "Suicide, Slavery, and Memory in North America," *Journal of American History* Vol.97, No.1 (June 2010): 39-62, David Silkenat, *Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce, and Debt in Civil War-Era North Carolina* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011), and Richard Bell, "Slave Suicide, Abolition, and the Problem of Resistance," *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* Vol.33, No.4 (2012): 525-549;

¹⁹ Howard Kushner, *American Suicide: A Psychocultural Exploration*, 2nd Edition (Rutgers University Press, 1991) [1st Ed. *Self-Destruction in the Promised Land: A Psychocultural Biology of American Suicide*, Rutgers 1989]. Other scholars have drawn similar interpretations about homicide in American history, see Karen

In the first half of *Self-Destruction in the Promised Land* Kushner tracked this change through sermons, medical records, and asylum records from the seventeenth to the late nineteenth centuries, highlighting how the treatment of suicide went from a moral treatment, usually focusing on the care and moral nurturing of suicidal individuals to a custodial approach that focused on mental illness. Kushner found that the growth of the amoral view in Americans' understanding of suicide forced the medical discourse on suicide to bifurcate into therapeutic and scientific approaches to suicide. The second half of *American Suicide* works to reunite sociological, neurobiological, and psychoanalytic approaches to American suicide in a single discourse, what Kushner calls a 'Psychocultural Biology of suicide.' A Psychocultural Biology approaches the etiology of suicide through a combined approach that is grounded in understanding cultural facts surrounding suicide and those facts in relation to scientific treatments. This method is a rather unorthodox cultural history. While using sources and insights of cultural history, Kushner ultimately aimed to answer the etiological questions of social history. Rather than cultural history by itself, Kushner's method uses cultural history to answer the questions social history failed to answer. Kushner later used this method in several articles on Gilded Age suicide. These include an analysis of immigrant suicide in industrial regions in the United States through cultural mourning practices as well the impact of modernity and shifting gender roles on the late nineteenth-century medical discourse on suicide.²⁰

Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

²⁰ Kushner *American Suicide* 93-94; Howard Kushner, "Immigrant Suicide in the United States: Toward a Psycho-Social History," *Journal of Social History* Vol.18, No.1 (Autumn 1984): 3-24; Howard Kushner "Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Medical and Social Thought," *Journal of Social History* Vol.26, No.3 (Spring 1993): 461-490.

Kushner's sources throughout his studies are primarily medical periodicals and psychiatric literature. At points where his studies have a bearing on cultural phenomena, Kushner brings in novels, sermons or diaries. Rarely does he use the popular press, i.e., newspapers periodicals, &c., where sensationalist mainstream representations of nineteenth-century suicide prevailed. Kushner's "cultural history" is a melding of intellectual-medical history with broad cultural changes in the nineteenth century. He does not explicitly approach the suicide sensationalism of the Gilded Age.

The only scholar who has specifically approached suicide sensationalism in the Gilded Age is Kathleen Brian, whose 2013 dissertation "Morbid Propensities: Suicide, Sympathy, and the Making of American Eugenics" argued that the sensationalism surrounding Gilded Age suicide was a precursor to the twentieth-century Eugenics movement. According to Brian, the sensationalism surrounding Gilded Age suicide was part of a suicide-sympathy discourse that foreshadowed Eugenic thought by defining which individuals were determined to be separated from society. Sympathy discourses were explicit cultural redefinitions of suicide to exert social control, i.e., determining which members of society were worthy of sympathy. By creating panics over manias, the middle class was able to unite in a common cause which highlighted other members of society as dangerous or opposed to the social order. Sympathy-discourses were a marked attempt to create a Darwinian scale of fitness and unfitness within American culture that was a precursor of eugenics. Brian analyzed the growth of these discourses in the sensationalism surrounding purported "suicide clubs" in urban centers as well as purported threats against the vitality of the Victorian family.²¹

²¹ Kathleen M. Brian, "Morbid Propensities: Suicide, Sympathy, and the Making of American Eugenics" (Ph.D. Diss., The George Washington University 2013)

Brian interpreted suicide sensationalism as a facet within a discourse of sympathy which is a Foucaultian power discourse in American society. A discourse of sympathy is a power structure wherein different strata of American society fought over the meaning of sympathy in suicide as a means of social control, through constructing the limits of what can be accepted as truth and untruth within their society. For Brian, the white middle and upper class used sympathy to define which individuals were persons and which were not, fueling Eugenic thought. Sympathy itself was reframed to describe the pleasure a supposedly unfit person would receive in death while at the same time expressing the pleasure society would receive by benefiting from the death of eugenically unfit individuals. Inquiry in cultural history aims to reconstruct the phenomenal experience of historical agents, and Brian's Foucaultian discourses are a constructivist phenomenology. I believe that Brian's use of Foucaultian discourses precludes other perspectives on suicide in American culture that stands apart from her eugenics thesis²²

Realist Cultural History

Cultural historians who make use of Foucault are invoking a form of constructivist phenomenology in their conception of historical agents. Constructivist phenomenology is a form of transcendentalism, i.e., the thesis that the world-in-itself exists over and above the observer. On the constructivist view, when I perceive something, I only perceive an impression of a thing-in-itself, and on the Foucaultian picture, that impression is a socially constructed facet of a power structure. Constructivism is that it frames the past as a chess game. Every move by a historical

²² Brian, "Morbid Propensities," 21-28

agent is either offensive or defensive. Each action and representation in the experience of a historical agent on this picture is part of a power struggle within the discourse.²³

This is not to discredit Brian's thesis; there are indeed power discourses, but they do not wholly define the past. The chess game past of the constructivist cultural historians turns every piece of historical evidence into a hammer. It implicates a Hobbesian view of human nature and history, in which all humans are in constant struggle with one another, which precludes other interpretations of human experience. This approach makes historical agents atomistic individuals bouncing into one another, with lives that can only be interpreted as "Nasty, brutish, and short." This sort of human life is not helpful when ascribing agency and forging empathy with historical agents.²⁴

In the preface to the paperback edition of *No Place of Grace: Anti-Modernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920*, TJ Jackson Lears called for Cultural Historians to experiment with new theoretical tools for "without a dose of speculative boldness, historians are doomed to the deadly antiquarianism to which they have rightly been scorned." In my approach to Gilded Age suicide, I use an alternative foundation of cultural history derived from German philosopher and founder of the school of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl. The

²³ Other scholars have voiced similar criticisms of New Cultural History. Early on in the development of the school, Rudolph Weingartner criticized new cultural historians for not subjecting their philosophical underpinnings to scrutiny, see Rudolph Weingartner, "Some Philosophic Comments on Cultural History," *History and Theory* Vol.7, No.1 (1968): 38-59. Hannu Salmi has criticized cultural history for not being able to capture historical realities and instead argued that cultural history only maps a range of abstract historical possibilities, see Hannu Salmi, "Cultural History, The Possible, and the Principle of Plenitude," *History and Theory* Vol.50, No.2 (May 2011): 171-187

²⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Or the Matter, Forme and Power of an Ecclesiastical and Civil Commonwealth* (1651) Ch.13; This view of human nature has also led New Cultural Historians to elevate the history of those at the top of the power structures by ascribing power and deep meaning to all of their cultural practices however mundane, see Daniel Wickberg, "Heterosexual White Male: Some Recent Inversions in New Cultural History," *Journal of American History* Vol.92, No.1 (June 2005): 136-157.

constructivist phenomenologists who form the bedrock of New Cultural History, i.e., Foucault, Merleau Ponty, &c., were all intellectual descendants of Husserl. Husserl, while a constructivist himself later in his career, espoused a realist phenomenology in his earlier works which holds the potential for a more substantive cultural history of nineteenth-century suicide.²⁵

While constructivists hold that the objects of experience exist over and above the phenomenal observer, Husserl held that the observer could get at things-in-themselves directly in conscious experience. On this picture, perception is akin to several mathematicians using different proofs to arrive at the same answer. Their proofs were not social constructs, but rather different expressions of universal intuitions that led them to the same answer. The objects of experience are real universals and not social constructions built between us and the thing-in-itself. This means that the historical agent's knowledge and representations are not social constructs, but the real, concrete experience of the world in itself. The perceptions of agency that are expressed through suicide sensationalism, are more concrete than agency within a Foucaultian power discourse; instead they are concrete, real expressions of their experience.²⁶

²⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J.N. Findlay, Vols. 1 and 2 (1900/1912; repr., New York: Routledge, 2001); TJ Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Anti-Modernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1870-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, 1994), xiii; The pervasive acceptance of Foucault and constructivism among American cultural historians can also be seen in the broader rejection of moral knowledge that has taken place in twentieth-century western society. Due to changes in cultural views of knowledge that took place in the mid-twentieth century, historians, and scholars in general, have shifted towards an acceptance of relativism and constructivism, solely defining knowledge and cultural practice as power plays, see Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (Oxford University Press, 2006) also see Ch.1 of Dallas Willard, et al. *The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge* (Routledge 2018).

²⁶ This is a cursory explanation of Husserl's realism, for a more in-depth explanation of his realism see Dallas Willard, "Knowledge" in Barry Smith and David Woodruff Smith, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 138-167 and Dallas Willard, *Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge: A Study in Husserl's Philosophy* (Ohio University Press, 1984).

Husserl's realism means that the representations of historical agents, i.e., the goal of cultural historian's inquiry, point to an experience of universals and not socially constructed power structures. The question to be asked now is how do we find these realist representations in primary sources? Husserl in his opus *Logical Investigations* framed the process of the subject's perception of universals in terms of what he calls 'meaning-intention' and 'meaning-fulfillment.' Meaning-intention is when the mind sets up for the possibility of a meaningful act. Meaning-fulfillment is when an object of consciousness is encountered which fulfills the intention. Back with the mathematician example, the meaning-intention is the shared intuition the mathematicians have that guides their problem-solving. The meaning-fulfillment is the completed proof.²⁷

With meaning-intention and meaning-fulfillment we can frame historical agent's reactions and perception in terms of their perception of universals. This applied exceptionally well in the case of suicide, a cultural symbol that exists at the intersection of two universals: death and agency. An 1890s anarchist polemic on industrialization and working class can be evidence of how the anarchist perceived their agency under industrialization. Suicide is the public assertion, via voluntary death, of one's agency. Focusing on agents' perception of universals is a bottom-up cultural history. Rather than assuming a definition of culture or defining the social structures and constructs before analysis, the Husserlian method enables me to reconstruct experience before making any interpretive judgment on social structures. In the following sections, I approach primary sources as expressions indicative of agents' perceptions of

²⁷ Husserl. *Logical Investigations*, Investigation I §9; This is, of course, a simplification of Husserl's picture of conscious perception. Meaning-intention and meaning-fulfillment are the central acts of perception in a multivalent cognitive process. For a fuller explanation of this process see pp 47-51 of Aaron Preston, "Intuition in Analytic Philosophy," *Teorema* Vol.34, No.3 (2015): 37-55.

universals by working backward to see how those sources are meaning-fulfilments for meaning-intentions.²⁸

In the remainder of this study, I apply Husserl's realism to the cultural reactions to suicide in Gilded Age America. Approaching suicide as the cultural intersection of the universals of death and agency, rather than as a tool within a power discourse, I approach several cultural discourses where suicide metaphors and reports of suicide played through sources from the mainstream middle-class press, the revolutionary press, in tabloids, fashion magazines, and the religious press, to give a full picture of the myriad reactions to Gilded Age suicide.²⁹

In Part II I analyze the reactions to the suicide of Haymarket Anarchist Louis Lingg, arguing that the trope of anarchism-suicide was a tool of social critique that revealed Americans' deep concerns about agency under the new state forged under industrialization. In Part III I analyze changes in the perception of the suicide of women in nineteenth-century cities. I focus on how the etiology of women's suicide became increasingly connected with the vices of the modern city as well as changes in marriage, labor, and women's economic status that came with industrialization. In Part IV I cover the use of suicide in cultural dialogues over business and the new industrial economy forged in the Gilded Age. At a few points in this study, my subject matter crosses over with subject matter Kathleen Brian approached in her study of Gilded Age

²⁸ Critical theorist Dominic LaCapra indicted Cultural Historians of applying unanalyzed concepts of culture over human experience in Ch.7 of *Soundings in Critical Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). A similar argument is made by Kerwin Lee Klein who argued that cultural historians' lack of analysis failed to distinguish language and culture, essentially deflating culture. Kerwin Lee Klein, *From History to Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 61-63.

²⁹ Note, while my interpretation is within the framework of realist phenomenology, I still use the language of discourse to refer to areas of cultural dialogue where suicide played a role. This is a more literal use of the term than Foucault, for I am referring to public usages of a term and not a power structure; By referring to suicide as a powerful, public symbol of agency I am invoking Jack Douglas' interpretation of suicide as the public transformation of the substantial self, see Jack Douglas, *The Social Meanings of Suicide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967) Ch.17.

suicide, namely the section on life insurance in Part IV, and the nativist rhetoric surrounding anarchism and suicide in Part II. At these points of overlap, I highlight the difference in interpretation between her constructivist methodology and my Husserlian approach. Through these three discourses, I argue that suicide in the Gilded Age was a meaning-fulfillment for a meaning-intention constituted by Americans' anxiety about their agency under industrialization. As a powerful public symbol of agency, Gilded Age Americans seized upon suicide to express concerns they had about their ability to control their lives and persons under industrialization and modernization. In the final section, I interpret this finding in the context of scholarship on modern consciousness before commenting on the return of suicide discourse in the current “New Gilded Age.”

Part II:

The Exploding Cigar

On the morning of November 10th, 1887, in a cell in the Cook County Illinois Jail, Louis Lingg placed a cigar in his mouth and lit a match.

Lingg was due to hang the next day with his fellow 'co-conspirators' in the 'Haymarket bombing' the previous spring. In 1886, amid a rally for the 8-hour day in Chicago's Haymarket Square, a bomb was thrown into a crowd of police officers, killing several officers and wounding dozens. Lingg, a carpenter, was a well-known anarchist and labor agitator in Chicago. In the immediate aftermath of the bombing, the police searched his apartment as part of a broad sweep of all the anarchists of the city. Finding several bombs there, Lingg was taken in. Later, seven other Chicago anarchists were indicted by grand jury: August Spies, Oscar Neebe, Samuel Fielden, Adolf Fischer, Albert Parsons, George Engel, and Michael Schwab. The eight were tried collectively for the murder of Mathias Degan; a police officer killed in the blast.

Their trial gripped the nation's attention span as well as the fear and imagination of Chicagoans. Chicago experienced intense labor struggles and urban disorder in the period preceding Haymarket, starting with the 1877 railroad strike. Riots and bombings became commonplace in late nineteenth-century Chicago. Chicago elites, middle class, and strata of the working class especially feared anarchists. They heard terrifying stories of the Paris Commune, assassinations of aristocrats, and nihilist bombings in Russia. The anarchists in Chicago had regularly called for violence and bombings to undo the social order in Chicago. Anarchists were

widely perceived as part of a foreign wave in the United States. Lingg himself was a German immigrant.³⁰

The anarchists rounded up in the aftermath of Haymarket were not directly connected to the bombing—that was never a question in the trial. The anarchists were tried based on their beliefs as symbols of Chicagoans' fears. Jury selection took weeks; anyone perceived as potentially being sympathetic to workers or the anarchists was thrown out. Justice was flouted throughout the entire trial. Most of the evidence put forth by the prosecution were articles written by the accused for anarchist papers, particularly the German paper *Arbeiter Zeitung*, that only demonstrated their political views. One expert was brought forth who made a loose connection between the chemicals in the bombs in Lingg's apartment and the bomb used in Haymarket. Anarchism was on trial, not the bomb thrower. On August 20, 1886, the verdict was announced: seven of the eight, including Lingg, were condemned to death, the eighth, Oscar Neebe, was sentenced to fifteen years in prison.

Lingg stood out through the trial and media storm. Out of the eight, Lingg was accused of being the one who made and threw the bomb, while the others were equally guilty simply for being anarchists. The newspapers focused on his actions in court, drawing a picture of Chicagoans' fears wrapped up within Lingg. In his speech made in court, Lingg declared: "I am for force...If they use cannons against us, I will use dynamite" and labeled himself the "enemy of the order today." Lingg was an unabashed, admittedly violent anarchist, prompting the media to describe him as the 'rabid anarchist' or 'bloodthirsty anarchist.'³¹

³⁰ Carl Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, The Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman*, 2nd Edition (University of Chicago Press 1995), 116.

³¹ Leon Stein and Philip Taft, eds., *The Accused and the Accusers, The Famous Speeches of the Eight Chicago Anarchists in Court* (New York: Arno Press 1969), 42; "Lingg the Bomb Maker," *Chicago Daily Tribune*,

Lingg was later given the opportunity to sign a petition that admitted to guilt in the bombing, which would have commuted his sentence. He refused and disavowed the proposition. After Lingg refused to sign, a *Chicago Tribune* article ran the opinions of several doctors who claimed Lingg was 'insane' or 'paranoid'.³²

Lingg exchanged letters with a love interest from prison. The papers and tabloids speculated intensely on the identity of "Lingg's girl." His path toward execution began to be romanticized and dramatized through his letters and refusal to give up his convictions.³³

On November 6th, four bombs were found to be hidden in Lingg's cell causing another stir. The bombs in Lingg's cell caused further anxiety for governor Oglesby and other Chicagoans. Even in his cell in Cook County Jail, Lingg seemed to be a threat, accentuating him as a symbol of fear. He was a standout of the Haymarket eight, the one accused of the crime directly but also the one who refused to relent.³⁴

On November 10th, 1887, the sentences of Fielden and Schwab were commuted, and the remaining five were sentenced to hang on November 11th, 1887. The 'cigar' Lingg lit that night was a small dynamite cap. The cap exploded, killing him instantly. Lingg's death would become one of the most notorious suicides of the Gilded Age.

On the day of the anarchists' execution, Lingg's suicide made the front pages of newspapers nationwide. His self-destruction was front and center across the spectrum of media

May 16, 1886; "Lingg and his Bombs," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sept 16, 1887; "Is Lingg, a Sane Man?" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 10, 1887.

³², "Lingg's Ultimatum," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 9, 1887; "Is Lingg, a Sane Man?" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 10, 1887.

³³, "LET GO!" *The National Police Gazette*, November 19, 1887.

