CHAPTER THREE

PUTTING ON STYLE

In the twentieth century, youth is regarded as a distinctive stage of life, a time of self-expression and experimentation before the experience of marriage, children, and work. Clearly applicable to middle-class teen-agers, who can nurture a separate culture in high schools and colleges, this notion of youth may not seem relevant to the working-class adolescents of 1900, who felt the pinch of financial responsibility at an early age and subordinated individual desires to the family’s survival. Nevertheless, working-class youth spent much of their leisure apart from their families and enjoyed greater social freedom than their parents or married siblings, especially married women. Despite maternal efforts to make the home a place of recreation, they fled the tenements for the streets, dance halls, and theaters, generally bypassing their fathers’ saloons and lodges. Adolescents formed social clubs, organized entertainments, and patronized new commercial amusements, shaping, in effect, a working-class youth culture expressed through leisure activity.

Young working-class men had a long history of creating organizations for their own sociability. Militias and volunteer fire companies, for example, provided a structure for the bachelor subcultures of the mid-nineteenth century. By the 1890’s, gangs and social clubs had taken over this function. Certain forms of commercial recreation in the nineteenth century, such as pool halls, billiard parlors, and dime museums, were also identified with unmarried men, particularly the lodging-house population. The pattern of age segregation among

men continued after 1900; George Bevans found that young workingmen went chiefly to theaters, dances, poolrooms, and clubs while their fathers sought the camaraderie of saloons and lodges.

Single women in New York also pursued a social life distinct from their working-class parents’, but their search for pleasure in public forms of recreation was shaped not only by long-standing patterns of culture and social organization but by new conditions of family life, work, and commercialized leisure in the city. The alluring world of urban amusements drew young women away from the ugliness of tenement life and the treadmill of work. Not content with quiet recreation in the home, they sought adventure in dance halls, cheap theaters, amusement parks, excursion boats, and picnic grounds. Putting on finery, promenading the streets, and staying late at amusement resorts became an important cultural style for many working women. Entrepreneurs sought ways to increase female participation in commercialized recreation, encouraging women’s fancy dress, slangy speech, and provocative public behavior, as we shall see in later chapters. These cultural forms were not simply imposed on working-class female consumers by the emergent entertainment industry, however, but were developed and articulated as well by the young women themselves. Without doubt, amusement entrepreneurs capitalized on female fads and fancies, constructing desires as well as responding to them. Nevertheless, working women and men created their own forms of activity that broadly structured their social relationships and expressed a distinctive constellation of values and concerns. This process is most apparent in two noncommercial forms of recreation, the streets and social clubs, which working-class youth colonized as their own social spaces.

SOCIAL LIFE IN THE STREETS

The city streets were public conduits of sociability and free expression for all working-class people, avenues for protest, celebration, and amusement. Still, children and young people claimed ownership of the streets, despite intensified efforts by police and reformers to eradicate unruly revelry and unsanctioned behavior from the mid-century onward. Young working-class women throughout the nineteenth century were among those who flocked
to the streets in pursuit of pleasure and amusement, using public
spaces for flamboyant assertion. Although such “rowdy girls” had
long been targets of public commentary for their supposed immor-
ality and wanton behavior, young women continued to seek the
streets to search for men, have a good time, and display their clothes
and style in a public arena.³

Working-class girls were more supervised than boys, whose
choice of activities was seemingly endless: exploring the neigh-
borhoods, scavenging in alleys, shooting craps, playing baseball,
masterminding petty robberies, lighting election night bonfires,
chasing ambulances, harassing peddlars. Gang organizations were
rampant throughout the working-class districts of the city, where
groups of boys held sway over specific blocks, fighting interlopers
and rival gangs.⁴ Although girls did not enjoy this level of activity
and organization, the streets offered countless diversions. As Sophie
Ruskay recalled, “We shared the life of the street unhampered by
our parents who were too busy to try to mold us into a more respect-
able pattern.”⁵ Even when saddled with minders or younger sibling,
girls could still play sidewalk games, chat with friends, revel in the
city’s sights and sounds, or gather around itinerant musicians to try
out their dancing skill. Girls did not form their own gangs, but some
of the more adventurous joined in the boys’ fun, roaming the streets
and playing tricks on passers-by. As one study noted, “individual
girls are frequently attached to boys’ gangs and are sometimes real
actors in the gang-government.”⁶ More important, the streets were
alternative environments that taught children a repertoire of man-
ers and mores they did not learn in school. Attitudes toward sexu-
ality, marriage, and women’s work were conveyed in street games
and rhymes.⁷

