The American Veil: Wage Labor, Seclusion, and the Creation of the American Nuclear Family Home

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Abstract

The “home” is undeniably a staple of modern American life and culture. Yet, what constitutes a “home” as opposed to merely a “house” has historically been hotly contested ideological territory; it continues to be so today. In the early to mid-19th century, however, a distinct “Ideology of the Home” was codified whose constellation of symbols and ontological underpinnings would have massive implications for future discourses on gender and the family.[1] This was an ideology constructed to present essentially economic arrangements as morally oriented and provide a cultural basis for the exploitative nature of early wage labor. By imbuing spatial arrangements with a moral character, the Ideology of the Home set the stage for persistent patterns of race, gender, and class-based discrimination and oppression. To understand this assertion, however, we must contextualize it within the broader shifts happening at the turn of the century, particularly in the Urban Northeast. We will thus take New York city as a poignant case study.

Introduction:

The emergence of a distinct “Ideology of the Home” was intertwined with a shift beginning in the late revolutionary period from women being conceived of through the archetype of Eve and original sin, to being conceived of through the archetype of Mary and the spiritual mother. This shift has been described as one from the “Cult of Eve” to the “Cult of Mary.” This shift was in turn marked by the beginnings of a greater societal shift into market capitalism, and from subsistence agriculture to wage labor - the Market Revolution.[2] It was at this time that the “Ideology of the Home” was formulated as a glorification of the secluded abode of the nuclear family as opposed to the broader networks of kin relations that still characterized many people’s lives.[3] Presented as Women’s “sphere,” the home came to be conceptualized as an isolated social formation, a supposedly “natural” refuge from the cutthroat world of the ever-expanding capitalist marketplace.[4]

From then on, the home was to be the feminized moral bastion of American life, where chaste women (recalling Mary) were secluded and thus “protected” from the marketplace, raising their sons to be citizens and future laborers, and their daughters to be “virtuous.”[5] It was at this time that the home came to be defined by women’s “pastoralized” domestic labor, labor that ceased to be recognized as labor at all and was instead presented as simply exuding from a generalized, abstracted, and mythicized womanhood.[6] This notion of the

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[1] I capitalize Ideology of the Home throughout to show that it references a specific constellation of symbols that is historically environed in its emergence, yet which has persisted far beyond that historical moment in its essential character.

[2] See Stanley “Home Life and the Morality of the Market,” 74-96.

[3] I use “the Ideology of the Home” to refer to both the physical/spatial manifestation of the home at this period, as well as its symbolic character. Key to both of these aspects is the idea of the home as the centralized location of the nuclear family and of woman’s “sphere.”

[4] See Boydston “The Pastoralization of Housework,” 112-121.

[5] See Bloch “The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America,” 37–58. Throughout the 19th century, we begin to see “virtue” employed in relation to women almost exclusively to denote chastity, which at this period became irrevocably tied to their seclusion in the home.

[6] See Boydston “The Pastoralization of Housework,” 112-121. It was at this time that women went from being conceptualized as the “helpmeet” or “goodwife” to the “mother.” In other words, women went from being conceptually attached in at least some way to their role as laborers, to being entirely subsumed under a concept of natural maternity and labor that ceased to be considered labor.

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home held implicit in it a false dichotomy between a masculinized market, where wage labor is performed, and a secluded, feminized home.[7] In the Ideology of the Home, women's labor increasingly came to be conceived of as merely a natural excretion from a simultaneously romanticized and devalued femininity – women were divine and morally strong, but expected not to labor for a wage, increasingly the primary arbiter of social value. Those women who sold their labor, or in any way overtly ventured into the world of the market, were considered unnatural and demonized, in a way similar to witches in the colonial era, for threatening the stability of the Ideology of the Home.[8]