³⁴ "Bombs in Lingg's Cell" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 7, 1887; "Governor Thunderstruck," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 7, 1887.

outlets. The front page of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* carried an image of Lingg standing tall, lighting the cigar in his mouth, captioned 'The Doom of Anarchy' (Appendix C). The front cover of *The Pictorial West*, ran an image of the cigar violently exploding in Lingg's mouth (Appendix D). All the major newspapers ran detailed reports on Lingg's suicide, particularly its method and his horrible disfigurement from the bomb. Nashville's *Daily American* wrote, "he [Lingg] had erased from his countenance every trace of God's image." The *Detroit Free Press* ran the headline "Lingg's Awful End." The *National Police Gazette* ran the headline "All Over! The Four Condemned Anarchists Meet Their Fate Like Men." These accounts sensationalized the death of the most notorious anarchist. Within these sensational headlines ran a nuanced battle over the symbolism of Lingg's death.³⁵

Lingg in the Anarchist Press

The frontlines of this cultural battle were staked in the anarchist press. The Chicago anarchist paper *Alarm* expressed the most vocal defense of Lingg in the aftermath of his death. The *Alarm* was edited by Albert Parsons, one of Lingg's fellow conspirators in the Haymarket affair. Publication was briefly stopped when Parsons was arrested in 1886 but picked up again following the executions. The November 19th, 1887 edition of *Alarm* hailed the accused as 'martyrs,' victims of the 'modern inquisitors' who died for their "social heresy." On the front page of the issue that came out after the executions ran eulogies for the five dead anarchists, Lingg's was brief, and the *Alarm* did not speculate on his motive for suicide.³⁶

³⁵ "The Doom of Anarchy," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, November 19, 1887; "Horrible Suicide of Lingg-the Anarchist," *The Pictorial West*, November 19, 1887; "Thrice Cheated," *Daily American*, November 11, 1887; "Lingg's Awful End," *The Detroit Free Press*, November 11, 1887; "All Over," *The National Police Gazette*, November 26, 1887.

³⁶ "Echoes of the Past," *The Alarm*, November 19, 1887.

The other anarchists were described regarding their moral and ideological convictions. 'Calm' George Engel was the "one of the tenderest and truest men"; Parson's eulogy opened with mention of his "Puritan descent"; Adolph Fischer was 'the peer of any hero in the point of courage'; August Spies was noted for his polite conversation. Lingg's eulogy was devoid of moral or theological language; it stated that it had "no explanation" for his suicide but made it clear that 'fear never led him to suicide. The title of the eulogy, though, was: "the handsome young carpenter." Further articles on Lingg in the *Alarm* used similar language. An anarchist from Detroit wrote a tract on Lingg the "brave, heroic, and manly." Less than two months after his suicide, a poem on the Haymarket martyrs in the Boston anarchist periodical *Liberty* referred to Lingg as the "bravest of them all." Later articles on Lingg referred to him as "dangerously handsome."³⁷

Some articles in *Alarm* used the moral language found in the descriptions of the other anarchists, but this moral language was still tied to Lingg's youth. One report spoke of Lingg as 'Noble' and used a description of Lingg from a supposed guard in the Cook County Jail that said Lingg was 'pure in morals and thought. The same article also spoke of his love for his mother. The *Alarm* also frequently stated that Lingg did not fear death. Lingg was innocent, beautiful, youthful and pure—powerful rhetoric aimed to underscore Lingg's suicide as the ultimate tragedy.³⁸

³⁷ "Echoes of the Past," *The Alarm*, November 19th, 1887; "Robert Reitzel of Detroit," *The Alarm*, November 19, 1887; "Hoch Die Anarchie," *Liberty*, Vol.5, No.12 (January 14, 1888); "Some Reminiscences," *The Alarm*, December 17, 1887.

³⁸ Noble Louis Lingg, " *The Alarm*. November 19, 1887; "Some Reminiscences," *The Alarm*, December 17, 1887.

Anarchists were quick to defend this youthful, vigorous image of Lingg against attack from the mainstream press. In 1889 an article printed in the anarchist newspaper *Liberty* censured a *Boston Globe* reporter who—the *Liberty* claimed—had poorly characterized the anarchists—particularly Lingg. The *Globe* reporter was explicitly cited for calling Lingg "a curiosity with a door-mat head, a doughy face, magnificent chest, and poorly fashioned legs." The response printed in *Liberty* called the *Globe* Reporter "one of those hacks of literature" who "pawn the dirty linen of their souls daily for a bottle of sour wine and cigar." A 1907 article in the New York anarchist periodical similarly contested the legacy of Lingg as portrayed by a reporter for the *New York World*. The *World* reporter was accused of becoming a 'horrible monster' when it came to reporting on Lingg. Lingg was defended as an innocent, sane martyr, exceedingly courageous for the anarchist cause.³⁹

To anarchists, Lingg's suicide and youth formed a symbol of the vitality and tragedy of the anarchist cause. The suicide of such a handsome, pure individual was an indictment against the system that persecuted him; his suicide was thus not through his agency. The anarchists worked Lingg's youth and purity into calls for their support in his death. The self-destruction of such youth was the ultimate tragedy. The non-anarchist media took this symbol up as well but used it to contrary ends.

Lingg in the Mainstream Press

Chicago papers and national papers seized upon Lingg's youth and suicide to depict anarchism as an irrational ideology. The *Daily Inter Ocean* reported that "Lingg was strikingly handsome

³⁹ *Liberty*, June 8th, 1889; Voltairine De Cleyre, "November Eleventh 20 Years Ago," *Mother Earth*, Vol.2 No.9 (November 1907): 368-374, 370-71.

but very vain...he was the beau-ideal of an anarchist." The 'beau-ideal' transposed his beauty against his death. Some papers, for example, Nashville's *Daily American*, worked to paint a weak, unmanly image of Lingg in his death by focusing on the extreme gore and physical appearance of Lingg: "the man's face, has seemed as beautiful as an archangel's, was made a revolting mass of blood and shreds of tangled flesh."⁴⁰

The tabloid, the *National Police Gazette*, commented extensively on Lingg's masculinity in death. The headline on the November 26th edition, read "All Over! The Four Condemned Anarchists Meet their Fate Like Men", specifically excluding Lingg from those whose death was described as "like men." Their description of Lingg's body repeated the language around his appearance, referring to his 'lithe athletic form' and his 'handsome face.' The *Gazette* also printed a drawing of Lingg confidently holding a candle to the cigar in his mouth, in a similar style to the November 19th cover of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* as well as a drawing of the cigar violently exploding in Lingg's mouth similar to *The Pictorial West* (See appendix). The same article ran sub-headlines that read "Spies Cries like a Baby" and "Mrs. Parson faints."⁴¹

The self-destruction of Lingg's masculinity and youth was used by the mainstream press to express the irrationality anarchism, an ideology that was an assured path to self-destruction. Suicide served to refute the anarchists' claim to martyrdom. An article printed in *Chicago Tribune* a few days after the executions warned Chicagoans against viewing the anarchists as martyrs, arguing that the anarchists were murderers more than anything else, especially not ideologues for the cause of labor.⁴² Such arguments reverberated in the Gilded Age press to

⁴⁰ "Lingg the Suicide," *Daily Inter Ocean*, November 12, 1887; "Thrice Cheated," *Daily American*, November 11, 1887.

⁴¹ "ALL OVER!" *National Police Gazette*, November 26, 1887.

⁴² "Overdoing the Martyr Plea," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 20, 1887.

express other dimensions of the discourse, that entailed more profound arguments over manliness and masculinity.

Other papers extended the language of suicide to the other anarchists. Rumors that Engel attempted suicide ran through many outlets. The *Alarm* denied such rumors but other papers widely reported on it. The *National Police Gazette* reported that Engels had overdosed on morphine. The *New York Tribune* reported that Engels had taken Laudanum in an attempt to “evade the rope.” The rumors surrounding Engels death were just one example of the mainstream press’ use of suicide to paint the anarchists as cowardly or unmanly. Some of the more revelatory examples of this manipulation of the suicide symbol occurred long after the executions, in a time when cultural memory faded and had become more malleable.⁴³

In 1896 the *Daily Inter Ocean* printed a story supposedly from an interview with ‘Jailer Folz,’ one of the night guards in Joliet at the time the anarchists were imprisoned there. The guard claimed that the bombs found in Lingg's cell were there for the suicide of all five condemned anarchists. Folz claimed “it was the doctrine of the anarchists” that if captured “it was their duty to take their own lives.” Folz claimed that Spies, “the big coward,” told him of the suicide plot after the bombs were found in Lingg's cell. Reports on the bombs from 1887 did not mention group suicide. For the most part, reports speculated that Lingg aimed to kill the guards before his execution, specifically Folz. The *Tribune* strongly claimed that the bombs were “a mare's nest, a canard, a fake,” planted for media sensation before the execution as it was impossible for Lingg to get the bombs in his cell given the security around the prisoners. The *New York Times* also speculated on the bombs being “a conspiracy” by the police. The *Tribune*

⁴³ “ALL OVER!” *National Police Gazette*, November 26, 1887; “Trying to Evade the Rope,” *New York Tribune*, November 8, 1887.

also reprinted a statement by Fischer that backed up their claim it was a fake, for “no sane man would have bombs in his cell... subject to search at any moment and all times.” Other jailers purported Lingg to be “a lunatic...simply an overgrown boy,” and the bombs were planted by Lingg, who planned for them to be discovered in order to make him seem more threatening. An article from the *Daily Inter Ocean* two days after Lingg's suicide quoted Folz as saying that the bombs in Lingg's cell were intended to be thrown at reporters.⁴⁴

Describing Spies as the “big coward” undermined the martyrdom of the anarchists, manipulating the symbol of suicide against Lingg through a sensational yet unlikely story. The *Daily Inter Ocean* and other outlets manipulated the symbol of Lingg to highlight similar connections between cowardice, suicide, and anarchism in the decades following Lingg's death. A short mention of an anarchist who committed suicide, outside of prison, was titled “Followed Lingg's Example.” An article in the *Tribune* on the attempted suicide of a convicted murderer using a pistol cartridge, without any mention of anarchism, was titled “To Follow Lingg's Example.” An 1892 editorial on anarchism as ‘an engine of cowardice’ writes of cowardice as an ‘essential basic principle of an anarchist’ and that when anarchists are caught “there is not a Lingg in a thousand of them.” One 1888 article in the *Hyde Park News* detailed, in sensational language several suicides in Europe that used bombs which ‘eclipsed Lingg's performance.’ When a thief waiting on death row committed a very painful suicide in 1904, the *Tribune* also noted how Lingg's suicide followed a similar logic. “He [Lingg] courted a more painful death than the one that the law sentenced him to,” making it sound as if Lingg's opposition to the law,

⁴⁴ “Jailer Folz's Story,” *Daily Inter Ocean*, November 16, 1896; “Of the Deadliest Sort,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 8, 1887; “Bombs in Lingg's Cell,” *New York Times*, November 8, 1887; “Bombs in Lingg's Cell,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 7, 1887; “Lingg's Intentions,” *Daily Inter Ocean*, November 13, 1887.

via suicide, was illogical; the appropriate execution for Lingg was more rational than his death by agency.⁴⁵

This symbol surfaced when the cell Lingg died in was reused in the case of Eugene Prendergast, a disillusioned office-seeker who assassinated Chicago Mayor Carter Harrison in 1893. When Prendergast was placed in Lingg's former cell, the *Tribune* detailed how two murderers transferred from Lingg's cell to another part of the prison to prepare that specific cell for Prendergast. The jailers even conversed with Prendergast on suicide over breakfast, probing Prendergast to see if he had any inclinations toward self-destruction.⁴⁶

Notably missing from the reports and editorials on Lingg's death, was any mention of mental disorder. In their initial statement on Lingg's death, the *Daily Inter Ocean* asserted that "it was claimed he was mentally debilitated, but it was never proven." A brief inquest into Lingg's sanity had also been made before his death. The inquest was rejected, and the papers described it as an attempt to absolve Lingg. Minimal language of 'insanity' or mental health was used to describe Lingg or other anarchists.⁴⁷

The anarchists were rarely referred to as insane or mentally unstable in descriptions that appeared in the mainstream press. Insanity was a common language used to describe female suicide in the late nineteenth century, and given the battle over the masculine image of the anarchists, one might expect the anarchists to be portrayed as insane, granted the same etiology

⁴⁵ "Followed Lingg's Example," *Daily Inter Ocean*, April 26, 1888; "To Follow Lingg's Example," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 17, 1888; "Engines of Cowardice," *Daily Inter Ocean*, August 30, 1892; "Heavy Suiciding," *The Hyde Park News*, January 21, 1888; "Trying to Escape the Gallows," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 19, 1904.

⁴⁶ "Assassin is in Jail," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 30, 1893.

⁴⁷ "Lingg the Suicide," *Daily Inter Ocean*, November 12, 1887; "His Sanity Questioned," *Daily Inter Ocean*, November 11, 1887; "Is Lingg a Sane Man?," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 10, 1887.

as female suicide. But this was not the case, if anything, anarchy itself was called insane but still not the anarchists. Instead, anarchism was a logic that diverged from the language of masculinity.⁴⁸

The Logic of Anarchism

Rather than being chalked up to insanity, anarchist suicide was seen as the result of anarchists following through on their own logic. An article in the *Chicago Tribune* the day after his death remarked that Lingg was an 'appalling' example of someone who had believed too sincerely in an idea. The same article stated that Lingg, who had a "thirst for the blood of the social order," condemned himself to an ignoble and unheroic grave. Lingg was a fruit sown by the Bakunin and Most, contemporary Russian anarchists, on 'soil prepared by Marx'; Lingg was the 'appalling object-lesson' of taking an idea too seriously. This notion of suicide as the *result* of anarchism was a metaphor in the Gilded Age that went far beyond Lingg.⁴⁹

In her dissertation on Gilded Age suicide, Kathleen Brian focused on the role suicide played the nativist rhetoric surrounding Lingg's suicide. The gruesomeness of Lingg's suicide was an opportunity for the white middle class to define anarchists and labor agitators as irrational outsiders, commanding sympathy away from their cause. This move defined the anarchists as "degenerates" outside of mainstream society which would lay the groundwork for turn-of-the-century eugenic standards of fitness and unfitness that marginalized those outside of the middle class.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 155; *ibid.*, 157; *ibid.*, 162.

⁴⁹ "Lingg the Suicide," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 11, 1887.

⁵⁰ Brian, "Morbid Propensities," 272-273.

Brian's interpretation only highlights one role that the anarchist-suicide trope played. If the context of anarchist voices and the wider use of the anarchist-suicide trope is taken into account as well as the broader trope of anarchism, the trope seems to be indicative of deeper concerns about industrial society that manifest in locales other than Eugenic thought.

One article in the *New York Tribune* claimed anarchism itself enabled Lingg's suicide. It claimed that only the carelessness of the guards caused Lingg's death and "anarchy had pervaded the jail." The *Daily Inter Ocean* claimed Lingg's suicide was an excellent example of nihilism and that his suicide had "introduced the methods" of the International to the United States. Lingg's suicide was to the general public fulfillment of the telos of an anarchist. This language surrounded many other accounts of anarchists in the Gilded Age, both sensational and mundane.⁵¹

Sundry subsequent accounts of anarchist suicides connected suicide with the ideals and ends of anarchism. In 1889 an anarchist imprisoned in Joliet attempted suicide, the cause of his suicide was described as the result of when an anarchist is forced to work. Other articles pointed toward a perception of anarchists as opposed to normal labor or work in Chicago. In 1888 a story ran on an 'anarchist sympathizer' who refused to work; the 'anarchist' forced his wife to work, after which he supposedly spent his family's money on buying one of Lingg's revolvers, alcohol, and then gave the rest to the anarchist defense fund.⁵²

One article in the *Tribune* in 1902 detailed how a woman who committed suicide in the city was at first assumed to be the prominent anarchist Emma Goldman. A friend of Emma

⁵¹ "The Suicide of Lingg," *New York Herald*, November 11, 1887; "A Typical Nihilist," *The Daily Inter Ocean*, November 11, 1887.

⁵² "Hronek Attempts Suicide in Prison," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 1, 1889; "One of Lingg's Revolvers," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 8, 1888.

Goldman was summoned to confirm that it was indeed not Emma Goldman. The language in the article demonstrated an expectation that the woman was Emma Goldman. Similar stories describing “desperate anarchists” who attempted suicide in prison regularly made headlines in Gilded Age cities.⁵³

One of the more sensational stories of anarchism and suicide occurred in 1890 when it was widely reported that nineteen anarchists committed suicide in New York. The report was supposedly given by a detective in New York who had discovered a group of sixty-two anarchists planning to burn down New York and Boston. The anarchists had a suicide pact wherein all would ‘die as martyrs to their cause’ before they could confess to the crime. The sixty-two anarchists were supposedly members of the Chicago section of the “Socialistic Arbeiter.” Nineteen members were living in Brooklyn. At one point they decided that the plan was not moving along fast enough and so all nineteen committed suicide. The detective believed more anarchists would commit suicide soon. Other articles on the detective’s report wrote as if the anarchists had nothing to do outside of their cause but suicide.⁵⁴ Whether this story was true or not (New York papers did not carry the story), it speaks to the sensationalism around the anarchist-suicide trope.

In 1902 a rumor circulated that three anarchists who were planning to assassinate Theodore Roosevelt had instead committed suicide. The three anarchists had drawn lots to kill Roosevelt after his inauguration, but before the plan could follow through, all three committed

⁵³ “Female Anarchist Ends Life,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 3, 1902; “Desperate Anarchist Arrested,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 3, 1894; “Attempt to Slay Spanish Premier,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 13, 1894:

⁵⁴ “Many Anarchists Commit Suicide,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 13, 1890; “Hustling Off: Anarchists Busy Committing Suicide,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, January 13, 1890; “Wanted to Die,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 13, 1890.

suicide, as testified by a former anarchist and parishioner in a New York Methodist church. The “former anarchist” had planned with the three and was there when they drew lots to take part in the assassination, but she then ‘unburdened herself’ after a “moment of religious fervor” at First Methodist. The first anarchist chosen was described as “knowing his life had been forfeited” and died by accident in Paris, but the woman claimed that it had to have been suicide; the other two took poison after being chosen. The *Chicago Eagle* quipped that the anarchists committed suicide because they heard “Mr. Roosevelt is pretty handy with a trigger himself.” Other articles on the same date as the *Tribune’s*, reported that the Secret Service issued a statement denying the plot, stating that the President was never under any danger, but the sensational story continued. Weeks later, the *Christian Advocate* recounted the affair as an “extraordinary but not improbable story” and that “whether [the story] be true or not, there are nests of anarchists throughout the world.”⁵⁵

The mainstream press also regularly ran articles that sensationalized the suicides of the anarchists in Europe. One article on the 1910 suicide of Italian Luigi Luccheni, who assassinated Empress Elizabeth of Austria in 1898, explicitly stated that he “feigned insanity.” A report on an assassination attempt against the King of Spain in 1906 dramatized the hunt for anarchists afterward, “arrested on general principles where ever found,” but one anarchist who committed suicide after being arrested was claimed to had to have been the one who threw the bomb at the king.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ “Plots to Kill President,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 19, 1902; *Chicago Eagle*, December 13, 1902; “Denies Plot on President,” *Rock Island Argus*, November 19, 1902; “An Extraordinary but not Improbable Story,” *Christian Advocate*, November 27, 1902.

⁵⁶ “Slayer of Empress Suicide,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 20, 1910; “Assassins at Madrid,” *Collier’s*, June 16, 1906.

