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"A Cool and Deliberate Sort of Madness": Production, Reproduction, and the Provisional Recovery of Progressive-Era Women's Narratives

From June 1908 until April 1909, the criminal branch of the New York Supreme Court tried nurse and Russian Jewish immigrant Sarah Koten for murdering her employer, Dr. Martin W. Auspitz. On June 7, 1908, Koten had requested the doctor's presence at the home of a pretended patient. On his arrival, she shot him through the heart. Koten's defense counsel entered a plea of emotional insanity (*The Day* 1908). But before the trial concluded, Koten provided a more nuanced account of her actions. Auspitz had chloroformed and raped Koten while she was working for him at his sanitarium. Koten pressed for charges against her attacker, but a lower court rejected her complaint. She determined to kill him when she eventually found herself pregnant and unable to work. Koten resolved, in her words, "to be my own judge" (Stokes 1909). Her explanation for why she killed Auspitz is accessible due to an article in the *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, which transcribes into English a prison conversation held in Yiddish with social worker, leftist political activist, and writer Rose Pastor Stokes, herself Jewish and an immigrant (Stokes 1908). Stokes remained a staunch ally for the duration of the trial. The murder case was widely covered and apparently generated a great deal of public sympathy. The judge ultimately accepted Koten's plea of insanity and gave her a suspended sentence, ruling that she be released into the care of the Council of Jewish Women and allowed to raise her child in anonymity (*Boston Morning Journal* 1909). This relatively happy conclusion to the trial, though, is not the end of the story. Stokes went on to re-write Koten's experience of suffering and unwanted pregnancy in a realist play, *The Woman Who Wouldn't* (1916). Also, reports of copycat crimes emerged in the press. As Koten's high-profile story gained a popular following, at least three arrested women likened their own cases to hers.

This essay examines these multiple narratives alongside one another to show how abiding feminist reading practices might be extended in order to more directly attend to the relationship between recovered narratives by

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and about women. Koten and the women who recognized their own anguish in her story are not visible in any of the histories of women's struggle, nor is Stokes's involvement with the Koten case recorded in her biography (Zipser and Zipser 1989). And yet these stories reveal much about how early twentieth-century women publicly negotiated sexual, reproductive, and labor abuses. They also reveal the strategic value of provisional identifications among women. During Koten's arrest and subsequent arraignment, journalists delighted in recounting anecdotes about her ostensible hysteria and criminality. In the months that followed, this hysterical figure rapidly transformed in the press into a picture of demure and humble femininity, the happy mother of a much-beloved child. In short, Koten successfully constructed a narrative that secured the approbation of both the general public and the courts. But this strategy was not unconditionally available to all. The three women who emulated Koten's actions made similar appeals, but they proved less convincing and were dismissed by the press and courts. Neither was Koten's strategy universally appealing. Stokes's play undercuts the logics of paternalist sympathy that Koten relied upon. Instead, it deploys a productivist ethos, foregrounding waged work as the nexus of poor women's emancipation. In doing so, it recasts questions of sexual justice and reproductive autonomy as a labor issue.

This essay spotlights the unsettled relationship between narratives of self-defense with the broader aim of elaborating a set of interpretive practices that attend more diligently to the politics of renarration. Such an approach, I suggest, calls for a mode of recovery scholarship that vigorously pursues connections between narratives while remaining pragmatically attentive to the particular discursive-political positions of each story. To this end, I explore Stokes's renarration in some depth, and I focus in particular on the text's attempts to structure a feminist ontology rooted in both waged labor and maternalism. Addressing intersecting themes of poverty and unwanted pregnancy, *The Woman Who Wouldn't* tells the story of a young flower maker, Mary Lacey, and her fight for self-definition as a worker, mother, and—ultimately—union organizer. Speaking to pressing political and social questions of its day, the play seemingly reinforces contemporaneous perspectives that imagined “the modern play” as reflecting back to society its ills and misdeeds. For leftist radical Emma Goldman (a peer and colleague of Stokes), the social significance of modern dramatic art lies in its conscious departure from the ethos of art for art's sake. Rather than standing aloof from the world, Goldman suggests, the modern artist is “a part of life” and “cannot detach himself from the events and occurrences that pass panorama like before his eyes” (1914, 4). By reproducing aspects of the Koten case, the play seemingly

“mirrors” the “complex struggle of life” (Goldman 1914, 4). But its aims are as much creative as they are reflexive. Far from a simple reiteration, the play strategically reconstructs Kotten’s trial narrative in order to refocus attention on the urgency of labor reform.

In the first part of this essay, I provide a more developed overview of my methodological concerns. I turn to a set of broader theoretical frameworks that continue to structure debates about feminist recovery and reading practice. Building on feminist interpretative and archival scholarship, I elaborate what I refer to throughout this essay as a provisional reading practice. I then provide an account of Kotten’s trial and Stokes’s dramatic retelling in *The Woman Who Wouldn’t*. By highlighting the play’s political investments, I question the effect of the text’s ultimate refusal of ideal womanhood—an ideal that provided the strategic ground for Kotten’s survival. Ultimately this essay makes a double-pronged argument. First, I claim that attending to the position of each narrative in relation to broader social structures reveals how women negotiated intersecting productive and reproductive oppressions at a time when vocabularies for describing such oppressions were undeveloped, if not wholly unavailable. Second, I suggest that taking these narratives together structures a theory of identification as strategic political elaboration. Such a theory clears space for apprehending how women historically sought to question what might be possible on an individual or collective level. Both strands of my argument address the broader question of how we read and understand the multiple textualizations of feminist politics coalescing under the capacious mantle of early twentieth-century woman’s struggle.

