

Sexual Deviance and Racial Excess

The brown lady looked almost as astonished, though not quite as alarmed, as when, at the Exhibition, she had gasped in the face of Mrs. Beale. Maisie in truth almost gasped in her own; this was with the fuller perception that she was brown indeed. She literally struck the child more as an animal than as a “real” lady; she might have been a clever frizzled poodle in a frill or a dreadful human monkey in a spangled petticoat. She had a nose that was far too big and eyes that were far too small and a moustache that was, well, not so happy a feature as Sir Claude’s.

—Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (1897)

In July 1885, W. T. Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* in London, published a series of articles titled “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon,” which became a landmark in the public debates over child and adolescent sexuality. Describing the findings of Stead’s private investigations into juvenile prostitution in London, these articles challenged the British Parliament to confront the devastating conditions of what is now called “child sexual abuse” by raising the age of consent.¹ Stead’s exposé successfully mobilized an enormous public demonstration in Hyde Park to demand the passage of legislation raising the age of consent for girls from age thirteen to sixteen, thereby forcing the passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. This act stipulated sixteen as the age of consent: it is a milestone that marks state intervention into the policing of children’s sexuality and the increasing surveillance of working-class girls in the name of protection.²

Exemplifying the period’s heightened preoccupation with the boundaries of childhood and sexual exploitation in England, Stead’s exposé was part of a broader discursive formation that took place from 1870 to 1914.³ During this period, the forces of media publicity, mass campaigning, and statutory

legislation were mobilized in an effort to reckon with child prostitution, incest, and the age of consent—pressing concerns that are thematized in Henry James’s *What Maisie Knew*. These issues were related to a host of other “problems” of capitalism and British imperialism that dominated the social landscape of late-Victorian London, including increasing class instability, the exacerbation of poverty, the influx of Jewish and Irish immigrants, the persistent presence of Africans, and the rising number of Asian Indians.⁴ Moreover, young women’s increasing participation in the labor market also triggered heated debates about over women’s access to public entertainment, women’s property and custody rights, and the crisis of the white middle-class family. London also saw a shift in the boundaries between childhood and adulthood defined in sexual terms as some upper-class members struggled to resist an ethos based on pleasure arising among the middle class, which emerged as early-Victorian sexual codes of reproduction broke down.⁵ Commenting on the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, historian Judith R. Walkowitz remarks that “the desire to protect young girls thinly masked coercive impulse to control their voluntary sexual responses.”⁶ An explosion of discourses during this period—from urban exposés of child and adult prostitution; legal debates about child abuse; the denigration of women’s presence in public space; to the racialization of prostitutes, working women, and sexual criminals—all mediated the rapidly changing social boundaries.⁷

The ramifications of Stead’s exposé and the subsequent legislation crossed the Atlantic and alerted American social reformers, thus generating similar legal and cultural accounts about female sexuality.⁸ In the United States, the last quarter of the nineteenth century also witnessed drastic changes in single adolescent girls’ relationship to the labor market due to several factors, including the decreasing availability of meaningful work within young women’s own households; their movement out of unpaid domestic employment at home into the paid workforce; and their relocation to the rapidly growing U.S. cities, often with but sometimes without their families. These changes created an exponentially growing visibility of single young women in U.S. urban centers, particularly in places of entertainment, thus causing concerns for the safety of “the working girl.”⁹ The social impact of prostitution instrumentally shaped these public discourses about young women: while in London the presence of prostitutes in the audience prompted concerns about Music Halls, where performers were “revealing too much flesh,”¹⁰ the debates about the age of consent that

took place between male public legislatures and female reformers in the United States were in part a response to physicians and public health authorities' attempts to institute a system of state-regulated prostitution in U.S. cities.¹¹ The reformers' demand in the United States paved the way for larger-scale state surveillance that was also fraught with class tensions. While working-class single women were targeted, the definition of appropriate codes of morality for female youth was based on middle-class ideals of female sexual restraint and modesty. For some working women, however, sex outside of marriage was a necessary survival strategy; moreover, some working-class daughters perceived in the public world of work not sexual danger but new opportunities for romantic relations and pleasure outside of marriage as they moved to cities for employment.¹²

In literary culture, fictional narratives of female development served as an important form that mediated this intense public preoccupation with white adolescent female sexual purity. This chapter examines two types of contrasting narratives of young women's education and development as responses to the period's increasing surveillance of white women's deviation from proper domesticity: first, two examples from U.S. popular women's college fiction, a genre that addresses public anxieties about the growing number of women in higher education and the regulatory function of women's college; second, the canonical author Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897), a bildungsroman novel set in London that thematizes a young female child's coming-of-age in the aftermath of her parents' divorce.¹³ Mediating the prevailing sentiment about the urgency to increase state surveillance of young women, Josephine Dodge Bacon's *Smith College Stories: Ten Stories* (1900) and Jean Webster's *When Patty Went to College* (1903) affirm the possibility of producing proper (white) female subjects through education by framing women's college as a temporary digression from marriage. At the same time, portraying the college as an "escape" from marriage and a space where homosociality becomes possible, both texts critique the institution of marriage while also undermining one important argument that was circulating during the age-of-consent campaigns: that the policing of white middle- and upper-class women's sexuality could be achieved through prolonging their time at school. On the contrary, *Maisie*, a tale of troubling development of adolescent female sexuality in the midst of illicit intimacies, unfolds as a trans-Atlantic racial drama: the institution of marriage and proper white female sexuality both crumble in the shadow of a prostitute-like figure,