It is important to note that many of the reports in anarchist suicides may also have not been anarchists committing suicide. Many times reports tacked on ‘anarchist’ to suicides that they may have deemed worthy of an anarchist. One such article in the *New York Times*, titled "His Threats Carried Out: Crazy Anarchist Kills His Wife, Child, and Himself" writes of an 1890 murder-suicide by a union member who was "inclined to be an anarchist." Whether or not these suicides were actual anarchists or members of anarchist societies, the media tacked on “anarchist” to crimes they viewed as indicative of an anarchist. Suicide was widely perceived as one of these crimes.⁵⁷

One anarchist who committed suicide in a market in Chicago in 1890 was reported as leaving a note saying that it was "the only relief to escape the cruelties and sufferings of this barbarous system.” The note went on to describe how Marx, LaSalle, and Darwin guaranteed freedom and social change in the future. The article intended to paint the anarchist as irrational, committing suicide in the hope of a future he could not live in; the *Tribune* titled the article "took chances on the next world."⁵⁸

A supposed “found diary” of a young man who committed suicide in New York was published as *Diary of a Suicide* in the avant-garde magazine *Glebe* in 1913. The magazine proclaimed the diary to be authentic and taken from a dead body, but the magazine gave no further detail. The diary tracked a young man's life and the family issues that led to his suicide. Throughout the diary are interspersed comments on his fascination with anarchism. At one point

⁵⁷ “His Threats Carried Out: Crazy Anarchist Kills His Wife, Child, and Himself,” *New York Times*, January 5, 1890.

⁵⁸ "Took Chances on the Next World," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 20, 1890.

he writes that he is 'philosophically at least, an anarchist.' The author described the formation of his anarchist beliefs and at other points expressed admiration for Tolstoy's anarchism.⁵⁹

One 1897 article in the *Chicago Tribune* spelled out what Chicagoans had been saying through their use of the suicide-anarchist metaphor. "If suicide is ever logical, it is the logical conclusion of anarchy...the logical result of illogical reasoning." Suicide was part and parcel with anarchist ideology. Suicide was a tool that expressed anarchism's latent irrationality. Murderers in the nineteenth century were drawn up as mental aliens, or "others" to society. Anarchists who self-murdered were, on the other hand, irrational aliens, but this is only one side of the coin. Anarchists also used this broad anarchism-suicide metaphor but manipulated the symbol to opposite effect.⁶⁰

A Modal Logic of Industrial Society

The use of the anarchist-suicide connection in Emma Goldman's magazine *Mother Earth* gives critical insight into the breadth of roles played by the suicide-anarchist metaphor at the end of the Gilded Age. *Mother Earth* was begun by Goldman in 1906 as a journal of Anarchist literature, theory, and general news, with contributions by many of the leading intellectual and activist figures in the Anarchist movement, e.g., Peter Kropotkin, Voltairine De Cleyre, and Maxim Gorky among others. The legacy of Lingg and the other Haymarket martyrs figured prominently throughout the periodical's history. A crucial part of the discourse was how the public used the symbol of the anarchists and Lingg's suicide. A 1912 article, wrote of the

⁵⁹ George E. Baker, "Diary of a Suicide," *The Glebe* Vol.1, No.2 (November 1913), 65 <https://archive.org/details/diaryofsuicide00bake/>; *ibid.*, 12; *ibid.*, 41.

⁶⁰ "Suicide of an Anarchist," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 26, 1897.

public's 'pouring a vial of poison' on the character of the Anarchists in the period after Haymarket, attempts to destroy their legacy by treating them as insane. The article specifically made clear that all of the anarchists 'could have committed suicide had they been bereft of all shame.'⁶¹

A later article in *Mother Earth* noted that Lingg had died in resistance of the 'movement that grounded humanity down' and his death was the most tragic of all the 'tragedies of the time.' Lingg was a victim of the irrationality of society and state. His suicide was an act of agency against that force. Besides Lingg, *Mother Earth* regularly commented on Anarchists who committed suicide, praising and interpreting the actions of martyrs similar to Lingg. Anarchists viewed the scope of anarchist-suicides as evidence of the effects of living under an industrial-capitalist regime. Emma Goldman's periodical *Mother Earth* noted many suicides by anarchists who assassinated police officers and political officials. For example, when an anarchist news editor committed suicide in Sweden, she noted it as another 'noble victim' of 'governmental cruelty.' Anarchism-suicide surfaced in points of direct contact between authority and anarchists. The 1910 Los Angeles suicide of prisoner who had been attacked by a police officer, was another example of the work of 'vengeful, eager authorities.'⁶²

An article in *Mother Earth* from 1907, claimed that suicides and other 'vices' were 'threateningly on the increase' as a result of the 'imbecility' of the United States' constitution. The United States' laws prevented humans from acting as 'true rational beings.' Another article in the same issue claimed that unregulated production forced individuals into suicide. In Emma

⁶¹ James Montgomery, "They are Not Dead!" *Mother Earth* Vol.7, No.9 (November 1912): 283-87; 286; *ibid.*, 286.

⁶² Lizzie Holmes, "25 Years After" *Mother Earth* Vol.7, No. 9 (November 1912): 300-305, 303; *Mother Earth* Vol.2, No.2 (April 1907): 472; *Mother Earth* Vol.5, No.7 (September 1910): 212-213.

Goldman's writings, she tied in suicide to her critique of capitalism. Goldman made several references to suicide in her work the "Psychology of Political Violence." For example: "suicides of whole families for want of life" and "present-day society is badly organized, so badly that every day many wretched men commit suicide." Goldman took the public perception of the risk of suicide in the Gilded Age as evidence for her theory.⁶³

When a group of Russian anarchists simultaneously committed suicide in a Siberian prison in 1910, *Mother Earth* noted them for 'sublime heroism'; the anarchists saw death as the only means to spread their word of their tortures under the Tsarist regime. A 1910 description of Russian anarchists who attempted suicide noted them as "self-possessed in the highest degree." Suicide was an act of agency, death by choice, and for *Mother Earth*, it was the highest action possible.⁶⁴

Across the spectrum, anarchists and activists saw civilization pushing workers toward suicide. A 1913 issue of *Mother Earth* ran the biography of a worker who committed suicide, Manuel Pardinás. Pardinás worked through his entire life, continually suffering under capitalism, before committing murder-suicide in the name of anarchism; the author remarked that his suicide was "perhaps [the] only happy moment in his life."⁶⁵ *Mother Earth* ran an excerpt by Friedrich Nietzsche which defined by life under the State as "the slow suicide of all."⁶⁶

⁶³ W.C. Owen, "True Political Imbecility" *Mother Earth* Vol.2, No.2 (April 1907): 495-499, 497; *ibid.*, 498; "The Crisis," *Mother Earth* Vol.2, No.2 (April 1907): 431-432, 432; Emma Goldman, "The Psychology of Political Violence" Chapter 3 in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (3rd Ed. Mother Earth Publishing Co. 1917) http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/goldman/pdfs/EmmaGoldman_THEPSYCHOLOGYOFPOLITICALVIOLENCE.pdf

⁶⁴ "Protest Through Suicide," *Mother Earth* Vol.5, No.11 (January 1911): 340-41; *Mother Earth* Vol.5, No.2 (April 1910): 63.

⁶⁵ Pedro Esteve, "Manuel Pardinás," *Mother Earth* Vol.7, No.11 (January 1913): 379-381.

⁶⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The New Idol," *Mother Earth* Vol.7, No.12 (February 1913): 409-411; 410.

Other labor publications, not explicitly identified with anarchism, used this language. An article in the *Journal of United Labor*, a publication of the Knights of Labor, proclaimed that the state's failure to recognize workers' demands for perpetual labor contracts was inconsistent for the state at the same time it denied workers the "right of committing suicide." Without the right to suicide, workers were still forced to live without the right to earn what is necessary for survival.⁶⁷

One anarchist claimed in a collection of essays responding to "the Great Agnostic" Robert G. Ingersoll's *Is Suicide a Sin?* That anarchism was, in fact, a direct remedy to suicide. Anarchist Charles Wilfred Mowbray, identified the "sin" of suicide to be a sin of society itself. Mowbray recognized that "many of those associated with the Anarchist movement have simply been suicidal" but that if we "agitate in order to bring about a system of society such as Anarchist Communism...then and only then will we have got rid of the cause and effect of suicide."⁶⁸

While using suicide sensationalism to their own ends, anarchist outlets also commented the sensationalism of suicide in the American press. A 1903 tract in the Chicago anarchist periodical *Lucifer, the Light Bearer* railed against journalism that made murder 'pornographic,' specifically citing cases of suicide sensationalized in the press. The author claimed this 'pornography' of the press to be a new instrument of oppression and servitude.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ "A Sketch of Political Economy," *Journal of United Labor*, June 25, 1884.

⁶⁸ Charles Wilfred Mowbray, "Better Live and Protest" in *Is Suicide a Sin? Robert G. Ingersoll's Famous Letter and Replies* (New York: Standard Publishing Co., 1894): 44-49, 44; *ibid.*, 46; *ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁹ "The Pornography of Murder," *Lucifer, The Light Bearer* Vol.7, No.22 (June 17, 1903): 177-184, 178.

Suicide was a tool of critique and protest in the Gilded Age, a modal logic of American anarchists. Its metaphor expressed their view of the limits of possible action against the state; it expressed the limits of agency in modernizing America. To the upper and middle classes, suicide was a symbol of anarchist irrationality, but they also used it to express concerns about agency. They both used the same non-psychiatric language of agency and choice to describe suicide, albeit to opposing ends. Suicide was thus a symbol manipulated by both sides to express anxiety about the social order in Chicago and the nation.

The anarchist-suicide trope was a meaning fulfillment to concerns about agency perceived by both ends of the social spectrum in the Gilded Age. Anarchists saw suicide as a fulfillment of the irrationality of the social order; the middle class saw anarchism as a fulfillment of the irrationality of defying the social order. Within the Husserlian framework, these two uses of the trope point to a meaning-intention about agency in Gilded Age society. For the middle class, suicide was a metaphor that best expressed their fear of anarchism. The debates over Lingg's death, the depiction of suicide as the natural end of anarchism, illustrated the power the image of the state had over Gilded Age Americans and their perception of what it meant to defy that state. To Gilded Age Americans, both anarchist and mainstream, anarchism-suicide fulfilled a shared anxiety about agency under the social order of industrial society. The state drove people to suicide; both oppression under and opposition to the state resulted. The anxiety behind the symbol of Lingg was two sides of the same coin.

Part III:
The Lake, Love, and Liquor

The rain fell hard in Chicago on the night of September 7th, 1890. Three men who were fishing off the Twenty-eighth Street pier escaped the rain in an open freight car near the pier. Looking out from the car they noticed a young woman sitting in the rain atop a pile of lumber—she was crying. The woman suddenly stood up and walked down the pier. The men stood up and followed her from a distance. When she got to the end of the pier, she jumped.⁷⁰

She would later be identified as Nellie McMann, a twenty-three-year-old woman who worked in a shoe factory to support her mother and five siblings. According to an account in the *Chicago Tribune*, Nellie had gone out driving with a young man the previous evening. She arrived home quite late and was scolded by her mother upon arrival. She told her mother that since she worked full time to support the family, she was entitled to “some recreation.” Her mother continued to argue, and the next day Nellie visited with a friend where she recounted the argument and mentioned her plans to “end her existence by jumping into the lake.” Afterward, Nellie went home and repeated her plans to her family who argued with her not to leave. Her brother followed her as she went out of the house—but she persuaded him to leave.⁷¹

When Nellie jumped off the Twenty-eighth Street pier, one of the men, Edward McMullen jumped in after her. McMullen, a clerk for the Illinois Central, tried to pull Nellie out

⁷⁰ “A Young Woman Suicides,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 8, 1890.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

but she struggled, and he eventually let her go. McMullen's friends pulled him out of the river before the police arrived and fished Nellie's body out with grappling hooks.

In 1886 another woman, Jessie Johnston, committed suicide near the Twenty-eighth Street Pier. Johnston was a bookkeeper for a business on Wabash Street. She married a graduate of Chicago University several years prior, and the two had recently moved back to Chicago from Iowa. When she married Johnston purportedly "lost her mental balance," a "severe disease peculiar to her sex." Jessie Johnston suffered from bouts of paranoia. Her doctors ordered her to take small walks, and they gave her a small card and told her it would be a "charm against all evil." The card was found on her person after she drowned. On the day of her death, Johnston had attempted to visit her old family doctor. When she could not make an appointment, she left and was seen walking rapidly toward the lake.⁷²

In the winter of 1892, Mary Simpson walked out onto the frozen ice off of Ohio Street, disrobed and lay down on the ice. Simpson, a dressmaker, quickly froze to death and was found by a teenager who phoned the police. She left a brooch tied around her neck as well as a satchel near her body with calling cards and a prescription for "nerve quieter."⁷³

The doctor who made out the prescription was interviewed by the *Tribune* who confirmed that the medicine was a tonic for "extreme nervousness." Other associates were interviewed, and Mary's life story was reprinted in full across two columns in the *Tribune*. She was born to poor farmers in Waukegan, and when she was older, Mary moved to Chicago to work as a seamstress. When her father passed away, she inherited a small amount of money with which she opened her own dress shop on Elizabeth Street. The business failed two months before

⁷² "Jessie Johnston's Suicide," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 24, 1886.

⁷³ "Frozen on the Lake," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 18, 1892.

her death, and the administrator of her father's estate tried to take back some of the money. Mrs. Simpson also had supposedly been married three times but never divorced. Her third husband spoke to the *Tribune* after coming to the morgue to identify the body. He told them he married Simpson “against the consent of his people,” a wealthy Chicago family.⁷⁴

On the evening before her death, Mary had been staying at a friend's house. In the morning she woke up and begged her friends to allow her to leave the house. She spoke in garbled speech and refused to explain why she wanted to leave so suddenly. Her friends took her outside and walked her up and down the street, but Mary broke free of them. She ran a short distance, tripped, and smashed her face on the sidewalk. Assuming that Mary had merely wanted to go home, her friends lent her thirty-five cents for the streetcar. She never took the streetcar though, and the thirty-five cents was on her body after it was found on the ice, five miles away. The friend who loaned her the money later told the *Tribune* that Mary had often talked about dying in the lake: “Mrs. Simpson had shown a strange fascination with the lake and had told her many times that she will die in its waters.”⁷⁵

The accounts of the deaths of Nellie McMann, Jessie Johnston, and Mary Simpson marked a turn in the image of American women's suicide. The accounts of these women were highly sensationalized with in-depth biographies of the women, descriptions of their love lives, descriptions of their bodies, and wild speculation on their intentions. Other accounts included graphic images of the death of suicidal women, such as the image of Catherine Punch from Part I. The descriptions of their deaths were dramatic and did not contain the moral language that was

⁷⁴ “Frozen on the Lake,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 18, 1892.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

previously used to describe women's suicide. These depictions were a divergence from earlier Victorian views on women's suicide.

Physicians in the Gilded Age placed suicide within the Victorian ideology of separate spheres which solely ascribed sentimental reasons for women's suicide. This usually involved ascribing moral reasons, for example, an 1868 article in the *Christian Recorder*, claimed that women commit suicide due to moral influences “love, jealousy, domestic troubles, excited sentiments of any kind; men to material trials, poverty, business losses, drunkenness, and debauchery. Another commenter claimed that “sickness, domestic trouble, lives of shame drive women to suicide.” The records show the latter cause is more frequent in women.”⁷⁶

The Victorian era also saw the language of insanity came into use, primarily to describe women's suicide. As Howard Kushner argued in *Self-Destruction in the Promised Land* the language of insanity was the replacement for the moral view of suicide that prevailed in American culture since the seventeenth century. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the early Victorian image of women's suicide took root, imbued with fears of gender chaos and the destruction of the Victorian family under modernization. In an analysis of nineteenth-century asylum records and statistics, Howard Kushner argued that women's suicide came to symbolize fears of modernity that had come about in the early nineteenth century, along with prostitution, alcoholism, and other vices that Americans feared would increase with the growth of cities. The early nineteenth-century answer to these fears called for a ‘moral treatment,’ a hope that a return

⁷⁶ “Increase of Suicide,” *The Christian Recorder*, October 17, 1868; “Mayor Johnson's Anti-Suicide Commission,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 24, 1905.

to Victorian domestic values would resolve the problem of self-destruction; sentimentalism for a time without the vice of the cities.⁷⁷

This sentimentalism pervaded most early Victorian representations of female violence. In a study of infanticide in Baltimore during the first half of the nineteenth century, social historian Katie Hemphill discovered that infanticides were generally attributed to women's chastity and fall from grace rather than concrete causes such as poverty. Hemphill discovered that the women who committed infanticide were ostensibly driven to kill their infants due to poverty, but the media only spoke of infanticide in moral language. The moral language clouded court cases of infanticide and resulted in poor women receiving the benefit of the doubt in court. Similar interpretations have been about Victorian murderesses.⁷⁸

In the Gilded Age, this sentimental lens on female suicide gave way to a sensationalist, graphic depiction of women's suicide. This depiction still included moral condemnation and psychiatric language, albeit placed in a context of graphic and sensational language. Women's suicide became 'mysterious,' 'celebrated,' 'thrilling,' and 'romantic.' The fear of modernity took on a new form as Americans experienced radical changes under industrialization that were unimaginable in the first half of the century.⁷⁹

In the following, I analyze the role of women's agency in these sensationalist accounts. These accounts still contained the tropes of love, marriage, and domesticity that prevailed in the mid-century Victorian image of suicide, but the sensationalism was increasingly tied in with new

⁷⁷ Howard Kushner, "Suicide, Gender, and Fear of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Medical and Social Thought," *Journal of Social History* Vol.26, No.3 (Spring 1993): 461-490.

⁷⁸ Katie Hemphill, "'Driven to the Commission of This Crime': Women and Infanticide in Early Baltimore, 1835-1860," *Journal of the Early Republic* Vol.32, No. 3 (Fall 2012): 437-461; See Ayse Naz Belamur, *Victorian Murderesses: The Politics of Female Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016).

⁷⁹ "Women and Suicide," *Chicago Tribune*, December 23, 1894.

roles in the market that opened up to Gilded Age women, as well as several byproducts of industrialization. This sensationalism reveals a different cultural meaning of women's suicide which extended beyond Kushner's Victorian fear of modernity.