In their teens, young women and men used the streets as a place
to meet the other sex, to explore nascent sexual feelings, and carry
on flirtations, all outside the watchful eyes and admonitions of par-
ents. “Doing nothing”—small talk, scuffling, joking, and carrying
on—was infused with meaning for working-class youth. With no
supervision but the cop on the beat, young women could be un-
ladylike and unrestrained on street corners and in doorways. To
Maureen Connelly, an Irish immigrant to the Yorkville section of
Manhattan, “fun was standing at the door with boys and girls and
kidding around—this was a big thing in our life—until the po-
liceman came and chased us.”⁸ Some adolescent girls, whom par-
ents and reformers labelled “tough,” spent their evenings on street
corners and in alleys and gang hangouts until late at night. More
respectable young women might promenade the local commercial
streets or parks in a group or with a gentleman friend, enjoying the
walk, window-shopping, and chatting. Each working-class neighbor-
hood had its place to be seen: Eighth Avenue, with its gaudy
movie houses and flashing lights drew crowds of West Side Irish,
German, and native-born youth; the Bowery, Grand Street, and
14th Street attracted the inhabitants of the lower East Side; and
First Avenue near 72nd Street was known as the Czech Broadway to
its promenaders.⁹

SOCIAL CLUBS

The streets offered uninhibited space for youth activity; social clubs
and amusement societies offered an organizational structure. Social
clubs evolved from several traditions of associational life, including
the lodge, political club, and gang. By the late nineteenth century,
street gangs were increasingly being transformed into social or plea-
sure clubs throughout the working-class neighborhoods of Manhat-
tan, as police and reformers cracked down on gang activity. Social
clubs often had the patronage of political associations like Tammany
and were places where budding politicos learned to become part of
the party machinery. As the Civic Journal observed, “To move into
public life under local conditions a man must ‘play monkey’ to the
political hand-organ of his party, and it is a club that turns the
 crank.”¹⁰

With names like the Go-Aheads, the East Side Crashers, the
Round-Back Rangers, and the Limburger Roarers, the clubs ranged
from the respectable to the marginally criminal. University Settle-
ment observed that the social instinct in the lower East Side “[found]
its gratification in countless ‘Pleasure Clubs,’” the height of whose
ambitions is a chowder party in summer and a ball in winter.”¹¹ Clubs
contained approximately twenty-five to fifty members, youths fifteen
to eighteen years of age who attended school or worked in factories
and offices. These clubs usually met once a week in a rented hall,
saloon, or tenement basement to discuss business and organize dances and entertainments. Other nights club members might gather in a cigar store or cafe to drink, smoke, play cards, and gamble.

Young women's involvement in social and pleasure clubs varied. Some joined clubs that functioned like the lodges and associations of older working-class men. The Roumanian Young Folks' Social Club and the Independent Bukowmaer Young Men's and Young Ladies' Benefit Society were typical landsmanschaft organizations of the lower East Side. These proffered mutual assistance, sick benefits, and burial plots while encouraging immigrant youth to remain close to their traditional cultures through sociable gatherings. "We had a social club from our city," recalled Ruth Kaminsky, "We used to go to meetings every second week or meet in our house." 12 However, most young women did not join mutual benefit societies to the same degree as their fathers and brothers. Only saleswomen joined in large numbers, but these associations were usually sponsored by the department stores. The five to ten cents a week other wage-earners customarily spent on insurance and death benefits was often paid into a private insurance company whose function was entirely commercial rather than recreational and communal. 13

More often, youth organizations tended to be oriented toward amusement and mixed-sex sociability rather than mutual aid, education, or political action. Significantly, social clubs were often called "pleasure clubs" by their patrons, to differentiate them from the more serious-minded lodges and benefit societies. As one investigator testified, women's organizations "seem to be largely social; they belong to little societies; they tell me they belong to a 'Heart and Hand Club,' a social club; nothing for the study of their own wage conditions at all." 14 Women were admitted to auxiliaries of young men's pleasure clubs or formed their own, adopting such outrageous names as the Lady Flashers, the Lady Millionaires, and the Lady Liberties of the Fourth Ward. Organizing social clubs was a simple task. "You get together a number of people, you know, youngsters, . . . in the neighborhood and you just open up a social club," recalled Rachel Levin, who lived in the lower East Side. "We set . . . up our own programs," observed Ida Schwartz, a Russian-born milliner who joined a club when she was seventeen. "We made an organization, and we had a little dues, and then we used to make affairs and you made dances and met people, like young people do." 15 Her club was typical of these organizations; its primary aim was to sponsor elaborate social gatherings for itself and rival clubs, hold dances in rented halls, and congregate at the city's picnic parks and beaches.