Positioning texts and narratives by and about women in relation to each other doesn’t necessarily mean placing them in competition. The method I deploy here intentionally resists logics of rivalry and opposition. At the same time, I hope to avoid dwelling on difference for difference’s sake. Feminist criticism, as Nancy Fraser writes, must be attentive to “both smaller, local narratives [and] larger contextualizing accounts” (1995, 62). My analysis of this multivocal archive maintains the ongoing importance of recovering (and amplifying) the voices of erased and understudied figures. However, my broader aim is to show how focusing more deliberately on the unsettled relationships between narratives illuminates the social and political landscapes that shaped and delimited the parameters of women’s stories in these decades.

Provisional reading

To acknowledge the unsettledness of the relationship between these early twentieth-century narratives is not to issue a call for resolution. Rather, it

is to assume a mode of reading that adheres more diligently to an ethos of provisionality. My understanding of a provisional reading practice gathers together two critical impulses, each with roots in earlier genealogies of feminist theory and praxis. In the first sense, provisionality constitutes a critical commitment to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to as “deferral” (1990, 16). Such an approach deliberately suspends the impulse to combine two discourses or narratives, effectively postponing “the moment of their accountability to each other” (16). While Sedgwick deploys this strategy to address the relation between early iterations of gay and lesbian studies and feminist analysis, in this essay I reapply the concept to address the challenges of reading constellations of recovered texts by and about women. In the sense I mean here, deferral denotes seeking out—or taking the time to discover—the manifold terms of each text.

For instance, I have already implied that Kotten’s story was partly contingent on her relationship with Stokes. Kotten reveals her story in the interview; Stokes recounts the story in print and, later, rewrites it as a play. But to take the relationship as central risks too quickly redirecting critical attention away from contingent narrative arcs—other perceptible stories that aren’t necessarily reducible to Stokes’s presence. By deferring, we take a particular discursive site and explore it before considering its relational offshoots. In other words, before considering the connections between the trial narrative and the play, we should defer the impulse to make the connection and flesh out Kotten’s narrative as it’s available across multiple sites.

There is another sense in which my approach to reading these narratives might be seen as engaging provisional logics. This second impulse emphasizes process. My discussion in this respect depends upon concepts developed within critical archive studies. Feminist scholars—Hortense Spillers (1987, 2003), Frances Smith Foster (2007), Toni Morrison (2008), Gabrielle Foreman (2009), Nicole A. Waligora-Davis (2011), and many others—have grappled with the critical problem of archives and the ethics of recovering subjects concealed or erased by structures of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class oppression. My analysis here, however, draws particularly on Ann Laura Stoler’s formation of “archive-as-process,” which “looks to archives as condensed sites of epistemological and political anxiety rather than as skewed and biased sources” (2009, 20). This approach treats archives as sites of dispersed power and shifting power plays. It involves tracking and apprehending the accretions and movements of power, which is, as Verne Harris writes, “a process without beginning and without ending” (2001, 6). In foregrounding such critical insights, I hope to better illuminate a central argument of this essay: namely, that the process of placing recovered archival narratives in relation to each other does not end but rather constitutes ongoing work. In highlighting these two

strands of provisional practice—the first deferral and the second process—my analysis in this essay draws upon theoretical concerns that have proved influential across fields of gender, feminist, postcolonial, and archival studies. The theoretical contributions emerging out of these multiple disciplines enhance the aims of recovery and should continue to inform the field as it proceeds.

Finally, my approach here is attentive to the spatializing logics of this interdisciplinary body of scholarship. In later work, Sedgwick brings greater theoretical definition to bear on what she earlier described as “the irreducibility” of separate, if relating, discursive positionalities (1990, 16). Eschewing critical preoccupations with generative principles, which she describes as “the topos of depth or hiddenness” and “the drama of exposure,” Sedgwick describes an alternative schema that gestures beyond the “origin and telos” of conventional narrative. The spatial “preposition” of being “beside” conceptualizes relations between distinct objects by moving beyond reductive dualisms. “*Beside*,” she suggests, “permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking. . . . Its interest does not, however, depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations” (2003, 8). Rather than seeking out concealed, linear relations of cause and effect, “beside” proposes a wider spectrum of affiliations, acknowledging multiple positions within social structure.

Similarly, Stoler’s attentiveness to structure conceptualizes the archive as a site where multiple, material forces cohere, circulate, and break down. Her method provides a useful framework for discerning structures of power within and across archival space. Alongside content, she argues, scholars of archives would do well to consider the “principles and practices of governance lodged within form” (2009, 20). Her aim is to identify how governmentalizing activities shape archival production. While such arguments address the urgencies of new approaches to state archives in particular, the general inference of Stoler’s claims—that archival spaces reveal the production and elaboration of social and legal epistemology—can be constructively reapplied. Assembling Kotten’s and Stokes’s stories as a feminist archive, my analysis throughout this essay is attentive to how these narratives register prevailing discursive forces, manifested in court records, the popular press, and a radical play.

Spatializing discourses are both compatible with and enable the intellectual work of feminist recovery. Though recovery is sometimes characterized as an act of excavation, scholars working in the field are increasingly attentive to the limitations of this metaphor as a tool for approaching the incomplete or partial archive. As a result, we find scholars embarking on what Lois Brown describes as “wide-ranging physical and intellectual journeys” (2010, 131). These journeys involve expansive geographical travel as well as an intellectual commitment to tracing narratives disseminated across public spaces and

diffused across multiple genres. For Brown, who is concerned with the challenges of recovering women of color writers, such an approach is necessary in order to distill meaning from traces that are “subtle” and “accidental,” as well as “deliberate” (132). Other scholars, such as Jean Pfaelzer (2007) and Kristen Hogan (2016), are attentive to the diverse spatial dynamics of archives. These scholars hold in common a threefold commitment to narrative, embodiment, and social environment. My analysis here seeks to further the project of defining recovery as spatializing discipline.

