The "Girl Suicide Epidemic" of the 1910s: *Pain and Prejudice in US Newspapers*

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The "Girl Suicide Epidemic" of the 1910s
Pain and Prejudice in US Newspapers

Diana W. Anselmo

Reading the medicalization of US immigration policy in tandem with the feminization and juvenation of suicide in early twentieth-century newspapers, I argue that US exceptionalism sits on a perdurable and widespread embrace of eugenics ideals, traceable to the years around World War I. Cast by journalists and scientists as a public health hazard, the so-called "girl suicide epidemic" symptomizes a patriarchal society's efforts to pathologize gender, class, ethnic, and psychogenic differences through the weaponization of renewed public concerns about women's social roles, national belonging, and infectious disease control. By contextualizing archival research on early twentieth-century newspapers with immigration legislation, eugenic theory, and psychology literature, I aim to enter feminist efforts to challenge an idea of sovereign US citizenship defined by Anglo-Saxon male whiteness and homogenous wellness.

In the 1910s, US newspapermen rang the alarm on a nationwide trend: girls endeavored to kill themselves at a worrying rate. In June 1912 papers reported that Cincinnati had developed a "Suicide Lane" after three girls killed themselves over a seven-day period.[1] By November locals in Los Angeles had named "the chip of Ceres Avenue between Sixth and Seventh streets" "Suicide Lane." Within weeks at least five "young suicide devotees" from that working-class neighborhood nearly succumbed to voluntary poisoning. "The most sensational of the attempts" was that of "Lillian Fabrigat, the 16-year-old Spanish girl who . . . fled down the street with only a blanket about her, [screaming she was] on her way to drink the fatal potion of peroxide . . . because her Turkish sweetheart was going away to war."[2]

Fabrigat's suicidal body—electrified by her foreign birth, histrionic youth, and non-western lover—illustrates the narrative of feminized otherness that would glut early-twentieth-century press coverage of suicide. Defined by unruly sexual awakening, the figure of the self-destructive white-passing girl not only helped shape popular and medical understandings of female development, but also underpinned the gendering of "suicide intent" as a feminine pathology: the product of a biological fragility hyperbolized by social precariousness, industrial alienation, and the hormonal maelstrom of adolescence.[3]

The following pages survey US newspaper coverage of the "girl suicide epidemic," an early-twentieth-century moral panic responding to a perceived surge in "undesirable" immigration and female public agency. Coupling nativist propaganda with renewed

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concerns about public health, I argue that the girl suicide epidemic operated as a narrative shorthand, condensing in its sentimentalized reports of thwarted girlhood fears of social and ethnic mobility surrounding the outbreak of a devastating world war and a global pandemic.

Before bloodshed and influenza swept over Europe and the United States, ponderings about human progress, mortality, and well-being already permeated turn-of-the-century social inquiry. In particular, studies on self-destructive behavior based on social statistics proliferated across Western Europe, with Italian psychologist Enrico Morselli and French sociologist Emile Durkheim leading the research on suicide.[4] Gender differences underlaid these theories; as Howard Kushner remarks, "since the nineteenth century, experts concluded the best safeguards against suicide lay in the restoration of traditional values, specially the patriarchal family. Given the logic of these assumptions it was a foregone conclusion that women would prove more immune to suicide than men."[5]

Such "foregone conclusion" began facing resistance in the first two decades of the twentieth century, when a number of social scientists reported that "the statistics on suicide show that women choose this method much more often than men."[6] In 1904 notable US psychologist and pedagogue G. Stanley Hall propounded that "a strange rise on the percentage of suicides" resulted from single girls in their teens and early twenties being unsteadied by adolescence's "mood of gloom."[7] In the 1910 edition of his essential work *Women and Socialism*, German politician August Bebel claimed that recent data showed "the rate of female suicides between the 16th and 21st year is exceptionally high," while sociologist John Rice Miner's doctoral dissertation, "Suicide and Its Relation to Climatic and Other Factors" (1922), supplied British field data demonstrating that, beginning in 1915, suicides in England and Wales duplicated for girls between fifteen and nineteen years of age, almost twice as many as the number of male suicides occurring in the same age bracket (3.6 to 2.1 average cases).[8] The ratio of male to female suicides reversed in other age brackets, indicating that women were most prone to suicidal ideation during their teen years.[9] Similar data manifested in the United States, with dailies warning that "since signing the armistice [1918], there has been a constantly increasing number of suicides everywhere" in the country; although "men outnumber[ed] women 2,987 to 1,657," when it came to suicide among minors, girls outpaced boys 252 to 225.[10] Directed by heterosexist essentialism, most social scientists reached "the conclusion that ungratified sexual impulse, love-sorrow, secret pregnancy, or the deceit of men constituted the frequent causes" of female suicide.[11]

Small- and large-distribution US papers began assiduously reporting on adolescent girls taking their lives in the late nineteenth century—*assiduously* being the operative word. Rashes of suicides made US headlines as early as the late eighteenth century, when sentimental writers and young readers imitated Johann Goethe's famous tale of self-destruction *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774).[12] Likewise, Kushner notes that the belief "modernity" in the shape of industrial cities "caused increases of suicide and mental illness" remained "a mainstay of nineteenth-century observers."[13] Thus, the shift

in journalistic narratives happening in the early 1900s did not consist in publicizing the suicide act, but in reimagining and regendering its key demographic: the young male romantic and the amorphous urban worker became the unstable adolescent girl.

A browsing of digitized dailies published across the US between 1887 and 1920 yields nearly 2.5 million mentions of "girl suicide"; in previous decades the gendered phrase barely reached the hundreds.[14] Concurrently, when compared with prior and posterior decades (1773 to 1963, the range provided by the Library of Congress "Chronicling America" database), the phrase "suicide mania" suffers spikes in the 1900s and 1910s. To wit, although young female suicidality began attracting the attention of reporters at the close of the 1800s, it did not escalate into a nationwide panic until the following century. By 1914 an advice columnist for Chicago's *Day Book* (a Progressive penny-press daily) proclaimed that a "suicide mania" indiscriminately targeted unmarried girls in their teens and early twenties: "one day, a young girl committed suicide because she was accused of theft, while another took her own life because she felt sure of failing in college examinations for which she had overstudied."[15] So diverse were the backgrounds of young female suicides that US journalists borrowed epidemiological language to describe the widespread phenomenon. They dubbed it "girl suicide epidemic."

As a cultural figuration, the white adolescent girl first gained currency in the national imagination at the onset of the twentieth century, surfacing as the object of fascination in commercial ephemera, film screens, muckraking journalism, and psychology studies. Each medium claimed its own version of the "American Girl"—respectively, "the Gibson Girl," "the Movie Girl," "the Girl Problem," and "the Budding Girl." A preoccupation with disciplining white female agency and sexual awakening united them all.[16]

An influential contributor to taxonomies of female development, G. Stanley Hall defined adolescence in 1904 as an interim life stage taking place between fourteen and twenty-four years of age, adjoined by financial, social, and legal dependence linked with being childless and unmarried. When referring to "young" and "adolescent girls," I use Hall's parameters, drawing on biographic data shared in US newspapers (including victims' ages, marital statuses, sexual histories, and living arrangements) to draw a nuanced picture of what was then culturally understood as constituting "a girl," as well as its intersections with contemporaneous debates on whiteness and national belonging.