the American Countess, whose gender and racial ambiguities evoke the period's sexual stigmatization of racialized working people on both sides of the Atlantic as well as in British and U.S. colonies. While this relational reading reveals that proper female development could only be secured through marriage and by structurally separating proper subjects from illicit couplings (e.g., adultery and prostitution), the problematic rendering of the Countess undermines the distinctions between marriage and prostitution that social reform discourses anxiously reinstate, suggesting that their perceived differences are at best illusory, particularly for poor working white women.

Of particular interest to this chapter is the ways that these representations negotiate the gender, race, class, and national divisions that shaped and came out of the age-of-consent campaigns: while the campaigns were manipulated by competing interest groups, the debates ultimately solidified the structural opposition between normative white female subjects and working and racialized women. In the United States, for example, while middle-class female reformers mobilized to propagate their values, the medical field sought to consolidate its authority, and the largely male entrepreneurs sought leverage against political machinations by calling public attention to the "evils" of prostitution and white slavery.¹⁴ Meanwhile, male legislators disapproved of raising the legal age of consent for fear of the influence of "a manipulative, dangerous female sexuality" on young boys, especially from working-class and black women, while white middle-class female reformers continued to press for higher-age consent laws to defend middle-class young girls against sexual violence and those who were overlooked by the legal system due to the low legal age of consent.¹⁵ Through the juxtaposition of two examples of women's college fiction and James's *Maisie* within this specific historical context, this chapter illuminates how these representations—despite their differences in terms of genre, theme, and positions on the perceived crisis of white female purity—obscure the class tensions that the campaigns brought to heightened visibility. Moreover, as *Maisie* lays bare, these tensions are easily displaced onto problems of race that the Countess evokes. As the discussion below will demonstrate, this juxtaposition makes available perspectives on intersubject formations that cannot be fully grasped in a single textual, generic, or racial context established by conventional literary studies, thus allowing these rather conservative texts to be strategically reframed for critical ends.

The Limits of Transgression: White Femininity in Women's College Fiction

Since men's colleges began to admit women, particularly after the opening of the single-sex Vassar College in 1865, the concern about women's sexuality gave rise to public objections to the higher education of women, including both coeducational and single-sex institutions.¹⁶ Such objections often drew on sexology to rationalize the detrimental impact of higher education on adolescent upper- and middle-class young women's femininity and reproductive capacities—an impact that allegedly would potentially undermine women's ability to provide domestic and reproductive labor.¹⁷ The lack of public access also created doubts about the college's regulatory function since it could not be easily monitored.¹⁸ Women's college fiction, written mostly by women's college graduates, offered the period's general audience glimpses into the exclusive experience at women's colleges otherwise largely shielded from public view.¹⁹ Mediating public concerns, this genre shifted from a focus on the detrimental effects of intellectual work in the 1870s and the 1880s, such as making women pale, fragile, neurasthenic, and physically tormented,²⁰ to “energetic, wholesome, and fun-loving” from the 1890s and the 1910s—a period that historians call the “golden age” of women's college, when the enrollments of Northeastern women's colleges increased as social acceptance grew.²¹ In this genre, most heroines enter matrimony once they leave the college despite their temporary gender and sexual transgressions there.²² Literary critic Sherrie Inness thus argues that this genre constitutes “part of a socially hegemonic ideology that operated to reassure the public that the liminal college years would not interfere with a woman's later conformance to social norms of bourgeois, feminine behavior” and her progression toward “legitimate monogamy.”²³ As Josephine Bacon, author of *Smith College Stories*, reassures the reader in the Preface, the college girls are “very much like any other girl.”²⁴

This conciliatory and conservative tendency notwithstanding, *Smith* mediates the dual perception of women's college both as a site of regulation and possible gender and sexual transgressions through staging sporadic moments of ambivalence that complicate the seeming coherence of the general narrative arc. In “The Evolution of Evangeline,” a story about a celebrity student's life after graduation, for example, the embrace of marriage as a vehicle for social mobility is explicitly juxtaposed with the