My provisional analysis combines these critical concerns. Acknowledging the intellectual value of deferral, my discussion of the trial accounts, the play, and the copycat reports deliberately delays synthesis. Instead, my discussion uncovers the distinct discursive contexts of each narrative. In treating the archive as a space of process, I highlight the importance of reading the feminist archive as a politically unsettled space. Additionally, in showing how temporary alliances give way to more antagonistic political strategies, my analysis weighs in on broader debates about feminist identification. These narratives are both discursively involved and distinctly located within abiding social structures; they are simultaneously “like” one another and politically inimitable.

In the pages below, my discussion of Koten and Stokes elaborates a mode of archival recovery that is primarily attentive to women’s political-strategic confrontations with both structural and symbolic patriarchal laws. Just as archives can be studied in relation to their broader social and political contexts, so looking to archive can reveal how structural contexts inform agency and action at particular historical moments. Stoler suggests that “imagining what might be,” in the space of the archive, can be as significant as “knowing what was” (2009, 21). Attention to “visionary and expectant” elements of archives may provide a means of more fully apprehending how women historically imagined their own existence in the world and tested the parameters of the possible (Stoler 2009, 21).

The trial of Sarah Koten

Koten’s trial narrative dramatically reveals the implications of the early twentieth-century US public’s inclination toward “imagining what might be.” During the almost yearlong hearing, questions about Koten’s identity proliferated as commentators debated how to read a woman guilty of “a cool and deliberate sort of madness” (*East Oregonian* 1908). In this way, the press played an active role in shaping Koten’s identity. From the day after the murder to the closing days of the trial, newspapers across the country chronicled a shift in feeling. While journalists initially trucked in lurid details—describing Koten

as a “wretched” and “frenzied” girl and “a total wreck” (*Wilkes-Barre Times Leader* 1908b)—they eventually aligned her with the timeworn concept of ideal womanhood. Though Koten was an unlikely candidate for such laurels, public sympathy nonetheless grew. In the run-up to her acquittal, commentators across the nation vocally advocated her release. In this section, I chart Koten’s remarkable transformation in the popular press from abject wreck to ideal woman, and I reflect on the role she may have played in constructing an identity that would ultimately save her from incarceration.

Stokes’s interview took place two weeks after Koten’s initial arrest and provides an account of Koten’s resolve at the time. Claiming a unique sisterly bond, Stokes imaginatively positions her interview outside the economies of patriarchal representation. Confined to a cell in New York’s Blackwell Island Prison, the young woman is distraught and has, evidently, refused to relate her side of things to any previous interlocutor. The interview transcription, printed in the *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, recounts the following: “I went to see poor Sara [*sic*] Koten, in her cell. Others had tried to ‘interview’ her, and she shrank from questions as from hot pincers. So I asked no questions, but I talked with her in Yiddish (Yiddish makes such a difference) and her story welled up from within her between breaks of sobbing and blinding tears. She would stop and struggle silently with herself for a few minutes now and again when memory of the days when she was passing through the valley of the shadow came over her” (Stokes 1908, 8). While descriptions of Koten’s affect—her “sobbing” and “blinding tears”—seemingly lend themselves to paternalistic characterizations of a “ruined” girl, the ensuing exchange considerably undercuts the ideological constructions perpetuated in the popular media. Koten explains her motive for killing Auspitz in rational terms. Having tried and failed to achieve redress in the courts, she assumed responsibility for making sure that the doctor would not go on to ruin the lives of more women. “When I thought of my broken life and the lives he might live to break—” she says, “well, I felt it was my duty to kill him.” Significantly, in Koten’s own version, the facade of pathetic victim gives way to an account that emphasizes sexual autonomy. When Stokes expresses her disbelief that Koten might turn her back on “the world’s sympathy,” Koten’s response is suggestive: “I have had a taste of said sympathy of some of the world and prefer to taste death.” In this telling there is no mention of Koten’s child—or, in fact, any intimation of regret. “He will never, never ruin other women’s lives as he ruined mine!” is her ultimate refrain (Stokes 1908, 8). Koten’s justification for murder proclaims women’s right to self-possession in the face of corporeal violation. Additionally, her invocation of future victims casts the murder explicitly as an activist intervention on behalf of other poor women.

Abiding within this interview transcription is a logic of identification that demands consideration. Stokes—also a Jewish immigrant, who had, for much of her earlier life, labored as a factory worker in Ohio—imagines herself as uniquely positioned to facilitate, rather than extract, Koten’s narrative of suffering and vengeance. Given Stokes’s background in labor activism and her history of solidarity with working women, this claim is plausible. Nonetheless, Stokes’s authority is worth interrogating. Her method hinges on simultaneously deploying both gendered and ethnic identity (“Yiddish makes such a difference”) and negating her own authorial agency (“I asked no questions”). For Koten—in this retelling at least—the impulse toward legibility is catalyzed only when Stokes demonstrates the acceptable credentials and convincingly positions herself as a sympathetic listener.

Feminist scholarship has taught us that we gloss over such claims at our peril. Indeed, Carla Kaplan observes that the “dangers, impasses, and problems” associated with the practice of feminist identification, most notably its silencing effect, must be addressed head-on (1996, 34). In other words, economies of identification deployed by women interlocutors obscure more complicated political impulses. Although I agree with Kaplan that identification is ultimately “fantasmatic” (34), my concern here is not the essential existence of identification. My aim, rather, is to query the effects of such claims at this particular historical moment. How are we to interpret Stokes’s claimed intimacy with Koten? What are the effects of Koten’s claim that she acted out of a strong sense of collective responsibility?

At this point, deferral is more prudent than explanation. Before drawing any conclusions, it is constructive to consider this interview in relation to the multiple narratives constructed in the press. Indeed, considering Koten’s story as it was constructed over time and across numerous forums reveals that Koten’s identity in the Stokes interview was only one among several. Moreover, it was not the identity that was most influential in the long term. Sympathy, not assertive femininity, proved a more decisive factor in garnering public support.