As I argue elsewhere, the very concept of girlhood was troublesome in the early 1900s.[17] Hall may have cast the native-born white boy as the personification of ideal adolescence and, by extension, of a rugged young America, but he also warned that "budding girls" posed "the most intricate and baffling problem that science has ever yet attacked."[18] According to Hall, an adolescent girl "is no longer a little girl, but by no means yet a young woman . . . but a something quite unique and apart."[19] Eluding scientific classification, "these little animals" embodied titillating liminality: a borderland between primeval childhood and civilized adulthood, not yet fulfilled but rife with potential.[20] Unlike their male peers, "budding girls" concerned US clinicians, educa-

tors, and reformers: the opacity of female mental development made them unpredictable and dangerous, ticking time bombs necessitating constant supervision to ensure proper diffusion and containment. A figure defined by uncertainty and susceptibility, both desirable and hazardous, the adolescent girl rose as the most evocative avatar to tackle discussions on gender differences, border crossings, and coherent identities, the wellspring of moral anxieties and nationalist phobias haunting US consciousness at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The heightened visibility young female suicidality (including suicidal thoughts and nonfatal suicidal behavior) received in right- and left-leaning papers thus cannot be disarticulated from a swelling clinical interest in adolescence taking place at the turn of the century. It bears note that all types of US denizens killed themselves in the early 1900s: men and women, children and elders, poor and moneyed, city slickers and rural folk. Local reporters dutifully documented their passing, itemizing addresses, causes of death, and surviving family. But unlike those matter-of-fact obituaries, reportage on girl suicides thrived on sensationalism and purple prose. "Dig my grave wide and deep; place a stone at head and feet; place on my breast a dove to show I died of love"—so began a news item on sixteen-year-old Agatha A. Skerfeth, who in June 1913 "committed suicide by hanging herself in the garret or her home in Audubon, N.J.," leaving "pinned to her breast the above piece of doggerel."[21] This consistent deployment of sentimentalism—of relying on the dramatic, the domestic, and the morbid to stir readers' emotions—distinguished coverage of girl suicide.

More interested in painting a poignant picture than disseminating accurate facts, journalists presented girl suicide as illuminating performances in pathology, emotive snapshots offering readers access to individual suffering and larger social ills. For instance, in 1913 one girl suicide, Miss Lucille M. Gibson of Oakland, California, "jumped to her death from a ferry boat" after being "criminally assaulted" by her fiancé. A year later a fortune teller drove Miss Agnes Fairbanks of Kansas City to suicide by "prophesize[ing] that her fiancé would become a drunkard and beat her cruelly."[22] The latter case resulted in fortune tellers being interdicted from doing business in the city, while the former brought attention to sexual consent and abuse, issues indivisible from women's bodies, social value, and legal standing in the early-twentieth-century US. A subgenre ensconced in anxiety, periodical dramatizations of girl suicides' attempted to prescribe clear distinctions between appropriate and deviant female behavior by drawing inspiration from a rhetorical style (sentimentalism) long affixed to an affected female readership.[23]

Framed by issues of propriety and taste, the decision to bring suicide from the private realm to the public eye still demanded a careful balancing act.[24] Sensational chronicles of female self-murder sold copies, but to avoid accusations of immorally trading on dirty laundry, newspapers repackaged coverage of female suicide as civic duty. Although "it seems almost indelicate to call public attention to any suicide," columnists argued it was their mission to familiarize US audiences with these "pitiful tragedies" because they could "hold warning for scores of other disheartened girls."[25]

Girl suicide reportage intensified during a period historians Warren Susman and Richard deCordova describe as birthing "the cult of personality," Hollywood stardom, and the celebrity tabloid press. In the interest of circumventing accusations of exploiting personal ruin for profit, early-twentieth-century journalists positioned persistent coverage of girl suicide not as a glorification of individual tragedy, but as a service to the national well-being.[26]

Simply put, reports on a girl suicide epidemic responded to a wider destabilization of once well-delineated boundaries between spheres of power, knowledge, and livelihood in which gender, race, class, and now age played critical roles. The function of the girl suicide press coverage was to produce a universalizing forensic narrative of female failure at the threshold of transformation: from dependent adolescent to adult citizen. A popular variant cautioned that immoderate studying pushed white schoolgirls off the deep end. Extensively publicized cases include that of first-year "college student Margaret Dauerty," the well-off "daughter of Reverend William H. Dauerty," who in 1909 drowned herself in a cistern in rural Hughsonville, New York, after "having been forced to abandon her studies at Vassar because of mental strain due to overwork."[27] Six years later Lillian May Cook, an eighteen-year-old "nurse girl" (childminder) and office stenographer from Brooklyn, New York, sent a bullet through her heart in West Rock Ridge Park, Connecticut.[28] An acquaintance described Cook as "temporarily deranged. She was studying very hard. She wrote to me before she disappeared to tell me about the examination she was to take the following night at the business school. I am afraid that it was all too much for her."[29] According to the press, class and location were secondary to age where female suicide by overstudy was concerned.

News of overdrawn college girls taking their lives parroted a popular theory by Harvard physician Edward H. Clarke, claiming female brains could not sustain the exertion of academic pursuit without serious damage to their health.[30] When in 1916 journalists asked Hall "why children so often want to die," the leading psychologist agreed that white girls attending high school and college had become the representatives of modern alienation, driven to "self-murder" by a profound inability to reconcile their cloistered romantic reveries with the hardships and obligations of everyday life. White schoolgirls, Hall heeded, "have never been so inebriated with lofty dreams and visions. Schooling has never so incapacitated youth for the humdrum of daily bread-winning work." Echoing Clarke's sexist views, Hall held overlong "schooling" responsible for the decline in native vitality and for lethally displacing "girls who return to plain homes with high school diplomas," burdening them with "lofty" ambitions but no practical expertise on domestic affairs, the ideal conclusion to female development.[31] For traditionalist thinkers like Hall and Clarke, suicide operated as an embodied comeuppance triggered by girls entering spheres of knowledge previously cordoned off for men.

Write-ups on working-girl suicide allude to a similar psychophysiological unfitness but focus on the dire straits of urban life instead. Xenophobia and misogyny abound, often running in tandem with progressive calls for labor reform. In 1913 *Day Book* exposed the case of nineteen-year-old Selma Peterson, a New York City worker exploited by the Jewish company Kuppenheimer Clothers. On her deathbed, Peterson

confessed that having to "live for six months on twenty-cent dinners" drove her to suicide by "gas asphyxiation."[32] The following year, the "Russian Jewess" Rosa Asorowsky committed suicide in "the Chicago Ghetto district," also "by turning on the gas in her room at 1506 W. Polk street. In a letter found by her side, she told the story of her hopeless life . . . spent in [urban] sweatshops."[33] The suicides chosen for publication are telling: Jewish employers and employees are propped up as exemplifying the social damage wrought by unchecked industrialization and out-of-home female labor, while medicalized terms like *brooding* and *depression* telegraph psychological divergence as a precondition for voluntary annihilation, further blurring the lines of pathologizing mood disorders likely rooted in circumstance, not biology.[34]

In 1920 the moderate liberal daily *San Francisco Chronicle* ran a syndicated piece that aptly summarized the by-then crystalized narrative of migrant girls' failure to make it in "the big city" culminating in suicide:

> Chicago, April 26—Miss Grace Perk, age nineteen, found life too dull in the sleepy little town of Sheldon Ill. so she came to the big city to "find herself." Today she found rest in the potter's field. Three months of battling with the high cost of living broke her spirit and health. Poverty, loneliness and what appeared to be hopeless prospects finally wore her down and last night she turned on the gas in her room.[35]

By the early twentieth century, the theory that suicide stemmed from a lack of homeostasis between environment and organism already permeated medical and journalistic writings, urban unhealthiness and social abrasion generally being fingered as the main culprits.[36] And yet, couched in sentimental language, Perk's inverted Cinderella transformation insinuates that migrant girls' suicidality may not have been circumstantial but elemental, the product of a "disequilibrated mind" mired in "hopeless" feminine fantasies of "finding oneself."[37] Between the lines, self-undoing is depicted as something that happened to the unskilled when failing to accept their station in life. Articles on girl suicide shifted the blame from a country built on the ruthless inequalities of industrial capitalism to a narrative of biological determinism and gender essentialism, where female migrants floundered to find their footing in "the big city" due to inborn limitations and hubris, not systemic segregation and discrimination. In other words, although "poverty" and "loneliness" may be the stated culprits of Perk's bleak "potter's field" end, newsmen frequently pinned girls' self-deaths (from overstudy to underperformance) on themselves: on their shortsightedness at natural glass ceilings, their fragile minds and unreasonable ambitions, their ill-planned stabs at autonomous living outside their "sleepy little towns," their overreach outside their station, and, in certain cases, their countries of origin. Through such rhetorical sleight of hand, many reporters—independent of their political bias—intimated that the "suicide impulse" might not be a general index of societal dysfunction but a pathology common to the weaker (i.e., underprivileged, unmatured, feminine) "minds."