These single-sex and mixed-sex clubs structured social interaction by engineering the introduction and rendezvous of working-class youth. Schwartz noted that her club was comprised of men and women from school and work, whose friendship often led to marriage: "We were about twenty couples, and then of course when we got older, we were married . . . among the girls." 16 To parents, allowing a daughter to step out with the crowd was more acceptable than permitting her to go out alone on a date. Young women too sought safety in numbers. Around the time that she graduated eighth grade and entered the workforce, Maureen Connelly joined the Friends of Irish Freedom, an ostensibly political organization, but one which, she noted, "was more social than anything else." The group had meetings every Friday night, followed by a dance, which was "the highlight of our lives." She had little interest in what they did for Ireland, but "most of the girls joined—and of course you didn't go with a boy when you were seventeen. They were there and we danced with them and laughed about them, but you didn't take them serious." 17

The importance of social clubs as mediators of urban courtship may also be seen in a short story, "Schadchen's Luck," written by a member of the Henry Street Settlement, Samuel Lewenkrohn. In this story, a matchmaker tries unsuccessfully to bring together two young East Siders, who resist his efforts and demand the freedom to seek a mate of their own choosing. The young man's social club runs a ball, and the woman attends with her girl friends to represent their club. The two meet, he asks her to dance, true love triumphs—and the relieved matchmaker claims to have fulfilled his end of the bargain. 18

The activities that young working-class women pursued in their leisure were largely heterosocial in orientation, directed toward meeting men, dating, romance, and fun. Reformer Belle Israel summed up the attitude of many working girls when she noted, "No amusement is complete in which he is not a factor." 19 At the same
time, it would be misleading to view the consciousness of most young women solely in terms of a desire for marriage and to argue that their leisure activities simply affirmed the world of their fathers, a traditional patriarchal order.

Ambiguously, young women marked out their leisure time not only as an opportunity for romantic entanglement but also as a sphere of autonomy and assertion. The Bachelor Girls Social Club, composed of female mail order clerks at Siegel-Cooper, addressed this paradox when they were accused by several male co-workers of being "manhaters" and of "celebrat[ing] Washington's Birthday without even thinking of a man." The club heatedly responded: "No, we are not married, neither are we men haters, but we believe in woman's rights, and we enjoy our independence and freedom, notwithstanding the fact that if a fair offer came our way we might not [sic] consider it." Young women's desire for social freedom and its identification with leisure activities spilled over into behavior unsanctioned by parents and neighbors, as well as middle-class reformers. Clubs, for example, could be gathering places for sexual experimentation. A club member familiar with the organizational life of young East Yorkers reported to the University Settlement that "in all [clubs] they have kissing all through pleasure time, and use slang language," while in some they "don't behave nice between young ladies." Similarly the street corners and doorways were spaces for kissing, hugging, and fondling, free and easy sexual behavior "which seem[s] quite improper to the 'up-towner,'" but was casually accepted by working-class youth.

CLOTHING, STYLE, AND LEISURE

Streets and social clubs, as well as such commercial forms of amusement as dance halls and theaters, became the spaces in which young women could carve out a cultural style expressing these complex and often contradictory values. It was in leisure that women played with identity, trying on new images and roles, appropriating the cultural forms around them—clothing, music, language—to push at the boundaries of immigrant, working-class life. This public presentation of self was one way to comment upon and mediate the dynamics of urban life and labor—poverty and the magnet of upward mobility, sexual assertion and the maintenance of respectability, daughterly submission and the attractions of autonomy and romance, the grinding workday and the glittering appeal of urban nightlife.

Promenading the streets and going places with the crowd, young working-class women "put on style." Dress was a particularly potent way to display and play with notions of respectability, allure, independence, and status and to assert a distinctive identity and presence. Genteel reformers noted with concern the tendency of young working women to present an appearance fraught with questionable moral and social connotations. Mary Augusta LaSelle lamented the use of low decolletage, gauze stockings, high-heeled shoes, freakish hats, and hair dressed with "rats" and "puffs," or artificial hair pieces—"in too many cases a fantastic imitation of the costly costumes of women of large incomes." To such middle-class observers, working women were seeking upward mobility, dressing like their betters in order to marry into a higher class. This interpretation, while not without foundation, obscures the more complex role of fashion and style in the social life of working women.

Proper clothing in working-class culture traditionally helped to define respectability. As Lillian Betts observed of the workingman, "He, with the mother, has one standard—clothes." Among laboring families hard pressed for income, dress divided itself into two types, work clothes and Sunday clothes. Work clothing necessarily varied with the requirements of job and employer, from the crisp white aprons and caps of waitresses to the hand-me-down garments worn by factory hands. Sunday clothes, however, were visible displays of social standing and self-respect in the rituals of church-going, promenading, and visiting. Appropriate attire was a requirement of social participation. Elena and Gerda Nakov, two impoverished needlewomen, considered "their clothing [to be] so poor that they were ashamed to go out on Sunday—when everybody else put on 'best dresses'—and would sit in their room all day." For newly arrived immigrants, changing one's clothes was the first step in securing a new status as an American. When Rose Fasternak landed at Castle Garden, her brother took her directly to a hat store: "They said in this country you don't go to work without a hat." Clothing was only the palpable aspect of competing cultural
styles among young working-class women. Patterns of speech, manners, levels of schooling, attitudes toward self-improvement, and class consciousness differentiated groups of women beyond the obvious divisions of ethnicity and religion. In workshops, stores, clubs, and dance halls, observers noted the cliquishness of adolescent girls around these considerations. In the moralistic language of one reform committee, “The several floors of a large factory often mean as many degrees of respectability or demoralization” among working women. Journalist Mary Gay Humphreys described the New York girls of the 1890's who took themselves seriously as independent and thoughtful workers, and reflected this view in their public style. Women strikers in a thread-mill, for example, linked fashion—wearing bonnets—to their sense of American identity and class consciousness, contrasting their militancy to Scottish scabs who wore shawls on their heads. Believing in the labor movement’s ideology of self-improvement, organization, and workers’ dignity, these women devoted their leisure to lectures, evening school, political meetings, and union dances. While they sewed their own ball gowns and loved display, they also agreed that ribbons were a “foolish extravagance.”