Previous Scholarship

Scholarship on the home as a symbolic tool has yielded a wide and varied body of literature. Jeanne Boydston's analyses in "The Pastoralization of Housework" and *Home and Work* tied many of these currents together in cohesive analyses that tackled multiple aspects of this process. Elucidating the ways in which The Ideology of the Home functions to obscure and devalue women's labor, she has been able to synthesize many of the currents underlying this process. In her analysis, the Ideology of the Home is presented as a class bridging response to the instability of wage labor, with the pastoralization of women's work understood as an aspect of the attempt to present the wage as the "neutral [and universal] index of economic value."[9] In her book *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York*, Christine Stansell likewise articulates the many ways in which the Ideology of the Home, and the pastoralization of women's labor, has led to the demonization of lower class women unable or unwilling to align with the norms of domesticity implied in the Ideology of the Home.[10]

In each of these analyses, and in the literature as a whole, the spatial and architectural aspects of the home are subordinated to what are seen as the more significant cultural currents that construct the home ideologically. The home is conceptualized almost entirely symbolically. The spatial constraints of domestic womanhood are seen primarily as a byproduct of the more symbolic attempt to bifurcate home and marketplace, such that the cutthroat logic of the market, and the preeminence of wage labor, could be justified, and so that masculine control could be reasserted. Furthermore, the otherization of those unable to live up to these norms is seen as a byproduct of what is presented as an already solidified cultural construction - class and race inequality is seen as external to the formulation of the Ideology of the Home.

I argue that this model must be expanded and modified, and that the spatial must not be subordinated to the cultural but must rather be placed in a dynamic relationship with it. Centrally, I argue that the pre-existing scholarship fails to recognize the function of the Ideology of the Home in disguising an immanent contradiction in the urban environment of early 19th century America. The emergent capitalism of the 19th century required the housing of a large labor pool which could be paid wages essentially below subsistence. This required spatial constructions such as the tenement to be the predominating forms of housing for the majority of urban laborers as they were cheap and could function at incredibly high densities. However, these were also housing situations which directly undermined the preeminence and masculinization of the wage by continuing to facilitate women's engagement in the market and in currency free reciprocity exchange. Thus, the Ideology of the home plays the direct role of disguising this contradiction by presenting the seclusion of women as moral, and by extension women who are not secluded as immoral – a class signifier is transformed into a moral signifier. Thus, those who directly facilitated the emergence of capitalism are demonized as a way of presenting the privations of early wage labor as an individual moral failing. The Ideology of the Home likewise

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[7] See Boydston "The Woman Who Wasn't There," 183- 206. This separation simply did not exist. As has been shown by Boydston and others. Women at this time were very much a part of the market, transforming the raw wages of their husbands into usable goods, labor which made possible the low wages paid at the time, and not uncommonly performing wage labor themselves.

[8] See Gamber "Tarnished Labor," 26-28; Stansell *City of Women* 11-24; and Boydston "The Woman Who Wasn't There," 183-206.

[9] See Boydston "The Pastoralization of Housework," 120.

[10] See Stansell *City of Women.*

more often than not implicates these women in racist schema wherein their economic difficulties are presented as characteristic of an innate racial inferiority.

Thus, the urban environment of the 19th century directly prompted the construction of the Ideology of the Home as a way to normalize and uphold the class stratification necessary to the emergence of capitalism. The spatial aspects of the home and the demonization of women existing outside that spatial construction are not merely a byproduct of the ideology, but the very core of that ideology. This discovery entails a restructuring of the prominent narratives of causation presented by scholars such as Stansell and Boydston. In such a restructured model of causation, the demonization of the lower-class immigrant women who made capitalism possible served to legitimize the exploitative character of early wage labor. The Ideology of the Home then presents itself as a strong cultural ethos around which this process could be legitimized – it is necessarily a post-facto formulation. The ability to seclude women in the nuclear family home was a way to draw a line both symbolic and physical between Anglo White women and the growing immigrant and slave populations – this line became a logic of exploitation. In this emerging capitalist system, the class war was fought over women's bodies, and the physical structure of the home was the primary weapon.