In the 1910s press efforts to cast a pall on female autonomy stretched beyond coverage of girl suicide. In her study of "the discourse of suffering" framing the emergence of "the white American chorus girl in the first decades of the twentieth century,"

Desirée Garcia argues that male journalists editorialized female biographies of pain to gain control over "larger discussions . . . about the place of women at work and in the city, . . . [including] the possibilities of mobility and mutability for young women in the context of a rapidly changing society."[38] Culturally holding the dual valence of hard work and shortcoming, "suffering" became "the dominant register" to narrativize young female aspiration for (professional, emotional, economical) independence.[39]

The sheer volume of headlines singling out non-Anglo-Saxon female newcomers as victims of the "suicidal mania" gestures to journalists applying this feminized narrative of urban hardship to xenophobic fears regarding immigration.[40] Due to her troubling intersectionality, the immigrant girl who appears white and well-adjusted but still commits suicide became a site for embattled discussions on a standard definition of "whiteness" and, by extension, "wellness." Although some of these foreign girls supplied reasons for their suicides, a good number unexplainably walked into the abyss. "Why Did She Killed Herself?" is the question the *Evening Journal* repeatedly posed after Shews Levine, a Russian immigrant and Orthodox Jew, "tore her bedsheet into a rope and hanged herself from a transom." A Boston correspondent, Zoe Beckley, introduces the newly arrived girl as having "rejected the ideals of old-fashioned love, marriage, and motherhood, [for] freedom, self-expression, money, and the stimulus of 'progressive thought'" that she expected to find in the United States. However, once Levine's fiancé saw this "change in his gentle sweetheart," he called off their union. Beckley questions: "why did [Levine] prefer death to the free road before her, that she is said to have so coveted? She was a highly educated young woman [who] 'did not believe in marriage.' Why, then, did not the adventure of self-support appeal to her?" The high-strung demand for answers function as a rhetorical device aiming to reiterate both the unfathomability of female aberrant psychology and the otherness of non-Anglo-Saxon (as well as non-Christian) immigrants. A subheader even posits: "Is the Russian Girl's suicide the tragedy of the unattractive immigrant?," leaving open to interpretation what constituted such lethal "unattractiveness"—Levine's "Bolshevist ideas" or being "far from pretty"?[41]

The apparent randomness of the suicide act coupled with young female foreignness (from her birthplace to ethno-faith and ideology) gestured to a neurophysiological anomaly. Ailments of the nerves, various feminist historians have shown, reached the apogee of feminization in the late nineteenth century, when Jean-Martin Charcot's experiments on young female patients at the Salpêtrière hospital paved the way for groundbreaking explorations of the human psyche by Sigmund Freud, Pierre Janet, Carl Jung, and Boston's own Morton Prince.[42] Together these psychiatrists tethered "neurotic" disorders such as hysteria, schizophrenia, and split personality to reproductive womanhood, a feminizing of delicate sensibilities previously used to deride sentimental readers. By 1915 Freud's work gained traction in women's periodical press, with *Good Housekeeping* advertising that "psycho-analysis . . . applies to that crop of nervous maladies which, especially women, have suffered so long . . . , resulting in . . . broken lives, the madhouse, or the suicide's grave."[43] At the same time that psychoanalytic

theory took root in US culture, eugenicists claimed mental illnesses to be hereditarily transmitted imperfections inherent to lesser bloodlines and commonly passed on the mother's side. By emphasizing inexplicable psychological distress and self-destructive behavior in their coverage of nonnative girl suicides, the periodical press naturalized a narrative of pathological female interiority and a distrust of otherness clustered around non-Anglo-Saxon denizens.[44]

In marrying psychiatric theory with social analysis, journalists also reiterated Durkheim's novel ideas on suicide. Ascendant in US scientific circles in the 1910s, particularly the fledgling Chicago school of sociology, Durkheim postulated that four types of suicide acts resulted from individuals being eroded by industrial alienation: anomic, egotist, altruist, and fatalist. Culling official data from European countries, Durkheim did not link self-murder to specific social occupations, instead favoring geography and creed. He did, however, link mental illness to femaleness. Dividing suicide "motives" according to binary sex, Durkheim concluded that women killed themselves due to "mental troubles and religious mania" twice as often as their male counterparts. The clinical language applied here is meaningful because it distances female suicide from normalized negative emotions, allocating those to suicidal men: Durkheim identified "remorse," "jealousy," and "distress" as driving many European men to death, while unspecified "mental sickness" tended to motivate female suicide.[45] Two decades prior, Morselli also advanced that "mental diseases" significantly accounted for women's suicidality, while men frequently succumbed to "financial embarrassments" and "weariness of life."[46] In using demographic analysis to correlate female interiority with psychopathology, pioneering male researchers solidified the scientific othering of women's social trauma and pain.

In fastening suicidal ideation to fair-skinned immigrant girls who looked "well-dressed and quite pretty," journalists massaged yet another sensitive cultural nerve: the ongoing struggle to establish definitional classifications of racial superiority and social dominance gatekeeping access to US society's upper echelons.[47] Legislation led the way. Between 1875 (when the Supreme Court declared regulation of alien immigration a federal responsibility) and 1921 (the year after white women won suffrage), the US Congress passed or amended myriad bills restricting foreign immigration—namely, the unlimited extension of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1902; the Gentleman's Agreement with Japan in 1907, a governmental protocol limiting the number of passports Japan issued to nationals seeking entrance in the United States; and the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, which established national quotas for immigration based on census records.

However, laws restricting immigration on racial difference quickly became insufficient as droves of Europeans arrived at US shores. The notion of "whiteness" grew contested as an effective instrument of distinction and segregation. To limit both assimilation and naturalization, whiteness had to become a plural, rarified construction, "a public fiction," Matthew Frye Jacobson calls it, where cultural clout and sociopolitical power rested on ancestry and pedigree.[48] As a result, in the early twentieth century European immigrants of humble origins, swarthier complexion, non-Christian faiths,

or non-Anglo-Saxon bloodlines—such as Irish, Italians (specifically Sicilians), Greeks, "Galicians," Jews, and eastern Europeans—came to be social and legally regarded as lacking in "racial credentials."[49] Their whiteness was considered less valuable than native-born US citizens because it did not originate from the self-governing Anglo-Saxon stock and Protestant heritage that supposedly spawned modern western civilization, of which the United States considered itself a flourishing offspring. If policymakers remained unvigilant, the Union would soon "become a dumping-ground for the sweepings of Europe," eugenic pundits presaged.[50] Press coverage of the suicides of literate, seemingly integrated, white-skinned immigrant girls hence aimed to soothe fears of erosion of a cogent national fingerprint and, more pointedly, of *undetected* foreign assimilation. Between the lines, articles on immigrant girl suicide imply that, although fair immigrants could *look* "American," dysfunctional synapses under the skin signaled their cultural and ethnic illegitimacy.

This implication is particularly noticeable in articles covering Russian girls' suicides between 1905 and 1920. A search in the Library of Congress digital database shows US correspondents specifying the "girl suicide" as "Russian" more recurrently than other nationalities. The press narrative follows familiar beats: the Russian victim is attractive and in her teens, has not been in the US long, and is often involved with a white male citizen; her suicide is "dramatic" and "mysterious," her psychology "agitated." Examples stem from all walks of life, although working-class cases like that of "Miss Stefanka Smyr" are more prevalent. "Aged 18, [the] pretty Russian girl had been in this country eight months," when in 1913 she "committed suicide in a dramatic manner—by jumping into the Connecticut river from the highway bridge that connects [Middletown] to Portland," while letting out "a shrill scream." Reportedly Smyr "ke[pt] company" with a tailor's son, a "lovers' quarrel" being floated as the cause for her spectacular suicide.[51] From the affluent side, the most publicized self-death was that of blue-blooded heiress Miss Olivia Temohovich. A week after Smyr, "the most beautiful Russian girl . . . committed suicide at the St. Francis Hotel by shooting" herself through the heart on the eve of her wedding to Isaac Upham, a wealthy San Francisco businessman; the reason for her suicide was deemed "a mystery."[52] Another broadly circulated case was that of "17-year-old Cecilia Tantonia," a "rich Russian girl" and "daughter of a former Prefect of Police in Warsaw, Russian Poland." "A runaway from a school in Berlin . . . and a would-be-suicide" passing through New York City, Tantonia told the Police Court that "the desire to kill herself was a sudden impulse."[53] "Only 17 years old, her history reads like a dime novel," the *Salt Lake Tribune* trumpeted, emphasizing the histrionic excess of foreign girl suicide.[54]

Although some reporters mentioned the victim's "revolutionary ideas," the correlation between Russian female suicide on US soil, communist ideology, and political unrest (following the Russian Revolution of 1905) was seldom overt. Instead, between 1908 and 1910, St. Petersburg became the stage for a girl "suicide epidemic," with US reporters likening the phenomenon to an infectious disease poisoning the local air. In one week in September 1908 the "suicide mania" allegedly took out sixty-six

"Russian working girls, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five."[55] Two years later the "epidemic of suicides" claimed eighteen "girls of high social standing," fifteen of them in one single day.[56] By 1920, however, suicide letters from multiple "young beautiful Russian noblewomen [falling] victim of the Bolshevists" at home and abroad populated the printed page.[57] Stated or implied, xenophobia transited in US papers under the guise of public health advisory and concerns with endemic female fragility.