For other young women, dress became a cultural terrain of pleasure, expressiveness, romance, and autonomy. “A girl must have clothes if she is to go into high society at Ulmer Park or Coney Island or the theatre,” explained Sadie Frowne, a sixteen-year-old garment worker. “A girl who does not dress well is stuck in a corner, even if she is pretty.” Similarly, Minnie saved her earnings in order to “‘blow herself’ to an enormous bunch of new hair, which had transformed her from what she called ‘a back number’ to something dead swell.” As another working woman succinctly put it, “If you want to get any notion took of you, you gotta have some style about you.”

Stylish clothing—a chinchilla coat, a beaded wedding dress, a straw hat with a willow plume—was an aspect of popular culture that particularly tugged at women’s desires. Maria Cichetti lovingly remembers hats and the sense of being “dressed”: “They were so beautiful, those hats. . . . They were so rich. A woman looked so dressed, you know, in the back, with the bustle . . . I wanted to grow up to wear earrings and hats and high heels.” The demands of fashion caused Rose Pasternak to be docked for lateness:

That time they wear the big puffs on the hair, you know, like wigs. Until I put on the girdle—my brother and my cousin used to pull the laces for me, you know—until I fix the hair, till I walked to the place to work. . . . I was ten minutes late, five minutes late. . . . On four dollars a week, I never had a full pay. Many department store clerks, observed a saleswoman, were restrained and sensible in their clothing, but “there are others of us who powder and paint, who bleach our hair, whose bodies suffer for food because every penny goes for clothes.” Even newswomen who could ill afford a presentable shirtwaist might splurge on an outrageous hat. To be stunningly attired at the movies, balls, or entertainments often counted more in the working woman’s calculations than having comfortable clothes and shoes for the daily round of toil.

The fashions such young women wore often displayed aristocratic pretensions. Grand Street clothing stores cheaply produced the styles found in exclusive establishments. Working women read the fashion columns, and many could observe wealthy women in department stores and the streets for inspiration in their dressmaking. This seems to have been one manifestation of a broader pattern whereby working-class youth played with the culture of the elite. Etiquette demanded, for example, that they refer to their closest comrades as “lady friends” and “gentleman friends.” Jacob Riis even reported the organization of a boys’ club which called itself the Gentleman’s Sons’ Association. Similarly, romance novels such as Women on Fate’s Loom, in which wealthy heroes and long-suffering young heroines underwent the turns of fortune, were popular reading. The female box-makers whom Dorothy Richardson observed even adopted storybook names that connoted wealth and romance, such as Henrietta Manners and Rose Fortune.

Working women’s identification with the rich seems to have been more playful and mediated than direct and calculated, as much a commentary on the rigors of working-class life as a plan for the future. Significantly, women did not imitate haute couture directly, but adapted and transformed such fashion in creating their own style. While they could ill afford the fine cloth or exquisite decorations of the wealthy woman’s dress, there was no purely economic reason why they chose to wear flashy colors, gaudy hats, and cosmetics. Indeed, imitation of “ladies of leisure” might involve admir-
ing the style of prostitutes as well as socialites. As Ruth Rosen has argued, much of the appearance of twentieth-century women, including their use of make-up and wigs, was common among prostitutes before becoming accepted by "respectable" females. In the promiscuous spaces of the streets, theaters, and dance halls, prostitutes provided a cultural model both fascinating and forbidden to other young working-class women. Tantalized by the fine dress, easy life, sexual expressiveness, and apparent independence, while carefully marking the boundary between the fallen and respectable, a working woman might appropriate parts of the prostitute's style as her own. So-called "tough girls," as Lillian Wald described the assertive and rowdy working girls of her community, played with the subculture of prostitution: "Pronounced lack of modesty in dress was one of several signs...their dancing, their talk, their freedom of manner, all combined to render them conspicuous."

