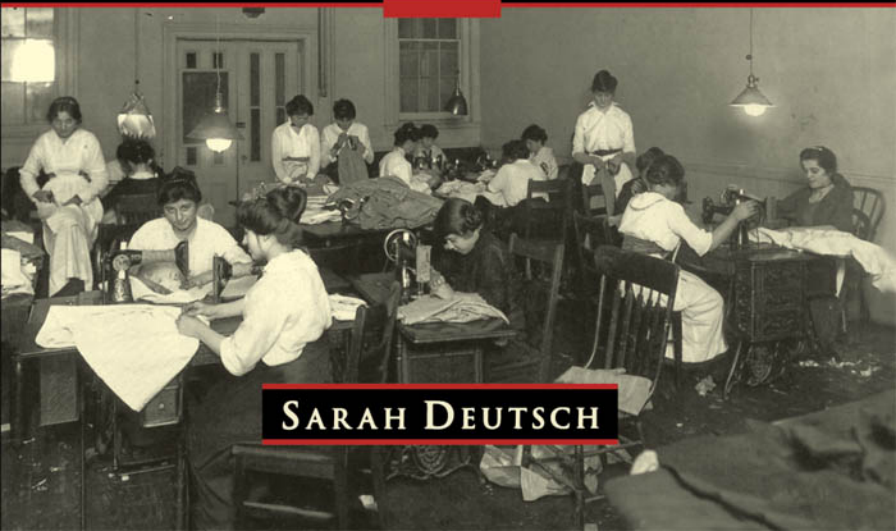# WOMEN AND THE CITY

Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870–1940

SARAH DEUTSCH

WOMEN AND THE CITY

ALSO BY SARAH DEUTSCH

From Ballots to Breadlines:
American Women, 1920–1940
(The Young Oxford History
of Women in the United States, Vol. 8)

No Separate Refuge:
Culture, Class, and Gender
on an Anglo–Hispanic Frontier
in the American Southwest, 1880–1940

Women and the City

GENDER, SPACE, AND POWER IN BOSTON, 1870–1940

Sarah Deutsch

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Map on page xii: U.S. Department of the Interior. Census Office.
Report on the Social Statistics of Cities. Part I, *The New England and the Middle States.*
Washington, D C.: Government Printing Office, 1886.

For Robert and Nancy Deutsch

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Sarah Deutsch, University of Arizona

ABBREVIATIONS

AFL American Federation of Labor
BCLU Boston Central Labor Union
BESAGG Boston Equal Suffrage Association for Good Government
BLWV Boston League of Women Voters
BWTUL Boston Women's Trade Union League
BYWCA Boston Young Women's Christian Association
DH Denison House
FS Fragment Society
GGA Good Government Association
IBEW International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers
ILD International Labor Defense
IWW Industrial Workers of the World
LWCS League of Women for Community Service
LWV League of Women Voters
MBSL Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor
MCL Massachusetts Consumers' League
MHS Massachusetts Historical Society
MWSA Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association
NAACP National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NRA National Recovery Administration
NWTUL National Women's Trade Union League
PSA Public School Association
UGW United Garment Workers
UTW United Textile Workers
WCC Women's City Club
WEIU Women's Educational and Industrial Union
WSC Women's Service Club
WTUL Women's Trade Union League