commodification of women. The story unfolds with an enumeration of Evangeline's extraordinary popularity and accomplishments—from the countless invitations to social functions, her leadership roles in scholarly and artistic organizations, to “a bathtub full of commencement flowers” that she receives—followed by her fellow students' speculation about the prospect of her marriage. One predicts that Evangeline will “marry money,” while another insists that “[i]t's clever people she wants . . . she'll marry some clever man who knows the best people and will make her one of them.” The distinction between two different kinds of capital identified here—one monetary and the other social—turns out to be irrelevant. Shortly after graduation, Evangeline marries a famous artist, “whose portrait of her in white and gold attracted so much attention at a very recent Salon.”²⁵ Thus obtaining economic mobility and also social prestige, she “evolves” from a student celebrity to a social celebrity. Supposedly an exemplary and enviable trajectory, this process of commodification—the public consumption of Evangeline that enables her husband to further raise his public profile and possibly accumulate wealth—is set apart from the period's other forms of anxiety-provoking female commodification by aesthetic and class terms, but it also resonates with the period's feminist critique of unpaid labor within marriage. While Evangeline's academic and social accomplishments and her highly successful marriage affirm that women's college does produce proper female subjects, the specification of her “marrying money”—the crude economic ramifications of which are somewhat “softened” by the artistic context—calls into question the separation between marriage and the labor market: while the college provides a temporary shelter from the “evil influences” of the marketplace that James's *American Countess* dramatizes (to be discussed in the next section), it is marriage that ultimately subjects upper- and middle-class daughters to the market force, albeit a different kind. Within this context, the exaggeration of their excitement about graduation underscores the restrictive nature of college and their false perception of liberation, contradicting the common portrayal of the college as a space of temporary escape and transgression where female intimate bonds are forged: “Oh, come now! We aren't students any more! We can do what we like . . . Oh, come on, girls! Don't make a fuss; we don't want to stay, anyhow!”²⁶ Overshadowed by bittersweet nostalgia, this implicit complaint and naive optimism about the future, especially considered in relation to Evangeline's seemingly glorious yet emotionless marriage, simultaneously appease the public and subtly

critique the oppressive structural restrictions both within and beyond the sanctioned space of women's college.

Such an ambivalence toward this allegedly transgressive space is also dramatized through another story by Bacon about an ambitious young woman's disappointment at college as an alternative to marriage, "The Education of Elizabeth." Throughout the story, the narrator uses a series of letters to establish a sense of intimacy with the reader and to capture the vivacity and defiance of the female protagonist, Elizabeth. Early on, an impassioned letter to her friend, Carolyne, relays Elizabeth's determination to reject marriage and pursue college education:

you know what I think about the terrible narrowness of a boarding-school education! It is shameful, that an intellectual girl of this century should be tied down to French and Music! And how can the scrappy little bit of gallery sight-seeing that I should do possibly equal four years of earnest, intelligent, regular college work? He [her father] said something about marriage—oh, dear! It is horrible that one should have to think of that! I told him with a great deal of dignity and rather coldly, I'm afraid, that my life would be, I hoped, something more than the mere evanescent glitter of a social butterfly!²⁷

Refusing to reduce her life to a shallow, frivolous existence, Elizabeth rejects her suitor, Arnold Ritch, due in no small part to her excitement about a nonheterosexual social world:

I am not a man's woman . . . it is very strange how men bore me now that I have known certain women. Women are so much more interesting, so much more fascinating, so much more exciting! This will probably seem strange to you, but the modern woman I am sure is rapidly getting not to need men at all!²⁸

Alluding to the public concern about the formation of female intimacy that prompts women's college graduates to extract themselves from the patriarchal sexual economy, this letter paves the way for the portrayal of Elizabeth's independent spirit. On the eve of the announcement of her engagement to Arnold, which, according to his father, "has been entirely satisfactory to all parties concerned," she suddenly departs for Smith.²⁹ This dramatization of Elizabeth's

determination to seek a different path, however, is contradicted by the story's surprising turn and conciliatory conclusion: Elizabeth's time at Smith soon turns out to be a disappointment, and she eventually becomes completely disillusioned. Merely two months after she declares her passion for college education, the mental and physical strain as well as her dissatisfaction with college life prompt her to change her mind: she drops out of college and quickly gets engaged to Arnold. She again conveys her change of heart in her letter to Carolyne right before the engagement, refuting everything that she previously embraced: now she feels that "a college education isn't everything," and she even draws on Arthur's opinion to rationalize her disappointment at her language education at Smith.³⁰ In criticizing the narrowness and superficiality of social life at Smith, with "the funny little dances and the teas and all that," Elizabeth further resorts to his authority: "Arnold says he thinks the attitude of so many women [in women's colleges] is bound to be unhealthy, and even in some cases a little morbid. I think he is quite right, don't you?"³¹ Appearing to concede to white patriarchy, Elizabeth concludes her last letter to Carolyne with an ecstasy over the engagement and an obsession with Arnold as the center of her universe. As a budding deviant "New Woman" who quickly turns "normal," Elizabeth's dramatic, somewhat arbitrary and ironic transformation echoes the stereotype of women's college graduates while satirizing the overbearing power of patriarchy. In this way, the story unequivocally critiques marriage and women's limited options while also providing a compromise to appease the period's concerned public, through seeming invalidating the education at Smith and appearing dismissive of the superficial social life there.