An Imperative to Segregate

As has been repeatedly pointed out in previous scholarship, the seclusion of women and the devaluation of women's labor provided a key steppingstone to the devaluation of all forms of labor not performed in pursuance of a wage.[11] The pastoralization of women's labor is understood as the first step in a pattern that would unfold throughout the rest of the 19th century, wherein all labor performed in pursuance of barter/reciprocal exchange became symbolically feminized and thus devalued, conversely elevating and masculinizing the wage as the preeminent form of family maintenance.[12] It has been likewise shown that the pastoralization of women's labor served early capitalists by allowing them to pay wages that were in fact below subsistence. They were able to do this because of women's unremunerated labor, which filled in the gaps and performed the significant labor of turning the wage into actually consumable products – thus subsidizing the emergence of wage labor and by extension capitalism.[13] The Ideology of the Home also paved the way for the development of capitalism by morally castigating anybody involved in non-capitalist modes of exchange and production – predominately lower-class women in tenements.

Upon an analysis of the advice literature and travel journalism of the time, we can see the ways spatial arrangements in which women are not secluded, and where the line between market and home are more overtly blurred, are presented. These were primarily the boardinghouse and the tenement. To understand these dynamics, it will be helpful to hone-in specifically on what can be seen as a primary nexus of these many interlocking social currents in the early 19th century – New York.

During this period, in the first decades of the 19th century, urbanization and immigration were bringing huge numbers of people into the ports of New York. Between 1800 and 1820, New York City's population would more than double from 60,000 to 123,000 people.[14] Over the next decade, its population would go on to double again.[15] The vast majority of the newcomers to the city were new immigrants from Western Europe such as Germany, Ireland, and England.[16] However, there was also a burgeoning urban community largely composed of the sons of agriculturalist patriarchs whose family lands were becoming increasingly fragmented – this group often formed the basis of an emergent middle-class.[17]

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[11] See Boydston "The Woman Who Wasn't There."
[12] See Boydston "The Woman Who Wasn't There."
[13] See Boydston "The Pastoralization of Housework," 113.
[14] See Stansell *City of Women,* 4-10.
[15] See Stansell *City of Women,* 4-10.
[16] See Stansell *City of Women,* 4-10.
[17] See Stansell *City of Women,* 4-10.

America's neutrality in the European wars earlier in the century brought New York's merchant capitalists massive wealth and set the groundwork for a larger capitalist economy. However, through the confluence of many different circumstances, particularly America's disastrous involvement in the war of 1812 and a significant influx of immigrants, New York saw at this time a significant spike in urban poverty, and the large-scale destruction of the self-sustaining household.[18] New York artisans, inspired in part by the experiments of New England's newfangled industrial capitalists, were industrializing their practices and bringing wage labor to the forefront of society. This increasing urbanization and industrialization increasingly tied subsistence to the wage. With the environment of the city and the emergence of wage labor making the self-sustaining household impossible, women were ever more forced to work as wage laborers.

For these new immigrants and migrants, housing as well was a distinct issue. The resurgence of the use of the Victorian term "vagrant" displays this issue, with many new migrants being pushed to houselessness.[19] However, many others found homes in tenements, a housing arrangement relatively new to this period of the rising city, and boardinghouses, an older housing arrangement usually housing more affluent residents who were nonetheless either unwilling or unable to bend to the Ideology of the Home. Thus, the city of the early 19th century is one in which women were less secluded and more involved in wage-labor than many would have liked to admit.

Figure 1: The proprietor of "the boardinghouse where you're expected to make love to the landlady." From Thomas Butler Gunn's "Physiology of New York Boardinghouses.