The complex dynamics of working women's self-definition is suggested in Rose Schneiderman's recollections of her adolescence. The future labor leader and activist voraciously read the romance literature so popular among young working women, and, internalizing its messages, worried that her hair and figure did not fit the fashion of the day: "All the romantic novels I consumed made me a most romantic young woman, and when I looked at myself in a full-length mirror I was very unhappy." Popular culture also helped define ideals of masculinity, although this was mediated by the realities of working-class experiences and expectations: "From the books I read I had also developed a special taste in men. Among other traits, I wanted them well-read and cultured. I never dreamed of marrying a rich man. That was entirely out of my ken." Personal pleasure in dancing outweighed her interest in romance and courtship: "My idea of what a man should be didn't quite match up with the boys Ann Cypress and I were meeting at the Saturday night dances in the neighborhood...I didn't enjoy their company, but I did love to dance and was pretty good at it, so I put up with them."

Putting on style seemed to fly in the face of the daily round of toil and family obligation—an assertive flash of color and form that belied some of the realities of everyday life. Yet this mode of cultural expression, linked to the pleasures of the streets, clubs, and dance halls, was closely shaped by the economic and social relations of working-class life. Maintaining style on the streets, at dance halls, or at club functions was an achievement won at other costs—going without food, sewing into the night to embellish a hat or dress, buying on installment, leaving school early to enter the workforce, and forcing confrontations within the working-class family.

THE FAMILY ECONOMY AND CONFLICT OVER LEISURE

No investigation on the order of George Bevans' *How Workingmen Spend Their Spare Time* provides the detailed information necessary to correlate working women's leisure activities with their family situation, ethnic background, residence, or occupation. Government surveys and reformers' reports provide ample statistical data on women's work, but comparable sources on leisure do not exist. However, the evidence of reformers, observers, journalists, and working women themselves does allow us to explore the parameters within which different young women made choices about their amusements and social life. Cultural practices rooted in religious, ethnic; and class traditions suggest the varying definitions of appropriate behavior for unmarried women in Manhattan's working-class communities. Whether one lived in a family or alone in a boardinghouse were important determinants of social freedom. Relations within the family, too, shaped the choices women could make, as did their access to money and other resources.

Most young women negotiated leisure within the dynamics of the family economy, which was both a strategy for survival and a working-class cultural ideal. In an industrial system dominated by low-paying unskilled and semiskilled jobs, the inadequacy of men's wages necessitated the economic contribution of daughters, sons, and wives, thus reinforcing the interdependency of family members. In a 1914 study, for example, the typical working-class family of five contained three wage-earners. Such economic strategies were supported by cultural traditions within working-class communities that legitimized and reinforced notions of mutual obligation, filial responsibility, self-sacrifice, and family unity. The impact of these expectations could be profound, as Lucy, a twenty-three-year-old Italian box-maker supporting her mother and brother, discovered: "The other week my mother turned away a good offer of
marriage because she said I must work until my brother is old enough to work." Custom demanded that daughters contribute all or a substantial part of their earnings to the family. In 1888, 72 percent of female factory workers interviewed gave all their earnings, and this figure remained relatively unchanged into the 1910’s, when three-quarters to four-fifths handed their pay envelopes over to their parents unopened.

Parents made a distinction between the contributions—and independence—of sons and daughters. Boys were less pressured to contribute all their earnings, often paying half for board and keeping the rest for themselves. Before the 1920’s, girls under twenty-one could not make the same arrangement without risking family conflict. Flower-maker Theresa Albino, the daughter of Italian parents, gave all her earnings to her mother, while her eighteen-year-old brother contributed three or four dollars a week. "But you know how it is with a boy," she explained. "He wants things for himself." Similarly Maureen Connelly, an Irish-born saleswoman, observed that her brother paid only board, but "I gave all, I’d be afraid to say I’d give board. The idea never even entered my mind."

Mothers also expected their daughters to help them with housework or tend their younger siblings, an expectation not placed on sons, who had more freedom to roam the streets, play sports, and seek adventures with their gangs or clubs. In an 1888 survey of three thousand female factory workers in Manhattan, for example, three-quarters assisted with the housework after their day of wage labor.

The degree to which parents permitted daughters an independent social life in the public sphere varied among different immigrant groups. Chaperonage remained an important institution among East Side Jews, but parents considered it appropriate for their daughter to go for walks and to dances with men, as long as the parents knew about the excursion beforehand and had met the young man. Young Jewish women often attended theaters, clubs, and dances weekly and, according to one investigator, had greater freedom in spending their income than German or Italian girls. A survey of the favorite amusements of fifteen hundred wage-earning women conducted by sociologist Annie MacLean also suggests ethnic differences. She found that over 50 percent of Jewish girls preferred theaters, concerts, or dances to other forms of entertainment, while a somewhat lesser number of Americans and Germans, approximately 40 percent, did so. Irish women, according to this study, did not attend musical entertainments, but 35 percent preferred theater trips or dancing. In contrast, Italian girls were most likely to engage in home-centered amusements or to state no preference at all; fewer than 30 percent listed a commercial form of leisure as their preference.

