

**‘Long Trudges Through Whitechapel’:
The East End of Beatrice Webb’s and Clara Collet’s Social Investigations
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The fascination that the slums of London held for middle- and upper-class women of the nineteenth century has, in recent years, proved a fruitful topic for studies of Victorian literary, gender, and urban culture.¹ These women, be they female philanthropists, social investigators, district nurses or Charity Organisation Society (COS) inspectors, all felt and followed, as Ellen Ross describes it, the ‘magnetic pull’ of ‘the poorest urban districts’ in their pursuit of the new opportunities that the slums offered to women.² Many have commented upon the increased professionalization of these women’s slum activities throughout the period. Yet, as a growing number of diverse women claimed the urban spaces of the poor as the arenas of their work, and as others have drawn on the links between female slum workers and female suffrage campaigners, these overviews often suggest that middle-class women operated with a confident progressivism, overlooking the uncertainties that many experienced while working in the slums as they struggled to conceptualize and articulate the exact nature of their role in poor communities.³ This essay examines two examples of this uncertainty, and its influence upon the representation of the East End and its working-class female inhabitants: Beatrice Webb’s article for *Nineteenth Century*, ‘Pages from a Work-Girl’s Diary’ (1888), which investigated the working conditions of female ‘trouser-hands’ in East London, and the short story ‘Undercurrents’ (1891–94), which was written by Webb’s lesser-known contemporary and sometime colleague Clara Collet, and which explores a young female philanthropist’s attempts to care for an alcoholic factory girl from the East End.⁴

Both Webb’s and Collet’s texts fluctuate between a vision of middle-class women’s slum work rooted in earlier nineteenth-century ideas of feminine purity and ‘influence’, and an increasingly prevalent discourse of the fin de siècle that emphasized ‘scientific’, objective observation of working-class life over personal influence or sympathetic involvement. As social investigators for Charles Booth’s monumental *Life and Labour* series, Webb and Collet fit the identity of the objective female researcher. At the same time both also accord with more conventional images of the female philanthropist, through their work for COS (Webb as an inspector, Collet mainly as a contributor to their in-house magazine the *Charity Organisation Review*). Webb also

played this role in 1885 as one of Octavia Hill's female rent collectors for the Katharine Buildings, Aldgate, whose presence and management was intended to inspire greater moral behaviour in the tenants. Thus although their careers can be read in terms of a shift away from traditional female philanthropy to scientific social research, 'Pages' and 'Undercurrents' suggest a more complex negotiation between the two roles while Webb and Collet were working and writing on the East End in the late 1880s and early 90s. They represent East London as simultaneously receptive to female influence, and yet also 'doomed' to degradation according to conventional social science theories of the time. The historian Seth Koven has stressed the importance of this idea of middle-class feminine influence to women's slum work in the nineteenth century, concentrating in particular on the ideology of civic maternalism (an ideology which I will return to in my discussion of Collet's 'Undercurrents'). This approach is in contrast with Angelique Richardson's emphasis on the significance of scientific — and especially, eugenic — thought to ideas about middle-class women and the poor post-Darwin.⁵ This essay, however, seeks to demonstrate the sometimes contradictory significance of *both* discourses to women like Webb and Collet in their understanding of their work in the East End. My argument thus offers an addendum to both Koven's and Richardson's readings of the relationship between middle-class women and urban space in the late nineteenth century. It also seeks to nuance Ross's use of middle-class women's writings to reconstruct the Victorian working-class mother in her study *Love and Toil*, through consideration of how these observers' uncertain ideas about their own professional position shape their depiction of the women of East London.⁶

Webb's 'Pages' fluctuates between an intimate representation of the women Webb encountered while undercover in a workshop on the Mile End Road, and a more distant, objective view of these working women, as she seemingly alternates between her former and current roles as rent collector and social investigator. As her private diaries indicate, much of 'Pages' is copied straight from the notes Webb took during her investigation; however, there are some significant additions and changes to the original material that will be examined later.⁷ When interviewed in 1895 for *The Young Woman* magazine, Webb trivialized her article as a 'romantic' adventure and set it against her other 'more solid work of investigation', but when describing the same piece of research in her later autobiography *My Apprenticeship* (1928), Webb defined it in terms of objective observation, suggesting that she herself never knew entirely where to place 'Pages' on the

spectrum between ‘romance’ and ‘science’.⁸ After investigating Webb’s text more fully, I examine Collet’s later text ‘Undercurrents’, which, while more clearly a work of romance than a piece of short fiction, can be seen to engage in a debate similar to that of ‘Pages’, since Collet also equivocates between middle-class female involvement and distance from East London’s slums. For Collet, however, the vocabulary of this debate has been transformed, in line with the growing influence of eugenicist thinkers such as Francis Galton and Karl Pearson, as well as with a general shift in tone following the 1870 Education Act, as mothers — working-class mothers especially — were seen to bear a new responsibility towards their children.⁹ Thus in ‘Undercurrents’, Collet’s uncertainty about the role of the middle-class woman in the spaces of the urban poor is represented via a tension between the ideologies of civic and biological maternalism, with her heroine having to choose between becoming a ‘mother’ to the poor, or a biological mother to the next generation of the middle classes. In *Imagined Londons*, Pamela Gilbert writes that

there are no Londons other than those of the imagination. From multiple perspectives, in diverse historical circumstances, people have turned their faces toward the city, and created it as the site and embodiment of communities of their dreams and necessities.¹⁰

As the setting of Collet’s and Webb’s investigations, the East End in the two texts is imagined as a fraught and inconsistent space, shaped by the conflicting visions of its middle-class female visitors and its working-class inhabitants.