This type of negotiation also characterizes the ways that *Smith* mediates the competing sexual mores of reproduction and pleasure through contrasting accounts of complacency and complaint. In "At Commencement," one mother lauds her daughter's successful socialization at Smith:

We feel, Mr. Fosdick and I, that my daughter's friends have been almost as good for her as what she learned. . . . She was always so solitary and reserved and never cared for the girls at home, but here she has such good friends and loves them all so—she's grown more *natural*, more *like other girls*; and we lay it all to her having been thrown in from the beginning with such pleasant, nice girls as these.³²

Commenting on public concerns about white adolescent female sexuality that fueled and were magnified by the age-of-consent campaigns, historian Mary Odem points out that during this period “the prolongation of a period of dependence and segregation of youths from the world and the pressure of adulthood” was a middle-class privilege, since “working-class families possessed neither the economic resources nor the cultural values that would have supported such an extended period of dependence and close supervision of youth.”³³ Read within this context, the mother’s remark above affirms women’s college as a regulatory institution for “turbulent” female sexuality—rather than a place that “defeminizes” young women—by highlighting the college’s function of cultivating proper gender, sexual, and class formation for the select, privileged few.³⁴ At the same time, the intimation of the enormous “work” that it takes to forcefully “assimilate” young women into a monolithic mold of “natural femininity” turns this praise into an ironic statement that exposes the very artificiality and hegemonic nature of this cultural construct. A commentary from one Smith alumna in the same story self-referentially hints at how women’s college fiction mediates social regulation—through the discourse of normative femininity and the defeminization of female professionals—by creating a “third space”: “all the papers [newspapers and journals] are filled with that trash about gracefulness and womanliness and girlish delicacy and the great gulf between us and the coarse professionals, and as far as I can see we are filling in that gulfs as fast as possible.”³⁵ Unlike other stories that are told exclusively in a narrative form, “At Commencement” integrates the dramatic form to create a compromise between or even an alternative to the two opposing public views of women’s college as a place that makes women “mannish, desexed, or desiccated” or a space of regulation that only produces normative white femininity.³⁶ Structured by a parallel plot, the story juxtaposes scenes from the school’s senior-class play, Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, with scenes from their commencement. Thus blurring the lines between the play and the story, the parallel plot creates a metanarrative that opens up other possibilities beyond the stories’ overall conciliatory tone. In addition to highlighting the festivity of the commencement, the direct reference to *Twelfth Night*—a play famous for the complex web of desires created by cross-dressing and homoeroticism—evokes and accentuates gender and sexual transgressions that appear sporadically in the stories. Just as the success of the restoration of order at the end of *Twelfth Night* and the play’s lingering effects of subversion are forever

debated by Shakespeare's critics, the deviance of "college girls" in *Smith* is formally contained, shielded from public view, but threatens to exceed the fictional boundaries, echoing one alumna's comment that she does not see "how anybody can say that girls can't do anything in the world they set out to do."³⁷ The open, festive ending of the commencement provides no definitive clues to the graduates' future, whereas the nostalgia of a main character, Theodora, about female intimacy hints at an apprehension about the impending encroachment of a (white) heterosexual economy on them.

The critique implicit in this type of nostalgia and ambivalence turns into an explicit objection to the heterosexual script in Jean Webster's *When Patty Went to College*, which paints women's college as a utopian space. Contrary to the competitive student culture in *Smith*, for Patty, college life is "happy, irresponsible community life," "the only natural way of living," and "an eternity" too good to be true. While Patty, like Theodora in *Smith*, laments the inevitable end of this temporary seclusion and escape, she does not hesitate to voice her objection to marriage; also, unlike Elizabeth in *Smith*, she maintains her critical stance throughout her college career. The narrator highlights this stance by detailing Patty's contemplation on her fate upon graduation during her freshman year: for her, exiting the female-exclusive intimate space means that "all would be over," for she will soon bear children, become an old lady, and tell her grandchildren "stories about when she was a girl."³⁸ Her pessimism about matrimony, coupled with the romanticization of college life as "the only natural way of living," suggests that marriage is in fact "unnatural." This refusal to placate public opinions is consistent throughout the novel: unlike the upbeat festivity at the end of *Smith*, *Patty* concludes with Patty's preoccupation with the passage of time and the prospect of her love life, which causes her friend's concern:

What's the matter, Patty?" Priscilla asked solicitously. "Don't you feel well?"

Patty sighed. "I'm getting old," she said.

"You're getting what?"

"Old. Soon I'll be thirty, and then forty, and then fifty; and do you think any one will love me then if I deal in subterfuges and evasions? Character, my dear girls, is a plant of slow growth, and the seeds must be planted early."³⁹

Obviously, Patty's melancholy about life after college has to do with her reluctance to participate in the "unnatural" sexual economy, for which the happy days of female intimacy obviously have not prepared her. The homoerotic subtext—that which would necessitate her subterfuges and evasions in the world beyond women's college—lurks behind Patty's "complaint" of the inevitable path toward patriarchal reproduction, which hastens the passage of time through reducing women's intimate life to extractable reproductive labor.