Boston in 1880
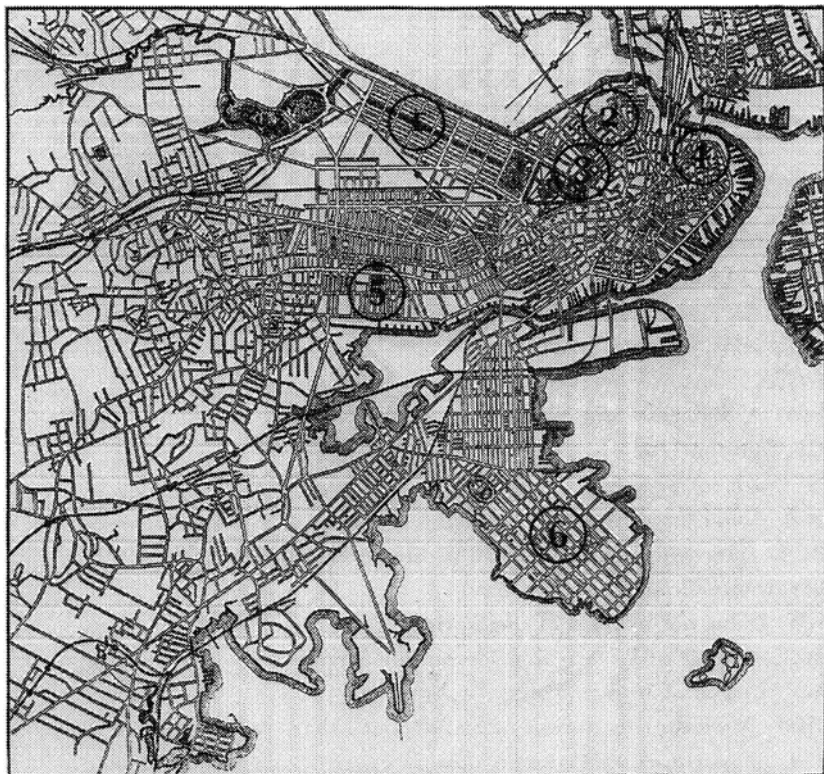
WOMEN AND THE CITY

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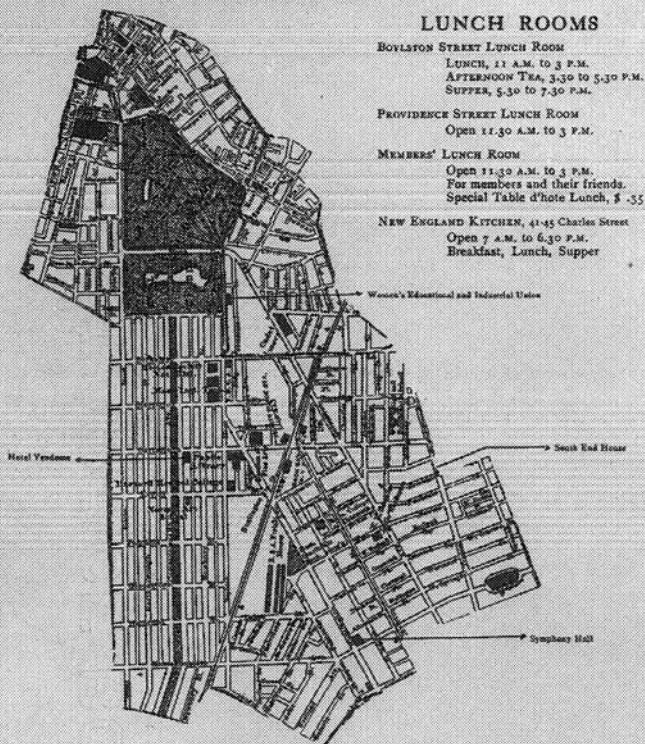
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The WEIU's burgeoning satellites created a new map of the city for women.
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Introduction

❦

Reconceiving the City

It was August 1893, in Boston. Times were hard. In the crowded dwellings of the South End, the onset of one of the worst depressions in the country's history would upset a precarious balancing act and tip many residents into poverty. Mrs. Scanlon was determined not to be one of them. On Wednesday, the twenty-third, Mrs. Scanlon buried her husband. By Saturday her thoughts turned to her own survival. She needed work so that she could keep her three children, and she needed child care so that she could work. She decided to look for a small tenement near a day nursery.[1]

Mrs. Scanlon's strategies and opportunities, like those of other men and women, lay rooted in a tangible environment. How close were child tenders? How far away was work? She knew the intimate relationship between her survival and the physical organization of the city. While some social scientists have turned their attention to these issues in contemporary cities, few historians have explored the relationship between the city's evolving structure and the choices and strategies of different groups of women. Sam Bass Warner's seminal work on streetcars did not deal with women; Stephen Thernstrom's quantitative studies also omitted women. Even those who have considered the sexual geography of the city usually focus on prostitution or the development of suburbs. Or they examine representations and symbolic uses of women, how women were placed in an environment created by others.[2] Ethnic and labor studies, such as those by Judith Smith and Ardis Cameron, have

shown women's centrality in constructing neighborhoods, but have not attempted to demonstrate women's centrality in constructing the city as a whole.[3] Christine Stansell, Mary Ryan, and Kathy Peiss have broken new ground in giving women a more active role defining urban culture and geography. They show middle- and working-class women contending over the meaning of city spaces, such as streets and dance halls.[4] These historians have begun to see women as manipulating, if not shaping, urban space.