I

Beatrice Webb, ‘Pages from a Work-Girl’s Diary’

As David Feldman documents in this issue, by the late 1880s, public concern about the ‘sweat shops’ of East London was significant. This concern, which connected the practice of ‘sweating’ with the recent influx of Russian Jews into the East London clothing trade, merged with a longer-standing public preoccupation with the plight of the vulnerable and exploited seamstress — now seen as particularly victimized by the ruthless Jewish ‘sweater’. In 1888, Webb sought to address the issue with the publication of ‘Pages’, which detailed her experiences while working as an undercover researcher in a workshop on the Mile End Road. While ‘Pages’ has often been considered in light of Webb’s tense depictions of the East End Jewish community, here I will examine Webb’s equally

contradictory representation of the East London women that she ‘sweated’ alongside in the trouser workshop run by ‘Mrs Moses’.¹¹ This representation will be shown to be reflective of Webb’s own uncertainties about the exact nature of her role as an East End female investigator.

As noted, when Webb discussed her investigation in *My Apprenticeship*, she stressed the scientific, objective aspects of the research, commenting that

observation is, in fact, vitiated *if the persons observed know that they are being observed*; and it was in order to avoid any such hampering consciousness that I decided to try my luck in getting work in a series of sweaters’ shops.¹²

Webb regarded her investigation as a kind of anthropological study of East End workers in their natural habitat, which she designed and implemented to avoid influencing their behaviour. In planning and regarding her work in this way, Webb and her undercover investigation can be seen as part of the wider social scientific discourse of the 1880s and 90s — of which eugenic thought was one aspect — that emphasized objectivity and denied a relationship between the observer and the observed. Webb’s emphasis on her avoidance of contaminating influence while disguised as a working woman has been given subsequent support by Deborah Epstein Nord, who argues that ‘disguise as a tailor-hand allowed Beatrice Webb to observe labour in a tailor’s workshop without impinging on the behaviour of the people she investigated’.¹³ I seek to question Nord’s statement, as well as Webb’s own ‘scientific’ reading of her work: both, I contend, elide the complexities of Webb’s position while disguised in the workshop. While it is impossible to answer the question of the impact of Webb’s presence among the working girls, to insist on the ‘scientific’ nature of her study obscures the fluctuations between objectivity and intimacy that characterize Webb’s representation of the working women and the East End. It also ignores the role of literary strategy in the investigator’s account of the sweatshop, as Webb uses her narrative to substantiate her professional position.

The beginning of ‘Pages’ differs notably from the original account that Webb recorded in her private diary. In her diary, Webb describes the journey that takes her from her lodgings at ‘56 Great Prescott St’ to the workshops of the East End, noting her ‘very queer’ feelings as she walks towards her destination.¹⁴ However, in the article version, Webb opens her narrative from within ‘the Jewish settlement’ of East London where she is already disguised as a trouser-hand:

It is midday. The sun's rays beat fiercely on the crowded alleys of the Jewish settlement: the air is moist from the heavy rains. An unsavoury steam rises from the down-trodden slime of the East End streets and mixes with the stronger odours of fried fish, the decomposing vegetables, and second-hand meat which assert their presence to the eyes and nostrils of the passers-by. ('Pages', p. 301)

The opening of Webb's published text thus evokes a sense of immediacy. Webb's use of the present tense lends her text a dynamic and urgent feel, as the reader pictures the investigator moving through the streets of East London. This feeling of urgency both encourages the reader to experience Webb's East End journey as if they themselves are there with her, but also asserts her authority to enter London's slums as a professional researcher. The evocative nature of Webb's description of air 'moist' from the 'heavy rains' positions the female investigator as a medium between the reader and the slum. In her recreation of the East End on the printed page, Webb demonstrates her skill in interpreting and translating the working-class scene for her middle-class readers, and with this demonstration we can see Webb as participating in what Judith Walkowitz has defined as the contestation of London's terrain, with the investigator revising and reworking 'the dominant literary mappings of London' to assert her 'presence in the public domain'.¹⁵ Webb's opening description sees her claim the East End as a legitimate site for the professional middle-class woman, as the space becomes transformed into the setting of the female social investigator who moves through the scene with urgency and purpose.

Webb's self-positioning as scientific researcher continues with her descriptions of 'the down-trodden slime of the East End' with its 'decomposing vegetables' and 'second-hand meat', offering a Darwinian reading of the setting which emphasizes the degeneration of both the East End and its inhabitants. Although the beginning phrase 'it is midday' stresses the contemporary focus of the article, Webb's attention to the 'slime' and the 'steam' of the settlement suggests that East London has degenerated to a kind of *primaeval* swamp, teeming with early life forms. Yet while the East End decays before her, the early immediacy of Webb's depiction undermines her distanced scientific stance. The 'steam' of decomposition assails her 'eyes and nostrils', implicating the 'civilised' and cultured body of the middle-class woman within this same narrative of social degeneration. In these initial paragraphs, the East End's degeneracy is rooted in both immigrant and indigenous communities. It acquires race and class inflection as the

investigator comments on the ‘Jewish girls with flashy hats, full figures, and large bustles; furtive-eyed Polish immigrants with their pallid faces and crouching forms; and here and there poverty-stricken Christian women’ (p. 301). While these figures are analysed as almost a species apart, with their ‘full figures’ and ‘crouching bodies’ coolly defined for the reader, once again Webb is unable to maintain her distance from the setting of her work. ‘Jostled on and off the pavement’ by these same ‘Jewish girls’, ‘Polish immigrants’, and ‘Christian women’, Webb is unable to preserve her distinction from the objects of her investigation (p. 301). This physical contact — at once intimate and disturbing for Webb and her text — highlights the fraught relationship between the female investigator and her East End setting.