Read in light of literary critic Lauren Berlant's discussion of "the female complaint" as a popular mode of representation in nineteenth-century U.S. white women's culture, the objection to and lament about marriage as a restrictive institution in *Smith* and *Patty* both create a form of leverage against patriarchy. As Berlant argues, the "female complaint" is "an admission and a recognition both of privilege and powerlessness: it is a powerful record of patriarchal oppression, circumscribed by a knowledge of woman's inevitable delegitimation within the patriarchal public sphere," although it also usually implicitly "forecloses any action to change the fundamental condition of the complaint's production."⁴⁰ Within this framework, the "complaint" in women's college fiction can be viewed as mediating white upper- and middle-class women's contradictory desires to *both* challenge patriarchal power and appease its anxieties. However, an exclusive focus on the gender ramifications of this genre is unable to account for the intersecting discursive formations of race, class, nation, and empire, animated by the period's public preoccupation with white women's sexuality, nor the divisive, racializing effects of the institutionalization of white heterosexuality, as outlined in the introductory chapter. Situating *Smith* and *Patty* in this intersecting framework suggests that narratives of women's education and proper development are as much about competing ideologies of white female sexuality and labor as they are about discourses of race, class, nation, and empire, regardless of a lack of direct textual references. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the prevailing "cult of womanhood" was undermined by the emergence of the "New Woman," racial violence against blacks, Chinese exclusion, and California's antimiscegenation law targeting Chinese and Filipino workers were all rationalized in popular discourse as a defense of white women's purity. Moreover, as chapter 3 will show, popular anti-Chinese representation utilizes the figure of white woman to denigrate oppositions to anti-Chinese exclusion as feminized acts of national betrayal, often framed in

the terms of deviant interracial intimacy: this pattern registers a prevailing nationalist gendered racial logic that also informed the Expatriation Act of 1907. At a time when white marriage was perceived to be threatened by imperial expansion and immigration, the alliance that this period's "female complaint" mobilized would also often align white upper- and middle-class women with the white heterosexual script of the U.S. nation and empire that the legal administration of intimacy actively produced. This context is particularly important given that women's colleges historically were closely tied to missionary activities both within the United States and beyond—a crucial instrument of U.S. racial rule and imperial expansion that was also one of the few venues where educated white women could exercise their power and authority beyond the home. This is not to say that women's college fiction and the white female subjects that it produces should be understood simply as direct reflections of this history or as repositories of culture. Rather, to take the imperative of feminist intersectional analysis seriously, we must decenter and denaturalize whiteness: these fictional narratives should be understood as part of broader meaning-making and subject-producing processes that are *connected to* and *mediate* this imperial history and culture—even though the correspondences are not always readily legible through conventional literary, social, and historical analyses that demand certain coherent subjects and subject relations at the exclusion of others.⁴¹ Elizabeth's celebration of the pedagogical value of male- and parental- sanctioned overseas travel in *Smith* is hence more than a gesture of conciliation: it is also a performance of normative white femininity that simultaneously evokes and displaces imperial intersubject formations that, as will be discussed below, flash up in James's *Maisie* through the racialized body of the American Countess.

Spectacles of Race as Scenes of Education in the Shadow of Empires

Chronicling a white family's disintegration that revolves around the divorced parents' new liaisons thrust on the impressionable young female child, Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* foregrounds the period's intersubject relations that are textually absent in women's college fiction through the portrayal of Maisie's relationship with the most notable racialized character in James's voluminous oeuvre: the American Countess, who embodies

the period's intense public preoccupation with race that remains marginal at best in his other works.⁴² As the only racially marked character in the drama of messy "coupling games" in *Maisie*, the American Countess—the "brown lady" whom Maisie refers to as "almost black" at one point—is the only character who defies the doctrine of coverture: unlike the other female characters involved with Maisie's father, the Countess does not seek to be "covered," that is, exchanging sex for financial security or social mobility through marriage. Her monetary power is as excessive as her sexuality: she "pays" instead of being paid, in the words of Mrs. Wix, Maisie's governess.

Extending Toni Morrison's brief but influential characterization of the Countess as "the black woman who lubricates the turn of the plot and becomes the agency of moral choice and meaning,"⁴³ literary scholars have explored the absence/presence of race that the Countess signifies in light of racial conflicts in either the U.S. context or the British context and the competition between the two empires.⁴⁴ John Carlos Rowe, in particular, states that the Countess is a symbol of U.S. imperialism and also the link between marginal peoples in the English imaginary, without going into exact details.⁴⁵ Her racial and *gender* ambiguities and the trans-Atlantic histories that she evokes call for a critical reassessment of interpretive paradigms that presume the boundaries of culture and social difference to be structured by discrete and already formed categories of classification. Reading the Countess as a metaphor of the methodological and epistemological problems of compartmentalized analytics, the remainder of this chapter extends Rowe's general observation by foregrounding the *connections* (rather than separation) between *specific* discourses of gender, sexuality, and racialized labor of the declining British empire and the rising U.S. empire that the Countess simultaneously evokes. Reframed in this light, the Countess's relationship to Maisie's development underlines interlocking discourses of race and empire through which the period's gendered national and imperial subjects emerge: among others, the debates over child abuse and "white slavery" in trans-Atlantic age-of-consent campaigns, as discussed earlier in this chapter; and the legal codification of white heterosexuality in the United States in response to the crisis of marriage, immigration, and expansionism, as outlined in the introductory chapter.