Women did more than respond to shifts in urban geography, however. They took a hand in altering the map of the city and in defining its meaning. No single pattern characterized the way Boston's diverse women approached the city, nor did their uses of the city follow a linear development.[5] But by their actions and their estimation of the city, women of all groups challenged the dominant, idealized sexual division of urban space and function between 1870 and 1940. Sometimes competing and sometimes converging with each other's needs and desires, they created a new set of relations and places. They changed the recipe of possibilities and even the urban infrastructure of schools and services, laws and landscape, for themselves and for men in the city. This book examines women's constant negotiations, alliances, and assertions in their struggle to survive at least in part on their own terms in a domain—the public space—in which their legitimacy as actors even today finds resistance.

Boston provides an ideal site for exploring these dynamics. It typified late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century cities in the U.S. with its female majority, expanding boundaries, relatively large female labor force, numerous female associations, ethnic and racial diversity, and political struggles between Yankee reformers and immigrant or ethnic political machines.[6] The city's spatial divisions—its working-class and elite territories, men's and women's spaces, public and domestic arenas— marked continuing relationships and negotiations rather than static terrains. Urban women's expectations and possibilities in the 1890s, for example, differed considerably from those in the 1870s or the 1920s. This book starts just after the Civil War, when women began to lay claim to public space in the city, and ends around the time of a woman's election to the Boston City Council in the late 1930s.

Although the 1890s appear as a pivotal decade in many of the chapters, with the rise of the college-educated "New Woman" and reform

municipal government, I have ordered the book topically rather than chronologically. The first part puts at its center the politics of everyday life, or what James Scott has labeled "infrapolitics"—the "continent," of which organized movements, strikes, and candidacies are the "coastline."[7] It moves in four chapters through working-class matrons' struggles to make homes; middle-class and elite matrons' critique of those homes in favor of the primacy of their own; working girls' rejection of the purported safety of middle-class and elite or even parentally supervised spaces for their greater sense of safety among their peers; and, finally, female petty entrepreneurs' claims to ultimate autonomy.

In each case, the daily lives and domestic spaces of these women were intimately connected to the sorts of claims they made in and on public arenas. This is most clear in the case of middle-class and elite matrons, who based their claims to a new role in municipal governance on the purported superior morality of the domestic spaces they created. But the connection is equally intimate for the working-class women, as becomes evident later in the book, not only in the style of their kosher meat boycotts and labor strikes, but in the ways they mobilized allies. When working-class women recruited certain social service workers to aid them in labor disputes, for example, they did so within the pattern of daily interaction they had already established.[8]

The second half of the book follows women as they organized and institutionalized their efforts, from voluntarist to labor union to municipal party and electoral politics. Each chapter sets the shifting alliances by which women gained and lost power in the city against the ever-changing backdrop of urban governance and geography that facilitated or hindered them. The kaleidoscope pattern of their attempts to enter directly and shape the public arenas of streets, workplaces, and city hall demonstrates the complex ways in which the relationship between women and the public terrain is specific to class, ethnic/racial identity, and historical moment.

Space is not a character in this book the way land or water often is in environmental histories. Space does not have independent agency. Its meaning or power is determined by the way groups of people organize their social, political, economic, and other interactions.[9] This is a story of the constant interplay between different groups of people and city space. Urban spaces were designed, appropriated, or reappropriated by

different parties. For all players, the ability to lay claim to certain types of space and the power to shape space—public arenas, housing, and so forth—was crucial to their ability to meet their basic needs and their often less basic desires.[10]

In a city neither designed for nor controlled by women, women had to reimagine or reconceive the city before they could create female-controlled public and semipublic spaces. At first I looked for those reconceptions where I had been trained to look for men's theories of city form, in explicitly theoretical texts or in sentences that started, "The city is. . . ." I did not find them. Instead women revealed their reconceptions of the city in the ways they wrote about moving through it, in the practices of their organizations, and in their daily lives.[11]

Reconceiving Boston

By the late nineteenth century, Boston had assumed its modern outlines. In a brief orgy of annexation, Boston brought within its borders Roxbury, Dorchester, and other outlying territories. At the city's center, the crowded elite of Beacon Hill swooped down upon the new blocks of the Back Bay, made possible by landfill. Impoverished immigrants continued to flock to the North and West Ends but also crowded into the genteel housing stock of the new South End, ambitiously developed but victim to one of the century's many depressions. The spread of the central business district crowded the poor still further into noisome streets, dank basements, and alley shacks. It spurred a move to the suburbs by those workers who could afford to flee the city, but it utterly failed to erode the understated dignity of the Back Bay and Beacon Hill. So successfully did these elite neighborhoods fend off commercial encroachment that their inhabitants remained anomalously, stubbornly anchored as the rest of Boston swirled about them. In the 1890s, four-fifths of the city's rich still lived in the city; cousins crisscrossed the tree-lined streets of the Back Bay. By contrast, almost half of the workers living in the city in 1880 were gone a decade later, and many times that number had come and gone in the intervening years. Amidst the flurry, the city retained its female majority, and women comprised one-third of the labor force.[12]