Women as Cause

In 1894 the *Chicago Tribune* ran a lengthy review of suicides at Niagara Falls which opened with the statement: "Of all the celebrated cases of suicide that have occurred in this country in the last sixty years, woman has almost invariably played a prominent part as either participant or cause."⁸⁰

Male suicides that resulted from women received intense attention in the papers. Usually, women were seen as passive causes of male suicide. A 1904 column by Dorothy Dix on the "Seven Ambitions of Woman" defined female love as unwilling to reciprocate love to men who fall short of "threatening to commit suicide if she won't return his affections." One case that displayed this logic was the 1897 suicide of George Bunday, an attorney who committed suicide with his bride because his parents would not accept his wife due to her social rank. The article detailed his life with minimal mention of his wife before pointing the blame for Bunday's death at his mother and bride. Another such story appeared in 1905 about two officers in the German Army got into an argument over a woman. The men decided to duel, but since the German army outlawed dueling, the men decided to draw lots and have the loser commit suicide. It was agreed that the loser, Officer Victor Von Tausk, would live two years before committing suicide. Tausk then left the army and moved to Wisconsin to work in a factory, when his two years were up he committed suicide in Green Bay. Another story blamed the suicide of an engineer at the Chicago

⁸⁰ "Women and Suicide," *Chicago Tribune*, December 23, 1894.

Water on the man's ex-wife when the ex-wife remarried a wealthy railroad superintendent and returned a series of letters the engineer sent to her.⁸¹

In 1899 a woman named Kate Masterson published a lengthy article in *Frank Leslie's Weekly* harshly condemning the 'Gilded Vice' of Washington D.C. society. Masterson reported that hostesses in Washington were no longer serving drinks at private functions because the 'courtesy was abused' for the purpose of 'wining and dining.' For example, the 'wife of a foreign dignitary' who would 'not be tolerated in New York's society' was allowed to become intoxicated at a formal reception and that such behavior had made the 'whole fabric of Washington life in a certain circle corrupt.' Masterson chalked this social degradation up to the influence of un-American values supposedly brought to Washington by the foreign diplomats. Masterson claimed that a number of suicides in Washington which she referred to as a 'suicide chain' was the result of these values being "combined with the freedom and 'Progressiveness of American girls'" which "resulted in a social condition [the suicide chain] which must disgust and discourage every thinking American man and woman."⁸²

In cases where women intervened to prevent male suicide, the papers typically claimed other causes outside of the woman's agency to be behind the success of the intervention. In one story from 1875, a woman sat at her sewing machine troubled by her lack of labor 'for the conversion of sinners' and asked God what she should do. The woman then heard a small voice which told her to visit a store on the other side of town. When the woman went inside the store,

⁸¹ Dorothy Dix, "The Seven Ambitions of Woman," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 21, 1904; "Suicide of George Bunday," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 17, 1897; "True to Suicide Compact," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 15, 1905; "Killed Himself for the Love of a Woman," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 14, 1897.

⁸² Kate Masterson, "Wickedness at Washington: Gilded Vice at the National Capital and its Terrible Results," *Frank Leslie's Weekly*, January 9, 1902.

she asked the owner about the interests of his soul. The owner replied, "you know what I was thinking of when you came in, I had made up my mind to take my own life and trying to determine whether to use poison or a pistol." The man then told the woman that he had changed his mind and would turn to Christ for salvation. In this story, the woman was an instrument of God and did not exercise concrete agency in preventing the suicide.⁸³

These depictions removed women's agency from cases of intervention in male suicide. Meanwhile, the inverse image of the male role in women's suicide prevailed. Like the account of Nellie McMann's death, accounts of women's suicide regularly focused upon and sensationalized attempts by men to prevent women's suicide. Gilded Age women were depicted as a cause of men's suicide, undermining male agency in the ultimate act of male agency. In the same outlets, women were not depicted as the cause of their own suicides though.⁸⁴

Modern Love

"More than one-third of the Chicago women who take their life die for love" opened an article titled "Chicago Women Who Died for Love" that appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* 1902. The article included brief descriptions of twenty-one women who committed suicide in 1901, remarking that "it is true they may have differed in detail, but in reality, one continued tale of broken hearts, quarrels, angry words, thoughtless men, and jealousy would tell the tragic story of one unhappy life."⁸⁵

⁸³ "A Suicide Prevented," *Messiah's Herald*, April 7, 1875.

⁸⁴ "Driven to Suicide By Her Troubles," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 9, 1893.

⁸⁵ "Chicago Women Who Died for Love," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 30, 1902.

Love and marriage were pervasive tropes in accounts of women's suicide, but with a distinctly different, industrial, perspective that diverged from the sentimentalist, Early Victorian image of female suicide. Love was taken as a determining factor in many women's suicides. A headline from 1900 dramatically read: "She Killed Herself Because She Fell in Love" with the subtitle "Sensational and Dramatic Suicide of a Woman Who had a Vivid Past and was Madly in Love with a Youth." The woman in this story was claimed to have committed suicide because she "did not want to make a young man who honestly loved her unhappy." Headlines and ascriptions such as these were commonplace.⁸⁶

Love was usually assumed in cases where the intention of the victim was unknown or ambiguous. In 1888 the suicide of a young girl occurred around the same time as the suicide of a family friend who had fallen on poor health and lost his job. The man's suicide was not commented on, but the paper assumed the girl had committed suicide out of "hopeless infatuation." In 1903 a young woman was found slumped over on the corner of sixty-first and Bishop street in Chicago. The woman had just taken carbolic acid and died upon reaching the hospital when a photo of a man was found pinned to her clothes; the coroner determined that love was the cause. Another case occurred in 1887 when a young woman committed suicide in Chicago, leaving a note behind citing abuse from her father: "I am not crazy, but my health is broken. A dead woman's curse on all who have wronged me. Father wants me to die. I will do so, but if my spirit can come back I will haunt him until he dies...Father has driven me to this." This note was only mentioned cursorily; the *Tribune* instead accepted her father's side of the

⁸⁶ "She Killed Herself Because She Fell in Love," *The National Police Gazette*, June 23, 1900.

story. Her father states that she was “unquestionably insane” and was probably caught up in a “love affair” that “unsettled her reason.”⁸⁷

An account of the “most remarkable” suicide of a young woman, Alice Cozzens, in 1893 focused on how the autopsy showed the woman had been “recently married or betrayed by some man,” implying that the autopsy found that she was not a virgin. The article extensively interviewed her father and mother who told the tabloid that Alice rarely went out or associated with anyone. When her parent's neighbors were interviewed, they claimed that Alice had her own bank account on Wall Street and “paid bills with checks” prompting her father to later make a statement that “Alice has no property of her own.” The tabloid also interviewed the owners of several cafes that Alice and her mother purportedly frequented. The owners gave a litany of conflicting account. One claimed that Alice's mother was the widow of a Confederate general, another claimed that Alice had a child, while another owner believed Alice was engaged to a wealthy businessman in town. The article also quoted the owner of a cabaret that claimed Alice's mother had taken her there since she was a little girl. Several drawings of Alice at the cabaret were included, depicting Alice watching women in sleeveless dresses dance and in other pictures Alice herself is depicted in a sleeveless dress speaking with her mother (Appendix E).⁸⁸

Alice Cozzens's supposed economic independence was a cause of sensation, and similarly, the suicides of women who lived or worked on their own received extensive treatment in the press. When a divorced society woman committed suicide in a Bloomington Illinois hotel in 1890, the report on her death included a lengthy biography which described her life as “a sadly

⁸⁷ “Wave of Suicide” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 10, 1888; “Love Causes a Suicide,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 26, 1903; “Suicide of a Young Woman,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 2, 1887.

⁸⁸ “A Mysterious Suicide,” *The National Police Gazette*, April 1, 1893.

interesting one." A report on single music-teacher from France who committed suicide in the Gran Union Hotel Chicago in 1894 included extensive detail on the contents of the trunk she left in the hotel; speculating intensely through the only source information on her the newspaper had access.⁸⁹

Part of this sensationalism was due to a belief that unmarried women were more likely to commit suicide. An early article in the *American Phrenological* claimed that being unmarried would lead women to suicide in the same manner than insanity leads to suicide. The journal recounted the story of a poor young French woman who went ran an errand and found a man attempting to hang himself. The woman cut the man down and a few days later the father of the suicidal man sent her a note and told her that his son was very wealthy and wished to marry the woman who saved his life to which the woman said yes. The author then wrote "the poor girl made a wise decision when the laws of Phrenology and Physiology as they bear on heredity are put into account," implying that suicide was a natural outcome of being unmarried, but also added "no person having a tendency to insanity or suicide has a right to transmit these appalling tendencies to posterity" but that the man's insanity was likely caused by his being single. Later analyses of statistics would regularly ascribe divorce as a cause of suicide.⁹⁰

While some contemporaries assumed spinsterhood as a cause of suicide, others saw portrayed marriage as an equal cause. A report that appeared in the *New York Times* in 1883 noted that even though one would expect that "the unmarried yield more readily to the suicidal impulse," given suicide statistics from Philadelphia which showed higher rates of suicide in

⁸⁹ "Beautiful Mrs. McMillan's Tragic End," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 22, 1890; "Suicide of a Music Teacher," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 7, 1888.

⁹⁰ "Suicide—Female Firmness," *American Phrenological Journal*, August 1, 1850; Goldwin Smith, "Cause of the Increase of Suicide," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 2, 1900.

married people, it seemed that “the married state seems to make life much more burdensome and undesirable than it is to the single.”⁹¹

Within this trope was the image of suicidal woman in troubled or unconventional marriages such as Mary Simpson, the supposed bigamist. In 1879 *The National Police Gazette* printed a graphic etching of a woman burning herself alive after she was supposedly questioned by acquaintances about the legitimacy of her marriage (Appendix F). The image depicted her husband as just out of her reach while she poured kerosene onto the fire. Other tabloids included similar accounts, one in 1869 depicted as a woman burning her apartment because her husband left her and she was unable to make rent. These violence images of woman's suicide were clear signs of the shift away from the sentimentalist image of women's suicide which more often depicted women as gentle victims, usually only depicting suicide by drowning.⁹²

Suicide as a result of domestic violence was sensationalized. One such story involved a woman, whom the article claimed was also unfaithful, poisoning herself after an argument over money with her husband, the account in the paper described in grotesque detail the woman's "dramatic suffering" in her young daughter's presence. Other articles sensationalized stories of men who committed murder-suicides against their spouse. One 1898 report on a bigamist who shot both of his wives and himself describes in minute detail the entry point of each bullet the bigamist husband fired at the women's bodies.⁹³

⁹¹ “A Study of Suicide,” *New York Times*, June 17, 1883.

⁹² “Awful Suicide of a Despairing Woman,” *The National Police Gazette*, November 29, 1879; “Attempted Suicide of an Insane Woman,” *Sporting Times and Theatrical News*, October 2, 1869.

⁹³ “Fatal Ending of a Quarrel,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 24, 1888; “Fatally Shoots Two Women,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 16, 1898.

Domestic violence grew in the Gilded Age as women's new economic independence posed a threat to domestic patriarchy. Uxoricide, or spousal homicide, increased in cities such as Chicago where rapid industrialization had taken place. In Chicago, women's economic roles directly challenged household gender roles, particularly in the economic recession of the 1890s when male economic authority was particularly unstable. Likewise, a study of uxoricides in early twentieth-century New Orleans noted that suffrage brought an increase in uxoricides, with husbands feeling threatened by their wives' entrance into the political sphere. Recurrent debates over women's right to work and wives' right to their wages marked a shift toward an economic definition of marriage under industrialization. Late nineteenth-century feminists argued that marriage contracts began to be seen as on par with wage contracts, an issue that would later come up in courts of law. Marriage collapsed from a relation of female dependence on males into a wage relation. Cultural historian Amy Dru Stanley interpreted these changes as the reduction of marriage to a wage relation, i.e. an intrusion of the cash nexus into Americans' personal lives. With husband's place as the sole breadwinner threatened by the new occupations opened to women in the industrial economy, domestic violence rose as a means of establishing patriarchy in the home.⁹⁴

Sensationalizing suicide tied into love, marriage, and domestic violence reinterpreted women's agency within institutions where women's agency had rapidly changed in the Gilded

⁹⁴ Jeffrey Adler, "'We've Got a Right to Fight; We're Married' Domestic Homicide in Chicago, 1875-1920," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* Vol.34, No.1 (Summer 2003): 27-48; Jeffrey Adler, "'I wouldn't Be No Woman If I Wouldn't Hit Him': Race, Patriarchy, and Spousal Homicide in New Orleans, 1921-1945," *Journal of Women's History* Vol.27, No.3 (Fall 2015): 14-36, 31; Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); *ibid.*, 185; *ibid.*, 197.

Age. These tropes were the meaning fulfillment to a meaning intention Gilded Age Americans' held about the changes in marriage and women's economic positions under industrialization.

Feminism, Reform, and Urban Vice

Feminist periodicals portrayed female suicide as a rational act resulting from oppression. The use of female suicide by reform periodicals stretches back into the early nineteenth century. Early reform periodicals portrayed male affection as the root of 'fallen women' and women's suicide. A very early, 1842, article in the journal *Friend of Virtue*, published by the New England Female Moral Reform Society, an early anti-prostitution and anti-double-standard society, included a detailed article on a supposed link between male seduction and female suicide. The article claimed that male seduction was the root of fallen women and a cause of women's suicide. Other early reform periodicals called for legislation to be passed that punished men who "dares murder women's peace," by breaking their trust and leading them into 'self-murder.'⁹⁵

One article from 1871 claimed that "five thousand of somebody's daughters, every year, go to premature graves through the wiles of seducers" but would "not have done so if they had possessed knowledge of some calling to have them saved from destitution." The article then argued that it was mothers' responsibility to "bring up their daughters as competent dressmakers, as washerwomen, as chambermaids" &c. to remedy "this great evil." Later in the Gilded Age, feminist organization molded critique formed into calls for wage equality. In 1870 an early feminist newspaper, *The Revolution*, cited a case of suicide as a reason to support "radical equality of the sexes." A young woman at a boarding school in New Jersey, Miss Carrie Jones,

⁹⁵ "SEDUCTION AND SUICIDE," *Friend of Virtue: A Monthly Journal; Devoted to the Dissemination of Light & Truth on the Subject of Moral Reform*, September 15, 1842, 277-278; "Self Murder," *Advocate of Moral Reform & Family Guardian*, October 1, 1850, 148.

attempted suicide after her father sent a letter refusing to continue paying her tuition and disallowing her to return home. Carrie, not seeing any available means of supporting herself attempted suicide with carbolic acid. *The Revolution* stated that Carrie's case was a "serious argument in support of reforms" because "had this unfortunate young person belonged to the other sex, neither herself nor other would have felt it cruel for the Father to have said..." now you must take care of yourself." Because the labor market was not open to women, suicide was the only option for young women without support. What is needed *The Revolution* claimed is "better views of women's rights and duties" to make "tragedies like this impossible." An 1891 article in the liberal magazine, *The Arena*, used the trope of women's suicide to make a similar argument. The author in the *Arena* argued that the suicide of a woman who was not paid enough to support herself was 'the story of many other.' The polemic then claimed that if women's wages were not raised the trend would continue and America would "share the same fate of Greece and Rome."⁹⁶

Other reform periodicals from the time period used women's suicide as a tool of critique. One article in the temperance periodical, the *Christian Ambassador*, recounted a dark tale of a woman who went down to a bar to bring her husband home after a night of drinking. When the husband refused to walk home with her, she went back to their barn and hanged herself while her four-year-old watched. The article made much of the child witnessing the suicide and claimed that alcohol had forced her away from the child and his sibling, using her suicide to call for prohibition.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ "A Woman Suicide," *Hall's Journal of Health*, July 1, 1871, 157-159; "A Sad Story," *The Revolution*, June 23, 1870; "White Slaves of New York," *The Arena*, No.17 (April 1891): 638-640, 640.

⁹⁷ "Suicide of a Woman," *Christian Ambassador*, June 22, 1861.

The use of the woman as a victim of alcoholic men was prevalent in media published by temperance societies. Various temperance organizations included suicide in their condemnations of saloons. For example, one of the largest organization, the Anti-Saloon league, claimed that “license means saloons and saloons mean...suicide.” Temperance societies were a place where women experience a high degree of agency in the Gilded Age; it was one of the first places where American women asserted moral leadership in American society. These reformers saw the issue with alcohol the loss of control that alcohol introduced into Americans' lives as well as other supposed vices such as divorce and prostitution caused by alcoholism.⁹⁸

With the Gilded Age a new urban vice, opium, grew in popularity. Concerns about opium extended across several spheres of public discourse. Many criticisms of opium use were against doctors. When a professor at the Chicago Medical College committed suicide in Lake Michigan in 1876, the papers cited morphine addiction. An article in the *Chicago Medical Times* on the doctor's suicide stated that “Other physicians, and they are not a few, addicted to the use of morphine, should take warning before reform becomes impossible.” Opium was also tied into nativist rhetoric. Most contemporaries blamed the drug's introduction to the country on Chinese immigrants. Opium dens were generally located in Chinese neighborhoods. Gilded Age Americans saw the dens as particularly damning because of their symbol as an environment of uncontrolled interaction between sexes and ethnicities.⁹⁹

The suicide of women under the influence of opium or morphine became a sensational subject in the press. An 1884 editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* on “Opium and Suicide” ascribed

⁹⁸ The National Prohibitionist, December 5, 1907; William McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 82.

⁹⁹ “Suicide,” *Chicago Medical Times*, September 1, 1876, 245; Timothy Gilfoyle, *A Pickpocket's Tale: The Underworld of Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Norton, 2006), 89.

“Fashionable women” as especially addicted, the editorial went on to provide graphic examples of women committing suicide while under the influence of opium. One example involved a woman who attempted to leap from a cliff under the influence of opium, only to be stopped when her daughter grabbed her skirt and cried for her to stay. In 1897 the *Tribune* ran the story of a trapeze artist with Barnum and Bailey’s who injured herself performing, after which she attempted to commit suicide under the influence of morphine. The story was included with several other stories of financially independent women who were led into morphine use from “despondency.”¹⁰⁰

An extensive warning in the fashion magazine *Harper’s Bazaar* on the dangers of marketing opium to women focused on the ability of women to use “morphine habitually for years without the husband’s knowledge.” The habit was “easy to glide into” for women, but “self-liberation” was impossible. The opium habit would only end in either overdose or “the ghastly hand of suicide.”¹⁰¹

The images of women trapped under the influence of alcohol opium or alcoholic husbands was a powerful symbol in the Gilded Age press. In the mainstream press, these women were symbols of the moral decay of the era, and when they committed suicide, it fulfilled Americans’ general anxiety about the effect of industrialization on the traditional Victorian family. These vices signaled another new public agency for women only to be connected with self-destruction.

¹⁰⁰ “Opium and Suicide,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 1, 1884; “Despondent Women Take Morphine,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 26, 1897.

¹⁰¹ H.H. Kane, “The Opium Habit Among American Women,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, October 27, 1883.