In his study of race in the Gilded Age, Julian Carter proposes that urgent anxieties regarding "the perceived loss of a unified, cohesive system of values" manifested in vigorous policing of boundaries between "legitimate" cultural bearers and "the people they saw as outsiders"—that is, those of different ethnicities, races, creeds, classes, abilities, and nationalities.[58] Acting as keepers of "legitimate" culture, US journalists interpreted the pageantry and unpredictability of immigrant girl suicidality as proof of an undetected biological otherness—an otherness whose constitutional failings undermined an ersatz performance of authentic, healthy, and ideal (i.e., native-born) whiteness. That seemingly, well-adjusted immigrant girls fell prey to a self-sabotaging "epidemic" made more convincing the argument that "legitimate whiteness" carried an endogenous signature that could never be effectively replicated or counterfeited. No one—not even fair, English-speaking girls—could everlastingly "pass" as rightful "members of a high civilization to which they had no birthright."[59] In the end, the "inferior" psychophysiological makeup of first-generation immigrant girls would always betray what native-born elites—many who employed them—perceived as a fraudulent impersonation and a perilous approximation of the original article.

Editorialized reports on suicides of young, white-looking female immigrants, in sum, set to expose an inherent unfitness—not only to participate in US civic life but to fulfill a narrative of self-betterment essential to the national ethos.[60] That inability, on its turn, presumably stemmed from foreign girls' constitution. The Pittsburgh Survey on women and the trades, conducted by Elizabeth Beardsley Butler between 1907 and 1908, captures the spread of this bias to eastern European immigrants, particularly blue-collar urban girls.[61] Most "Slavic girls" employed in Pittsburgh's "metal trades" seemed unable to "work up to the better occupations", had innate "low standards," a predisposition for "indifference", and their unwillingness to learn the English language limited their advancement in the US workforce, Butler concluded.[62] When compared with other foreign-born workers, the social researcher found "Slavic girls" biologically predetermined to always be "used for the less desirable . . . , much inferior and unpleasant work."[63]

Hostile markers of internal difference manifested in girls' resistance to learn English as in their inability to find happiness on US soil. The case of Alexanderia Gadmires—"a young Russian girl [who] attempted suicide by poison aboard an incoming Baltimore & Ohio railroad train"—illustrates this reductionist understanding of immigrant disenfranchisement as a lack of basic mental hygiene. In a published suicide letter, Gadmires confesses to poisoning herself because she is "sadly disappointed at her failure to find the United States as it had been represented to her."[64] Also "tired

of life in America, and despondent war conditions prevented her return to her native Hungary," eighteen-year-old Marion Goldstein committed suicide in her Bronx apartment by "inhaling gas."[65] Incapable of carving her place in the national melting pot, it is the unassimilated immigrant girl, not the American Dream, that appears intrinsically flawed.

The way journalists wrote about suicidal working girls like Perk, Gadmires, and Goldstein further colloquialized what Durkheim termed *egoistic suicides*.[66] Morbidly self-centered and lacking social integration and self-restraint, egoistic suicides felt untethered, disenfranchised, and ultimately meaningless. Building upon Durkheim's statistical model, reporters treated girl suicides as meaningful social data, using their biographies to manufacture the necessary cultural authority to traffic on prejudice and fear-mongering. As such, girl suicide press coverage wielded humanitarian concern as a prophylaxis against social mobility, indirectly demonizing young women's newfound "excessive individualism" by warning immigrant girls that relocating to US cities presented a high risk of falling prey to calamitous uprootedness.[67]

In this way news on white-passing immigrant girls endemically driven to suicide dovetailed with a broader medicalization of human interiority and identity. Many physicians considered suicidality a sign of "perverted metabolism," typical of "unfit classes, like paupers, insane persons, idiots and lepers."[68] Prominent US lawyers and sociologists alerted that the immigrant underclasses often fell into those categories and thus should be thoroughly vetoed by federal officials upon arrival lest they carried such aberrant inclinations into the New World. Journalists deputized evidence of these concerns in their purple coverage of girl suicide, reporting, for instance, on "a young immigrant girl" named Martha Novick who, in 1913, "escaped the terrors of the burning Volturno" in southern Italy, only to go "insane" in the Ellis Island hospital "and fling herself in the New York Bay."[69] Years prior "Marie Eismann, a German girl hardly twenty years of age" who had come to work as a "domestic" in an affluent San Francisco home, proved to be secretly "out of her mind" when she gassed herself and killed the father of her employer, a distinguished octogenarian who died from exposure to "the heavy fumes of the gas." Although the senior demise was likely accidental, reporters charged the girl servant with "walking an innocent man into a death-trap," painting her as "a nervous woman [who could] go to extremes," and "a steady patron of fortune-tellers" with an alleged history of thievery.[70]

In its attempts to popularize a diagnostic shorthand of essentialist deviance, the newspaper coverage of girl suicide operated as a rudimentary means for forensic profiling. The Darwinist view that suicide evidenced an internal weakness suffused trailblazing research like Morselli's, who opined that "suicide appears as a legitimate and necessary effect . . . of human selection, which operates according to the law of the evolution of civilized peoples."[71] From a eugenics standpoint, journalistic records documenting a collective proclivity for criminal behavior (which suicide legally fell under) helped make the case such aberrant tendencies were demographically traceable. Nativist lobbyists readily leveraged such a perceived pattern of pathology to implement

stringent immigration protocols. The increasing medicalization of immigration policy in the early 1900s can be found in the numerous checkpoints, invasive psychological examinations, and line inspections mushrooming on main US entry points like New York City, Boston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. "The first rule of national life is self-preservation," the assistant surgeon at Ellis Island stated in 1912. "Since immigration has had and still has so important a role in American national life, it must be carefully scrutinized to determine which immigrants are desirable, from the standpoint of the betterment and continuance of the American nation."[72] Thus, the inclusion of the term *epidemic* in the press banner was not new, nugatory, or accidental.[73] In addition to signaling a renewed concern with infectious disease control, it evinced an epistemological turn to correlate female reproductive bodies and immigration with the spread of unwanted pathogens: through airborne transmission or social and sexual contact.

At this time the drive to kill oneself began to be understood through an epidemiological lens: as a symptom of the infectious "suicide germ."[74] After a first influenza pandemic (1889–1890), San Francisco's brush with the bubonic plague (1900–1904), and various localized polio breakouts (1916), fear of disease transmission spread. In 1916, a year before the US joined World War I, "puzzled scientists observed an entire nation of one hundred million persons [fall] in the grip of a strange mental depression. What is the matter with America? they ask, and the answer comes back in the roar of Europe's battle fields."[75] According to one US statistician, the outbreak of World War I had even "brought a bumper crop of suicides" to the country, establishing "the highest rate for the last 20 years."[76]

Seeking to make sense of a nationwide case of "the blues" and a bloody international conflict, US columnists turned to renowned European experts.[77] In the space of three months, quotes by Cesare Lombroso and Gustave Le Bon appeared in syndicated articles but still the prognosis was dire: "the great French psychologist" alerted that "ideas, sentiments, emotions and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as microbes. The action of contagion may hence be felt from a distance."[78] Biology once again dwarfed environment where the suicide impulse was concerned: like a thing with spores, it traveled and infected patients regardless of their location. The fear of thinning boundaries is palpable in US periodical discourses conflating the Great War and mood disorders with infectious disease. Further attesting to the creeping of psychiatry into matters of US public health and population control, epidemiological imagery not only came to be mapped onto large-scale sociogenic phenomena but also cited by reporters as a credible equivalence.