More than other working-class youth, unmarried Italian women found their social participation curtailed by conservative cultural traditions regulating women’s familial roles and affirming patriarchal authority. Parents ordered daughters to come home directly from their places of employment, turn in their pay envelopes unopened, and help with the housework. Chaperones usually accompanied young women who went out in the evening, and the modern concept of dating was alien to most Italian parents. The requirements of courtship assumed that a woman went out only with the man she would ultimately marry. Rather than attending dances and theaters, the couple would visit at her home several times a week until the courting year had ended. Even when a young woman was permitted to go out, and exceptions were allowed especially for movies, an early curfew was set. These practices reflected the common belief tersely expressed by two Italian parents: "The daughter has [a] better chance at marriage by staying away from public amusements."

In the case of Italian girls at least, parental control and daughterly submission extended far beyond the need to ensure the family’s economic survival.

Yet this notion of the family economy as the determining structure of young women’s experience simplifies the dramas of control, resistance, acquiescence, and subterfuge that occurred within many working-class families. While daughters may have accepted the family claim to their wages and work, struggles often ensued over their access to and use of leisure time. Participation in social life, parental supervision, spending money, and clothing were common issues of conflict. As wage-earners and contributors to the family, they sought to parlay their new-found status toward greater autonomy in their personal lives.

In an example of this familial drama, Louisa, a young woman
living in a West Side Irish neighborhood around 1910, discovered that working in a candy factory for five dollars a week gave her power within the family. Her economic contribution enabled her to claim the privilege of going to dance halls, staying out late with men, and purchasing extravagant suits and hats. Social investigator Ruth True observed of Louisa that "the costume in which she steps out so triumphantly has cost many bitter moments at home. She has gotten it by force, with the threat of throwing up her job." Her distraught mother decried such undutiful behavior: "She stands up and answers me back. An' she's comin' in at 2 o'clock, me not knowin' where she has been. Folks will talk, you know, an' it ain't right fer a girl."

Indeed, a bargain was struck in many families, with daughters bartering their obedience in turning over wages for the freedom to come and go as they pleased. Reformer Lillian Betts found that the American-born girls she studied viewed independence not as a privilege but a right. "Beyond the fact that some of them must be at home at ten or half-past, there was no law but their own will." Indeed, Maureen Connelly threw caution to the wind when she violated her parents' curfew: "If I went out and I knew I'd get hit if I came in at twelve, so I'd stay out till one." 

Even in Italian families, young women carved out spaces in their lives for privacy, independence, and unsupervised social interaction. When parents forbade a young man's visit, a daughter might slip out into the streets to meet him. Antoinette Paluzzi, who came to New York from Sicily in 1920 when she was thirteen, was not allowed by her father to date. Her mother, however, permitted her to walk with a girl friend to the local park, where she would meet her beau, being careful to obey the stipulation that she return home before her father's workday ended. Similarly, Angela Defina and her fiancé were chaperoned whenever they went out, but occasionally they took an afternoon off from work to visit the Hippodrome, despite Angela's fears that her father would find out. Some adolescent Italian women even defied cultural tradition by frequenting commercial dance halls. Observing women on the balcony of the Excelsior, a cafe and dance house, a Committee of Fourteen investigator noted that "2 appeared to be respectable Italian girls."

Attitudes toward autonomy differed even between sisters. In the early 1920's, Sophia Margolis dutifully stayed close to home, turning over her pay envelope and sharing her leisure with her mother. In contrast, her sister would take a few dollars of her own wages to spend on clothing and entertainment, and eventually demanded and received the right to pay only board. More independent than Sophia, she stayed out late at Roseland Ballroom's costume parties, risking the neighbors' gossip about her notorious behavior. "My sister would have a good time," recalled Sophia, "going out dancing, going bathing, going to Coney Island by herself."

At its extreme, young women's rebelliousness was expressed in the subculture of "tough girls." At the Lexington Cafe, a saloon on the corner of East 116th Street and Lexington Avenue, a vice investigator observed an eighteen-year-old "Italian street corner tough" conversing with an intoxicated man:

The girl had no hat on and had probably just left her house to go on an errand when she met this man[,] I heard her say, my mother will think I got lost I was supposed to go to the drug store she wouldn't know what became of me. The man was under the influence of liquor and was trying to put his hands under her skirts, she resisted at first but afterwards let him go as far as he liked.

Although the investigator does not describe this incident and its participants in great detail, the vignette suggests the powerful allure of leisure as a realm of assertion, sexual experimentation, and escape from parental demands.