Fashion is Suicide

Nineteenth-century fashion and youth magazines were rife with suicide metaphors. “Best Mode of Suicide for Ladies” read the title of a brief article on the front page of the *Youth’s Cabinet*, an early children’s magazine, “wear thin shoes, lace with a bed wrench and rope and you will kill yourself without being suspected.”¹⁰²

Fashion and consumerism were new spaces of agency for Gilded age women. Beginning in the 1880s more and more middle-class women ditched corsets and wore looser fitting dresses in public. These women were deemed ‘aesthetic women,’ who dressed to express their own tastes rather than dressing to fulfill Victorian ideals of domesticity which involved a tight corset and dark colors in public. These women were visible symbols of a region of new agency for women in the Gilded Age. From the perspective of Gilded Age Americans, this new freedom was connected to the impact of industrialization on once-traditional gender roles in American society.¹⁰³

Accounts of women’s suicide focused on what a woman was wearing at the time of death. An article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* from 1898 covered the story of a woman who committed suicide in Australia. The article by detailed her outfit, how she wore her most ‘effective dress’ with her ‘hair dressed.’ The article then went on to comment on the evening dress of a different woman who committed suicide. The article closed by stating that “The average man’s vanity is not small, but it is a poor passion beside that of the average woman who would always wear well than be well.” Numerous accounts of Gilded Age women used this

¹⁰² “Best Mode of Suicide for Ladies,” *Youth’s Cabinet*, November 18, 1841.

¹⁰³ Mary Blanchard, “Boundaries and the Victorian Body: Aesthetic Fashion in Gilded Age America,” *The American Historical Review* Vol.100, No.1 (February 1995): 21-50; *ibid.*, 39.

language, with articles that opened with descriptions of 'refined' and 'well dressed' women who died by their own hand. In March 1910 a fashionable sealskin coat was found floating in the water off the twenty-fourth street pier in Chicago. Police fished out the coat and interviewed employees at a nearby brewery who said they saw a woman walking nearby who may or may not have been wearing a similar coat. The *Chicago Tribune* put two and two together, claiming that "circumstances point to a suicide" albeit noting that the police disagreed with their presumption.¹⁰⁴

Fashion also engaged women as consumers for the first time. Department stores that sprung up in the 1870s created roles of consumption for women to match women's new roles as producers in factories and white collar work. Consumerism contained within itself a contradiction though. While women acted as agents in purchasing clothes and following fashion, consumerism also sought to subsume women's agency to the power and pull of marketing and fads. Department stores grew to define the limits of women's roles as consumers by focusing on depersonalizing the shopping experience through the creation of displays and aisles of goods. These arrangements of goods regimented the consumer experience and removing the free social encounters that women may have had with street peddlers or the open storefronts within neighborhood markets. The image of passive female consumers led into aggressive mirror and light displays in department stores that assumed women to be at the whims of these material and impersonal forces. Within this matrix of control, fashion was formalized in magazines and catalogs as a means of shaping their social behavior.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ "Suicide in Full Dress," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 28, 1898; "Death Hides a Mystery," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 2, 1903, "Death Hints in a Letter," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 30, 1901; "Did the Owner Commit Suicide?" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 17, 1910.

¹⁰⁵ William Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union: The Feminist Reform of Sex and Society* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1980), 233-235; See Ch.2 of William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants Power*

Mixed into nineteenth-century fashion magazines, which focused on cultivating Victorian domesticity through articles on fashion, love, and homecare, were graphic sensationalist pieces on suicide. An 1872 piece in *Frank Leslie's Ladies Magazine* reported on a doctor's collection of suicide letters. The article listed the last words written by a dozen suicides. A student wrote his final letter to his family doctor asking to do a Phrenological study of his brain to search for "the bump of suicide." Another letter was from an old man who would rather die than enter "those boxes which they call 'asylums for aged'." Another letter was written by a businessman who claimed that the loss of blood from his failed suicide 'restored his reason' but that if the "same symptoms recur I can not answer for myself." The collection of letters "show that persons may destroy themselves without manifesting any sign of aberration of intellect; that they accomplish the act coolly, calmly, deliberately, and in a rational manner." The letters also purported to be from individuals who were successful in killing themselves after previous failures, dispelling the claim that "those who failed in one attempt, rarely make a second unless they are decidedly insane."¹⁰⁶

These magazines regularly included stories that either romanticized or sensationalized suicide. In 1897 *Godey's Lady's Book* printed a story titled "God's Answer" about a New Orleans minister who, while waiting for his wife, Mary, to return home realized that he had leprosy. The minister blamed the leprosy on a Chinese immigrant he met while doing social work in a slum in New Orleans. The thought of Mary being the wife of a leper drove the minister to pull a gun out of a drawer and attempt to shoot himself. But, the minister's hand shook, and he dropped the gun

and the Rise of a New American Culture (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union*, 241; Christopher Breward, "Femininity and Consumption: The Problem of the Late Nineteenth-Century Fashion Journal," *Journal of Design History* Vol.7, No.2 (1994): 71-89, 74-75.

¹⁰⁶ "The Last Sentiments of Suicides," *Frank Leslie's Ladies Magazine*, March 1, 1872, 210-211.

to the floor. He attempted again but was put off by the even worse thought that instead of being the wife of a leper, Mary would be the wife of a suicide. The minister decided instead to pray for death to which God answered by striking him with lightning through the telephone in his cottage. The minister subsequently died, and Mary was neither the wife of a leper nor a suicide.¹⁰⁷

In a short story from 1892, a woman, Elaine, learned that a man whom she had a crush on in her youth, Everard Hale, had also been in love with her. Unfortunately, it was too late, and the woman had already married a wealthy man in their town. Nevertheless, Everard wrote several letters attempting to convince Elaine to leave her husband. Convinced, Elaine tried to run away with Everard on his yacht but the yacht hit a storm, and Elaine drowned. Later, Everard found a note from Elaine which read "My Dearest Everard—You would not have the woman you honor with your love stoop to dishonor even for you. Without you, I cannot live, and the beautiful sea opens her arms to received me I go." Instead of drowning, Elaine committed suicide to preserve their honor. When Elaine's wealthy husband died years later, Everard went to the morgue and placed Elaine's suicide note in with the coffin.¹⁰⁸

The marketing of romanticized and sensationalized stories to women worried the nineteenth-century medical establishment. Physicians were concerned that such stories and novels would lead to women's suicide, which followed the debates over the *Sorrows of Young Werther* and other sentimentalist literature in the Early Republic. Prominent medical journals regularly ran articles analyzing different novels that were "baits" for women's suicide.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Annie Brashear, "God's Answer," *Godey's Lady's Book*, May 1897.

¹⁰⁸ Ada E. Field, "Elaine," *Godey's Lady's Book*, May 1892.

¹⁰⁹ Richard Bell, "In Werther's Thrall: Suicide and the Power of Sentimental Reading in Early National America," *Early American Literature* Vol.46, No.1 (2011): 93-120; Katherine Gaudet, "Liberty and Death: Fictions of Suicide in the Early Republic," *Early American Literature* Vol.47, No.3 (2012): 591-622; "Baits for Suicide," *The Medical Critic and Psychological Journal* Volume 3, No.12 (October 1863): 585-604, Note:

Underlying the intersection of fashion and suicide was a conception of women's suicide as the result of vanity. In some cases, women's suicide was depicted as a casual act that fit into drawing room conversation or dinner parties. In 1903 a young society woman in New Jersey left her guests at the table of her country home and "sent a bullet into her heart." The New Jersey woman had "taken special pleasure in preparing for the dinner party," and most of the language in the article described her suicide as a casual event. When the wife of Chicago Cubs shortstop Joe Tinker committed suicide, the *Chicago Tribune* made much of how Mrs. Tinker excused herself from a group of friends in the living room to shoot herself in the bedroom. In 1901 a New York Society woman hosting a dinner party walked to the sideboard in her dining room, poured herself a glass of carbolic acid and drank it in front of her friends. The newspaper accounts described her death as "the climax of the party."¹¹⁰

In other cases, the role of female vanity in suicide was made explicitly. In 1903 a nearly full-page story ran in the *Chicago Tribune* about a young woman in Spain who committed suicide after selling her hair to feed her starving mother. The woman was born to a wealthy family but became poor after her father passed away leaving behind a mountain of debt. The article went into detail on how the girl and her mother fell into poverty, the pair first working to support themselves before falling ill and losing their ability to labor. At this point, an Englishman visited their town and upon seeing the daughter, offered five thousand francs for her hair. The daughter sold her hair to the man, bought bread for her mother and then committed suicide with a revolver, one of the only things that remained of her father's estate. The article

while this journal was published in London in 1863, British medical journals had a global readership in the nineteenth century and influenced American medical professionals in the era.

¹¹⁰ "Quits Dinner to Die," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 13, 1903; "Suicide," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 27, 1923; "Drinks Poison After a Party," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 6, 1901.

then speculated on whether the daughter's suicide was honorable self-sacrifice, allowing her mother to live longer on the money, or out of vanity for losing her hair. The author of the article motivated for the latter conclusion, focusing on the daughter's 'wounded vanity' and the loss of her 'crown of beauty.'¹¹¹

Throughout the Gilded Age, women's suicide was sensationalized in connection with tropes that symbolized new economic and familial agency exercised by women in the time period. The self-destruction of these women constituted a meaning-fulfilments of concerns about changes in agency under industrialization. These concerns were held by the middle-class Americans who feared gender chaos and the breakdown of Victorian values under industrialization.

This side of the reaction to women's suicide in the Gilded Age constitutes a form of patriarchal equilibrium. Patriarchal equilibrium is the concept that women's status is never transformed over time; rather women's experiences transform. Their status change in quality but not in kind. This concept rejects the progressive narrative of women's history in favor of a narrative that approaches how patriarchal power has translated over time. Women's suicide in the Gilded Age was a location where men asserted a new form of patriarchal power by redefining the agency of women who committed suicide. It was a rollback against other forms of public agency exercised by Gilded Age women, as seen in the use of suicide tropes in fashion and consumerism. Suicide sensationalism was one form of public power over women's agency that changed; it did not constitute a higher degree of male power set to a match a higher degree of female power; instead it was a translation of power into a new arena.¹¹²

¹¹¹ "Did Vanity of Self-Sacrifice Cause her Suicide?" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 18, 1903.

¹¹² Judith Bennett, "Confronting Continuity," *Journal of Women's History* Vol.9, No.3 (Autumn 1997): 73-94, 75; There are several studies on the use of female suicide sensationalism as a form of social control in times of

On the other side were the feminists and reformers who used the trope of women's suicide as a form of social critique. This side of the dialectic, like the anarchists, used suicide to critique women's lack of agency in the new industrial economy. Together both sides of the suicide metaphor point to a deep cultural anxiety about the degree of agency women could exercise in the Gilded Age. This anxiety was a meaning-intention about agency for which women's suicide acted a meaning-fulfillment.

cultural change and crisis. See Nazan Maksudyan, "Control over Life, Control over Body: Female Suicide in Early Republican Turkey," *Women's History Review* Vol.24, No.6 (2015): 861-880; also see Part I of Janet Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China* (University of California Press, 2005).

Part IV:
The Moloch of Modern Commercialism

Can a commission of city officeholders or any other men prevent suicide? No. Will a man who has reached the limit of endurance and who in the majority of cases is at least temporarily deranged seek out an official board before whom to lay his troubles? No. What then, is the use of the action of Mayor Johnson of Cleveland in appointing a commission to take steps to reduce the number of suicides in his city? Simply this: it brings forcibly to the minds of all men of public spirit that fact that this misery is more than a private affair, that it concerns the state.¹¹³

The author of this 1905 *Chicago Tribune* editorial was criticizing Mayor Tom Johnson of Cleveland for starting an anti-suicide commission in his city. The commission accepted letters from individuals contemplating suicide, and if the commission believed that a small loan or employment had the potential to prevent an individual's suicide, the request would be granted. The commission gained notoriety across the country. Individuals wrote in from everywhere, purportedly overwhelming the Cleveland post office. Interviews with community leaders in Cleveland showed that many were in praise of the effort, and many found it to be timeliest. Other's cities began to consider mayor Johnson's efforts. On November 11, 1905, the *Chicago Tribune* reported five suicides occurred in one day, tuberculosis patient, a melancholic factory worker, a young woman, a department store owner, and an old man, which made Chicago a “fertile field for [an] Anti-Self-Murder Commission.”¹¹⁴

Those in praise of the commission hoped that it would address issues caused by industrialization. An early review of the commission in the liberal magazine, the *Arena*, hoped

¹¹³ “The Anti-Suicide Commission,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 13, 1905.

¹¹⁴ “An Anti-Suicide Commission,” *The Public Opinion* Vol.39, No.22 (New York: The Public Opinion Co., December 1905): 690-91; “Mayor Johnson’s Anti-Suicide Commission,” *The Sunday Star*, November 19, 1905; “Five Suicides in One Day,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 11, 1905.

that the commission would be able to remedy the “privilege-bulwarked Moloch of modern commercialism,” condemning those “dominated by the sordid spirit of the present business world” who might “sneer at this attempt to rescue and uplift the sinking ones.” This optimism was not without reservations though. A Cleveland Rabbi thought that the commission was timely, “in my own observation the terrible increase in suicide has been marked in the past ten years,” but he was skeptical of the approach of the commission, remarking “take the modern excitement out of the world and you will have fewer suicides.”¹¹⁵

Many criticized Johnson for not confronting the underlying industrial causes of the suicide increase. An article in Baltimore’s *Afro-American Ledger* argued that Cleveland’s policy needed to be extended to workers who were “temporarily unable to catch on in the industrial struggle, where failure leads to despondency, loss of self-respect, and ultimately self-destruction.” An editorial in the *San Francisco Examiner* harshly condemned the commission for the same reason. The author claimed mayor Johnson was only seeking “a cure for an evil.” The root causes of the suicide increase were:

Conditions in work, in commerce, and manufacturing were never so changing as now. And added to this is the brutal practicality of big corporations and big trusts, who eliminate from their payroll men older than forty years. In the money madness that is on us many, without business genius to fight a fair fight for a competency, make it sure by the savage method of taking it out of the flesh and blood of their workers....and yet the man who starts out practically to remedy these conditions or who preaches a remedy for them is denounced as a crackbrained dreamer. Still, Mayor Johnson’s commission might do some good until the causes of suicide are removed. WHEN INDUSTRIAL AND COMMERCIAL CANNIBALISM IS ABOLISHED MEN AND WOMEN WILL STOP DESTROYING THEIR OWN LIVES.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ “Mayor Johnson’s Anti-Suicide Commission,” *The Arena*, No.194 (January 1906): 71; “Current Topics,” *The Commoner*, December 22, 1905.

¹¹⁶ Frederick C. Howe, “Cleveland’s Suicide Commission,” *Afro-American Ledger*, January 6, 1906; “Mayor Johnson’s Anti-Suicide Commission,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 24, 1905 [capitalization in original].

These criticisms identified suicide with the new economy and market forged under industrialization. Johnson's approach to remedying suicide was part of *noblesse oblige*, a last gasp of upper-class Gilded Age reform thought that involved the upper class deciding which poor were worthy of assistance. *Noblesse oblige* decidedly did not include the calls for social engineering as Johnson's critics argued. While embodying older values, Johnson's attempt was still a new way of addressing the suicide epidemics. Previously asylums claimed to be leading societal institutions for the prevention of suicide. Social organizations formed to prevent suicide had previously been anti-drowning societies that existed in the Early Republic. These societies were groups of wealthy individuals who placed life preservers on docks and shorelines in American cities and paid bounties to citizens who saved others from drowning.¹¹⁷

The economic view of suicide, embodied in the debate over mayor Johnson's commission, was pervasive among middle and upper-class perceptions of suicide in the Gilded Age. Before Johnson was moved to place a cap on the suicide epidemic, the middle and upper classes held deep anxieties about the relation between the new economic life and the rise in suicide. This anxiety was expressed in descriptions of the suicides of bankers, industrialists, railroad men, and others connected to the Gilded Age elites. It was also embodied in public debates of life insurance and the discursive history of the term 'National Suicide.' Placed in the context of the resistance to middle-class suicide sensationalism found in African American press,

¹¹⁷ Kathleen Brian, "'The Weight of Perhaps Ten or a Dozen Lives': Suicide, Accountability, and the Life-Saving Technologies of the Asylum," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* Vol.90, No.4 (Winter 2016): 583-610; Kathleen McCarthy, *Noblesse Oblige: Charity and Cultural Philanthropy in Chicago, 1849-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) and Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and The Great Fire, 1871-1874* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Richard Bell, *We Shall Be No More*, Ch.1.

Pulpit, and later Labor press, this trope is indicative of a much broader anxiety about agency under industrialization.

Ownership of the Means of Self-Destruction

The first section of this study included several nineteenth-century arguments that the suicide increase was the result of ‘civilization.’ The language in these arguments usually included economic language, i.e., of the ‘have and have nots.’ For example, one article in *The Advance* claimed that suicide rates in “civilized nations” were due to the fact that only a “minority of people can avail of its [civilization’s] blessing; the majority of people only develop a longing for the fruits of civilization.” The notion that civilization created new wants and needs that resulted in suicide formed a logic that defined how the middle class perceived the suicide epidemic among their ranks. Most accounts of industrialist and professional class suicides defined their life and self-destruction in terms of their business life.¹¹⁸

For example, in July 1894 the millionaire oil magnate P.C. Hanford committed suicide at the Hotel Metropole in Chicago. Reports on his death revolved around his business dealing and said little about Hanford's mental state or his family life. The sub-headline in *New York World* asked: "Was Speculation the Cause?" The *Daily Inter Ocean* stated ‘no cause for the rash act’ before going into extensive detail on Hanford’s art collection and conjecture about Hanford’s business affairs. The *Los Angeles Times* attributed the suicide to ‘worry’ over business affairs.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ “Causes of Suicide,” *The Advance*, March 28, 1912, 63.

¹¹⁹ “Takes His Own Life,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 12, 1894; “Suicide of P.C. Hanford,” *The New York World*, July 12, 1894; “Sad Case of Suicide,” *Daily Inter Ocean*, July 12, 1894; “Worried Over Business,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 1894.