Recentering race in *Maisie* thus also necessitates addressing the specific social and political dimensions of the bildungsroman genre that

characterizes many of James's works, which typically explore the development of white (racially unmarked) middle- and upper-class heterosexual female subjects, rather than simply settling at some general, ahistorical, or universalist speculations about authorial considerations.⁴⁶ As an ambiguous and contradictory figure, the Countess signals a crisis of the white-centered epistemology of this genre as much as she underscores the urgency to create alternative interpretive frameworks to make visible emergent epistemologies that destabilize the presumed coherence, closure, and autonomy of the nation as a category of analysis, through which the subject comes into being and becomes intelligible. Hence, the Countess is not simply a historical "citation" or a symbol in psychological, imaginary, or aesthetic terms, but also a figure that simultaneously embodies, obscures, displaces, and problematizes British and U.S. colonial discourses—particularly colonial administration of prostitution—as well as their historical ties to the production of white heterosexuality. As a tale of the fall of British aristocrats threatened by the rise of U.S. capitalism, *Maisie* narrates female citizenship formation in the age of U.S. expansionism, when the racialized, feminized, and immigrant labor indispensable to the market economy and the racialized bodies that the empires encounter are figured as threats to the institution of marriage, and by extension, to the white nation's proper female subject. In other words, *Maisie* can thus be read more productively not just as a text about the author's *general* intense curiosity about young women's and children's interiority and his discomfort with racial others, but rather as a *specific* negotiation of the period's shifting social landscape, where female sexualities exceeding the bounds of white patriarchal reproduction were criminalized and racialized. The narrative preoccupation with what Maisie knew—or perhaps more precisely, its obsession and frustration with this mystery—constructs the young female child as the *locus* to negotiate the period's discourses of social problems. The portrayal of adult characters' physical and verbal abuse of Maisie, the narrative preoccupation with her sexual knowledge, and Maisie's fear that she may end up "in the street" all emblemize how anxieties about the "immoral" influences of mass culture, entertainment, and city life—that is, the "evils" of modernity that the Countess both symbolizes and embodies—instrumentally shaped the discursive construction of young daughters of white family as vulnerable victims in need of protection, discipline, and control.

Maisie grapples with these discourses through the portrayal of the Countess's indispensable role in Maisie's development as a problematic gender and sexual subject. At the American Exhibition at Earl's Court in London, Maisie encounters the American Countess for the first time in the company of Mrs. Beale (Miss Overmore, her former governess turned her stepmother), when they pause in front of a sideshow called the Flowers of the Forest—"a large presentment of bright brown ladies" in "a medium suggestive of tropical luxuriance."⁴⁷ At her father's side, the Countess appears to Maisie "so brown" that she initially takes the Countess for "one of the flowers" in the sideshow, that is, one of the "bright brown ladies" that are "brown all over."⁴⁸ As a pivotal moment in Maisie's burgeoning comprehension of how race and gender constitute capitalistic sexual economy, this scene instantly links the illicit relationship between Maisie's father and the Countess to a colonial spectacle of material and racial excess. At the same time, this scene explicitly evokes the period's fear of young women's indulgence in material pleasures that prompts their deviation from dominant moral codes, especially for working women. While almost all critics interpret the color "brown" in this scene as a stable reference of a particular race within a single nationalist context, this ambiguous sign of racial difference and sexual deviance, which is overly repeated with variations, can be more productively read as simultaneously alluding to heterogeneous racialized subjects produced by the period's British and American colonial discourses: from indigenous peoples in the Americas, to Africans, Asian Indians, the Chinese, to the "little brown brothers" and the "white men's burden"—Filipinos, best exemplified by the exhibits at World's Fairs.⁴⁹ In other words, the Countess does not merely signify a specific group, but rather a set of intersecting contingent relations created by colonial logics.

The Countess's sexual deviance and her equivalence with primitivism (including her "animal-like" features) also specifically evoke colonial discourses of prostitution. In the period's British context, prostitution was constructed as "an often racialized throwback to primitivism, where passion and lust rather than reason and control ruled," hence an emblem of "improper attitudes to sexuality" and "a palpable misunderstanding of femininity."⁵⁰ These colonial constructs both informed and were reproduced in European-American women's social purity and missionary discourses, U.S. administration of prostitution in the Philippines, and

what historian Paul Kramer calls “the widest and most varied projections” of Contagious Disease laws in the British empire.⁵¹ Maisie’s developing racial consciousness, though supposedly “premature” at this point, vividly registers the fundamental logic behind the colonial construction of racialized working women as signs of the dominant culture’s notions of sexual deviance and primitive excess. If read specifically within the U.S. context, Maisie’s changing cognitive racial map simultaneously evokes the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling of 1896 that institutionalized black–white boundaries and the period’s “negroization” of the Chinese and Filipinos. In this light, the preoccupation with Maisie’s knowledge reveals that U.S. or British national subject formation is inherently both racialized and racializing: through this process, the subject becomes white through differentiating oneself from the spectacle of a variety of racial others as racial boundaries become ever more so clearly demarcated. Maisie’s later observation that the Countess is “almost black” thus suggests that although historically the black–white racial construct crystallizes into *the* dominant reference for the period’s complex and messy colonial racial mapping, this process is nevertheless incomplete, and the intelligibility of race can never be fully ascertained.