Koten’s ability to cut a sympathetic figure depended partly on the public’s momentary attentiveness to broader contexts of male sexual violence against women. A month into the trial, the *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader* (1908a) revealed that Auspitz had a history of “wronging” women. Prior to June 1908, at least two other women had brought complaints against him. One of these earlier incidents resulted in a serious attempt on his life. In 1907, Anna Jensen visited Auspitz’s office with the intention of “killing the cur.” Jensen, urged on by her fiancé, opened fire. Auspitz narrowly survived the attempt after the cartridge of Jensen’s gun failed. Agnes Deffa also confronted Auspitz. Deffa’s husband brought a divorce suit against her, charging that she

had had a sexual relationship with the doctor. When Auspitz testified that Deffa had invited his attention, his claims “infuriated” her, and she was restrained from physically attacking him in front of the judge. In both cases, Auspitz was fortunate to escape unharmed.

But it was strategy, not luck, that initially delivered Auspitz from the charges brought by Koten. A month prior to his death, the same article reports, Auspitz was arraigned in court on charges of rape. Testimonies by his brother and brother-in-law cast aspersions on Koten’s character, effectively undermining her claims. The doctor was promptly discharged. Following the subsequent murder, Koten’s position within a collective of outraged women proved significant. In a practical sense, it garnered material support. Anna Jensen, in a striking display of solidarity, launched a fund-raising campaign to aid her defense. Furthermore, journalists covering the trial repeatedly reminded readers of the broader pattern of complaint. It is likely that such details helped to normalize Koten’s actions in the eyes of the public and possibly even the judge.

Furthermore, at a time when abortion was under intense popular and professional scrutiny, Koten’s claim that she had refused to illegally terminate her pregnancy may have further enhanced her popularity. In the immediate aftermath of the murder, the *Pawtucket Evening Times* (1908) reported that Auspitz had “suggested she undergo an operation” to end the pregnancy. Koten refused, claiming that “such an ordeal” filled her with “dread.” The paper reported that, as a nurse, Koten had witnessed the aftermath of botched abortions and thus could not contemplate undergoing the procedure for herself. The rhetoric of fear, combined with an avowal of prevailing legal frameworks, speaks explicitly to the social orders surrounding sex and gender that entrenched woman’s role as natural mothers. Symbolic law surrounding sex and gender, according to Judith Butler, operates through discourses of fear, “through the deployment/production of an imaginary threat” (2011, 101). By avowing herself as “a body trembling before the law” of patriarchal control, Koten communicates her compliance with a social order that depends on women’s own willed subjection (Butler 2011, 65). Her self-construction, moreover, has the added appeal of revealing the fate awaiting those unruly women who would take the law into their own hands by ending their pregnancies. Koten’s testimony plays into these powerful social discourses. By insisting on her maternal duty, against all odds, she claimed her status as an object of compassion. A sketch of Koten by one of the “best known phrenologists and physiognomists of New York” (Fowler 1909) confirms this, illustrating a willingness to embrace her wholesome image (see fig. 1).

Koten’s claims evidently resonated. She would come to be imagined as a frail, pure symbol of social uplift. The remarks of Koten’s legal defense



Figure 1 Jessie A. Fowler, "Sarah Koten as Compared with Notorious Mrs. Gunness." *Spokane Press*, July 20, 1909, 4.

counsel, which were reported in a special "suffrage" edition of the socialist newspaper *The Coming Nation* (1909), offer a case in point. Koten is positioned as the ideal émigré, whose dream of prosperity was tragically compromised by factors beyond her control. A popular socialist (later com-

munist) newspaper, *The Coming Nation* had a political stake in assimilating Kote's sensational story into its own economic agenda by framing her actions as a commentary on class relations in the United States. The paper's description of Kote as a "frail little woman" (1909, 8) is congruent with socialist propaganda that, according to labor historian Mari Jo Buhle (1983, 93), conceptualized women as virtuous "purifying agents" able to resist the temptations and corruptions of (male-coded) public life.

The prison birth of Kote's son, Abraham, on October 8, 1908, only enhanced her appeal. Journalists interpreted the development as evidence that she had definitively committed herself to her natural maternal role. The *East Oregonian* (1908) relished evidence of motherhood's transformational influence. In this telling, Kote's presumed insanity falls away on the birth of her child, revealing a radiant and contrite woman. "Never before," the paper proclaimed, "has the gift of life seemed so precious, so intensely beautiful. . . . The baby which she thought would prove the crowning disgrace of her experience has, with one touch of its feeble hand, performed the miracle that has turned the wretched girl into a happy woman, proud and eager to live." Invoking the biblical proclamation that "love is the crowning grace of humanity," such triumphalism had the dual effect of obscuring Kote's radical motivations for killing Auspitz and of returning her to a position within paternalist Christian ideology (*East Oregonian* 1908).

But what of Kote's own agency? While it is important to note the significance of interested parties—journalists, lawyers, and activists—it is equally important to observe how Kote participated in crafting an identity in print. On January 20, 1909, the *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader* ran an article highlighting Kote's conversion from "an avenging fury with not a drop of gentleness in her" to a "gentle and retrospective" young mother (Forsyth 1909, 4). Here, Kote cares for neither her future nor her court case: "She has nothing but a soft head against her shoulder and a love within her which she is still wondering over and but half understanding." This is indeed a striking transformation from the Kote of Stokes's interview, seven months earlier. Kote's own voice is audible in the 1909 *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader* interview conducted by Ann Forsyth, and she corroborates Forsyth's assessment of her rejuvenated appearance. "There is nothing in the world like loving as a mother loves," she claims. "I think of nothing but him. It makes no difference what comes to me, I am not anything myself. . . . I have no care for anything but the baby" (Forsyth 1909, 4). Kote's strategic self-abnegation supplants her earlier articulation of feminist self-assertion.