Webb’s use of disguise to explore the sweating industries of London draws out the tense questions that the East End posed to her role as a female social investigator. Dressed as an unemployed trouser-hand, Webb loses the authority and influence that is evident in her private diary accounts of her earlier work as a rent collector in the Katharine Buildings:

4th June 1885: Working hard. Building unsatisfactory. Caretaker hopelessly inadequate. Tenants, rough lot — the aborigines of the East End. Pressure to exclude these and take in only the respectable — follow Peabody’s example. Interview with superintendent of Peabody’s. ‘We had a rough lot to begin with, had to weed them out of the old inhabitants — now only take in men with regular employment.’ The practical problem of management: are the tenants to be picked, all doubtful or inconvenient persons excluded or are the former inhabitants to be housed so long as they are decently respectable? May have some rough work to do, but am gaining experience.¹⁶

While it is this visible authority as a rent collector that she most desires to relinquish during her investigation of the East End workshop, when disguised as a working woman Webb also struggles to maintain her *invisible* authority as an undercover observer. The confident narrative tone of Webb’s diary entries concerning her rent collecting is not replicated in ‘Pages’, as her new identity seemingly prevents her from imposing an authoritative, investigatory gaze upon the urban scene. As a working girl, Webb becomes an insignificant participant in her setting and, moreover, feels herself to be so. When she is first rejected for employment Webb worries that her costume is not ‘genuine’ enough (p. 302). Nevertheless, on looking at her reflection in a shop window she is ‘startled at [her] utterly forlorn appearance — destitute enough to be “sweated” by any master’ (p. 302). The investigator’s awareness of her shabby outward appearance

subsequently impacts on her behaviour and self-perception, as she internalizes her insignificance: 'I feel horribly sick and ill; and I am so painfully conscious of my old clothes that I dare not ask for refreshment at an eating-house or even at a public' (p. 302). This new sense of vulnerability permeates the narrative and Webb frequently appears before the reader as unsure of herself or her surroundings, even after she secures a position of employment under Mrs Moses, 'feeling rather helpless', speaking 'humbly', and on one occasion her 'eyes [filling] with tears' (pp. 304, 310). Yet Webb's fellow women workers respond to her insecure demeanour with kindness, and we see them sympathize with her struggles to adhere to the rigorous working conditions of the workshop:

'This will never do,' angrily remarks the mistress. And then, perceiving the culprit by her side, she adds sternly: 'This won't do — this work won't suit me; you want to go and learn somewhere else first. This will never do — this won't suit me,' she repeats slowly as she pulls the work to pieces. She dismisses me from her side with a wave of her eyeglass, as if to say, 'It's no good answering me back again.' Without a word I arrange my trimmings ready to depart if the missus persists. Is it over-fatigue, or is it the perfect realization of my position as a disgraced work-girl? An ominous lump rises in my throat, and my eyes fill with tears. There is a dead silence. The younger hands look up from their work sympathetically; Mrs Long, with her head down, stitches on steadily; the woman of the slums gazes on me with bleared expression of mingled stupor and pity; fumbles underneath her work on the table and pushes something towards me. I hear the rattle of the brandy-bottle against the scissors as I see the old tobacco-box that holds her trimmings advancing towards me. (p. 310)

With this emotional moment of understanding between Webb and her co-workers, the investigator's assertion in *My Apprenticeship* of the objectivity of her observations becomes problematic. Webb's difficulties in the workshop inspire compassion from the other women, and their sympathetic response influences Webb's depiction of the scene:

'You'll soon learn,' she says kindly; 'you must watch me fix this, and then you can do the next yourself.' Directed and encouraged by her kindness, I work on, in a calmer frame of mind, listening to the conversation of my neighbours. ('Pages', p. 311)

As Webb identifies with the group she has set out to investigate, the question about influence returns, since she seems unable at this moment to uphold the position she claims for herself as an uninvolved social scientist. Rather, she returns to a more personal relationship with the East End that is reminiscent of her diary writings about her work with the Katharine Buildings:

15th September 1885 [...] The account she and her husband gave of the class we all have to do with is much the same as I should give with my small experience, *minus certain lovable qualities* which only a lady rouses into activity and appreciates.¹⁷

With both Webb and the women workers seemingly open to each other's influence, the East London setting represented by 'Pages' is thus momentarily transformed into a space that could potentially be receptive to the presence of the middle- and upper-class female, whose work involves personal influence and intimacy with working women with the aim of rescuing them from lives of ignorance and immorality.