Both the boardinghouse and the tenement of course came to be thoroughly demonized. Tenements were regularly attacked as homes of licentiousness, where moral impropriety and squalor supposedly ran rampant.[20] Unsurprisingly, this moral condemnation by an upper-class journalistic elite focused predominantly on women. Progressive movements throughout the 19th century, themselves often composed of a female vanguard, regularly attacked the women of tenements for what was viewed as an individual moral failing to live up to the Ideology of the Home.[21] Men also routinely had their masculinity cast in doubt because of their supposed

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[18]See Stansell *City of Women*, 10 and Boydston "The Pastoralization of Housework." The American home prior to the turn of the century was very different than what the Ideology of the Home would later assert it should be (ironically often with an appeal to "tradition"). These were homes in which both women and men participated in market exchange, and where the labor of each was considered valid (though of course patriarchal hierarchy and coverture still maintained their cultural prominence). These were households which rarely if ever were engaged in wage labor, and who remained tied into close networks of community both kin and non-kin, through social and economic bonds meant to help attain subsistence.

[19] See Stansell *City of Women*, 5. The mayor of New York, Richard Varick, in 1788 said "Vagrants multiply on our hands to an amazing degree."

[20] See Riis *How the Other Half Live* 8, 234-240. Tenements were by no means paradises, the issues that Riis pointed out almost a century later were by no means a new formulation. Tenements were generally more susceptible to epidemic disease, and prostitution was by no means unheard of in and around tenements. However, what we know now to be issues of poverty, were by social reformers such as Riis continually presented as inherent to either the spatial arrangements in which the people were enmeshed, or the innate characteristics of those people.

[21] See Stansell *City of Women.*

inability to sufficiently sequester their wives and daughters and create the expected gendered separation between home and marketplace.[22] These individual 'failures' were often seen as indicative of inherent racial characteristics.

Figure 2 The boardinghouse keepers "marriable daughter" depicted ensnaring men in her "man trap." From Thomas Butler Gunn's *"Physiology of New York Boardinghouses.*

Boardinghouses were similarly attacked as a housing arrangement that violated both the sexual segregation and pastoralization of women's work implicit in the Ideology of the Home. Boardinghouse keepers, essentially entirely women, were attacked and stereotyped as simultaneously insatiably sexual and unacceptably masculine, demonized for "selling" domestic labor that was expected to be given freely.[23] In the travel journalism of the early 19th century, boardinghouse keepers, who were often widows or women otherwise pushed to sell their domestic labor, are regularly referred to through unflattering ethnic stereotypes.[24] As Thomas Butler Gunn says to describe a German boardinghouse keeper in *Physiology of New York Boardinghouses,* "She is equally bulky in appearance…and sits in her chair in a rather masculine position." [25] Gunn later describes a Jewish boardinghouse keeper by saying "She is a large woman, with a full face, a

Figure 3 The boardinghouse keeper of "the boardinghouse where the land-lady drinks." From Thomas Butler Gunn's *"Physiology of New York Boardinghouses.*

[22] See Boydston "The Pastoralization of Housework." This is a pattern with a history stretching back to the emergence of racial categories in the 16th century, where non-white groups came to be defined and Orientalized by the cultural norms of womanhood in those societies. These women were portrayed as more licentious, more able to endure pain, more able to do agricultural labor than White women, something used to castigate the men in those societies as supposedly unable to maintain gender hierarchies and European norms of gendered behavior.
[23] See Gamber "Tarnished Labor"
[24] See Gamber "Tarnished Labor"
[25] See Gunn "Physiology of New York Boardinghouses," 257 and Gamber "Tarnished Labor."

hooky nose, and speculative eyes, like a Jewish version of Mrs. Trollope's *Widow Barnaby."*[26] Native born boardinghouse keepers were shielded in some ways from the censure reserved for immigrant boardinghouse

Figure 4 The bestial boardinghouse keeper of "The Dirty Boardinghouse." From Thomas Butler Gunn's *"Physiology of New York Boardinghouses.*

keepers, but the social danger they were seen to pose seemingly overrode their ethnic identity in most cases.