A photograph included with this article enforces Kote's claims. The image depicts Kote and baby Abraham together, positioned in almost perfect symmetry. Kote's gaze looks out of the picture, fixing the viewer's eye. The

top of her head connects with the sentimental caption: "There's nothing at all in the world like loving as a mother does" (fig. 2). It is worth recalling Susan Sontag's observation that "an event known through photographs . . . becomes more real" (2003, 105). The image effectively reifies Koten as a

SARAH KOTEN CARES ONLY FOR PRISON-BORN BABY BOY



SARAH KOTEN AND LITTLE ABRAHAM.

Figure 2 Ann Forsyth, "Sarah Koten Cares Only for Prison-Born Baby Boy." *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, January 20, 1909, 4.

devoted and guileless mother. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* (1909) printed a similarly powerful image—Koten depicted with her child and a tall, respectable-looking man with a top hat. While this male figure is presumably a lawyer or some other advocate, the image is redolent of the nuclear family ideal (fig. 3).



Figure 3 “With Babe in Arms Sarah Koten Pleads.” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 15, 1909, 6.

If public commentators and the legal establishment sought evidence of reformed womanhood, then Koten offered her audience just that. Certainly her performance convinced the judge. Justice James A. Blanchard was deeply moved by Koten's story. His voice "at times seemed to catch in his throat" as he gave his verdict on the case: "No woman who was ever enticed into a brothel has suffered more than she has and no woman ever had such terrible advantage taken of her. Justice in this case demands that she be punished no further" (*Trenton Evening Times* 1909, 1). Following the acquittal, Stokes escorted Koten to Grand Central Station and on to her home at Paradise Island, Connecticut.

Stokes's renarration: A new motherhood

While Koten's trial may have provided inspiration for the later play, the author's radical socialist politics also shaped its composition. Rose Pastor Stokes cuts a formidable figure in the history of leftist struggle. She immigrated to the United States in 1891, at the age of twelve, and spent her youth working in the cigar factories of Cleveland, Ohio. There, she became familiar with conditions of "sickness, semi-starvation, and despair" (quoted in Zipser and Zipser 1989, 23). She read Marx and eventually joined efforts to organize the labor force. Following her sensational marriage to New York millionaire James Graham Phelps Stokes, she moved to Manhattan—bringing her socialist politics with her. Stokes was involved with a number of significant labor struggles, including the New York shirtwaist strike of 1909, as well as the burgeoning birth-control movement. In 1916, Stokes experienced a period of sickness that diminished her characteristic fervor for political activism. To friend and comrade Nathalie Ells she wrote: "I who had never thought of my body had to think of it, and think of it too as a sick body needing special care. . . . The [play] is really the result of that desperate desire to create" (quoted in Zipser and Zipser 1989, 116). The play was never produced and was not widely read. And yet it is revealing of Stokes's commitments as well as those of others. Stokes conceived her play as a vehicle for advancing socialist ideology and as a proxy for physical struggle. While *The Woman Who Wouldn't* apparently renarrates aspects of Koten's story, it simultaneously engages these parallel concerns.

When the play opens, Mary Lacey is living at home with her parents, coming to terms with the realization that she is pregnant and that the man she previously hoped would marry her—a local coal miner named Joe—is now in love with another woman. Knowledge of this predicament brings Mary face to face with the structural (cultural and economic) conditions delimit-

ing women's reproductive freedom. Well aware of the ways poor, unmarried mothers are censured by all, Mary is paralyzed by fear: "Everybody," she laments, will "jes' murder me an' m' baby everyday . . . every hour in the day" (Stokes 1916, 57). Mary begs her doctor for help in terminating the pregnancy: "Ye see what'd happen t' me—I'd lose my job, an'—an' my friends'd go back on me, an' my father'd be jes' s' mad!" But the doctor remains unmoved and invokes the law as the ultimate authority: "You are asking me to take a human life—You are asking me to do that which would send me to prison for a long term of years. And your crime would be no less than mine. You want to—murder your baby!" The doctor's claims ultimately scare Mary off from aborting the pregnancy. She resolves to leave the community and make her own way in the world. With the help of a sympathetic labor leader, she pursues a new life as a union organizer and mother to her daughter Josephine. When she eventually returns home, she is transformed. As "Mother Mary," she assumes management of the coal miners' strike and takes her place at the head of her family.

The central problem of the first act is that Mary is struggling to take command of her situation and facing the prospect of life alone as a "ruined" woman. Having witnessed the treatment of neighboring women, she is aware of how the community will respond should it be revealed that she is carrying a "bastard" child. Her father's comment about another woman in the community—a notorious "brazen-faced hussy"—intensifies Mary's hopelessness. "I'd 'a' buried her an' the kid before I'd 'a' let a bastard into my family," her father snarls (Stokes 1916, 98). The father's scorn is brought to bear on his own daughter when he learns that she is pregnant, and he beats her. But Mary's anxiety about motherhood's social stigma, which defines the first two acts, gives way to a socialist vision of motherhood when Mary escapes to Pittsburgh in the third act.

In this way, Stokes's play lends ideological depth to the word "mother" itself. In Pittsburgh, Mary joins the organized labor movement. Her experiences living and working among labor leaders and radical socialists transforms her thinking about her own position and her right to human dignity as a mother and worker. "Oh, I learned things!" she tells Joe on her return, "I struggled and—and suffered; but I knew it was not because I had my little one . . . in the way—I—did!—not because the law didn't approve of us, but because the world didn't have to give us work! Because I hadn't a right to earn a living! Because the right to work which is the right to life was not mine—legally mine" (1916, 166). If Mary's predicament at the beginning of the play is her struggle against both poverty and the stigma of single motherhood, then her transformation in the third act dramatizes a proposed solution. Rather than capitulating to notions about women as protected beings,

the play gestures toward a new discourse of empowerment that might enable women to imagine new public identities for themselves as labor leaders.