Nonetheless, even as Webb's interactions with the East End women raise the possibility of a closer, more redemptive relationship between the female investigator and her subjects, her narrative simultaneously works to maintain a distant, 'scientific' account of the working women. This narrative distancing is evident in the investigator's treatment of the women's sexuality, which offers an important coda to Walkowitz's account of the stories of 'sexual danger' that emerged in the popular press of the 1880s, the most notorious of which was W. T. Stead's 1885 'Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon'.¹⁸ For while Webb reproduces the conventional, music hall-style version of working-class courtship and sexuality that she encounters through listening to the women's conversations, she deliberately silences the stories of sexual abuse at the heart of the workshop's gossip, concerns which were prevalent in debates among both men and women of the period. Early in 'Pages' Webb characterizes the working women as sexually independent, quoting what appears to have been a popular, if now forgotten, song:

The somewhat crude and unrhythmical chorus —

'Why should not the girls have the freedom now and then?
And if a girl likes a man, why should she not propose?
Why should the little girls always be led by the nose?'

seems the favourite refrain, and, judging from the gusto with which it is repeated, expresses the dominant sentiment of the work-girls. (p. 305)

The importance of the music hall to the women's experiences of sexuality is underlined again by Webb, who depicts it as central to their lives outside of the workshop:

'I say, Milly,' shouts one to the other, 'you tell that bl—y brother of yours that I waits 'alf and 'our for 'im houtside the Paragon last night. I'll be blessed before I serves as 'is Round the Corner* ag'in. 'Owever, at last, I says to

* East End slang term for the lady you take to the theatre or the music hall.

myself, “a watched kittle niver biles,” so I walks in by myself. The dressin’ there is grand,’ she adds enthusiastically. ‘Eh! But you sh’d see the piece they’re running at the Standard!’ rejoins Milly. ‘Jim’s promised to take me up to one of them grand places up West next Saturday. Will you come along? I’ll git Tom to come. You’ll want to be a making of it up by that time. Tom’s in reg’lar work and a rare catch h’as a sweet’ear,’ laughs the sister of the faithless swain. (pp. 311–12)

In reproducing the women’s discussions of their ‘sweet’earths’, Webb uses their sexuality to reinforce the objective distance between herself and the figures of her study. In both her mimicking of the women’s cockney accents and her description of their courtship practices, Webb returns to analysing the East End women anthropologically (p. 312). However, when the investigator encounters a different story about the women’s sexuality — one that accords with narratives of sexual danger — she remains publicly silent. In her private diary, for instance, Webb details a conversation where she is told that one of the female workers ‘has had three babies by her father, and another here has had one by her brother’, whereas in the published version all evidence of this exchange is erased except for the telling sentence ‘and here follow horrible details of the domestic vice and unnatural crime which disgrace the so-called “Christian” life of East London’.¹⁹

Although Webb’s repression of these stories of abuse and sexual perversity is attributable to the need to maintain female respectability in the public sphere (even Andrew Mearns’s revelation in 1883 of the problem of incest for the East End in *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* was anonymous), it can also be read as a deliberate narrative strategy by the investigator to insist upon her detachment from this aspect of East End life.²⁰ As Walkowitz’s *City of Dreadful Delight* illustrates, the late-Victorian period was notable for its increasingly public debates about sexuality and sexual abuse, which included Josephine Butler’s campaigns against the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1870s and early 1880s, and Stead’s inflammatory revelations of child prostitution (aided by Butler) in ‘The Maiden Tribute’ for his newspaper the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Walkowitz argues that the female legacy of ‘The Maiden Tribute’ led inevitably to the ‘social purity’ movement of the fin de siècle, with feminist supporters of Stead using ‘the new “license” to speak publicly on sexual matters’.²¹ However, Webb’s silence complicates this account, since the investigator’s refusal to speak of sexual abuse suggests the different ways professional women of the 1880s regarded the narrative of female sexual danger in the city. By choosing not to portray the women workers as victims of incest, Webb denies

their oppression but also rejects a role for herself that is reminiscent of Josephine Butler's style of philanthropy, where the middle-class woman is figured as the rescuer of her endangered working-class sister. To speak on behalf of the women and elaborate on the 'domestic vice and unnatural crime' of the East End would place Webb in a far more personal, influential relationship with the females of her study and situate her article within the feminized discourse of social purity ('Pages', p. 305). Webb's act of narrative repression thus maintains her stance as an 'objective' observer of East London life.

The two versions of 'Pages' — the public and the private — produce a doubleness in Webb's account of the East End, as the investigator's simultaneous awareness and disavowal of its sexual danger reflects her shifting narrative authority throughout the text as either rooted in her middle-class influence or in her status as a scientific, unobserved investigator. This disavowal, however, seems to provide only limited reassurance for Webb's sense of professional identity. She also seems impelled to contain the women workers within a discourse that emphasizes their animalistic degeneracy and dooms them to a life — and death — outside civilized, Christian society. This description of the women was not included in Webb's original notes on her study, but added in later with its publication, which further suggests Webb's desire to present herself as a social scientist rather than a redeeming moral influence upon working-class women:

During the day their fingers and eyes are fully occupied; in the evenings, on holidays, in the slack season, their thoughts rush out and gather in the multitudinous excitements of the East End streets; while their feelings unburden themselves in the pleasure of promiscuous love-making. [...] They live in the Garden of Eden of uncivilised life; as yet they have not tasted the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the heaven and hell of an awakened conscience are unlike undreamt of. There is only one Fall possible to them — drink, leading slowly but inevitably to the drunkard's death. ('Pages', p. 311)

By closing her study of the East End and its female workers with this tale of predestined degradation (her final image is of a miserable, exploited woman worker), Webb moves away from her sympathetic descriptions of the workshop employees. The investigator seeks to extract herself from her emotionally intimate depiction of East London via a more generalized and moralistic perspective indebted to both social Darwinism and contemporary writings on London's slums like Arnold White's 'The Nomad Poor of London' (1885), which declares, of the homeless: 'Physically, mentally, and morally unfit, there is nothing that the nation can do for these men, except to let them

die out by leaving them alone.’²² Webb’s socially determined conclusion can thus be read as central to both her self-fashioning as an objective female social investigator and her reimagining of the spaces of East London as appropriate arenas of work for the professional woman.