Boardinghouse keepers were routinely attacked for perceived gluttony, something attached to their portrayal as simultaneously overly masculine and lacking sexual propriety, and ultimately stemming from the fact that they were seen as monetizing their domestic labor.[27] As we see in figures 1-4, female boardinghouse keepers, for contradicting the pastoralization of housework, were alternately depicted as bestial, gluttonous, and unrestrained sexually. Generally, the poorer and more immigrant centered the boardinghouse, the less favorable its mistress is portrayed. However, for violating the norms of the Ideology of the Home, there remained a baseline of general opprobrium from which most women could not escape. As Jeanne Boydston says, "women remained in the labor force, but always on the terms of outsiders having to make anew the case for their seriousness, their respectability, and their economic contribution."[28]

These housing arrangements, however, were necessary for the development of wage labor in cities such as New York. These forms of housing were in fact the primary mode of living practiced in the majority of cities and made possible the housing of the vast labor pool necessary for the growth of capitalism.[29] Even many of the most forceful cultural agents opposed to these institutions had at some point lived in a boardinghouse or, less commonly, a tenement. Walt Whitman, one of the most forceful opponents of the boardinghouse and staunch proponents of the home as the only moral form of residency, was himself never married, and lived in many boardinghouses throughout his life.[30] Why then was this socio-spatial arrangement, which was so necessary to the growth of wage labor, so thoroughly demonized?

This is because while tenements and boardinghouses were necessary in their physical manifestation to the growth of wage labor, their spatial qualities (in particular tenements) presented ideological threats to the cultural consensus necessary for its growth. In the case of boardinghouses, women's domestic labor was itself wage labor, thus threatening the pastoralization of women's labor that allowed for the solidification of the importance of the wage-earning male breadwinner. As well, in boardinghouses, women and men often mingled

[26] See Gunn "Physiology of New York Boardinghouses," 104 and Gamber "Tarnished Labor."
[27] Gamber "Tarnished Labor."
[28] Boydston, "The Woman Who Wasn't There," 206
[29] See Gamber "Tarnished Labor" and Graeber "Debt, Service, and the Origins of Capitalism."
[30] See Roberts "A Map of Whitman's Washington Boarding Houses and Work Places"

in much closer circumstances and on much more equal footing than was considered acceptable in the Ideology of the Home. [31]

In the case of the tenement, women simply could not be constrained to the home, and were by necessity overtly involved in the market, once again threatening the pastoralization of women's labor. Furthermore, in the tenement, kin networks and currency free exchange remained significant if not predominant modes of economic arrangement. Reciprocity exchange and gift giving, it remains clear on an analysis of the few personal accounts of women residing in tenements at this time, remained prevalent. Even in middle class households the practice of female gift giving, though in many ways sucked of its economic importance due to the physical and social constraints of the Ideology of the Home, remained an important social ritual. This posed a threat to the capitalist assertion of the ultimate status of the wage. Thus, tenements and boardinghouses came to be designated as commercial, as embedded in the market in a way the home was supposedly not, implicating the women who lived there as being unnaturally tied into the market in way that was morally unacceptable. This contact with the market was seen as both masculinizing and implicating women in licentiousness through the contact in which it put them with non-kin men. In such a way, commentators of the time were able to conflate the structural and the economic with the moral, thus disguising the stratification in property and power fundamental to the emergence of capitalism.

However, though it would be easy to perceive this as a unilineal process of causation, with the Ideology of the Home coming first and the demonization of alternative forms of housing coming second (as indeed many do), I instead assert that the Ideology of the Home was constructed in direct response to the social dynamics introduced by these forms of housing, particularly the tenement. This hierarchy of housing arrangements, with those in which women were given the most agency being at the bottom, was key to the process of imbuing a moral character in the spatial, with those spaces in which women were least constrained being considered the most morally reprehensible. In this way, the home became the American veil: the more complete the woman's separation from the world of the market the more she was lauded as "virtuous" and the more the men in her life were able to display their status. But the fact that the home remained the reality of only a very small group of merchant capitalists, while tenements proliferated, points to the Ideology of the Home coming not first, but in reaction to these housing arrangements – a moral condemnation that disguised an economic underpinning.