This dramatic encounter at the American Exhibition sets the stage for other key scenes of Maisie’s education, where her violent confrontations with the adult characters expose the logic of capitalistic exchange that governs the “coupling games” in the novel, including the adult female characters’ selfish manipulation of Maisie in order to access the benefits of marriage. As these conflicts facilitate her maturation in the form of assimilation into the capitalistic sexual economy that is potentially incestuous, the narrator struggles to manage Maisie’s increasingly active sexuality: a precocious young girl who is heavily sexualized by male adult characters, Maisie is the epitome of the period’s white femininity in crisis. Signifiers of her sexuality overflow the narrative—another form of “queer excess” in addition to the American Countess’s—yet her sexuality cannot be pinned down, made fully intelligible, contained, or categorized.⁵² The narrative dramatizes a pivotal moment in Maisie’s problematic formation through the emphasis on her fascination with the spectacle of wealth at the Countess’s residence, which “struck her as the most beautiful she had ever seen in her life,” where things “were as much prettier than mamma’s as it had always had to be confessed that mama’s were prettier than Mrs. Beale’s.”⁵³ Here, Maisie’s perception of the overwhelming material excess underscores the Countess’s irresistible appeal: while Maisie is forced to declare her loyalty to her mother over her

stepmother through a performative praise of the former's possessions, the spectacle of the Countess's wealth inspires voluntary admiration, which develops in the Countess's absence when a long catalog of the "things" in her drawing room stand in for her presence. As the narrator describes, in this "small bright room," there are "more curtains and cushions, more pictures and mirrors, more palm-trees drooping over brocaded and gilded nooks, more little silver boxes scattered over little crooked tables and little oval miniatures hooked upon velvet screens than Mrs. Beale's and her ladyship together could, in an unnatural alliance, have dreamed of mustering."⁵⁴ This spectacle is so powerful that it even becomes as effective a scene of education as the American Exhibition: although Maisie did not see the sideshows at the exhibition due to the paucity of Mrs. Beale's means, "everything she had missed at the side-shows was made up to her by the Countess's luxuries."⁵⁵ As a rite of passage, this spectacle of the Countess's wealth—her deviation from the racial and gender rules of normative heterosexual coupling—critically facilitates Maisie's transformation from an object, an instrument to increase the adults' capital in their relations of exchange, and a passive observer to an active participant, to be discussed in more detail below. The racialized "brown" American Countess's central role in shaping Maisie's development thus can be read not simply as a reflection of the "confusion" of the period, as Rowe argues, but more productively as a symptom or even simultaneous denial and unwilling recognition of the untenability of racial purity, gender and sexual norms, class hierarchies, and national boundaries: that is, anxieties about the crises that the period's trans-Atlantic social reform movement sought to manage by reinstating lines of difference.

The dramatization of the Countess's excessive material wealth that concludes Maisie's direct contact with her further characterizes this racialized figure as the only female character that defies, and even redeploys, the doctrine of coverture, which undergirds the institution of marriage and structures relations of sexual exchange in the novel. When Maisie requests to be sent in a cab from the Countess's residence back to her stepmother's house, her father refuses to give her money; rather, he demands that Maisie ask for cab fare from her stepmother. Criticizing his behavior, the Countess gives Maisie a generous sum of money—much more than she needs. While Maisie is already aware of the Countess's attempt to gain her favor through the act of giving, in this particular instance, their relationship is explicitly defined by the literal exchange of real money as the giver and

the recipient. This lesson about capitalism through a “benevolent act of excess” even prompts Maisie’s father to offer her “bribes” for the first and only time.⁵⁶ As such, the Countess exceeds and reverses the doctrine of coverture: rather than seeking to be covered by her father like other racially unmarked female characters, she instead “covers” Maisie. While the sale of sex transforms its owners from free persons into slaves in the period’s “white slavery” discourse,⁵⁷ the Countess appears more “free” than all of the other characters, at least in monetary terms. At the same time, she is also both perceived to be an object and represented by the “things” that she owns.