II

Clara Collet, ‘Undercurrents’

‘Undercurrents’ remained unpublished in Clara Collet’s lifetime. It is now only available in the University of Warwick’s Modern Record Centre as a photocopy of the original manuscript, or as a transcript copied by Bouwe Postmus and printed in his article for the *Gissing Journal*. Postmus is one of the few scholars to draw any attention to the life and work of Collet, albeit via Collet’s close friendship with the author George Gissing, examining what ‘Undercurrents’ might reveal about their relationship. Collet’s great-niece Jane Miller also analyses ‘Undercurrents’ according to the Collet–Gissing friendship, in her *Seductions: Studies in Reading and Culture*.²³ This emphasis on Gissing risks distorting Collet’s significance, since it inhibits an understanding of Collet’s text in relation to the issues of female social investigation, the status and opportunities open to educated working women, and inter-class connections. For it is with this brief foray into fiction that Collet most clearly reveals the ideologies and fantasies that informed her investigation into the lives of working women — both working and middle class — and her roles as a COS philanthropist and civil servant. These fantasies also pose intriguing questions to Ross’s history of working-class motherhood, which was partly based on the sources of women like Collet, for the way in which they highlight the multiple (and sometimes conflicting) agendas behind female investigators’ ‘factual’ accounts of working-class mothers. Like ‘Pages’, the narrative of ‘Undercurrents’ is informed by a need to substantiate the professional middle-class woman’s position in the East End. It employs the simultaneous strategies of depicting East London as particularly receptive to the influence of Collet’s middle-class heroine (here articulated in the language of civic maternalism), and as a space doomed to racial and social degeneration with the only hope lying in eugenic fantasies of biological middle-class motherhood.

‘Undercurrents’ opens within a community of university educated, unmarried women. Set inside the Gower Street rooms of the heroine Marian Bligh, Collet depicts a

tea party between four friends — Miss Jenner, a ‘lady doctor’; Florence Douglas, a medieval scholar; Maggie Murray, a schoolteacher; and Marian Bligh, a female philanthropist who works in the East End (p. 9).²⁴ The women’s education, professional jobs, and rejection of marriage see them correspond with Collet’s idea of the educated working woman, which she subsequently explored more fully in her essay collection *Educated Working Women: Essays on the Economic Position of Women Workers in the Middle Classes* (1902), but they are also evocative of the women in the famous *Macmillan’s Magazine* article ‘The Glorified Spinster’ (1888).²⁵ Like the Glorified Spinster, who ‘considers marriage as a last resort for those who lack sufficient strength of mind or body to maintain their footing in the world alone’, Collet’s female characters confidently offer the reader a vision of a new femininity that exists outside both marriage and the family home, as Florence Douglas proclaims to Marian: ‘I have no fear that you will ever put your intellect at a man’s feet just to be used so that his may seem more brilliant. Domestic bliss will never content you.’²⁶ With this assured beginning, Collet seems to secure the position of professional women investigators, like herself and Webb, in late-Victorian society.

However, Collet’s depiction of the professional middle-class woman remains equivocal, as her all-female community is beset with divisions. As with the Glorified Spinster, Marian and her friends are absorbed with discussing ‘all things in heaven and earth’.²⁷ Their subsequent disagreement about motherhood sees the friends grapple with the nature of the educated working woman’s place in society and her relation to the ideal of the middle-class mother. The women’s debate over maternity reflects contemporary arguments. Miss Jenner’s emphasis on the social usefulness of mothers upholds the increasingly popular interpretation of middle-class maternity as a national duty. However, her belief in the usefulness of educated, middle-class mothers is then challenged by Florence Douglas, who argues instead for the rescue and raising of working-class children by women like themselves — voicing the belief identified by Koven that ‘women’s motherly capacities to love, nurture, and care for others were linked to the imperative to deploy these gifts within their local communities and municipalities’.²⁸

‘If a woman is going to have babies she is none the worse for having had medical training, and she can turn her knowledge to account in a great many ways besides ordinary practice. A great many ways. Do you know I think I will just go round and congratulate Miss Gavin and tell her what useful work she might do in her spare time by giving advice in the afternoons at mothers’

meetings.’ [...] ‘Just as though London were not swarming with children,’ said Florence impatiently. ‘If I were fond of children, I should adopt one or two’. (‘Undercurrents’, p. 10)

Collet’s heroine Marian responds with confusion to these competing arguments. She appears uneasy with the idea of civic motherhood and the legitimacy of middle-class women’s maternal claim over the working classes, as she comments to Florence:

‘It is wonderful how difficult it is to find a genuine *bona fide* orphan on both sides [...] You would be sure to have a parent turning up at one time or other; just when you had “learned to know it well and love it,” it would be claimed back by its loving father.’ (p. 10)

Marian’s contradictory position on motherhood — biological or civic — articulates the text’s ambivalence about women’s social role. For while the heroine asserts that ‘I don’t spend my time worshipping the Madonna’, the hero of the story, Frank Rust, certainly does: ‘What a charming face she has [...] Does she not remind you a little of that Madonna of Raphael’s in the National Gallery?’ (pp. 12–13). Indeed, such fantasies of mothers and mothering charge the narrative, as the very name ‘Marian’ implies. The ‘virgin mother’ and female investigator of ‘Undercurrents’ must therefore decipher her own position in relation to this idealized figure of the middle-class mother.