Motherhood is central to the play's project of both staging a feminist rejection of dominant masculinist ideology and making visible an alternative. "Mother Mary" channels contemporary social discourses, situating the play's radical vision among progressive models of women's emancipation. Most obviously, the construction of Mary as a radical labor leader draws on real-life women activists who, in their work as labor agitators, assumed the title "mother" as a *nom de guerre*. When Mary returns to her community to take charge of the miners' strike, she does so not as Mary Lacey but as a figurehead of class warfare who "puts courage into the men" and strives to protect the "little ones" from exploitation in the "mills . . . mines and factories" (167). Mary's new identity is redolent of real-life organizers Mary Harris Jones (Mother Jones) and Ella Reeve Bloor (Mother Bloor): two women whose "motherhood" served not as a marker of idealized femininity within a patriarchal schema but as a symbol of radical politics (see Gorn 2002).

Mother Mary similarly reconfigures the ideological significance of motherhood. The activist contributions of both Jones and Bloor represent important interventions into leftist radical politics in the early twentieth century, not least due to their efforts to broaden the class struggle by incorporating women and children. Mother Jones mobilized on behalf of striking communities and was especially energetic in her efforts to organize women. When mining companies in Arnot, Pennsylvania, brought in strikebreakers, she organized strikers' wives into "mop and broom brigades," who kept vigil with their children outside the entries to the mine to fight off the "scabs" hired to compromise the strike (Gorn 2002, 79). Similarly, Bloor was well known for her efforts to build relationships with vulnerable women at risk of being isolated by worker struggles, with many of her appeals directed toward women constituents. These radical women leaders, as Mary Triece suggests, "significantly recontextualized motherhood, family, and protest in order to highlight the connections between public and private spheres" (2007, 47). By mobilizing familial—specifically maternal—rhetoric, Jones and Bloor worked to illuminate the ways local communities were conditioned by larger social, political, and economic structures.

While historians credit figures like Jones and Bloor for reconceptualizing maternity in public rather than strictly domestic terms, *The Woman Who Wouldn't* dramatizes the radical potential of such a shift to uproot the very concept of public and private by dismissing the premise of patriarchal authority. Mary's experiences in Pittsburgh illuminate how women workers are caught between capitalist production and the patriarchal domination of reproduction. In the hospital where she had her baby, she says, there were many

girls in a similar situation: “somewhat different stories, but the same young, helpless look in the eyes—the same stunned looks on their faces. . . . I’d forget *myself*, watching *them*” (Stokes 1916, 163). Mary identifies with the masses of women struggling within interlocking systems of patriarchy and capitalism and ultimately pledges to pursue a life of service to their cause by embracing radical motherhood. Refusing to “fit into the old shell,” Mary envisions a new life for herself and her child. More than a home, Mary declares, a child requires self-respect and “a big, live faith in her mother” (171). Dismissing Joe’s words of foreboding, she concludes, “the woman of tomorrow will approve what many people of today frown upon, *and my little girl is going to be one of those women of tomorrow*” (172). Mary implies that her moral and political vision will prove a future reality.

Failed identification

So far my consideration of Koteen’s and Stokes’s narratives has sought to highlight the distinct discursive trajectories of each. The construction of Koteen in the pages of newspapers ultimately inclined toward the familiar trope of ideal womanhood. I have suggested that Koteen herself was involved in this construction and that she had good reason to trust that her performance would prove materially beneficial. Her initial actions implied disobedience to patriarchal authority, yet her acquittal hinged on the resuscitation of familiar conservative discourses that enabled her to claim a right to legal protection. My account of Stokes’s renarration reveals the extent to which the play dispenses with discursive logics that were central to Koteen’s defense. *The Woman Who Wouldn’t* redirects critical attention away from past ideals and toward future freedoms. As Lisa Duggan writes, such “contrasting stories” can be constructively viewed as “stories of location in the social world of structured inequalities” (1993, 793). My concern, now, is to show how these two differently situated narratives might be constructively connected in order to throw light on the broader structural configurations that shaped, enabled, and contained women’s bids for autonomy and power in the early twentieth century.

On the one hand, I suggest that taking these narratives together enables us to see the complex welter of ideologies through which early twentieth-century women had to navigate. On the other hand, these narratives reveal how identification between women nonetheless served as the means through which they contested interlocking oppressions of capitalist production and reproduction. First, taking these narratives together provides further scope for understanding how early twentieth-century women negotiated productive and reproductive ideologies. Recall, again, Koteen’s early defiance.

Her claim that the man who raped her “will never, never ruin other women’s lives” was as much a challenge to capitalist systems that economically and socially punished pregnant women and mothers as it was a protest against the law’s refusal to address her accusation of sexual assault. Her subsequent cooperation with a strikingly less radical public narrative is perhaps symptomatic of the fact that vocabularies for discerning the connection between sex- and labor-based oppressions were, at this time, largely unavailable. Male labor leaders were not the only hostile contingent on the left opposing progressive laws to allow women’s access to remunerative employment or financial support while pregnant. Women’s rights activists, too, largely rejected the possibility. While Progressive Era feminists energetically pursued protective legislation for women workers, arguments made by the most influential backers of maximum hours laws for women deliberately and robustly excluded women with children from those laws.¹ National Consumers League General Secretary Florence Kelley notably reinforced gender stereotypes about women as inherently weak and naturally dependent on men.² The political foreclosure of viable productive-reproductive discourses structures both Koten’s embrace of ideal womanhood and Stokes’s heroic rewriting.