Dread of pathogenic contagion drove both pamphlets calling for medicalized immigration restrictions and the girl suicide press coverage. Articles casting struggling unmarried girls as the victims of a mass outbreak shared their discriminatory rhetoric with eugenicists likening unregulated immigration to an epidemic, and entry limitations to public health safeguards. As the first secretary for the Immigration Restriction League admonished in 1908, "it must never be forgotten that assimilation works both ways. Immigrants are assimilating us and, if too numerous and too alien, they destroy

our power of lifting them, just as a strong man may be made feeble by the smallest germs."[79] Similarly applying the new germ theory of disease to social behavior, psychologists referred to group acculturation as "mimetic, a product of social infection."[80] Enlarged diversity and anonymity provoked by upsurges in urbanization, immigration, and rural exodus stoked this biased shuttling of epidemiological language to popular understandings of changing demographics.[81]

Primarily entrusted with reproduction, it makes sense that adolescent girls came to be regarded as patient zero of what nativists perceived as a "canary in the coal mine" impasse. In fact, early twentieth-century researchers believed that "contraception and contagion" herringboned the very genesis of female adolescence, with "expert studies showing that infection of disease is more virulent when imparted from young girls. It seems as if nature had decreed to . . . giving them some power to throw off onto their victims the germs of disease, so that for a time freshness of looks goes along with the peculiar power to diffuse the very most active forms of infections."[82] The concerted effort to feminize a self-sabotaging contagious pathology ("the suicide intent") pillared a cultural moment of intertwined xenophobia, misogyny, and social hypochondriasis where young unmarried women starred as de facto damsels in distress and carriers of hazardous genetic material.[83]

Articles on girl suicide also labored to discredit public recognition of female bodily autonomy. They undercut credence given to women's testimonies against male abuse, a contentious topic in the 1910s as more girls came forward to accuse men in positions of power of workplace misconduct and sexual harassment.[84] Deliberately wide-scope in its undermining, press coverage of girl suicide portrayed unattached young women as unfit to lead the autonomous lives that suffragettes, college girls, and professional women advocated for in the 1910s. Women's vocal reactions against systemic misogyny became repackaged as symptoms of chronic unwellness. Purportedly gender-coded propensities for depression, self-annihilation, and reckless sexual behavior not only singled out girls as vulnerable citizens, but also earmarked them as potential public health hazards.

It is at this juncture that unviable sexual reproduction emerges as a main thread in the press narrative on girl suicide. News of waged girls taking their lives after engaging in out-of-wedlock intercourse both legitimized those who frowned upon unmarried girls' entrance in the workforce and those who doubted the morals of immigrant women. In 1914 the *Day Book* reported that a sixteen-year-old "hired girl" from Austria, Julia Czmor, gassed herself after being jilted by a married lover and finding out she was with child. In her suicide note, Czmor confessed that the sexual trespassing sealed her fate: "Dear Cousin: Please forgive me. I am unhappy now. I have too much trouble. I could see but one man who wished it like this. . . . Forget me and please write to my folks. I had to do this."[85] In another article from that year, it is "17-year-old Mildred Dykstro," an eastern European restaurant waitress, who is displayed as the embodiment of "all the traditional elements that wreck young girls' lives and destroy potential mothers—neglect, a villainous man, desertion and the suicide."[86]

Unsurprisingly, squandered maternal potential becomes a dominant theme in accounts of girl suicide throughout the 1910s. Deflowered and deceased before reaching proper maturation, the impregnated immigrant girl suicide served multiple prescriptive goals. First, she confirmed readers' ugliest suspicions about impoverished foreign-born reproduction, bolstering elitist campaigns for stricter immigration and reproductive regulations. According to eugenicists, current laws "did not screen out the unfit" or guarded the country against "the tendency the less intelligent [have] to multiply more rapidly," oversights that threatened to "water the nation's life-blood."[87] Second, the voluntary destruction of unwed immigrant girls and their offspring not only reaffirmed native supremacy but also allayed nationalistic fears that "aliens who leave children behind [might] exert a profound influence on the community."[88] Last, the cautionary tale of the promiscuous girl suicide encouraged immigrant parents to restrain their daughters from assimilating. As historian Elizabeth Ewen recounts, first-generation immigrant mothers often "viewed the outside world of American culture with hostility," considering its many public amusements and consumer spaces (movie theaters, dance halls, department stores) "a direct threat to their [daughters'] ability to carry on cultural traditions and achieve economic viability."[89] Sensational press coverage on immigrant girl suicide confirmed these fears.

Public coding of self-murder as both a reproductive-age female pathology and an indicator of deviant behavior thus stems from the same poisonous tree as aggressive exclusionary legislation. In fact, the discrimination on the basis of mental divergence appears in the first federal law regulating foreign entrance into the United States: the Immigration Act of 1882. Section 2 explicitly states that, if upon "examination be found among [seafaring] passengers any convict, lunatic, idiot, or any person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a charge, they shall report the same in writing . . . and such persons shall not be permitted to land."[90] Although ungendered at the time, "mental disease and defect" ("lunacy" and "idiocy," respectively) are already connoted with the inability to enact self-sufficiency and self-care; they are also lumped together with a proven criminal record and would continue to be so for years to come. The Immigration Law of 1907 reinforced neurodivergence as a chronic disability and liable diagnosis, ordering that "persons who have been insane within five years, and persons who have had two or more attacks of insanity at any time previously" be automatically denied entry into the United States.[91]

Dissidence from the legal standards of psychoneurological normalcy not only resulted in denied entry but further enforced a bureaucratic demand for self-disclosure: the law expressly required that foreign-born "convicts, lunatics, and idiots" be reported "in writing" before being turned away from US shores. A rhetoric of public shaming and national exceptionalism underpins a processing protocol that sought to create a punishing official record of every immigrant who did not meet the federal standards for admission. Fear that compromised aliens would soon become a "burden" or a "charge" of the state (a pervasive pathologization of welfare dependency found in anti-immigration policy to this day) explains the original exclusion of the mentally ill, the disabled, and people with prior convictions from entering the country.

This directive persisted. In 1912 medical inspectors were being systematically trained to "sift out the physically and mentally defective [through] a rapid glance [at] the gait, attitude . . . [and] malformations of the body. If anything about the individual seems suspicious, he asks several questions. It is surprising how often a mental aberration will show itself in the reaction of the person to an unexpected question."[92] Immigration specialists assured that such strenuous screening procedures had been put in place "to protect the country from [becoming] the dumping ground for [foreign] convicts, paupers and insane," a mounting concern by 1908 since immigrants allegedly neared "two millions a year" and accounted for "60% of the [country's] insane patients."[93] Placing foreignness at the center of an etiopathogenesis of neurodivergence, federal protocol mandating eligibility for legal US admission ran on eugenic diagnostics from its very inception.[94]

Journalists rendering immigrant working girls visible through suicidality, disordered moods, and unviable reproduction hence dialogued with a larger scientific favoring of biological determinism and "an anatomo-clinical model of mental illness," treating "the body [as] a legible text," "emotion as a physiological event," class as a fixed inherited condition, and miscegenation as a disorder.[95] In fact, early-twentieth-century medical texts often grouped suicide with murder, incest, syphilis, and alcoholism, an array of pathologies expressed through embodied behavior.[96] This tendency to read the body as a roadmap for the unwell mind indicates a time when "the treatment of mental and physical diseases cannot be separated."[97] As Alain Ehrenberg notes, not until the 1920s—when "Freud and Janet modernized the old notion of nervousness by creating the notion of the mental—[was it] acceptable to believe that the mind could be ill without a biological cause."[98] Reiterating standard diagnostics delineated by psychology manuals, the Public Health Service, and two special federal censuses (1904, 1910) surveying the mentally ill, US journalists helped disseminate a clinical narrative that construed the adolescent female body as evidentiary, the suicide's womb as inhospitable, the female immigrant's sexual appetite as toxic, and a histrionic death-wish as observable symptoms of inherent difference and deviance.[99] Since a sizable number of illegitimate pregnancies reportedly resulted from encounters between first- and second-generation immigrant girls and native-born white men, press coverage on pregnant girl suicides suggested that an inability to produce viable offspring (through miscarriage, abandonment, or death) confirmed Charles Davenport's eugenic theory that "miscegenation commonly spells disharmony—disharmony of physical, mental, and temperamental qualities."[100]

Suicide and the wastefulness of reproductive futurity became linchpins of the girl suicide press discourse because, as Hall insisted, childbearing and childrearing were long regarded as a woman's principal (and arguably only) social function. Being "entrusted with woman's supreme mission of transmitting the sacred torch of life to future generations" should make the adolescent girl "realize she belongs, not to herself, but to posterity."[101] This troubling statement confirms the misogynistic tenet held by several anti-suffrage advocates: that women did not require civil autonomy because

their natural state was that of subservience. Seen by a patriarchal society as mere vessels of genetic material, adolescent girls' social value relied on maintaining the pedigree of their reproductive organs; consequently, national exceptionalism came to be understood as dependent on female (sexual, racial, moral) purity. A targeted measure of social control, the cross-disciplinary narrativization of suicide as a juvenile female affliction sought to preserve the transitive property of such essentialist equation.