Another prominent suicide connected to the Metropole Hotel had taken place the previous summer when Charles Eddy, a Vice President of the Reading Railroad, committed suicide in Chicago's Washington Park. Eddy had been staying at the Metropole at the time, and the article on his death in the *Chicago Tribune* commented almost exclusively on his work history and his ownership of a private rail car. The article also noted though that he may have lost a job offer due to the recession. The *New York Sun* reported that Eddy had 'few cares' while likewise providing in-depth detail of his work history. A week after Eddy's death reports came out that Eddy's associates at the Norfolk and Western Railroad believed Eddy was murdered. Their only reason for suspecting murder was that Eddy had recently made a large sum of money made from futures in the Norfolk and Western, which was available for Eddy to pick up in Virginia.¹²⁰

Suicides of individuals connected to the industrial elite focused on the meaning the death had for the upper class rather than the victim. When a teacher at the prestigious Chicago Latin School committed suicide in 1916, the headline in the *Chicago Tribune* specifically read "Teacher of Millionaire's Sons Cuts his Throat" with the majority of the article focused on the effect the suicide had on his students. Recall the account of the man who committed suicide on George Pullman's property from Part I. The *Chicago Tribune* depicted the final moments of man's life to be filled with desolate jealousy over Pullman's estate; the unknown man gazed with a "spiritual and perhaps material hunger" at "the wealth piled in brick and granite." After the man

¹²⁰ "Suicide in the Park," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 11, 1893; "Charles G. Eddy A Suicide," *The New York Sun*, August 11, 1894; "Believe C. G. Eddy Murdered," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 14, 1893.

died, a large crowd gathered to view the site of the man's self-destruction "under the impression it was actually the capitalist who put an end to his life."¹²¹

In August 1905 the *Chicago Tribune* ran a full page feature on a supposed connection between economic competition and suicide. The article included several charts showing the 'enormous increase' in suicides in the United States (Appendix G). This article chalked the increase up to the 'fight for wealth' which was "undermining the health moral, mental, and physical of the contestants." The fight for wealth was attributed to neurasthenia. Competition and wealth led to 'unnecessary' worry, which compounded by city life led to a supposed doubling of the national urban suicide rate in the first four years of the twentieth century. These suicides were occurring in the "years when the most is expected of a man."¹²²

The most striking statistic the article gave claimed that 12 out of every 100 suicides in the United States were bankers. Bankers, the article claimed, were constantly threatened with the loneliness and the potential loss of 'honor and business prestige.' Bankers' were also supposedly the connected individuals closest to economic competition and fluctuating interest rates. The article went on the chart out the daily life of bankers, placing their emotions on a chart titled "The Worried Man's Day."¹²³

An 1882 article in *The Phrenological Journal and Life Illustrated* claimed that the wealthy ignored their own health to the point that "half the rich men and women in [Boston]

¹²¹ "Teacher of Millionaires' Sons Cuts Throat," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 27, 1916; "Dies at Pullman's Gate," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 20, 1897.

¹²² "Worry Drives Thousands to the Madhouse and Suicide," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 13, 1905.

¹²³ Ibid.

belong to the class of the miserable.” The author claimed that he wouldn’t be surprised if they committed suicide.¹²⁴

This logic displayed itself in reports on the death of bankers. In 1884 a cashier at a bank in Virginia, Thomas Whyte, committed suicide after drinking heavily and yelling at his workers about his distaste for ‘striped suits.’ The report on his death only mentioned this as a preface to a more extended report on supposed mismanagement at the bank, interpreting his death as only a factor of more significant financial issues at this bank stemming from inflated interest rates.¹²⁵

A similar article ran in *Frank Leslie’s Weekly* a month later in September 1905. The article likewise outlined the statistics of suicide and lamented the rise of suicide manias in times of prosperity in the United States. The article also claimed that business losses were the leading cause of suicide, for business was “more likely to drive people to suicide than ill health, insanity, disappointment in love, or strong drink.”¹²⁶

In 1896 a full-page story titled "Suicide at Dawn: A Businessman Sits Up All Night With His Troubles" was printed on page 7 of the *Chicago Tribune*. The story purported to be about a New York businessman who recently committed suicide. The man had sustained some “trifling losses, but there was really nothing serious to worry him.” The man’s losses were only part of ‘hard work’ which “never killed a man who takes care of himself.” The problem for this businessman though was that he had developed insomnia. His brain “unrefreshed by restful sleep is not of much use in the turbulent tide of business.” The businessman’s insomnia grew into

¹²⁴ “Health the Best Wealth,” *The Phrenological Journal and Life Illustrated*, Vol.75 No.4 (October 1882): 212-213.

¹²⁵ “A Disgusted Cashier,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 23, 1884.

¹²⁶ “Curious Facts About Suicide,” *Frank Leslie’s Weekly*, September 7, 1905.

indigestion which made him thinner and more nervous for “the man who is losing flesh is losing the cushions which protect his nerves from hard knocks.”¹²⁷

This story was an advertisement for "Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery," a medicine that claimed to cure nervousness, consumption, stomach issues, and other ailments. The story was marketing targeted at American businessmen's fears of nervousness and suicide. Its emphasis on the man's normalcy before death depicted suicide as a constant, hidden possibility that could strike without expectation. The advertisement included a drawing of a relaxed man reading and smoking his pipe while the man's wife looked on with concern from the adjoining room (Appendix H).¹²⁸

The attribution of suicide to bankers was a middle-class perspective voiced in the mainstream press that was frequently tied into neurasthenia, as the case with Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery. Neurasthenia was deeply tied into what TJ Jackson Lears has described as a "feeling of weightless" among the American middle class in the late Gilded Age. Middle-Class Americans working all day in offices, beneath artificial light felt as if their labor was no longer producing or creating anything. These same Americans saw their sense of self fade as Darwinian evolution, and the chaos of urbanization fragmented their notion of personhood. Secularization undermined heaven and hell as definitive frames around life. The lack of material production coupled with moral uncertainty led them to feel as if themselves and society were adrift.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ “Suicide at Dawn: A Businessman Sits Up All Night With His Troubles,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 19, 1896.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 42-47.

Neurasthenia was a nervous disorder invented to describe this feeling of weightlessness. Psychologist George Beard coined the term in his 1881 book, *American Nervousness*. For Beard, neurasthenia was the medicalized apex of nervous exhaustion brought on by civilization. Generally, the disease covered numerous symptoms of neurosis and was particularly tied into "paralysis of the will," the inability to control one's life.¹³⁰

Remedies for neurasthenia included medicines such as "Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery" but also therapies that called for Americans to slow down and relax through camping, hobbies, and other activities. In this vein of thinking, middle-class Americans, in general, began to take up activities that combatted weightless. Weightlessness being tied into industrial, white-collar life, was combatted by the image of the pre-modern artisan and craftsman. Americans emulated this image by adopting new hobbies such as weaving and beekeeping. Crafts were coupled with outdoor activities such as hunting. These activities were seen all genuine, intense experiences that offset the weightlessness of modern society.¹³¹

For the middle class, suicide was the most intense experience that could be had in an era of weightlessness. It was the supreme act of agency in modern, industrial society which commanded ownership of one's life and body. Defining suicide as a middle-class phenomenon, i.e., the result of financial work, was a means of claiming and owning this intense experience. Suicide also appeared in middle-class modes of resistance to weightless. One of the leading voices in the arts and crafts movement, the textile designer William Morris, included suicide as a symbol of masculinity in his work. Morris regularly depicted men committing suicide as acts of

¹³⁰ George Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: Putnam and Sons, 1881); Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 50.

¹³¹ Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 56; *ibid.*, 75; *ibid.*, 70-71.

violent resistance to overwhelming forces, but also invoked the trope of women committing suicide to preserve male honor.¹³²

The ownership of suicide as intense experience is only one side of the dialectic on suicide and economics. On the other side of the aisle, in the immigrant press and African American Press, saw the rise in suicide as tied to the white middle class but with a radically different perception. This perception coupled with broader discourses on suicide is revealing of anxieties deeper than neurasthenia.

Against the Middle-Class Dialectic

The *Christian Recorder*, a paper published by the African Methodist Episcopal Church and one of the largest African American newspapers in the nineteenth century, saw the rise in suicide as a sin exclusive to the white middle class. For example, a January 1897 article read:

The self-murder side of the crime record of the year just ended is everything but hopeful...How to account for the mania is no less sad than perplexing. The victims were not from the lower classes. They were not pinched by poverty for the most part, nor any of them galled by oppression like the multitudes of our race variety in the South. They were fools from the higher and middle walks of life who were neither wise nor good enough to turn their misfortune to the best account.¹³³

The author saw the rise in suicides as the result of wealth seeking among the white upper class.

The article ended by stating that suicide may be the “tendency of Japhet’s civilization,” referring to Japhet, the son of Noah and purported forebear of European peoples.¹³⁴

¹³² Ingrid Hansen, *William Morris and the Uses of Violence 1856-1890* (London: Anthem Press, 2013), 89-92.

¹³³ *The Christian Recorder*, January 7, 1897.

¹³⁴ *The Christian Recorder*, January 7, 1897.

While the *Christine Recorder* located the suicide epidemic as a white middle-class problem connected to the economy, religious establishments in broadly blamed the new economy for the rise in suicides. One early article from 1869 claimed that the rise in suicides was linked to businessmen men who “have no Sabbaths” and that life for them is “a perpetual workday.” The 1869 piece claimed that the rise in suicide among businessmen was God’s punishment for not honoring the Sabbath.¹³⁵

One article in the *Christian Recorder* argued that all bodies of suicide victims be given to medical colleges as cadavers. The author was explicit that all suicide victims including the insane, specifically the ‘temporality insane’ because “this momentary insanity, of which we hear so much of late, is a thousand times more deviltry than anything else and the law should put the veto upon it by handing over all such to the doctors.”¹³⁶

The churches saw the suicide sensationalism as a threat to their institutions. Periodicals tied in the church’s waning authority under industrialization as partly to blame for the rise in suicides. A 1909 report on alcoholism in the *California State Journal of Medicine* claimed that suicide had effectively disappeared from Western society from the 5th through the 12th century but began to rise again with the Reformation. The report then stated that suicide recently increased rapidly due to “industrial, political, and religious disturbances.” The economic disturbances were caused by new standards brought on ‘appetites’ for prosperity which lead the “man with a \$100 monthly income to rival in enjoyments of life the man with a \$200 monthly income.” In 1896 an article claimed that the “The Commandment: Thou shalt not kill seems to be

¹³⁵ “Sunday and Suicide,” *The Advance*, July 22, 1869, 99.

¹³⁶ “Dead for the Doctors,” *The Christian Recorder*, December 28, 1882.

considered one of the mistakes of Moses, and a sacred regard for human life is one of the sentiments which American civilization does not propose to cultivate."¹³⁷

Americans primarily pointed the blame at Protestant institutions, a trope that extends further back before the Gilded Age. In 1830s suicide sensationalism had been used to undermine Unitarianism. A common statistic used in the Gilded Age was the ratio of Catholic to Protestant suicide, which was always used to criticize Protestantism. For example, one article from 1876 claimed that for every Catholic Suicide there were 5,115 Protestant suicides.¹³⁸

Some Protestant and Evangelical voices expressed concern over the suicide sensationalism undermining their authority; the blame was usually placed on the media itself. In 1874 an article in *Messiah's Herald*, a publication of the evangelical American Millennial Association, claimed that newspapers which sensationalized suicide were furnishing readers with the opportunity for "reflections on the emptiness of Christian professions and the heartlessness of the world." The author in *Messiah's Herald* claimed the increase in suicides were instead the result of 'natural religion' and the 'materialism of the age.'¹³⁹

An 1884 article in the *Christian Recorder* denounced the press for sensationalizing suicide and murder. The article claimed that the sensationalism of suicide and murder was 'molding the material of the next generation' in such a way that the nation will not succeed in 'perpetuating its life in accordance with better principles.' The sensationalism sold papers but it also 'instructed all in the devilment of the age.' An earlier article in the *Recorder* argued that the

¹³⁷ A.W. Hoisholt, "Suicide and Alcohol" *California State Journal of Medicine* Vol.7, No.2 (February 1909): 61-64, 61; "Murder and Suicide," *The Advance*, January 16, 1896.

¹³⁸ See Bell, *We Shall Be No More*, Ch.5; "Statistics of Suicide," *Chronicle: A Weekly Journal; Devoted to the Interests of Insurance, Manufactures & Real Estate*, January 27, 1876, 51-512.

¹³⁹ "Suicide," *Messiah's Herald*, September 2, 1874, 135.

Associated Press was concealing the goodness in the world.' Referring to suicide, the article claimed that the Associated Press was taking "a thousandfold more steps' to ensure that people 'hear of more wickedness than formerly.'¹⁴⁰

Some secular outlets likewise blamed newspapers for the rise in suicide. On an article in the magazine, *Collier's Weekly* from September 1906 illustrates this position. Titles "The Newspaper Peril: A Diagnosis of a Malady of the Modern Mind" claimed that newspaper sensationalism caused unnecessary nervous strain on the mind. Newspapers' involve fast news cycles that overstimulate the mind through "the art of forgetting." Newspapers "owned by millionaire politicians, promoters, or speculators used them for their own ends...accomplishing more self-destruction" and "every conspicuous crime, murder, suicide, lynching reported in detail in these newspapers begets ideas of like nature in innumerable minds."¹⁴¹

The criticisms of the African press and Church's response likewise shared a concern about suicide sensationalism and its connection to life in the new economy as well as an image of suicide as a problem confronting the new middle class. This side of the dialectic on middle-class suicide revealed the economic image of suicide and agency as running far more profound and wider than the middle class' ownership of suicide-as-intense-experience. Suicide for the Church was an indictment of the new industrial economy.

A Tempting Inducement

¹⁴⁰ "All About the Suicide! All About the Terrible Murder!" *The Christian Recorder*, August 21, 1884; *The Christian Recorder*, November 29, 1883.

¹⁴¹ Frederick Peterson, "The Newspaper Peril: A Diagnosis of a Malady of the Modern Mind" *Collier's Weekly*, September 1, 1906, 12-13.

Perhaps the most salient location where the suicide discourse clashed with American's images of the new market was in the debates over life insurance that began in the late nineteenth century. Life insurance policies had been in the United States since the mid-eighteenth century but were not widespread in scope until after the Civil War. In 1860 there were roughly 70,000 policies held in northern cities, but by 1870 that number had increased to over 800,000. With life insurance came growing acceptability among the American middle class that a value could be placed on a family member's life. Late nineteenth-century life insurance policies were seen as the market recognizing patriarchy by setting a monetary value on the life of the father in American families. The monetized patriarchy was seen generally as a direct response to the dangers posed by industrial, urban society. The cash nexus had taken up the American family.¹⁴²

When life insurance grew into a standard among the middle class in the 1870s and 1880s, it carried the suicide discourse with it. Lawyers, reformers, and preachers became concerned that the monetization of the breadwinner in middle-class families could potentially promote suicide. Newspapers and periodicals regularly reported on cases of suicide that involved life insurance policies. A cartoon that appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1874 titled "A Tempting Inducement" (Appendix I) depicted a life insurance salesman selling a policy to a man telling him "The advantage of *our* Company is that you do not forfeit your policy either by being hanged or by committing suicide. *Pray* take a prospectus." [italics in original].¹⁴³

¹⁴² Sharon Ann Murphy, "Securing Human Property: Slavery, Life Insurance, and Industrialization in the Upper South," *Journal of the Early Republic* Vol.25, No.4 (Winter 2005): 615-652, 618; Robert Whaples and Dave Buffum, "Fraternalism, Paternalism, the Family, and the Market: Insurance a Century Ago," *Journal of Social Science History* Vol.15, No.1 (Spring 1991): 102-103.

¹⁴³ "A Tempting Inducement," *Harper's Bazaar*, May 23, 1874.

Americans feared that life insurance would promote suicide. An 1875 article claimed that life insurance in had the potential to decriminalize suicide and in fact Life insurance "aided and abetted suicide." The article argued that life insurance was a method of insuring against the punishments of suicide. It cited that out of the 880,000 life insurance policies held in the United States; one-fifth did not contain any mention of suicide. It was not simply that there were no safeguards against suicide in policies though, the author was doubtful that any clause could be added to policies that could "effectually guard against suicide," because intention in death was difficult to prove and suicides could always be interpreted as accidental. Another article in the same periodical argued this point by citing an example of a husband who committed suicide in order to leave money behind to support his wife. The case was "a swindle upon the bereaved families of others," and the insurance companies were "markets for human life" that "make their payments the price of blood."¹⁴⁴

One review claimed that the number of life insurance policies paid out to cases of suicide was rising at "great rapidity." To the author, the rise in insured suicides was a sign that humans' "inner harmonies [were] so deranged that moral responsibility is gone." Others claimed that life insurance companies did not care about suicide. In 1872 one article claimed that life insurance companies had not "collected any statistics bearing on the subject." The same article went on to lament to the same concerns about rising in suicide rates in American cities.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ "Suicide and Life Insurance," *Chronicle: A Weekly Journal; Devoted to the Interests of Insurance, Manufactures & Real Estate*, December 9, 1875, 372-374; "Practical Comment on the Suicide Clause," *Chronicle: A Weekly Journal; Devoted to the Interests of Insurance, Manufactures & Real Estate*, October 7, 1875, 228.

¹⁴⁵ "Suicide Not Always Insanity," *Chronicle: A Weekly Journal; Devoted to the Interests of Insurance, Manufactures, and Real Estate*, August 26, 1875, 131; "Statistics of Suicide," *Northwestern Weekly Review*, April 6, 1872, 192.

An 1899 article in *Frank Leslie's Weekly* 'warned' against the "folly" of life insurance. The article located the 'folly' in the insurance companies involving suicide in business. This concern about the business of suicide shared the economic lens the middle class held over suicide among their own ranks.¹⁴⁶

On two decades following the publication of these concerns, legislation regulating life insurance and suicide was passed in many states. Nevertheless, these same concerns resurfaced. One critique of Missouri's insurance laws from 1894 claimed that the state's laws concerning life insurance defined specific individuals as valuable in the eyes of the state. The laws thus led "men, not stolid enough to be devoid of imagination, may come to believe themselves worth more dead than alive."¹⁴⁷

The life insurance debates also had the effect of undermining the prevailing medical opinions of suicide and insanity. Insanity as a defense of a life insurance claim received stiff resistance. The same article that critiqued the Missouri laws noted that the New York Life insurance company was planning to take insanity out of their suicide clause. The article still noted though that there was a 'danger' in the suicide clauses that could never be taken out.¹⁴⁸

Some media reports of suicides portrayed men accepting this logic. For example, in 1897, J.L. Downs, a wealthy businessman from Cleveland Ohio who was friends with George Pullman and Ulysses S. Grant, committed suicide. Reports on his death made much of his suicide note, addressed to the president of a crematory, it read:

¹⁴⁶ "Life Insurance—More Warnings," *Frank Leslie's Weekly*, July 29, 1899.

¹⁴⁷ "Suicide and Life Insurance," *The Independent: Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts*, April 12, 1894. 23.

¹⁴⁸ "Suicide and Life Insurance," *The Independent: Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts*, April 12, 1894. 23.