Family controversy over young women's leisure was compounded by the problem of space and privacy in tenement apartments, where the "parlor" served as kitchen, dining room, and bedroom. New York housing ranged from abysmal rear tenements to "new law" apartments with indoor plumbing and adequate ventilation, but overcrowding remained a dominant characteristic of working-class neighborhoods. Dumb-bell tenements, the prevailing housing type between 1879 and 1901, usually contained several apartments per floor, in a five- to seven-story walk-up. In 1900, an average of eight families lived in each tenement house, and the mean size of households was 4.3 individuals, usually crowded into two or three rooms. Although housing conditions improved after 1900 with the construction of new law tenements, families still had
to contend with small rooms and, often, the presence of boarders. Consequently, "privacy could be had only in public," and young people sought the streets, clubs, and halls in order to nurture intimate relationships.50

Contention over leisure, social freedom, and dating was also heightened by the inevitable cultural conflicts between the American-born or educated youth and their immigrant parents, who clung to Old World traditions. Lillian Wald noted that the Americanized wage-earning daughter "willingly gave her earnings and paid tribute to her mother's devotion and housekeeping skill, [but] said she felt irritated and mortified every time she returned to her home." Sadie Frowne, a young garment worker, observed that immigrant women criticized her for spending her income on fashionable clothes: "Those who blame me are the old country people who have old-fashioned notions, but the people who have been here a long time know better."51

The emergent consumer culture, with its beguiling modernity, challenged parental authority over manners and mores. Women attentively read the advertisements and commentary about personal appearance printed in the working-class dailies, even in the socialist press: the Jewish Daily Forward noted in 1915, for example, that facial hair "makes a bad impression"; to eliminate it, women should "go immediately to your druggist and for one dollar buy Wonderstone." Some women apparently pondered such counsel carefully; one young East Sider asked the Forward's "Bintel Brief," an advice column: "Is it a sin to use face powder? Shouldn't a girl look beautiful? My father does not want me to use face powder. Is it a sin?"52 Increasingly, as young people chose forms of entertainment identified with American culture, parents who had previously decreed cheap dance halls and theaters slowly acquiesced to them.53

RECREATION AND THE "WOMAN ADrift"

Although most adolescent working-class women lived at home, a sizable number—as many as sixty-eight thousand in 1910—lived alone, lodging in boardinghouses or renting rooms.54 Style and amusement were important aspects of their lives as well, but the "woman adrift," as she was called, experienced the culture of the streets, clubs, and dance halls in a different context from those who resided at home. Women who lived outside families trod a fine line between asserting independence and guarding respectability in their everyday lives. Many chose to live with relatives or board in the houses of strangers rather than risk their reputations living alone. Foreign-born women especially tended to seek a room with a "Missus," occupying a passageway or sharing a folding bed in the parlor at night. Among the Italian women whom Louise Odencrantz studied, only one-eighth were not living at home, and of these, the majority resided with kinfolk. This arrangement often created a surrogate family for young women, a necessity for those in low-paying or seasonal jobs. As "daughters," they might help out with cooking or child care and in turn would receive the family's assistance when in need. Since living alone spelled immorality among many immigrants, this strategy also ensured that a woman's respectability would be maintained.55

For these women, familial and cultural norms often affected leisure as much as they did women living with their parents. Old World tradition kept most Italian women off the streets and out of public amusements at night, whether they lived at home or not; visiting friends, attending church, going to movies and occasional balls or theatrical events comprised the bulk of their amusements. For one Italian living on her own, decorating a small tenement apartment was her major form of entertainment:

The room was decorated with several shelves of gay dishes. The images of 18 different saints adorned the head of the bed, bright pictures of the rulers of Italy, advertising calendars and panels, an alarm clock, and a guitar hung on the wall. The care of her room was a daily joy and her only recreation.56

Other "women adrift" found housing in noncommercial boarding homes organized by churches and philanthropic agencies, which usually established house rules for recreation and sociability and occasionally organized their own leisure activities. Their residents came mainly from American and "old immigrant" stock, especially English, German, and Irish backgrounds, who were more often employed as office workers, servants, teachers, and nurses than as fac-
tory workers or salesclerks. The gentility and bourgeois standards of such homes may well have attracted migrants from small American towns or girls who were otherwise exposed to dominant middle-class notions of domesticity and womanhood.

Still, by 1915, many boarders complained heartily about the regulations on social life enforced in the homes. Women’s sense of self-respect was eroded not only by taking charity but by the restrictions imposed on their time and leisure—the enforced quiet, prohibitions on dancing and popular music, limited space to entertain friends, and evening curfews. Locking the doors at ten or eleven o’clock, for example, hampered young women’s leisure in a city “where the theatre rarely is over until eleven, and where parties seldom begin until nine.”

Many refused to live in the homes, citing their opposition to charity, forced sociability, and a stultifying female culture. “A place like that should have a strictly hotel basis; no Christian stuff; and a decent name,” observed one Irish girl. Freedom, to such women, meant such simple acts as choosing one’s dinner at a restaurant rather than eating the planned meals of the home, and seeing male faces instead of a roomful of women: “Now I live in a furnished room house and I go into Child’s and I’m as good as the next fellow,” said one former resident. Heterosexual relationships were of utmost concern to them. “I don’t want to live in a place with a lot of hens,” said several women, explaining:

Everybody calls those Homes the “Old Maids’ Retreat” and they’re just about right. It’s not that I’m crazy about men, that I don’t want to live there, but just because I’m normal. If you live in a furnished room house you meet men sometimes and if you don’t meet them, at least you see them going in and out, which is something. It must be awful depressing to live with a bunch of gossipy women all the time.