At first, the move to the East End and Marian’s field of work coupled with the entrance of working-class Mollie Rust into the story appears to advocate the role of civic motherhood for the educated single woman. Mollie has married, above her class, the academic Rust, whom she met while attending a settlement project. The working girl’s ‘shrill voice’, along with her ‘lower class’ companions and public drunkenness (p. 19) echoes Collet’s description in ‘Women’s Work’, her 1889 essay for Charles Booth, of the factory girl as easily ‘recognized on ordinary days by the freedom of her walk, the numbers of her friends, and the shrillness of her laugh’.²⁹ Collet’s repeated use of ‘shrill’ to describe the working-class woman’s voice demonstrates how, for the social investigator, class identity is located in the body. ‘Shrillness’ suggests a body and character experienced as discordant and intrusive. It is Mollie’s ‘shrill voice’ which breaks through a lecture given by Rust to working men and disrupts the order of the narrative with her declaration ‘that’s my ’usband, that is. My! aint he a toff. Three cheers for Frankie!’ (p. 20). As the lecture is abruptly aborted midway through, Mollie appears before the reader as a disruptive and transgressive figure, and the polar opposite of Marian, who listens to Rust’s lecture with avid interest throughout. Yet Mollie’s

announcement of her relationship with Rust when set against the backdrop of the lecture hall also reveals the performative nature of her character. Everything about Mollie in this scene conforms to the image of the unsuitable working-class wife, as she exhibits her social status to the audience:

He had been lecturing about three quarters of an hour, and the burst of applause consequent on the exhibition of an exquisitely beautiful slide had just subsided when a shrill voice made itself heard throughout the room. ‘That’s my ‘usband, that is. My! ain’t he a toff? Three cheers for Frankie!’ Every one turned round. Standing on a form to which she had pushed her way after the lecture had begun was a pretty girl of about eighteen, dressed like a respectable factory girl and obviously and completely drunk. Two girls behind her wearing the plush hat and feathers of the lower class of factory girl were giggling at their companion’s demonstration. (pp. 19–20)

The crudeness of Mollie’s ‘demonstration’ alerts us to the symbolic nature of her role in ‘Undercurrents’, as Collet uses her stereotypical image of the factory girl to explore ideas of racial degeneration, hereditary disease, and working-class motherhood (p. 20). Mollie’s willing exhibition of her drunken body enables both Collet and her characters to fit the young girl into the same predetermined narrative of social degradation present in the conclusion of ‘Pages’. Significantly, this is the one moment in the text where Mollie speaks directly, as she becomes instead the object of the middle-class characters’ discussions. Collet’s refusal or inability to create a voice for the young girl perhaps complicates Ross’s assertion of the ‘aural’ emphasis of women’s slum work, in which female investigators and philanthropists reported conversations and quoted their subjects ‘at length’, regarding it a ‘solemn obligation to give a voice to disenfranchised labouring poor women’.³⁰ This act of silencing by Collet can be placed in relationship with the similar narrative strategy of Webb, as the two investigators reformulate the stories of working women to fit their own agendas, but also with Collet’s study ‘Women’s Work’, which likewise uses little direct quotation from its working-class female sources.

It transpires that Mollie inherited her alcoholism from her mother — a secret that was kept from her husband before he married her. Rust informs Marian that

about three months after we were married I came home to our cottage at Bow and found my wife with her, both — as you saw her the other night. Her mother had been in Colney Hatch for several months, insane through drink. She had been out for a few days cured for a time, had found out where Mollie was staying, and had celebrated the event. She is such a gentle loving hearted girl and yet she is doomed, a victim of hereditary disease. (p. 23)

While Rust cares for Mollie, he assures Marian that had he known of ‘that hereditary curse’ he would not have married her (p. 24). With his reference to the infamous lunatic asylum ‘Colney Hatch’, this ‘curse’ of Mollie’s appears to be both alcohol dependency and mental degeneration, and thus Collet’s narrative now upholds Ross’s assessment of the treatment of alcoholic working-class women by the middle classes:

Drinking (and therefore often heavy-pawning) wives were subject to literal battering by their husbands and to figurative battering by the poor-law, the COS, and other agencies. Mothers’ heavy drinking and their concomitant neglect and mismanagement of their infants figure in many Old Bailey cases, for their dereliction had dire consequences for their families.³¹

In Collet’s text these consequences are expanded, from their impact on the family unit to the nation as a whole. Rust’s revulsion at his diseased wife sees him subscribe to the sort of eugenicist theories explored by Karl Pearson in his essay ‘The Woman’s Question’, in which Pearson asks:

Shall those who are diseased, shall those who are nighest to the brute, have the right to reproduce their like? Shall the reckless, the idle, be they poor or wealthy, those who follow mere instinct without reason, be the parents of the future generations? Shall the consumptive father not be socially branded when he hands down misery to his offspring, and inefficient citizens to the state? It is difficult to conceive any greater race crime.³²

In ‘Undercurrents’, Mollie’s disease comes from within, and its transmission via reproduction is represented as a ‘race crime’. The working-class female body is thus the symbol of social contagion and degeneration for Collet, and Rust’s horror at Mollie’s pregnancy emphasizes the idea that this contagion is the inevitable biological heritage of the working classes: ‘and now that she is expecting to become a mother she is sore at the horror that I feel at having caused one more wretched being to drag out a miserable existence. God help them both!’ (p. 24).