This life has been insured thirty-five long years in the New York Life Insurance Company for 4000 dollars, all paid in full. As the body is of no further use, the insurance company should pay you for it. Take charge of my remains for the Fresh Pond Crematory.¹⁴⁹

An extensive report on Downs' death in the *Chicago Tribune* claimed that his business had not been doing well over the previous months and that the defeat of William Jennings Bryan in the 1894 election as well as damage done to George Pullman's reputation in the aftermath of the 1894 Pullman strike, had changed Downs for the worse. The article also noted that Downs was involved in the Whiskey Ring Scandal, a conspiracy of businessmen and government agents in 1870s who redirect whiskey tax revenue to their own pockets. Downs, a victim of the market and the times had willed his body away under the logic of life insurance.¹⁵⁰

Most scholars have focused on how life insurance consolidated power structures in American society. Through the establishments of life tables and defined risk that categorized human difference which gave Americans a tool to critique group differences and discriminate against different regions and groups. Kathleen Brian in her dissertation on Gilded Age suicide likewise focused on how fitness tables in conjunction with suicide clauses determined which Americans' lives were valuable and which were not, a precursor to eugenic thought.¹⁵¹

While Life Insurance acted as a tool of oppression, the broader economic view of suicide among the middle class ascribes it as a symbol of agency under the new economy. This is partly with a growing belief in determinism in American life. Life insurance piggybacked on the

¹⁴⁹ "Wills His Corpse Away," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 8, 1897.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Dan Bouk, "The Science of Difference: Developing Tools for Discrimination in the American Life Insurance Industry, 1830-1930," *Enterprise and Society* Vol.12, No.4 (December 2011): 717-731, 722; Brian, "Morbidity Propensities," Ch.3

growing field of actuarial science, the evaluation of risk based on statistical science. Life insurance was placing the value of human life into a statistical, deterministic framework. Supposed laws of statistical frequencies began to govern American life more in the mid-nineteenth century. Popular beliefs about “laws of mortalities” led Americans to see phenomena such as suicide and homicide as determined by powers external to free will.¹⁵²

This anxiety became more salient as these concerns over life insurance moved into legal and political arenas. By the turn of the century, life insurance policies began to carry extensive suicide clauses but debates over which types of suicide to exclude from the policies continued. A 1910 piece in the *Harvard Law Review* doubted the ability of life insurance policies to rule out suicide effectively. The article claimed that clauses which excluded suicide both “sane and insane” from coverage were still liable to pay out in instances, citing several cases. The article also commented on the need for life insurance policies to define ‘criminal suicide’ apart from suicide resulting from insanity. A 1915 article in the *Virginia Law Review* recounted several legal cases over the preceding decades that involved companies suing beneficiaries of suicides because of the victim's ability to ‘profit by his own wrong.’ The article noted this threat and called for public policy to address the issue of profitable suicide.¹⁵³

By the 1890s the public concern with suicide clauses was so great that judiciaries were inclined to reject any suicide clauses with the possibility of excepting suicide. In 1898 the Supreme Court ruled against of a policy that failed to specifically except all cases of suicide,

¹⁵² Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 84.

¹⁵³ “Express Conditions Against Suicide in Life Insurance,” *Harvard Law Review* Vol.23, No.7 (May 1910): 557-558; “Life Insurance. Suicide of the Insured,” *Virginia Law Review* Vol.2, No.8 (May 1915): 623-624, 623.

stating that it was “subversive of sound morality” and that suicide clauses generally had the “tendency to endanger the public good.”¹⁵⁴

Of the plethora major cases over suicide clauses in the late Gilded Age, *Ritter v. Mutual Life Insurance Co. of New York* (1898) marked a turning point in the public and legal discourse on life insurance and suicide. The defendant in the case made a distinction between insanity as understanding the physical but not the moral nature of the act. An expert witness for the prosecution argued that allowing beneficiaries to collect on suicides would “render those natural affections which make every man desirous of providing for his family an inducement to crime.” The court was persuaded by the defense’ argument that insanity took the agency out of suicide and that the beneficiaries of Runk’s estate could received the benefits of his policies.¹⁵⁵

Five years after the *Ritter* decision an article on the ‘suicide epidemic’ in *Collier’s* claimed that the increase in suicide resulted from the ‘habit of insurance.’ The article instead of solely blaming the insurance companies, as the case with earlier pieces, blamed the courts for holding suicide clauses ‘void’ and juries’ “readiness to attribute insanity to every person taking his life.” The *Ritter* case set a precedent of implied exceptions of the suicide clause which were seen by contemporary lawyers as a slippery slope leading to more issues with suicide in life insurance. For the following twenty years, the case was the bane of lawyers representing the insurance companies, who denounced the decision for radically shifting the burden of proof in cases of suicide insurance fraud on the companies, essentially voided clauses as the *Collier’s* article pointed out. After a case in 1920 overturned the *Ritter Decision*, an article in the *Yale Law*

¹⁵⁴ Morton Keller, “The Judicial System and the Law of Life Insurance, 1888-1910” *The Business History Review*, Vol.35, No.3 (Autumn 1961): 317-335, 331.

¹⁵⁵ *Ritter v. Mutual Life Insurance Co.*, 169 U.S. 139 (1898)

Review described the *Ritter Decision* as misleading courts and troubling lawyers and policy writers alike. The outcome and perception of the *Ritter* decision highlighted how Americans view of agency had fractured in the Gilded Age.¹⁵⁶

Middle-class Americans believed life insurance had turned suicide into new means of profit in the Gilded Age. Life insurance marked an intrusion of the cash nexus even more in-depth into American lives, placing a market value on life itself.

National Suicide

Life insurance, the connection between banking and suicide, and the etiologies constructed by the church and reformers all point to concerns about the new economy forged in the Gilded Age. These shared concerns about the market and its effect on American life manifested in a broader discourse on the direction of the nation under industrialization. Reformers, preachers, businessmen, and economists tussled over the meaning of the term 'National Suicide' to express conflicting concerns about the direction of the nation.

National Suicide came into widespread use during the Civil War. Preachers and political commenters described the South's secession or the Union's recognition of Secession as National Suicide. In a sermon given at All Soul's church in New York the week after Fort Sumter was bombed, Henry Bellows, orator and president of the United States Sanitary Commission, said "We see our brethren there under a general madness, ready to fire the Capitol, drawing a sword upon *their* own and *our* own country [italics in original]. We see them ready to commit National Suicide, and we rush to prevent a catastrophe as fatal to them as to us!" In a speech

¹⁵⁶ "The Increase in Suicide," *Collier's Weekly*, September 19, 1903, 2-3; F.F. Thomas Jr., "Public Policy Affecting Property Rights Accruing to a Party as a Result of Wrongful Acts," *California Law Review* Vol.1, No.6 (September 1913): 513-531, 519; "Suicide as a Defense in Life Insurance," *Yale Law Review* Vol.30, No.4 (February 1921): 401-404.

commemorating Washington's birthday in 1881, William Tenney said that for the Union to recognize secession would have been "National Suicide."¹⁵⁷

In the Gilded Age, the term came into use in calls for wage reform. An 1886 tract used the term to describe the oppression of American workers and to condemn American churches for legitimizing the causes of Capital: "shame on the Christian Minister or professed reformer that can pervert the scripture by quoting in justification of such monstrous oppression." The same tract went on to identify problems in American's standards of value and political economy as part of National Suicide. Another article that appeared in the liberal magazine *The Arena* in 1890 described the Whiskey Ring scandal and the growth of monopolies as National Suicide. In a similar vein, others used the term to criticize American imperialism. In 1899 Irish immigrant and minister Percy Tilson condemned the Spanish-American war as National Suicide for "slaying inoffensive and semi-civilized people in the innocence of their national childhood." Another 1890 article from *The Arena* used National Suicide to call for women's rights while using National Suicide to perpetuate an imperialist outlook. The article described the mistreatment of women in China and India as evidence of the countries' 'stagnation' and 'moral degradation,' asking "Can anything more nearly resembling National Suicide be found in history?"¹⁵⁸

But, as labor unions gained traction around the turn of the century, National Suicide was later taken up by the middle class to condemn their power. A 1910 Arthur Stillwell, founder of

¹⁵⁷ Henry H. Bellows, *The State and the Nation—Sacred to All Christian Citizens: A Sermon Preached in All Soul's Church, New York April 21, 1861* (New York: James Miller, 1861), 15; William Hamilton Tenney, *149th Anniversary of Washington's Birthday: Address of William H. Tenney* (Washington D.C: R.H. Darby, 1881), 9.

¹⁵⁸ Oscar F. Lumry, *National Suicide and Its Prevention* (Chicago: George G. Cram, 1886), 12; Howard Crosby, "The Rum and the Rum Power," *The Arena* Vol.1, No.4 (March 1890): 396-402, 400; Percy Magan Tilson, *The Peril of the Republic of the United States of America* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1899); Joseph Rodes Buchanan, "The Cosmic Sphere of Woman," *The Arena* Vol.1, No.6 (May 1890): 666-681, 672.

the Kansas City Southern Railway, claimed that National Suicide would result of from labor unions' growing power, the failure of the government to set higher rates for rail traffic, and a decline in legislation for the construction of new railroads. A clear statement of the industrial class' image of National Suicide was published in 1913 by John Kirby, president of the National Association of Manufacturers. Kirby defined National Suicide as the growing impetus for American reformers to see wealth distribution as the solution to the problems of the Gilded Age, condemning the reformers who charged Kirby's class with National Suicide. Any laws that attempt to make "rich men poor and poor men rich" will lead to 'National Suicide' and organized capital is needed to "preserve [the manufacturers'] manhood from constant humiliation." Kirby claimed that organized labor needed to be met with organized capital, i.e., organizations of business owners such as his National Association of Manufacturers, that would rise to combat any redistribution of wealth in the United States.¹⁵⁹

The Progressives Approach Suicide

The economic meaning of 'National Suicide' taken up in the Gilded Age was indicative of a broader anxiety Americans held about agency under the new industrial economy. Both labor and capital saw the industrial nation hurtling toward self-destruction. Mayor Johnson's anti-suicide commission was the embodiments of the middle-class view on this issue. The commission had legitimized their economic view of suicide while also taking up the distinctly Gilded Age notion of *noblesse oblige* that both legitimized their moral leadership while also denying the possibility of social engineering as an answer to the problem.

¹⁵⁹ Arthur Stillwell, *Confidence or National Suicide!* (New York: The Banker's Publishing Company, 1910); John Kirby, "Shall We Commit National Suicide?" *Frank Leslie's Weekly*, February 13, 1913.

One year after Mayor Johnson's commission had begun, the Salvation Army began work on establishing an Anti-Suicide bureau in London. The bureau was founded on three principles: 'inviolable secrecy,' free advice, and (unlike Mayor Johnson) 'no financial help guaranteed,' and had departments in London and New York. In April 1907, *The Sketch*, a London weekly arts magazine marketed to high society on both sides of the Atlantic, published a series of photos demonstrating the "lessons of consolation" practiced by the New York Department (Appendix). The photos showed a suicidal woman crying and being comforted by 'Mrs. Brigadier Boville', while a suicidal man was depicted shaking hands with 'Colonel Holland' who wished him 'Godspeed.' In the first year, the London Bureau saw 1,125 cases, many of whom were individuals of 'superior education.' By 1909 departments were established in several other cities in the United States, including Chicago, where "businessmen...have sought advice in considerable numbers."¹⁶⁰

Following the Salvation Army approach, several American labor organizations set up anti-suicide departments. On January 11, 1908, two hundred union workers marched on Boston's city hall to deliver a resolution calling for the mayor of Boston to provide worker's pensions and unemployment assistance. Included in the resolution was a call for the establishment of a city anti-suicide department that would provide advice for unemployed workers contemplated suicide, mirroring the Salvation Army approach.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ "An Anti-Suicide Bureau," *The Metaphysical Magazine*, January, 1908, 246; "Consolation Lessons for Would-Be Suicides," *The Sketch: A Journal of Art and Actuality*, April 3, 1907, 358; Arnold White, *The Great Idea: Notes by an Eye-Witness on Some of the Social Work of the Salvation Army* (London: The Salvation Army Printing Works, Winter 1909-10), 96.

¹⁶¹ "Resolutions Relative to the Massachusetts Unemployed," *Massachusetts Labor Bulletin*, February 1908, 58-59.

These bureaus formed only a year after Mayor Johnson's bureau, but they embodied a contrasting school of thought. These reformers took up a therapeutic approach that affirmed suicidal individuals as victims of mental disorder while at the same time condemning the industrial order that carried them to contemplate self-destruction. Mayor Johnson's bureau simply decided which cases were worthy and not worthy before throwing money at the problem. Johnson's commission demonstrated how deep the problem became for middle-class Americans. While the middle class saw economics at the root of the problem, but the middle class asserted themselves on the top of the economic order. The approach of the Progressive reformers also recognized this logic but used it to a different end—molding it to critique the economic order. The economic meaning of suicide that American workers and the critics of Mayor Johnson represent was another embodiment of this anxiety. The middle class accepted and expressed this logic, but not so directly. The public discourse on national suicide, Americans' fears of life insurance, the church's pushback against suicide sensationalism, and the economic language used to sensationalize the death of businessmen, point toward a middle-class anxiety about the role of the new economy in the suicide of middle-class Americans. This economic lens subsumed agency to the market and industry. These public discourses were a meaning fulfillment for a meaning-intention about Americans' loss of agency under industrialization.

Conclusion:

Return of the Suicide Belt

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a new suicide metaphor came into use up across several strata of American society—*race suicide*. Race suicide was an alarmist eugenicist term, coined by sociologist Edward Ross who claimed white Americans' birth rate had dipped below the death rate and the white race would eventually 'commit suicide.' At the dawn of the Progressive Era, this metaphor was prevalent across all strata of American society. Race suicide was tied into the nativist rhetoric of the late Gilded Age; as millions of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe moved into American urban centers, 'old stock' Americans of English and German ancestry, feared that new immigrant birth rates outpaced the white birth rate. The eugenics movement began in the 1880s, but eugenic thought and the metaphor of race suicide became widespread after the turn of the century.¹⁶²

Kathleen Brian's scholarship on Gilded Age suicide focused on this metaphor at the intersection of suicide sensationalism and eugenic thought. Her study detailed how suicide sensationalism was used by middle-class power brokers to shift Americans' sympathy away from individuals and ethnic groups those deemed unfit to survive. Race suicide, though, is anterior to a much deeper anxiety that came about with industrialization. The metaphor was just one manifestation of a growing anxiety about agency under industrialization. The reaction to Louis' Lingg's suicide, the polemics of female suicide, and pervasive use of economic tropes in suicide were meaning-fulfilments of a deep meaning-intention related to Americans' changing perception of a universal—agency.

¹⁶² Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2000), 155.

The reaction to the death of Louis Lingg and later use of the trope of anarchism-suicide revealed how Americans perceived the social order as a means toward self-destruction. Anarchists identified the oppressive industrial state with the self-destruction of the individual. Americans in general conflated anarchism, a symbol of direct opposition to the state, as a means to suicide. Both sides shared a conception of the state as conducive to suicide and self-destruction.

When women entered the new economy forged under the Gilded Age as workers and consumers, the patriarchy removed the agency from public depictions of women's suicide that intersected with their new economic agency. Feminists and Gilded Age reformers struck back by invoking the trope of women's suicide to critique the status of women's wages and patriarchal control within the family.

The middle and upper-class class economic lens on suicide distinctly revealed suicide as a meaning fulfillment for middle-class concerns about control the economy had begun to have over their personal lives, particularly over their deaths. Their fears of life insurance were tied into what they perceived as the economy ruling over life and death. The metaphor of National Suicide and the competing approaches to remedying the suicide epidemic revealed how Americans on both sides of the economic spectrum perceived the industrial state's effect on their ability to run their lives.

An image of industrial America as an impersonal, all-consuming force prevailed across the strata of Gilded Age society that used these tropes. This image was expressed through suicide, the most public symbol of agency in American industrial society. Together these three areas of discourse, with their internal contradictions, reveal a deep concern about agency held by Gilded Age Americans on both sides of the aisle. As industrialization and urbanization began to

define Americans lives, American felt as if they had lost control over themselves in the face of this new industrial state. This concern was a meaning-intention for which suicide, a public symbol of agency, was a meaning-fulfillment.

Suicide and the Modern Consciousness

In 1980, labor historian Herbert Gutman claimed that a cultural history of the working class in the Gilded Age needed to shift its focus from experience and “what ‘one’ has done *to* them” to how the working class responded and interpreted what was done to them. Cultural history on Gutman's picture is a study of “what man has done with what was done to him” and how agents responded. On this picture historical agents are defined wholly in terms of their relation to a power structure; their experience is only an experience of combativeness. Solely defining historical agents as means to ends within an impersonal nexus of representations and power plays.¹⁶³

Cultural history's lack of a focus on the real experience of historical agents can lead cultural historians into hopeless abstraction. Historical agents have their dignity stripped away before becoming enmeshed within a semiotic discursive system that floats further away from historical reality. Realist phenomenology builds cultural history from the bottom up, identifying the experience of historical agents before building into the reactions that form cultural discourse. The underlying anxieties about industrialization were a historical reality on the realist picture, an interpretation which lends itself to the body of scholarship on the concept of the ‘modern consciousness.’¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Herbert Gutman, “Labor History and the Sartre Question” in *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, Ira Berlin ed. (New York: The New Press, 1987): 326-328.

¹⁶⁴ Husserl's early phenomenological method is directed against inquiry floating away from real experience. Idealists such as Kant and Hegel, who were the main influences on the later constructivists, tried to interpret

The modern consciousness is a term used by phenomenologists to describe the effect of modernity on phenomenal consciousness. Martin Heidegger in *The Question Concerning Technology* argued that the onset of industrialization changed how humans perceived their environment. Modernity conditioned humans to perceive the world instrumentally; for example, Heidegger argued that pre-modern society viewed things such as a river aesthetically, but with the onset of industrialization, the river was then perceived solely through a potential use for humans, e.g., a hydroelectric plant.¹⁶⁵

Slavoj Žižek and other critical theorists have advanced the concept of *capitalist realism*, which argues that the onset of industrial capitalism brought a dramatically restricted perception of the world. These thinkers argue that the language of exchange and wage labor have permeated modern consciousness to the point that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than an end to capitalism.”¹⁶⁶

Critical theorists are not historians though; they primarily focus on the interpretation of Hegelian dialectic and use poetry or art for their examples. Few scholars have analyzed the modern consciousness through historical inquiry. The primary scholar of modern consciousness and nineteenth-century history is German sociologist Wolfgang Schivelbusch. Schivelbusch has argued that industrialization changed Europeans and Americans’ perceptions of time and space.

the thing-in-itself through cultural and constructed experience. Denying themselves the ability to comment on reality meant their inquiry only built upon further and further degrees of abstraction. To remedy this, Husserl advocated for a method he called ‘the phenomenological reduction’ which required one to altogether remove themselves from judgments about external reality in phenomenological inquiry, solely looking at the raw phenomenal experience before making any claims about anything external to experience, see Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, Lee Hardy Trans. (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1902/03).

¹⁶⁵ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1977): 3-35, 6; *ibid.*, 14.

¹⁶⁶ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (London: Zero Books 2009), 2.