While Koten redeployed conservative narratives that contained the problem of women’s difference, Stokes’s play imaginatively explores the possibility of unifying productive and reproductive discourses. In proposing a feminist identity rooted in both labor rights and maternal autonomy, the play collapses the historical separation between sex and class in order to make visible the particular experiences of working-class women whose lived experiences confound discrete political categorization. In a sense, *Mother Mary* represents a culmination of the identity only fleetingly claimed by Sarah Koten. By representing a politics grounded in women’s combined reproductive and economic well-being, *Mother Mary* reveals a truth ultimately suppressed by journalists and, as I argue here, by Koten herself. *Mother Mary* reveals that women will defend women’s rights to both labor and autonomous motherhood. Apparently echoing Koten’s momentary claim that she killed so that other women might live and work free of harassment, Mary takes up the mantle of leading others in the struggle against sexual and class oppression. Furthermore, the play’s climax reveals a truth that Koten’s trial narrative ultimately

¹ These laws also did not apply to domestic workers, thereby excluding the majority of African American women from Progressive Era reforms. For discussion of the exclusion of domestic workers from Progressive Era protection laws, see May (2011) and Fox (2012).

² Stokes and Kelley met on at least one occasion, at a 1915 Labor Day conference in Hampton Falls, New Hampshire. This was around the time Stokes was writing *The Woman Who Wouldn’t* (*Miami Herald* 1915).

denied: that the politics of maternity and the politics of labor are not independent but rather constitute the interlocking nexus of many women's subjection.

This is why, I suggest, we need to reflect on how abortion figures in both Kotten's public narrative and Stokes's play. In different ways, both narratives register the power of early twentieth-century moral-medical opinion. As Linda Gordon points out, abortion in these decades was "at least as safe and successful as childbirth" (2002, 25). Illegality, rather than practical considerations, made the procedure more risky and frightening than it otherwise needed to be. For Kotten, as we've seen, the option of ending a pregnancy through abortion was not viable. She claimed it was too risky. On the one hand, Stokes's play seemingly takes the same tack by foreclosing abortion as a viable avenue of feminist deliverance. On the other hand, the play's handling of abortion calls for a more politically nuanced reading. Stokes dismisses abortion but only after throwing a few political punches; the play slams the medical profession and the broader bourgeois morality it caters to. Mary responds with outrage when the doctor dismisses her grievances and accuses her of being a socialist apologist: "Murder! Murder!—An' they send us t' prison fer this. . . . Is th' boss o' th' mills ever arrested fer crippin' th' men in th' works?—Fer killin' them outright even? Don't they wring the sweat an' blood out of us an' buy laws with it t' protect themselves?" (Stokes 1916, 58). The play sutures questions of class oppression to questions of maternal health. In this respect, any question of whether Stokes's play, or indeed Kotten's narrative, "succeeds" in overturning social orders is largely beside the point. "Wedge within . . . folds of truth-claims," as Stoler writes, "emerges something else" (2009, 23). Looking to these narratives as sites of political agitation, rather than resolution, reveals how these women—through parody and critique—sought to destabilize master narratives that circumscribed their fields of action.

Second, the production of these narratives speaks to the political efficacy of identification. Stokes's involvement with Kotten during the trial was at least partly rooted in claims about their mutual likeness as immigrant Jewish women. While this identification apparently played a role in building a coalition of financial and legal support, Kotten's success in court also partly relied on a performative imitation of mainstream gender prescriptions. In other words, she presented herself as just like the social ideal. Later, Stokes's play redeploys identification in order to pursue a more socialist-inflected political agenda. Despite her participation in Kotten's case, the play indicates Stokes's realignment with more ideological concerns. Recognizing the role of identification within this archive is important to the extent that it sheds light on the shifting and transient relations that contoured women's engagements with structures of power at this time. Acknowledging identification becomes

a way of effectively tracing temporary deployments and disruptions of power. The impermanence of identification, in this sense, is its most revealing and politically salient feature.

While adventures in identification enabled new political possibilities for Koten and Stokes, other women evidently struggled to realize the promise of identification in the same way. Consider the following accounts of copy-cat crimes. In the two years following Koten's initial arrest, at least three women sought to align their crimes with hers. On July 16, 1908, the *Salt Lake Telegram* reported that nineteen-year-old Sarah Comiskey tried (unsuccessfully) to murder her father. Comiskey claimed that her assault on Sarman Comiskey was an act of justice. She stated that she "had emulated Sarah Koten in shooting her father, since he deserted her mother and herself." If Comiskey hoped to garner public sympathy, there is little evidence to suggest that she succeeded. Indeed the newspaper reported simply that she was "thought to be demented." Later that year, nineteen-year-old Nellie Walden shot Edward McDonald in the head. McDonald had promised to marry Walden. Instead, in her words, he "ruined her life." Walden succeeded in killing McDonald and later attempted suicide by jumping into a river. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (1908) reported Walden's claim: "My case is like that of Sarah Koten, who killed Dr. Auspitz." The case of Elizabeth Schmidt, also age nineteen, further indicates how Koten's case shaped women's efforts to exercise control over their relations with men. In January 1910, Charles Schmidt sued for an annulment of his marriage with wife Elizabeth. According to the *Trenton Evening Times* (1910), Charles claimed that Elizabeth had coerced him into marrying her, threatening to "blow out his brains like Sarah Koten did" if he refused. The courts complied with Charles's request, refusing alimony for Elizabeth.

Though this partial archive can only reveal so much about the lives or motives of these women, it indicates that their respective attempts to align their stories with Koten's were, at best, only minimally successful. These three women's claims represent, in some ways, a failure of identification. Yet these failures enable us to see the value of a provisional reading practice that looks for connections between narratives but resists synthesis, that is attentive to identification but also notes its profound limits, that demands we consider with what exactly Comiskey, Walden, and Schmidt were attempting to identify. On the one hand, their assertions that their attacks on fathers and lovers were "just like" Sarah Koten's murder of Auspitz strike a false note. Koten attacked her employer following an attempt to find justice in the courts, effectively putting an end to an uninhibited succession of sexual offenses. These later crimes emerged out of different circumstances. But the question of

whether the identification is “real” or “true” is largely peripheral to understanding the political effects of such claims.