These housing arrangements, and the ways in which the women in them came to be involved in the market and in wage labor, were a primary causational link in the web of cultural processes that would lead to the solidification of the Ideology of the Home. To live in tenements or boardinghouses came to be presented as deviance, with their presentation in media continually connected to undertones of rampant sexuality and a lack of moral restraint. In tenements, women more often participated in wage labor, they lived in close proximity to other men and women, and they regularly engaged in currency free exchange. Each of these was a clear threat to both patriarchy and the emerging capitalist system. Thus, the home, where women could be secluded and their labor devalued, emerged as something imbued with a moral character that was in turn a class and race-based symbol. The demonization of women unable to secluded, and the emasculation of men unable to force seclusion on the women around them, served the purpose of justifying wealth stratification and racial hierarchies as an outgrowth of these implicit moral structures, and turned the restrictions of patriarchy and capitalism into moral imperatives.[32]

We can see a clear prototype of these dynamics not too far away, in the American South. A key part of perpetuating the power dynamics of slavery was an assertion by the White human trafficker of control over the bodies of enslaved people, particularly enslaved women. As enslaved people were robbed of their ability to form homes, have privacy, or have control over their own bodies, White male slave owners built up giant

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[31] See Gamber "Tarnished Labor."

[32] See Wright *Building a Dream,* 0-34. The use of housing to denote predestined moral superiority has roots in the early colonies, where those with greater social and economic status lived in the grandest and most well build residences as a sign of an economic superiority thought to inherently flow out of a predestined moral superiority.

physical and cultural constructions (the plantation house), where their ability to seclude their wives and daughters was a direct assertion of racial superiority and power, and a way to justify a fundamentally immoral situation. The plantation house became the symbolic dike that allowed slave owners to shield their sense of morality from the depravity of their occupation. However, no matter how ornate the plantation house's wainscotting was, it could never truly hide the contradiction immanent in the slave owner's position. No matter how much the slave owner built up his symbols of honor and grandeur, the fact remained that his very existence as a slave owner and as an elite was predicated on the position of the slave – without the slave the 'master' is nothing. As poor female immigrants to the city were forced to sell their labor and live in tenements or boardinghouses, the upper- and middle-class similarly asserted their superiority by secluding their women and simultaneously exalting the home and demonizing the tenement and boardinghouse. However, this was an emergent capitalist class whose very existence was predicated on a subjugated subaltern femininity.

Irish women being portrayed in the pseudo-scientific literature of the time, were often done so using many of the same racist tropes as those used to portray Black women. Like Black women, Irish women supposedly felt less pain, were less sexually modest, and were more "ape like" than other White women. The ideology of the home was key to these racial generalizations, as it created a spatial entity to codify the moral condemnation, and thus economic exploitation, of those women unable to be secluded within the nuclear family. Like enslaved women, women living in tenements and boardinghouses were not merely seen as lower class, but had a moral character attached to them due to their form of housing – their contact with wage labor and with men outside their families came to be portrayed as indicative of racial difference. However, unlike enslaved women, the demonization of Irish and other immigrant women was not used to justify a system of enslavement, but the new system of urban wage labor.

Conclusion

Understanding the ways in which the power dynamics of the plantation home extended beyond the American south, and how these dynamics were deeply embedded in the context of Antebellum patriarchy, is crucial to understanding the ways in which the Ideology of the Home has persisted and made itself malleable in the face of increasing challenges to its legitimacy. Furthermore, the deep similarities between the plantation house and the urban home in terms of the roles they played in legitimizing and creating a moral *raison d'etre* for arbitrary hierarchies, points to an understanding of early wage labor as something operating on a much less "free" logic than some would like to imagine.

As owning a home increasingly becomes an impossibility for many, understanding the symbolically and ideologically rooted race, class, and gender ramifications of unequally distributed home ownership will undoubtably be an important subject for future research. As we reckon with questions such as this and others related to the spatial manifestations of White supremacy and patriarchy, the analytical framework set out here and in similar research has the capacity to be highly useful. In future research, by understanding the Ideology of the Home in such a way, we may use this framework to approach a study of mobility justice from a historically centered feminist perspective in a way that has not yet been attempted.

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