It is this grotesque caricature of working-class motherhood that enables Marian to resolve her own uncertainties about her place in society, as she takes up Mollie’s cause in an effort to restore the young woman’s innocence and redeem her for her husband. Although Marian had previously doubted her maternal capabilities, she is now transformed into a mother for the working classes — an idea which Rust emphasizes when he says ‘Mollie will never be afraid of you, Miss Bligh, when she knows what you have done for us. You have made life worth living again’ (p. 25). Marian’s position in the public sphere would therefore seem to be secured by the roles of civic contribution and

motherhood, as the single middle-class woman is depicted as naturally suited to the care of the poor.

Nevertheless, this depiction is undermined by the return of Mollie's alcoholism, which suggests the ultimate futility of Marian's maternal approach to the East End and its inhabitants, and once again highlights her uncertain position in public society. It also reaffirms the interpretation of Mollie as the nightmare mother of the story. The earlier assessment by Rust that Mollie is 'doomed' is substantiated, as the cycle of working-class degeneration is played out before the reader (p. 23). Collet's insistence on the hopelessness of Mollie's case thus prepares us for the girl's death and the replacement of the corrupt mother with the pure mother in the form of Marian. The threat posed to 'civilised' society by Mollie's contaminated yet fertile body is seemingly expelled by the factory girl's sudden and quick demise, which sees Collet abruptly announce that 'the end was drawing near. Mollie lived but a few days after the birth of her child' (p. 26). This hasty disposal of Mollie further illustrates the problematic relationship between the middle- and working-class women in Collet's text. While Mollie's disruptive and dangerous presence validates Marian's own work in East London, the factory girl must ultimately be written out of the story if the narrative of a racially and socially pure womanhood is to survive.

Nonetheless, the birth and survival of Rust's and Mollie's baby — a 'puny wizened little thing' whose intelligence would 'always be wanting' (p. 27) — maintains the fear of a degenerate society, as it appears to have inherited what Frances Russell (the wife of former Prime Minister John Russell) termed in her 1890 article 'A Neglected Path to Greatness' as 'the legacies of some forgotten ancestor that rise up to remind us of their past sins'.³³ It is with this baby's continued and uneasy existence in 'Undercurrents' that Marian's public role shifts again from civic mother — as seen with her attempted care of Mollie — to natural, biological mother, where her 'pure' offspring with Rust will undo the social damage of Mollie's contaminated legacy. Motherhood thus becomes a public service here, as a more insidious set of fantasies, which have lurked beneath the determinism of both Webb and Collet, come to the surface. The middle-class woman is no longer idolized for her redeeming influence, but for her potential as the mother of the race. Rust's declaration to Marian after the death of his wife draws out this new interpretation of the educated woman's position in society, as once again the academic becomes the

mouthpiece for the eugenicist cause, with his statement ‘men need wives like you and the race mothers’ (p. 29).

Likewise, the conclusion of ‘Undercurrents’ also reveals the educated working woman’s dependency on the eugenicist narrative for social acceptance. As Marian and Rust confess their love for each other, Marian’s previously plain body is invested with a ‘new beauty and meaning’ (p. 30). That this ‘new meaning’ is Marian’s fertility is underlined by the setting of their romantic confession in Miss Jenner’s nursery, where Mollie’s disabled child watches on. Crucially, the setting of the nursery enables a double justification of the middle-class woman in the public sphere — as a mother to the poor and degraded (since it is Miss Jenner who cares for Mollie’s baby), but also as a mother of culture and civilization, since the heroine of the story sets out to restore the damaged and ‘handicapped’ lineage of the middle-class man (p. 32). By taking the place of the East End mother, Marian thus resolves her hitherto ambiguous position in late-Victorian society. The duty of the professional woman is presented by Collet as the biological reproduction of educated, cultured citizens, in a manner that again corresponds with the arguments made by Frances Russell that

it is a grander privilege than we know, to be able thus to contribute something towards the progress of mankind, by the evolution of the higher forms of humanity, and a severe repression of all that is lowest in the type.³⁴

With the killing off of Mollie, Collet can be seen to engage in this ‘severe repression’ of a degraded East End community, whose fate was determined from the outset. Coupled with Mollie’s replacement by Miss Jenner and Marian, the female investigator reveals that the public role of the middle-class woman can only be justified via fantasies of ‘pure’ motherhood and nightmares of a socially and racially degenerate East London.