Adolescence, sinking girls into turmoil, could easily derail their procreative mission if the girls were not closely monitored. A call for collectively policing female sexual awakening and social mobility rested at the heart of the girl suicide moral panic, as press accounts surrounding one of its most notorious cases show. On February 9, 1916, eighteen-year-old Marian Lambert from Highland Park, Illinois, was found dead in a snowy grove in Helm's Woods, a stone's throw from her family's humble home. Rhapsodic descriptions of the high schooler's dead body—still gripping her textbooks under one arm, a gloveless hand clutching her chest, lips blackened by cyanide—rapidly circulated in dailies across the country as it came to light that the low-income suicide concealed a "sad sordid tragedy" of illicit romance, possible pregnancy, and mental disorder.[102]

Lambert's "mysterious" death and secret liaison with a well-to-do college student, William Orpet, ignited a national debate on the dangers lurking behind the new stage of female adolescence. As Orpet stood trial for murder and Lambert's mental state came under scrutiny in service of a suicide defense, the court of public opinion discussed the schoolgirl's self-administered fatality as a crossroads in women's history. Conservative commentators (many women themselves) argued that Lambert's demise symptomized a morally bankrupted era where adolescent girls, "perilously caught in the Niagara of feeling," were too often left unattended in the company of a pernicious mass culture.[103] The association between young consumers and self-undoing was far from new.

Since the early nineteenth century, that "many parents ardently believed that [sentimental] novels posed an existential threat to their teenage children, their efforts to control the reading habits of the rising generation betray[ing] their growing fears that the traditional order was crumbling around their ears."[104] Attempting to make sense of a recrudescence in female suicidality, US columnists fell back into tried patterns of control. They drew on the "Werther effect," a late-eighteenth-century moral panic casting adolescent readers (mostly female) as such impressible consumers that contact with excitable entertainment could instigate self-destruction. Working within this tradition, Oklahoma journalist Edith Johnson speculated that "a foolish book or a careless remark dropped by some thoughtless elder celebrity" propitiated Lambert's "unfortunate tragedy." "There is no telling how many [girls] are now devouring Elinor Glyn's *The Career of Katherine Bush* with the same ideas and impulses as Marian [Lambert]," Johnson continued.[105] "Books like these are dangerous because they fail to carry their stories to a logical ending—and that ending which is not so easily brushed aside in real life is that you can not [*sic*] offend the moral law without paying a price."[106] Suspicious of female pleasure and nonconformity, conservative commentators like

Johnson used cases like Lambert's to direct the public eye to find causality between young female suicidality and straying from "the moral law," thus naturalizing an abidance to the latter as mandatory for sustained female wellness. Like many girl suicides before her, Lambert's self-induced death was publicly narrativized as a transactional cause-and-effect, punitive but just: the eighteen-year-old "paid heavily because she defied the strongest instinct of womenkind—to defend her virtue at all costs."[107]

A parsing of girlhood's "moral" relation with gender and sexuality also midwifed more progressive press coverage. For Jane Whitaker, a women's rights movement supporter, Lambert's alleged suicide exposed a pressing need for reforming mixed-sex education and socialization. A long history of unequal gender expectations had taught girls to "resort to that which will not apply to the higher instincts in men, . . . the sex lure. Women's subservience in the scheme of the sexes has forced women to make the sex lure their only appeal." Cutting to the core of the sexist rhetoric galvanizing public castigations of sexually active girl suicides, Whitaker argued that "the weapon Marion Lambert is said to have tried to hold over the head of the boy she loved . . . and which brought about her death was the result" of a perverse double-standard undergirding binary patterns of gendered behavior upheld in the early twentieth-century US. While society "granted a man the freedom of choice" to pursue any affair or gratifying opportunity that might entice him, it taught adolescent girls that, even "when there is some appeal in a man that answers an appeal of hers, she must deny that appeal, or affront the civilized custom."[108] Orpet's eventual acquittal would cement humble-but-lettered Lambert as the public personification of this newly feared female type: the unsupervised, sexually active, and socially mobile "New Girl."

An heir to the freewheeling suffragette and the remunerated "woman adrift," it is this New Girl whom the "suicide epidemic" press coverage truly addresses.[109] No more the sedentary wife and mother that nineteenth-century social studies considered immune to self-destruction, the New Girl suicide is defined by reckless freedom. In the years surrounding World War I, the numbers of adolescent girls (both "native" and foreign-born) who chose to receive wages, attend higher education, frequent public amusements unchaperoned, date, seek contraception, and picket for equal rights skyrocketed.[110] Entrenched patriarchal structures began fearing a loss of supremacy if white young women decided to permanently delay the domestic roles of homemaker, wife, and mother. Working as an arm of heterosexist patriarchy, news articles that introduced girls' professional ambitions as "liberal ideas" causing self-ruin and "race suicide" ultimately aimed to undercut the positive possibilities of female equality in the public sphere.[111]

With the Great War nearing US shores, popular imagination excited easily, bracing for the imminent collapse of Western civilization; if by global conflict, moral deterioration, epidemic disease, or biological extinction, it was anyone's guess. The act of suicide, as appropriated by right-wing ideologues, rendered visible minority identities whose ethnic, religious, ideological, or psychophysiological differences might have gone unmarked, but whose mere sentience supposedly threatened the wholesomeness

of a collective US identity. As immigration officials explained, "only those peoples should be admitted whom experience has shown will amalgamate quickly and become genuine citizens."[112] Such chimerically "genuine" US constituency not only appeared homogenously white, prosperous, and Christian but also "happy" and "fit." The forceful equation of the American Dream with a joyful "good life"—symbolized by citizenship, proprietorship, and monogamous reproduction—is quintessential to a coherent US identity, Lauren Berlant and Sara Ahmed have shown.[113] From this perspective, the girl suicide discourse functioned as a regulatory heuristic that labored to reaffirm the fragile, limited view of happiness long upheld by a xenophobic white patriarchy. A public narrative of mass girl suicide confirmed that female dissidence neutered itself through an inherent incapability to harmonize with the country's core mores—individual happiness and generation of (material, bodily) wealth. A built-in self-purging mechanism, the suicide impulse automatically flagged and evicted those progenitors unfit for contributing to the advancement of US civilization; this included promiscuous foreigners and educated viragoes alike. News pieces on girl suicides, in short, proposed that once exponentialized into voluntary self-destruction, "excessive individualism" and social alienation could coalesce with minority difference to invalidate citizen rights.[114]

A close examination of the girl suicide press coverage also reveals that disordered moods have long been used as a means to erode minorities' bids for social and legal legitimization. The definitive outward symptom of an otherwise immanent deviation (ethnic, physiological, psychological), suicide not only othered a specific demographic (female, adolescent, unhappy) but also undermined intergroup solidarity. Debilitating suffering seemed to afflict diverse groups of girls living in the United States during the early twentieth century. And yet, according to medical and popular literature, their grievances did not foster communion or networked support but only strengthened an unassailable sense of otherness and hopelessness.

At its core, the girl suicide press reportage then resembles a jeremiad, a conservative wailing against progressivism where female choice is castigated under the cover of tragedy and pathology. The warning being delivered to parents, employers, suitors, and girls themselves sounded loud and clear: exposing unmarried girls to an enlarged pool of options increased devastating failure. Bogged down by possibility, budding maidens never blossomed into much-needed mothers, and hard workers never retreated into caring homemakers. They withered and died by their own hand, victims of a laissez-faire society that left them unsupervised and unguiged.