Examining provisional moments of identification reveals their inverse: the structures of patriarchal and capitalist domination against which identification is arrayed. By claiming to be “just like” Koten, Comiskey, Walden, and Schmidt were as much looking to find a legal strategy as to locate a precursor. They were trying to access what legal historians of the Progressive Era call “the new unwritten law,” a legal framework recognizing and protecting women’s conditional right to physical self-defense (Adler 2002, 882). The “new” law represented an augmentation of earlier unwritten laws that protected men’s patriarchal prerogatives as husbands and fathers. The “old” unwritten law, according to Nancy Isenberg, “was predicated on the idea that the state had an interest in protecting men’s right to defend, and if necessary avenge, their honor against sexual infidelity” (1998, 121). By the late nineteenth century, however, these frameworks accrued new significance in cases involving women. The new unwritten law, as Jeffrey S. Adler explains, recognized a woman’s right to defend herself with force against a violent husband. “Those who looked to this defense,” he explains, “explicitly claimed the right to resist their husbands and even to use lethal force in doing so” (2002, 887). The progressive potential of such laws seems obvious. And yet, as Adler carefully notes, women’s ability to claim protection under the mantle of the new unwritten law depended largely on their performance of respectable womanhood, a condition that directly benefited relatively wealthy white women.

By this measure, Sarah Koten’s success was anomalous. As a Jewish immigrant woman, her access to ideology-based state protection was not guaranteed. By the early twentieth century, as Eric J. Goldstein argues, Jews “began to register more significantly as uncertain figures in American racial discourse,” becoming “a topic of greater concern to native-born whites” (2006, 35). Indeed, it’s important to note that racial concerns shaped press coverage of the trial. In describing Koten as “cool and deliberate,” journalists characterized her in terms typically reserved for black women charged with similar offenses (see Adler 2002). Seen in this light, Koten’s performative transformation was as much a claim to whiteness as it was an attempt to claim status as a mother. Comiskey’s, Walden’s, and Schmidt’s identifications with Koten, then, might be seen as an audacious attempt to broaden the legal frameworks already in place. If the new unwritten legal frameworks were flexible enough to incorporate Koten, perhaps they would protect them in a similar way. And yet, the three women’s aspirations also constitute a kind of morally excessive political strategy. While the women’s efforts failed and Stokes’s play was apparently not widely read, these narratives col-

lectively reveal, through their shifting moments of identification, a system that bestowed privileges and protections in uneven and unpredictable ways.

A cool and deliberate sort of madness

Throughout this essay, I have explored a mode of inquiry that reveals not the truth of women's stories but the structures of domination against which women struggled. In the early twentieth-century United States, numerous discourses imagined poor women as natural objects of protection. In the very same year as Koten's hearing, the Supreme Court decision on the *Muller v. Oregon* case upheld women-only legislative measures.³ Arguing in favor of restricted working conditions for women, Louis P. Brandeis issued his now-famous claim about women laborers, stating, "in the struggle for subsistence she is not an equal competitor with her brother." Ideologies centered on women's less robust "physical structure" and "maternal function" underscored the decision (quoted in Woloch 1996, 422). Such laws simultaneously restricted and constituted political agency. While the Brandeis brief placed limitations on women's labor and freedom to contract, it also extended protections previously enshrined in the concept of ideal womanhood. Such ideals, as Koten's trial narrative and Stokes's play reveals, were malleable and could be constructively manipulated and renarrated to serve historically specific goals and political ends.

I have suggested that a provisional reading practice is needed in order to understand the relationship between such narratives. My methodology acknowledges the analytical value of deferral, seeking to reconstitute the concept in order to serve the intellectual goals of feminist recovery. My account of Koten's trial, Stokes's play, and the copycat reports deliberately postpones what Sedgwick calls "the moment of accountability" (2003, 16). In doing so, I clear space for uncovering the distinct historical conditions out of which each narrative emerged. In other words, I am attentive to the position of each narrative within what Butler refers to as "the domain of the political" (1992, 4). In the process, my discussion takes stock of the ways each story engages with the disciplinary powers structuring society.

In addition, this provisionality enables us to recognize the political efficacy of identification. Each of the narratives under consideration is historically and politically located and, for this reason, incommensurate. Nonetheless, my analysis here indicates that relations of identification play a constitutive role across all three. My goal throughout this essay has been to query the cir-

³ For a historical overview of the *Muller v. Oregon* case (208 U.S. 412 [1908]), see Woloch (1996, 2015).

cumstances under which these identifications emerge as strategically viable. Looking broadly across this feminist archive and taking into consideration multiple modes of storytelling reveals how temporary alliances are forged by, register, and speak back to forces that materially structure the lives of women. Furthermore, I suggest that the temporary, provisional nature of such identifications should not be cause for regret. The fact that identification is transient does not mean that it should not remain an important component of recovery analytics. Tracing the contours of identification, as my analysis suggests, can enable the work of making visible contingent and partial narratives that might otherwise remain undetectable.

The work of recovery, as Ava Chamberlain suggests, involves confronting the limits of archives and, when appropriate, accepting the archive's limitations (2014, 33, 36). As recovery scholars grow more sophisticated in our examination of wide-ranging and often disaggregated archives, we must continue to develop critical vocabularies for locating and then characterizing the relationship between different, sometimes partially available narratives. Such a practice involves intellectual, emotional, and sometimes physical travel. In this sense it is akin to a kind of madness. Entering the archive sometimes opens onto irreconcilable discursive terrain. The goal is not to settle or fix relations between those we find in the archive but to understand the transient moments that bring them together. If recovery is a kind of madness, then, we must do our best to ensure that our practice remains a cool and deliberate sort of madness.

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