In *The Railroad Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*

Schivelbusch argued that the onset of the railroad fundamentally changed how Americans and Europeans perceived time and space. The railroad marked the first time that humans could travel faster than the wind, water, or animal power. The world expanded in possibility as humans could travel vast distances in relatively short amounts of time. Railroads later brought along regimented time tables as well as time zones which reconstructed how time was perceived.¹⁶⁷

Similar to the railroad, Schivelbusch argued that electric lighting led Europeans and Gilded Age Americans to reconceive time and personal space. Electric light opened up the streets at night. Spaces within the American home suddenly had use at night, social customs and fashions changed as light changed how individuals were seen in drawing rooms and dining rooms. Light lent to labor's shift sun up to sun down to regimented shifts that ran all hours of the day.¹⁶⁸

Schivelbusch's research shed light on the effects of industrialization on the perception of universal concepts such as time and space. The railroad and electric light were only two mediums of dramatic cultural change. Amy Dru Stanley pointed out how the idea of labor changed from an understanding of labor as contract to hourly wage labor. Incorporation changed the face of business, depersonalizing companies and vastly expanding their capabilities. At the same time, the state expanded rapidly, creating a bureaucracy that was unimaginable before the Civil War. The new state suddenly faced demands to fill in where the church seemed to fall short in the industrial era leading to tensions over social control and the moral responsibility of the

¹⁶⁷ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railroad Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

¹⁶⁸ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

state. Within this matrix of rapid change stood Americans, of all classes, religions, and ethnicities who perceived these great forces as changing another human universal—agency. In the face of changes in time and space, the space for agency, for Americans’ ability to control their own lives shifted. The suicide sensationalism of the Gilded Age was one aspect of Americans’ shift into the industrialized, modern consciousness.

Suicide in a New Gilded Age

On the morning of July 15, 1974, Christine Chubbock, a reporter for Sarasota news station WXLT-TV, read a newscast to open her morning talk show *Sunshine Digest*. About ten minutes into the newscast, Chubbock, still reading from the script, said

In keeping with the WXLT practice of presenting the most immediate and complete reports of local blood and guts, TV 40 presents what is believed to a television first. In living color, exclusive coverage of an attempted suicide.¹⁶⁹

Chubbock then held a gun to her temple and killed herself live on air.

Four decades later two films on the life and death of Christine Chubbock were shown at the 2016 Sundance Film festival. The first *Christine*, directed by Antonio Campos, was a dramatization of Christine Chubbock’s life when she was working at WXLT. *Christine* chronicled her fight with depression and pressures from her boss to cover gritty local crime stories. The second film, *Kate Plays Christine*, was a mockumentary directed by Robert Sheene that depicted actress Kate Lyn Shiel’s preparing to play Christine Chubbock in a different film. *Kate Plays Christine* depicts Shiel becoming inexplicably obsessed with learning about Chubbock’s death, falling victim to the sensationalism that led Chubbock into depression.

¹⁶⁹ “Christine Chubbock Police Report” Sarasota County Sheriff’s Department, Case No. 74-15120 (July 15, 1974) p.18 https://archive.org/details/sixty90_protonmail_CC

Christine and *Kate Plays Christine* surfaced when the United States was in the midst of national debates over suicide, media, and mental health. The late twentieth century saw a sharp rise in the academic and public interest in suicide, after a lull in the first half of the century. A significant part of these debates has been the connection between suicide and technology. Mental health professionals and parents have criticized television shows such as Netflix' *13 Reasons Why* such for its depiction of teen suicide. There are also dialogues on the role of social media in promoting teen suicide. National Suicide rates are still a topic of public discourse with the term 'Suicide Belt' coming back into use in the 2010s to describe mountain states such as Utah, and Colorado that had higher suicide rates than the remainder of the country. The depictions of public suicide have changed to be more respectful to the victims, suicide letters and drawings of suicides are no longer in American newspapers, but polemical depictions of suicide persist in American media.¹⁷⁰

These public debates over voluntary death have persisted in American culture across the twentieth century, but these current debates take place in an era dubbed by many as a New Gilded Age. Income inequality has returned to similar levels as the first Gilded Age. Corporations such as Walmart, Amazon, and Apple have grown to massive proportions,

¹⁷⁰ See Andrew Fearnley, "Race and the Intellectualizing of Suicide in the American Human Sciences, 1950-1975," in John Weaver and David Wright, eds., *Histories of Suicide: International Perspectives on Self-Destruction in the Modern World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009): 231-256, also see Ian Dowbiggen, "From Sander to Schiavo" Morality, Partisan Politics, and America's Culture War Over Euthanasia, 1950-2010," *Journal of Public Policy History* Vol.25, No.1 (2013): 12-41; Julie Phillips and Colleen Nugent, "Suicide and the Great Recession of 2007-2009: The Role of Economic Factors in the 50 States," *Social Science and Medicine*, No.116 (2014): 22-31, refers to the mountain states as a 'suicide belt' on p.27; Examples of other references to the suicide belt: Kirk Siegler, "How One Colorado Town is Tackling Suicide Prevention—Starting with the Kids" *National Public Radio Inc.*, October 23, 2018, URL: <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/10/23/658834805/how-one-colorado-town-is-tackling-suicide-prevention-starting-with-the-kids>, Kelley McMillan, "Here's Why Ski Towns Are Seeing More Suicides" *National Geographic Blog*, May 26, 2016, URL: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/adventure-blog/2016/05/16/why-are-ski-towns-suicides-happening-at-such-an-alarming-rate/>; Jacqueline Howard, "Why Mental Health Experts Are Focused on '13 Reasons Why,'" *CNN*, April 25, 2017. URL: <https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/25/health/13-reasons-why-teen-suicide-debate-explainer/index.html>.

reminiscent of Standard Oil and the trusts that dominated the American economic landscape in the late nineteenth century. This era has also seen renewed nativist rhetoric and debates over the economics of immigration. These economic conditions have followed along a technological revolution that has seen a drastic change in how humans communicate and interact with one another. Augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and other technological changes have triggered public discourse on human nature and agency.

Distressingly enough, the modes of resistance from the first Gilded Age seem to be absent in this era. Union membership has declined and have been depicted as superfluous and corrupt in American media through films such as *Goodfellas* or television programs such as *The Sopranos*. A 1997 episode of *Seinfeld*, ‘The Strike’, mocked Kramer for taking part in a twelve-year strike at a New York bagel shop. The anti-trust laws that broke apart the major corporations of the Gilded Age, have not been enforced since the 1970s.¹⁷¹

Writing from the present, I have to admit these similarities may be superficial. It would be presentist to assume the First Gilded Age superimposed on the current era. Nevertheless, it is important to look beneath our public discourse and find where Americans’ fears lie.

¹⁷¹ See Tim Wu, *The Curse of Bigness: Anti-Trust in the New Gilded Age* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2018)

Appendix A

“A Young Magdalen’s Suicide,” *The National Police Gazette*, January 11, 1879.



**CATHARINE PUNOH, A WAYWARD YOUNG GERMAN GIRL,
HANGS HERSELF, IN THE HOUSE OF REFUGE, ON
RANDALL'S ISLAND, N. Y.—SEE PAGE 5.**

Appendix B

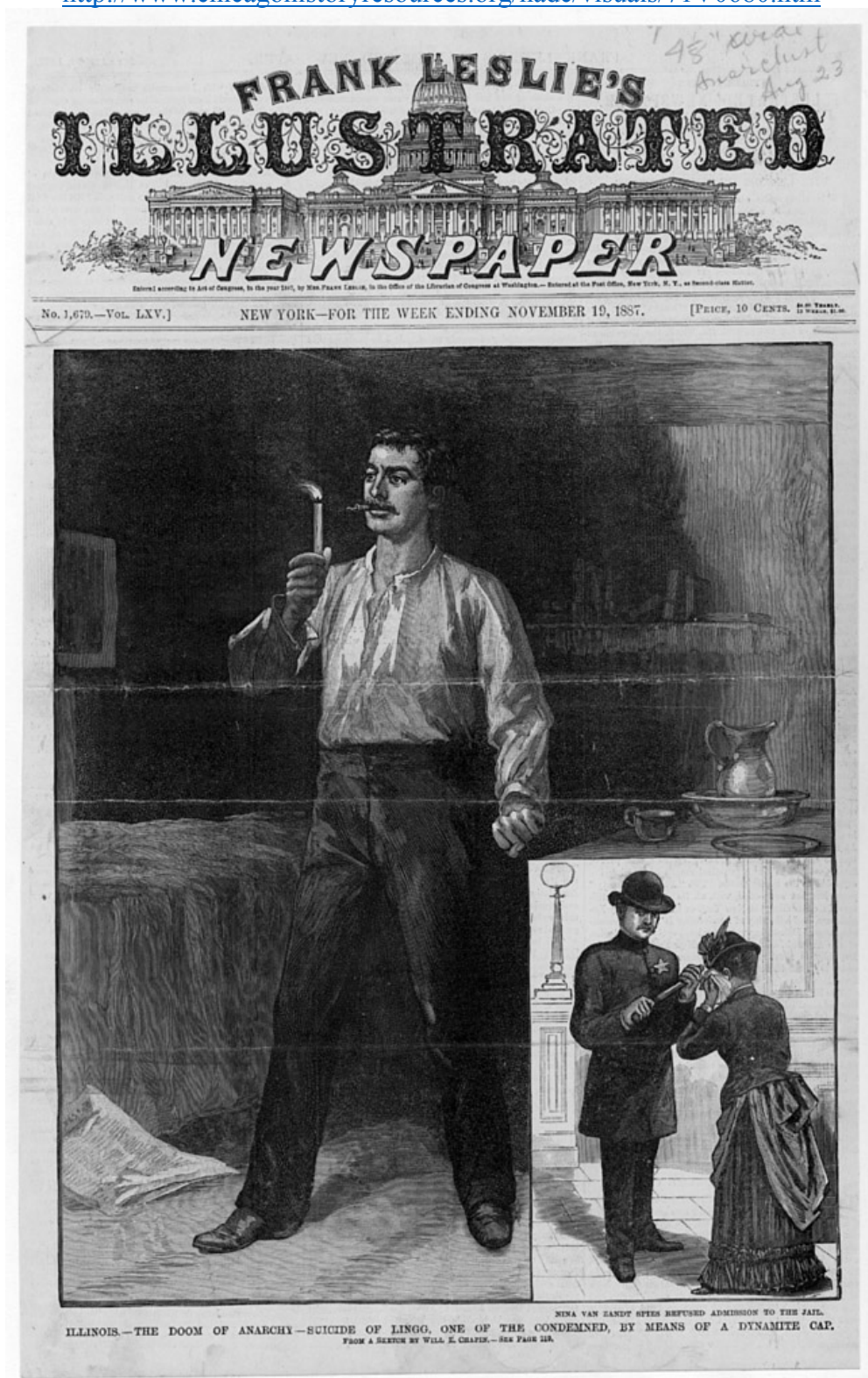
"Dies at Pullman's Gate," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 20, 1897.



UNKNOWN MAN'S SUICIDE NEAR THE PULLMAN RESIDENCE.

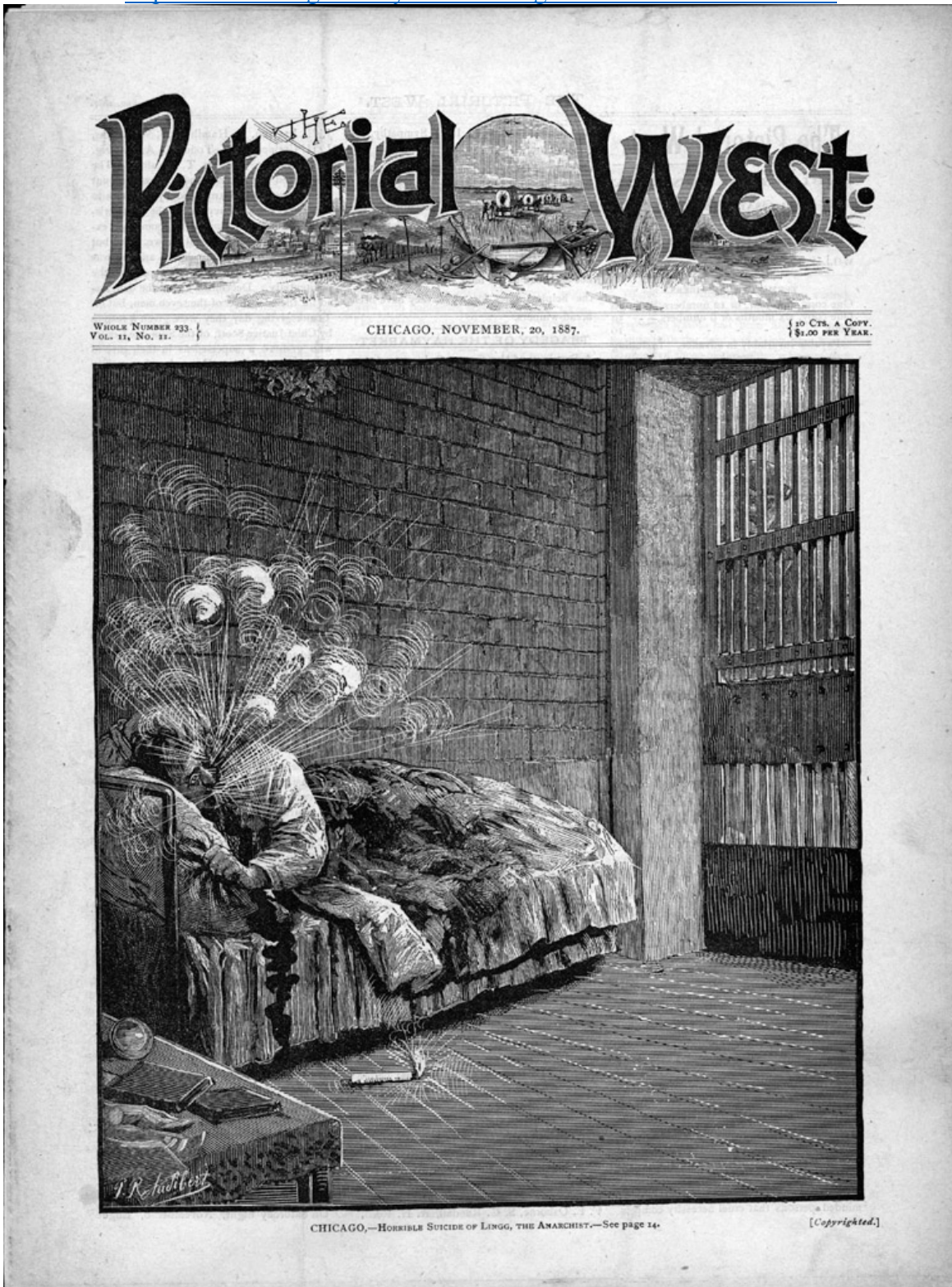
Appendix C

“The Doom of Anarchy,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, November 19, 1887.
<http://www.chicagohistoryresources.org/hadc/visuals/71V0680.htm>



Appendix D

“Horrible Suicide of Lingg-the Anarchist,” *The Pictorial West*, November 19, 1887.
<http://www.chicagohistoryresources.org/hadc/visuals/75V0500.htm>



Appendix E

"A Mysterious Suicide," *The National Police Gazette*, April 1, 1893.

were brought out concerning the girl and her mother. It appears that they were familiar figures in the Teederville district. It is said that the girl and her mother were frequenters of Koster & Bial's, the Imperial Music Hall, Ferdinand's Cafe, and Schnitzer's Holborn, at No. 43 West Twenty-fourth street. Schnitzer and his wife were intimate friends of Mrs. Cozzens and Alice. The Holborn is frequented by men of wealth, and the eleven rooms over the restaurant are usually full every night. Such names as "John Walkabout and lady," "Charles Helback and lady," and "George Washington and wife," appear on the register.

Schnitzer talked very freely about the Cozzens family. He had known Mrs. Cozzens a long time, he said, and had introduced her to his wife about six years ago. The two women were very friendly. Mrs. Cozzens and Alice visited his place

when and where he was married. Mr. Cozzens positively declined to answer. He said his wife was born



ALICE AND HER MOTHER AT KOSTER & BIAL'S.

in New York. Her father was from New Orleans.

But Mr. Cozzens' contradictory statements are not believed. If the stories of those who pretend to know what they are talking about are trustworthy, Alice Cozzens was not Samuel D. Cozzens' daughter. She was Alice Van Lauren. The mystery surrounding this unhappy tragedy is being gradually swept away.

Ferdinand, the proprietor of the cafe on Twenty-third street near Sixth avenue, tells a story which throws light on the hidden mystery. He says:

Appendix F

“Awful Suicide of a Despairing Woman,” *The National Police Gazette*.



A FRENZIED WOMAN'S FRIGHTFUL ACT OF SELF-DESTRUCTION—MRS. MEYERS CREMATES HERSELF ALIVE BY POURING KEROSENE OVER HER CLOTHING AND IGNITING IT, IN A FIT OF DESPAIR AT THE SUPPOSED ILLEGALITY OF HER RECENT MARRIAGE; MEMPHIS, TENN.—SEE PAGE 10.

Appendix H

“Suicide at Dawn: A Businessman Sits Up All Night With His Troubles.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 19, 1896



Appendix I

"A Tempting Inducement" *Harper's Bazaar* May 23, 1874

A TEMPTING INDUCEMENT.

Harper's Bazaar (1867-1912); May 23, 1874; 7, 21; American Periodicals
pg. 344



A TEMPTING INDUCEMENT.

CHEERFUL AGENT FOR LIFE-ASSURANCE COMPANY. "The advantage of *our* Company is, that you do not Forfeit your Policy either by being Hanged or by committing Suicide! *Pray* take a Prospectus!"

Appendix J

"Consolation Lessons for Would-Be Suicides" *The Sketch: A Journal of Art and Actuality*
Vol.57, No.740 (April 3, 1907)

358

THE SKETCH.

APRIL 3, 1907

CONSOLATION LESSONS FOR WOULD-BE SUICIDES: THE SALVATION ARMY'S ANTI-SUICIDE BUREAU IN NEW YORK.



MRS. BRIGADIER BOVILLE, OF THE ANTI-SUICIDE BUREAU,
COMFORTING A WOULD-BE SUICIDE.



MRS. BRIGADIER BOVILLE, A CHIEF OFFICER AT THE NEW YORK
ANTI-SUICIDE BUREAU.



COLONEL HOLLAND PERSUADING A MAN NOT TO TAKE HIS LIFE.



COLONEL HOLLAND BIDDING THE SAME MAN GOODBYE.

The Salvation Army, ever finding new outlets for its energy, has started an Anti-Suicide Bureau in New York, and there seeks to bring consolation to those who would take their own lives. The branch in this country is managed by Colonel Unsworth, one of whose posters reads: "Don't Commit Suicide, Consult Col. Unsworth, who will Help You."

Photographs by G. G. Bain.

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The British Medical Journal

California Law Review

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Christian Advocate

The Christian Ambassador

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Manufactures & Real Estate*

Collier's Weekly

Frank Leslie's Ladies Magazine

Godey's Lady Book

Hall's Journal of Health

Harvard Law Review

Harper's Bazaar

*The Independent: Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic
Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts*

The Journal of United Labor (The Knights of Labor)

Liberty

Lucifer, The Light Bearer

Massachusetts Labor Bulletin

McClure's Magazine

The Medical Critic and Psychological Journal

Messiah's Herald

The Metaphysical Magazine (New York)

Mother Earth

The National Prohibitionist

North American Review

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