On a microscale, this failure meant the wasting of singular lives. But on a national scale, the girl suicide epidemic telegraphed the precariousness of an ideal "American race" by implicitly recognizing that its hallmark—the Anglo-Saxon white male, entrepreneurial and in control—built his ascendancy on the backs of enforced female subjugation. The pro-life, pro-patria, anti-immigration stance of the girl suicide press coverage ultimately foreshadowed the rise of a rhetoric of white male victimhood trading popularly and politically on nostalgic antebellum sensibilities. As the twentieth century unfolded, such supremacist tendencies never died down, nor did they stop raking up a body count.

In the end, a lasting legacy of the girl suicide press discourse lives in the realization that self-annihilation, conceptually welded to unbearable pain is still culturally accepted as both a mark of exceptionalism and underprivilege, a choice and a punishment. For early twentieth-century experts, those who attempted to kill themselves were usually too far gone to be saved. They were extraordinary in their negativized difference, deviance bolted to their bodies, determining unequivocal ejection (through death, institutionalization, or deportation) from the happy, healthy, wealthy "American way of living." Such radical attempt at self-erasure, however, also granted otherwise marginal people a moment of public visibility, their names tallied in local and national dailies, their lives (and deaths) recognized in the national public record.

Suicide remains entangled with oscillating notions of privilege and stigmatization, agency and erasure. In US popular culture, it still operates as a one-way ticket to notoriety, conferring some artists with a permanent halo of mystery and youth. It is still feminized in the press, best-selling fiction, media, and fashion, often dehumanizing and glamorizing white, young, cisgender female bodies caught in the throes of acracy.[115] It is still aligned with foreignness, remarked upon repeatedly by right-wing pundits as a defining trait of non-white terrorists. Suicide remains the right to opt out and a last resort for the disadvantaged and disenfranchised. It is not a new positioning but, like mediated narratives of misogyny and xenophobia, it does appear undying.

Notes

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[1]"Girl Suicide Is Victim of 'Man's World' Says Social Worker," *Day Book* (Illinois), June 5, 1912, 11.

[2]"Another Starts Down 'Suicide Lane,'" *Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 1912, 18.

[3]S. N. Clark, "Depressed States Apparent in the Manic Depressive Group," *Medical Standard* 37, no. 5 (May 1914): 324–328; 324.

[4]Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897), trans. John Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: Routledge, 2005); and Enrico Morselli, *Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics* (New York: D. Appleton, 1882).

[5]Howard I. Kushner, "Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Medical and Social Thought," *Journal of Social History* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 461–490; 461.

[6]G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (New York: D. Appleton, 1904), 194.

[7]Hall, *Adolescence*, 77.

[8]August Bebel, *Woman and Socialism*, trans. Meta L. Stern (New York: Socialist Literature, 1910), 102; and John Rice Miner, "Suicide and Its Relation to Climatic and Other Factors" (PhD dissertation, John Hopkins University, 1922), 2.

[9]Miner, "Suicide and Its Relation."

[10]C. B. W., "Appalling Number of Suicides," *Theocrat* (Illinois), January 31, 1920, 210.

[11]Bebel, *Woman and Socialism*, 102.

[12]See Richard Bell, *We Shall Be No More: Suicide and Self-Government in the Newly United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[13]Howard I. Kushner, "Social Trauma and Suicide in Historical Perspective," *Communications*, May 14, 2018, http://journals.openedition.org/criminocorpus/3845.

[14]Data results from newspapers archived at the for-profit newspapers.com and the Library of Congress digital database "Chronicling America" at chroniclingamerica.loc.gov.

[15]Winnie Lee, "Hour a Day with Mother Earth," *Day Book* (Chicago), June 15, 1914, 13–14; 13.

[16]Although this article focuses on white female suicide, Black women's suicide permeates nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century US history, as expertly charted by Terri L. Snyder and Diane Miller Sommerville. See Snyder's *The Power to Die: Slavery and Suicide in British North America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); and Sommerville's *Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War Era South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2018).

[17]Diana W. Anselmo, "Betwixt and Between, Forever Sixteen: American Silent Cinema & the Emergence of Female Adolescence," *Screen Journal* 58, no. 3 (Autumn 2017): 251–284.

[18]In *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), Gail Bederman produces an insightful reading on the intersection of eugenics, US masculinity, and Hall's theory of adolescence.

[19]G. Stanley Hall, "The Budding Girl," *Appleton's Magazine* (June 1909): 47–54, 47.

[20]G. Stanley Hall, *Educational Problems* (New York: D. Appleton, 1911), 31.

[21]"Died with Doggerel," *Reading Times* (Pennsylvania), June 13, 1913, 1.

[22]"Companion of Girl Suicide Released," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 8, 1913, 1; and "Fortune Teller Drove Young Girl to Suicide," *Greencastle Herald* (Indiana), March 11, 1914, 3. 23 Bell's *We Shall Be No More* offers a detailed reading of US suicide coverage and the early-nineteenth-century feminization of sentimental literature. Conversely, my research on newspapers has revealed that female suicides often selected methods popularly associated with masculinity—namely, firearms and hanging—a fact that complicates print discourses invested on differentiating behavior according to essentialist gender binarisms.

[24]By the late 1800s US journalists knew that gruesome headlines involving young female fatality attracted revenue. Tabloid coverage of the two 1892 murder scandals involving Lizzie Borden and Alice Mitchell evidences as much. See Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

[25]Lee, "Hour a Day with Mother Earth," 13.

[26]Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1973); and Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

[27]"Vassar Girl Is a Suicide," *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 1909, 4.

[28]"No Reason Found for Girl's Suicide," *Evening Star* (New York), March 5, 1915, 7.

[29]"Try to Solve Girl's Suicide," *Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1915, 11.

[30]Edward H. Clarke, *Sex in Education or, A Fair Chance for Girls* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1873).

[31]G. Stanley Hall, "Why Children Want to Die," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 6, 1916, 4.

[32]"Twenty-Cent Meals Drive Girl to Suicide," *Day Book*, September 20, 1913, 1.

[33]"Young Girl Suicide," *Day Book*, March 9, 1914, 3.

[34]For more on the medicalization of mood disorders at the turn of the century, see Åsa Jansson, *From Melancholia to Depression: Disordered Mood in Nineteenth-Century Psychiatry* (Heidelberg: Springer International, 2021).

[35]"Girl Suicide!," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 27, 1920, 2.

[36]See Kushner, "Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity."

[37]Hall, *Adolescence*, 313.

[38]Desirée J. Garcia, "Toil Behind the Footlights: The Spectacle of Female Suffering and the Rise of Musical Comedy," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 40, no. 1 (2019): 122–145; 122–123.

[39]Garcia, "Toil Behind the Footlights," 122–123.

[40]"Ice Cold Water Cures Suicide Idea," *Sunday Telegram* (West Virginia), December 24, 1916, 2.

[41]Zoe Buckley, "Why Did She Kill Herself?," *Evening Journal* (Delaware), November 5, 1920, 8. This piece circulated in other dailies, including Utah's *Odgen Standard-Examiner*, November 2, 1920, front page.

[42]See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (New York: Penguin, 1985); Ruth Leys, "The Real Miss Beauchamp: Imitation and the Subject of Gender," *Feminists Theorize the Political,* ed. Judith Butler and Joan Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992): 167–214; and Asti Hustvedt, *Medical Muses: Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Norton, 2011).

[43]Peter Clark Macfarlane, "Diagnosis by Dreams," *Good Housekeeping*, February 1915, 125–134, 126.

[44]For an in-depth study of xenophobia in the United States, see George Makari, *Of Fear and Strangers: A History of Xenophobia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2021).

[45]Durkheim, *Suicide*, 102.

[46]Morselli, *Suicide*, 305.

[47]"Suicide of a Russian Girl," *Saint Paul Daily Globe* (Minnesota), March 8, 1891, 5.

[48]Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 4.

[49]Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 2.

[50]George F. Lydston, *The Diseases of Society: The Vice and Crime Problem* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1904), 129.

[51]"Jumped into River," *Norwich Bulletin* (Connecticut), April 1, 1913, 1.

[52]"Bride-Elect Commits Suicide," *Sun* (New York), April 12, 1913, 1.