Many young women sought lodging in commercial rooming houses and apartments for greater social freedom, in order to come and go as they pleased. In the 1890’s, many New York dwellings were converted into boardinghouses; Mary Gay Humphreys estimated that there were fifteen thousand furnished rooms for rent from Washington Square to Central Park in the blocks between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. “For a young man or young woman whose expenses must be kept within $10 a week, there seemed to be no other mode of existence.” Young women pooled their resources to live together in apartments, in “a new order of feminine friendship” that combined autonomy, sociability, and mutual aid. It was often difficult for women to find such rooms, since landladies preferred renting to men, who had larger incomes and smaller reputations to preserve. Still, lodging houses offered a woman the advantages of having her own place and, as a Czechoslovakian domestic servant observed, the opportunity to go out dancing evenings and Saturdays without parental restraint.

Living conditions in these furnished room apartments often drove women into the commercial amusements of the city. Rooms were small, bleak, and cold, and houses usually lacked public parlors or reception rooms where women could socialize with their friends. Moreover, women entertaining men ran the gauntlet between landladies’ disapproving stares and the knowing glances of male boarders. For boardinghouse keepers concerned with decency, “the most commonly used device is the rule that one may entertain only ‘steadies’ in one’s room.... The working girl who numbers among her acquaintances more than one man is looked upon as a brand.” Thus women combatted the loneliness of the furnished room by seeking out the movie houses, dance halls, cafes, and even saloons as places of rendezvous, diversion, conviviality, and courtship.

Whether they lived at home or alone, young women’s notion of a “good time” was intimately linked to the public spaces of the streets, clubs, and commercial amusement resorts. Clearly not all women could pursue these forms of leisure activities. With tiring labor and few resources, many had little opportunity to enter the social whirl. “When the girls get home they’re too tired to do anything,” observed one bookbinder, a statement confirmed by female workers in restaurants, garment shops, and other businesses. Family responsibilities kept others at home. Investigator Mary Van Kleeck, for example, interviewed Katie, a twenty-two-year-old ma-
chine operator in a bindery, who was washing the dishes as her younger sister dressed for a wedding: "Katie said that she used to go to dances and weddings when she was young, but she is too tired to go now."64

Other women held strict notions of respectability that limited their participation. Two poor but genteel working sisters defended their reputations when it came to social activities: "Evening amusements we cannot go to for want of clothes and beaux, and in fact we do not care for the company of that class of young men who we can know." The demands of the family economy often left women dependent on unsavory men for amusements, an arrangement many rejected. Commented a working girl who gave her weekly wages to her mother, "We have not the money for pretty clothes to attract the boys who would really care for us and of course we have no money to pay for our own amusement, and as a result we stay at home." Some obviously craved the world of popular amusements to which they could not belong. "Never have I been to a moving picture show or taken out," lamented Celia, a young immigrant. "The excursions that leave the pier make me jealous sometimes. . . . Only to be out like everybody else!"65 Within the varieties of working-class cultural experience, Celia’s words suggest that those who could indulge in the city's cheap amusements stood out as a model for other young working women.
In this millinery factory, long hours of toil were mitigated by a lively peer-group culture that fostered a new sense of identity among young working women.


The workplace presented new opportunities for sociability: female factory workers converse with shopmates off the job.

A young wage-earner and her gentleman friend meet during a lunch break.

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Stylish working women share confidences in a city park.

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Putting on style: Four sisters from the lower East Side make elegance and respectability part of the "public presentation of self" in this studio portrait.

Courtesy of Joan Korenman

Dreams for sale: Division Street clothing shops offered working women inexpensive versions of high-fashion designs.

Museum of the City of New York
Steeplechase Park enticed crowds of working women and men with the promise of "ten hours fun for ten cents."

Museum of the City of New York

On hot summer days, family groups and young people flocked to Coney Island beaches; in the evenings, the dancing pavilions (shown in the background) attracted young working-class "spitlers."

Museum of the City of New York


**Chapter Three**


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16. Tape I-117 (side B), Immigrant Labor History Collection.

17. Tape IV-12 (side A), Immigrant Labor History Collection.


20. Thought and Work, May 1906, p. 8; see also March 1906, p. 8; July 1905, p. 4; and Aug. 1905, p. 11.


29. Tape II-31 (side A), Immigrant Labor History Collection.

30. Tape I-132 (side A), Immigrant Labor History Collection.


35. Howe and Libo, How We Lived, p. 132.


Notes to Chapter IV

Chapter Four


8. Belle Lindner Israels, “Diverting a Pastime,” Leslie’s Weekly 113 (27