The portrayal of the Countess thus echoes U.S. postbellum construction of racially unmarked prostitution as the extremity of “female free labor” that negates the contract of marriage and the law of the free labor market, where sex supposedly could not be sold. Moreover, as a monetarily and sexually excessive figure who manipulates and profits from capitalism and who *also* becomes a commodity in Maisie’s view, the Countess echoes this period construction by embodying both freedom and unfreedom.⁵⁸ When read in relation to the specific racial contexts of British and U.S. capitalist expansionism and imperialist domination, the portrayal of the Countess displaces the consequences of British and U.S. imperialisms onto a nationalist narrative of white marriage and white female purity in crisis—and hence in need of defense. This displacement is perhaps most evident in Maisie’s changed perception upon the Countess’s return to her residence: instead of viewing her as an exotic and phantasmagoric figure as before, Maisie recognizes her “vulgarity” that Mrs. Beale, Maisie’s stepmother, is quick to observe at the exhibition. Narrated in the third-person voice, this new perception negates Maisie’s prior view that the Countess was “almost black” and affirms that “[w]ith the fuller perception . . . the Countess was brown indeed.”⁵⁹ Alluding to the *logic* of the period’s dominant racial discourses more so than the actual racial categories that they produce, this conclusive statement suggests that this logic, which constructs all “nonwhite” peoples as subhuman and animalistic, finally crystallizes in Maisie’s consciousness: the Countess “literally struck the child more as an animal than as a ‘real’ lady . . . [resembling] a clever frizzled poodle in a frill or a dreadful human monkey in a spangled petticoat.” In this instance, working, gendered, and racialized people’s perceived “excess” and deviance are literally inscribed on the Countess’s body. Maisie’s last—and lasting—impression of her consists of a series of visually striking physical abnormalities that mark her ugliness and gender perversity: the Countess

is something with “a nose that was far too big and eyes that were far too small and a moustache that was, well, not so happy a feature as Sir Claude’s.”⁶⁰ As a figure who destabilizes—or “queers”—intersecting systems of social classification and embodies the period’s multiple forms of deviance, the Countess’s conspicuous economic power signifies the specter of trans-Atlantic colonialism and imperialism, or the return of the repressed histories of feminized and racialized working people to the heart of the empire: be it the geographical London where the narrative is set, the major cities in the United States and Britain where the novel was published, or the European-American literary canon itself. Epitomizing the threat that racialized working women pose to the institution of marriage, the white family, white female purity, and the white nation and empire, the American Countess in London is simultaneously a racial other abroad and an alien at home in both U.S. and British contexts. Her presence evokes the inevitable consequences of capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism: the unsettling of racial and economic hierarchies as a result of the incorporation of exploitable female, racialized, and immigrant labor—the unequal capitalist relations of exchange that the racialist epistemology of *Maisie* simultaneously exposes, displaces, and struggles to manage and comprehend.

While *Maisie* is generally viewed as an ideologically conservative text, this reading suggests that the ambiguity and instability of the various dominant signs of racism, sexism, and colonialism can also be strategically interpreted in order to open up possible paths toward what Foucault calls “a historical knowledge of struggles.” The ambiguity of the Countess effectively fuses multiple antitheses to the terms of U.S. citizenship, from gender and racial ambiguity, to sexual deviance, to “foreignness” marked by both physicality and location—all of which are constitutive of the period’s legal codification of official white heterosexuality. If we read the portrayal of the intimate connection between the demonization of the Countess and Maisie’s improper development in relation to the historical continuity between the child-welfare reform starting in the 1880s and earlier reforms of prostitution and venereal disease in the 1870s in England, this racist representation ironically brings to the foreground the often overlooked structural linkages among these disparate discourses that produced unruly subjects: from young working women, female children and their “irresponsible” mothers, to racialized women in colonial contexts.⁶¹ Moreover, just as the Countess undermines the

boundaries between an object on display and a person as well as those between animals and humans in colonial epistemology, the discrepant yet interconnected histories that collide and coalesce into a single “brown” pervert’s menace to white marriage also move in and out of legibility as the separation between the colony and the metropole—where prostitution supposedly never went unchecked—no longer holds.⁶² At the same time, Maisie’s struggle with categorizing the Countess with a definitive racial label highlights the inherent instability and malleability of race, even when the colonial tropes in the novel strive to stabilize race as something innate and transparent, that is, written on the body. More broadly speaking, then, the white-centered epistemological crisis signified by Maisie’s perception of the Countess thus also points to the forgotten structural historical and linkages among the various “deviant” subjects produced by the period’s legal and cultural narratives of proper white heterodomesticity—from African Americans, Asian and European immigrants, racialized colonial subjects, working women, to sexual deviants—the very linkages that African American writer Pauline Hopkins explores in her nonfictional works, as chapter 2 will discuss next. Signifying overlapping trans-Atlantic discourses, the Countess’s relationship to Maisie also evokes the connection, exchange, or even collaboration between the British and U.S. empires that nationalist cultural and scholarly narratives tend to overlook, which will be further explored in chapter 5.

This strategic reframing of a canonical text that apparently registers the period’s white anxieties about shifting social boundaries also unsettles the presumed coherence of whiteness that much scholarship on *Maisie* takes for granted, particularly with respect to the various female characters in the novel who fake affection and selfishly manipulate Maisie in order to secure social mobility through their liaisons with her father. When juxtaposed with the Countess’s act of excessive “benevolence” to achieve nothing beyond facilitating a cordial relationship with Maisie, other female characters’ dogged adherence to capitalistic logic appears as equally problematic as—if not more troubling than—the excessive “immorality” that the Countess symbolizes, thereby evoking the period’s construction of “bad mothers” that also emerged during the age-of-consent campaigns. In part predicated on a theory defining female adolescence as a turbulent period that required close parental supervision, which primarily defined the middle-class experience, this rise of trans-Atlantic state surveillance of female adolescent sexuality also directed public attention to mothers, especially middle- and upper-class