[53]"Russian Girl Attempts Suicide," *Alexandria Gazette* (Virginia), January 2, 1906, 1.

[54]"Rich Russian Girl Attempts Suicide," *Salt Lake Tribune* (Utah), January 2, 1906, 7.

[55]"Suicide Mania Sways Russian Working Girls," *Evening World* (New York), September 7, 1908, 4.

[56]"Suicide Epidemic at St. Petersburg," *Rock Island Argus* (Illinois), March 18, 1910, 1.

[57]"Russian Woman a Suicide," *Evening Public Ledger* (Pennsylvania), May 14, 1920, 3. The suicide of a countess made front-page news widely, including in the *Topeka State Journal* (Kansas), February 7, 1920; *Arizona Republican*, May 14, 1920; and *New York Tribune*, May 14, 1920.

[58]Julian B. Carter, *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1880–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 5.

[59]Carter, *Heart of Whiteness*, 18.

[60]See Bederman, *Masculinity and Civilization*; and Richard M. Huber, *The American Idea of Success* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971).

[61]Elizabeth Beardsley Butler, *Women and the Trades: Pittsburgh, 1907–1908*, volume in the collection *The Pittsburgh Survey: Findings in Six Volumes*, ed. Paul Underwood Kellogg (New York: Russell Sage Foundation and Charitable Publications Committee, 1909).

[62]Butler, *Women and the Trades*, 25.

[63]Butler, *Women and the Trades*, 26.

[64]"Russian Girl Disappointed with U.S. Takes Poison," *Day Book*, July 18, 1914, 9.

[65]"Homesick Girl Immigrant Suicide," *Sun*, New York City, August 13, 1917, 3.

[66]Durkheim, *Suicide*, 105.

[67]Durkheim, *Suicide*, 168.

[68]Henry S. Munro, "The Call of the Twentieth Century," *Medical Standard* 37, no. 8 (August 1914): 301–307, 301, 307. Also see Prescott F. Hall, *Eugenics, Ethics and Immigration* (Boston: Immigration Restriction League, 1908); and E. H. Mullan, "Mental Examination of Immigrants: Administration and Line Inspection at Ellis Island Public," *Public Health Records* 32, no. 20 (May 18, 1917): 733–746.

[69]"Shipwreck Victim Attempts Suicide," *Pensacola Journal* (Florida), November 7, 1913, 8.

[70]"Caused a Double Tragedy," *San Francisco Call*, May 14, 1896, 5.

[71]Quoted in Paola Badino, "The Interpretation of Suicide in the Work of Enrico Morselli," *Medicina Historica* 3, no. 2 (2019): 83–85, 84.

[72]Alfred C. Reed, "The Medical Side of Immigration," *Popular Science Monthly*, April 1912, 383–392, 383.

[73]Expressing excessive behavior through clinical language (i.e., "suicide epidemic," "stage fever") can be traced back to the 1700s. See Ann F. White, "In Behalf of the Feminine Side of the Commercial Stage: The Institute of the Woman's Theatre and Stagestruck Girls," *Theatre Survey* 60, no. 1 (2019): 35–66; and Kushner, "Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity."

[74]T. E. Westerman, "The City of the Suicide Germ," *San Francisco Examiner*, June 16, 1907, 58.

[75]"Have You 'The Blues'? No Wonder! Whole U.S. Is Feeling the Same Way," *Day Book,* January 21, 1916, 14–15, 14.

[76]"Year 1914 Brought a Bumper Crop of Suicides," *Day Book*, November 24, 1915, 27.

[77]"Have You 'The Blues'?," 14.

[78]"Have You 'The Blues'?,"15. See also "The Public Forum," *Day Book*, March 14, 1916, 22.

[79]Hall, *Eugenics, Ethics and Immigration*, 11.

[80]Hall, *Educational Problems*, 540.

[81]The fear of non-white and non-Christian immigrants replacing US-born populations is the main argument supporting the "Great Replacement theory," an enduring right-wing talking point. See Reece Jones, *White Borders: The History of Race and Immigration in the United States from Chinese Exclusion to the Border Wall* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2021).

[82]Hall, *Educational Problems*, 28–29.

[83]Clark, "Depressed States Apparent," 325.

[84]See "Aurora Divided as to Guilt of School Head," *Day Book* May 27, 1915, 30; and "Young Girl Tries Suicide as Way Out of Degradation," *Day Book*, December 13, 1913, 4.

[85]"Love Affair—Married Man—Suicide—Search," *Day Book*, June 1, 1914, 8.

[86]"Young Girl's Rough Life Road Led to Suicide," *Day Book*, August 6, 1914, 26.

[87]Hall, *Eugenics, Ethics and Immigration*, 4–5.

[88]Hall, *Eugenics, Ethics and Immigration*, 3.

[89]Elizabeth Ewen, "City Lights: Immigrant Women and the Rise of the Movies," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 3 (1980): 45–66; 50.

[90]Immigration Act, Forty-Seventh Congress, 1st Session, chap. 376, August 3, 1882, 214–215, 214.

[91]Thomas W. Salmon, "Immigration and the Prevention of Insanity," *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 169, no. 9 (August 21, 1913): 297–301.

[92]Reed, "The Medical Side of Immigration," 386.

[93]Hall, *Eugenics, Ethics and Immigration*, 2, 5, 9.

[94]See Jones, *White Borders;* and Terri E. Givens, *The Roots of Racism: The Politics of White Supremacy in the US and Europe* (Bristol UK: Bristol University Press, 2022).

[95]German Berrios, *The History of Mental Symptoms*: *Descriptive Psychopathology since the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 302; Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 23; and Jansson, *From Melancholia to Depression*, 15.

[96]See Gershom Hill, "Ways and Means of Preventing Physical, Mental and Moral Degeneracy," *Illinois Medical Journal* 25, no. 4 (April 1914): 239–243.

[97]Henry Munro, "The Emotional Factor in the Etiology of Suicide, Criminality, Insanity, and Mortality," *Illinois Medical Journal* vol. 26, no. 4, (October 26, 1914), 273–289, 274.

[98]Alain Ehrenberg, *Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age* (1998), trans. Enrico Caouette (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 11.

[99]See Gerald N. Grob, "The Origins of American Psychiatric Epidemiology," *American Journal of Public Health* 75, no. 3 (March 1985): 229–236, 232.

[100]Charles B. Davenport, "The Effects of Race Intermingling," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 56, no. 4 (1917): 364–368, 368.

[101]Hall, *Educational Problems*, 35.

[102]Jane Whitaker, "Marian Lambert Paid Price Many Women Pay for Custom-Slavery for Sex," *Day Book*, February 21, 1916, 28.

[103]Edith C. Johnson, "The Price of the Woman Is the Man," *Commoner*, July 1916, 19.

[104]Bell, *We Shall Be No More*, 45.

[105]Johnson, "The Price of the Woman Is the Man," 19.

[106]A free-spirited retelling of Cinderella, Glyn's *The Career of Katherine Bush* (New York: D. Appleton, 1916) narrates the story of a young secretary who enters an illicit affair with an aristocrat. Instead of tragedy, the deflowered working girl finds love and marriage with another blue-blooded suitor. Whitaker, "Marian Lambert Paid Price," 28.

[107]Johnson, "The Price of the Woman Is the Man," 19.

[108]Whitaker, "Marian Lambert Paid Price," 28.

[109]In *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), Joanne J. Meyerowitz argues that the swell of unchaperoned girls migrating to US cities to join the workforce at the turn of the century provoked a violent cultural pushback from a patriarchal society. Conservative civic leaders and newspapermen counteracted these new signifiers of female autonomy by dubbing independent working girls "women adrift," a term connoting moral decadence and sexual promiscuity.

[110]See Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the- Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); and Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

[111]For more on "race suicide" and reproductive justice in US history, see Simon M. Caron, *Who Chooses?: American Reproductive History Since 1830* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press

of Florida, 2008); and Thomas C. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[112]Reed, "The Medical Side of Immigration," 383.

[113]Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1997); and Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[114]Durkheim, *Suicide*, 168.

[115]Recent examples include *The Virgin Suicides* (1993 book and 1999 film), *Girl, Interrupted* (1993 book and 1999 film), and *13 Reasons Why* (2007 book and Netflix original series, 2017–2020).