III

Considered by many as part of the newly professionalized generation of female slum workers, Webb and Collet in ‘Pages’ and ‘Undercurrents’ in fact offer a more equivocal account of their investigations of East London. Fluctuating between different models of female authority in their attempts to depict the East End as a suitable arena of work for the middle-class woman, the east of the city as imagined by Webb and Collet becomes a highly contradictory, inconsistent space. Although Webb insists on the ultimate

degradation of the women of Mrs Moses's workshop, throughout the text her 'scientific' investigation is disrupted by her sense of connection with the workers, which emphasizes her similarities with them. Collet also appears to opt for a scientific account of the relationship between her heroine Marian and East London, as she concludes her story with the eugenicist fantasy of middle-class motherhood as the solution to the problems of poverty and vice. Yet Collet's references at the end of 'Undercurrents' to Miss Jenner and her rearing of Mollie's disabled child also maintain a continued belief in the power of civic motherhood to nurture middle-class values within the working classes. The presence of both biological and civic motherhood in Collet's conclusion thus mirrors and develops the inconsistencies of Webb's article, and suggests the potency of both narratives of influence and distance for the female social investigator when seeking to imagine her place in the East End of the late nineteenth century.

¹ See, for example, Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (London: Virago Press, 1992); Ellen Ross, *Slum Travelers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation and the City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

² Ross, *Slum Travelers*, p. 1.

³ For arguments about women's increased professionalization, see Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*. For the relationship between women's slum work and women's suffrage, see Ross, *Slum Travelers* and *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London 1870–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁴ Beatrice Webb, 'Pages from a Work-Girl's Diary', *Nineteenth Century*, 24 (September 1888), 301–14. While Collet never saw 'Undercurrents' published in her lifetime, it has since been printed in full in Bouwe Postmus, 'Clara Collet's Clairvoyance', *Gissing Journal*, 31.4 (1995), 8–32. Further references to these editions are given after quotations in the text. The exact date of composition of 'Undercurrents' is unknown, but Postmus offers a compelling argument for the story to have been written between 1891 and 1894. A copy of the manuscript is available in the University of Warwick's Modern Record Centre (Collet MSS 29/3/13/4 [1–41]).

⁵ Seth Koven, 'Borderlands: Women, Voluntary Action, and Child Welfare in Britain, 1840–1914', in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, ed. by Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 94–135; Angeliqne Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁶ Ross, *Love and Toil*.

⁷ These changes mainly consist of alterations made to individual names to protect Webb against libel suits, as well as the excision of a discussion of incest, which will be analysed later in this essay. In transforming her notes into ‘Pages’, Webb also added more description of the East End scene and of some of the people she encountered, but the tone and experiences of the two pieces are essentially the same.

⁸ Sarah Tooley, ‘The Growth of a Socialist: An Interview with Mrs Sidney Webb’, *Young Woman* (February 1895), p. 148, quoted in Koven, *Slumming*, p. 156.

⁹ See Ross, *Love and Toil*.

¹⁰ Pamela Gilbert, ‘Introduction’, in *Imagined Londons*, ed. by Pamela Gilbert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 1–11 (p. 1).

¹¹ See, for example, Deborah Epstein Nord, *The Apprenticeship of Beatrice Webb* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), as well as David Feldman’s broader discussion of the topic in this issue.

¹² Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (London: Longmans, 1926; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 340 (emphasis in original).

¹³ Nord, *Apprenticeship of Beatrice Webb*, p. 174.

¹⁴ Webb, *The Diaries of Beatrice Webb: Volume I 1873–1892, Glitter Around and Darkness Within*, ed. by Norman MacKenzie and Jeanne MacKenzie (London: Virago Press, 1982), p. 241.

¹⁵ Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, p.11.

¹⁶ Webb, *Diaries*, p. 134.

¹⁷ Webb, *Diaries*, p. 138.

¹⁸ Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Webb, *Diaries*, p. 244; ‘Pages’, pp. 305–06.

²⁰ Andrew Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Inquiry into the Condition of the Abject Poor* (London: Cass, 1970; repr. London: Clarke, 1883).

²¹ Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, pp. 132–33.

²² Arnold White, ‘The Nomad Poor of London’, *Contemporary Review*, 47 (May 1885), 714–26 (p. 715).

²³ Jane Miller, *Seductions: Studies in Reading and Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

²⁴ Although it is never clearly stated what Marian does for a living, her connection with East End settlement projects throughout the story as well as references to her work as ‘men’s work’ (p. 9) suggests that the heroine is probably involved with some kind of social investigation or analysis in a manner similar to that of the author.

²⁵ Collet, *Educated Working Women: Essays on the Economic Position of Women Workers in the Middle Classes* (London: King, 1902).

²⁶ Anon, ‘The Glorified Spinster’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 58 (1888), 371–76 (p. 374); ‘Undercurrents’, p. 10.

²⁷ Anon, ‘Glorified Spinster’, p. 373.

²⁸ Koven, ‘Borderlands’, p. 108.

²⁹ Collet, 'Women's Work', in *Labour and Life of the People*, ed. by Charles Booth, 3rd edn (London: Williams and Northgate, 1891), pp. 406-81 (p. 472).

³⁰ Ross, *Love and Toil*, p. 20. See also Ross, *Slum Travelers*, p. 14.

³¹ Ross, *Love and Toil*, p. 71.

³² Karl Pearson, 'The Woman's Question', in *The Ethic of Freethought: A Selection of Essays and Lectures* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1888), pp. 370-94 (p. 391).

³³ Frances Russell, 'A Neglected Path to Greatness', *Westminster Review*, 134.1 (1890), 391-95 (p. 392).

³⁴ Russell, 'Neglected Path', p. 395.