While the economy grew and its population rose rapidly in these

decades from just over 250,000 to well over half a million, Boston failed to keep pace with the rest of the nation's major cities in either category and slipped further and further behind in the twentieth century. This relative loss, coupled with the increasing proportion of immigrant residents (one-third in 1880), the recurrent labor unrest, and the increasing visibility of ethnic Irish (a majority by 1890) made the tightly interwed and interbred elite anxious about their future. Henry James claimed of passersby on his 1904 visit to his old stomping grounds on Boston Common, "No note of any shade of American speech struck my ear. . . . [T]he people before me were gross aliens to a man, and they were in serene and triumphant possession."[13]

Those "gross aliens" may have shared the Boston Common with elite Bostonians, but their living quarters differed markedly. Each district had its own character. Though the West End, like the South End, had once been fashionable, by the 1880s its refurbished old buildings with bay windows, ornaments, bells, and speaking tubes housed the densest population in the city. Blacks, Jews, Irish, Portuguese, and Italians all had their sections.[14] In this labyrinthine district, alley led off alley; narrow passages emptied unexpectedly between high buildings or under them, and the only entrance to a tenement might be underground. Wooden walkways at different heights ran between the dark, crowded buildings.[15]

The dilapidated elegance of the West End and of the bowfront brownstones and avenues in the South End contrasted with the small, dark, cramped buildings that lined the North End's narrow, winding streets. With streets sometimes only six feet wide, sunlight rarely entered the buildings. In the back, buildings were even closer. Enterprising investors had filled the narrow tenement yards with more houses. Even the damp, noisome, and seeping basements had tenants. They suffered the highest death rate in the city. Scarlet fever, diphtheria, pneumonia, and whooping cough plagued the district. Stillbirths were common.[16]

To escape the close, dim interiors, men spent their time gathering in the streets and squares, women in the doorways and on the sidewalks. Mothers made lace, gossiped, and nursed babies on the stoops or at the open windows, and younger women promenaded through the neighborhood. Throughout the poorer districts, people jostled street performers and peddlers—and near the waterfront, sailors and dockworkers—and struggled to be heard over streethawkers' cries of "fresh fish."

In hot summer months, they slept on the rooftops, and in the winter, the men haunted the saloons and joined working women in the cafés and lodging-house restaurants, smoking, drinking, and talking politics and unions.[17]

In a semiautobiographical novel placed in the early years of this century, Vida Scudder, a professor of literature at Wellesley, tried to make sense of this landscape. Scudder had helped found several settlement houses in the 1890s and had resided in Denison House in Boston's South End. Settlement houses were homes purchased by members of the middle class or by middle-class institutions in working-class neighborhoods. Their founders' intent was to settle well-educated, middle-class people among the working poor, both to study the poor and to uplift them by their example of clean living and neighborliness.[18] The settlement house was both a social laboratory and a neighborhood center, and it often became an agitator for increased services and resources.

Scudder walked her heroine, on one wintry evening, across Boston from her uncle's home in the Back Bay to her settlement house in the South End.[19] This trek could be seen, and most often would be seen, as a journey not only through space, but also across class and ethnic boundaries. The Back Bay's straight broad avenues and relatively low density contrasted with the South End, whose sturdy housing stock was broken into ever smaller units to fit the pockets of immigrant workers who lived and lodged there.[20] So, too, did the Back Bay's old-stock Yankee Americans contrast sharply with the Irish, African Americans, Italians, Syrians, and Chinese of the South End.

Like most U.S. cities in the second half of the nineteenth century, Boston grew more and not less divided. It was still a walking city; Scudder's heroine could indeed cross the city on foot in an evening. But it was not undifferentiated space. The downtown became more distinct, with a greater number of quasipublic buildings: mechanics' halls, libraries, museums, and charitable institutions. And the Beacon Hill ladies from upper-class benevolent societies no longer found the objects of their beneficence on their doorsteps. Little directly connected the West, North, and South End working-class neighborhoods with Beacon Hill, whose residents successfully kept out the city's new streetcar system precisely for that reason.[21]

Later in the novel, Scudder's heroine walked in the opposite direc-
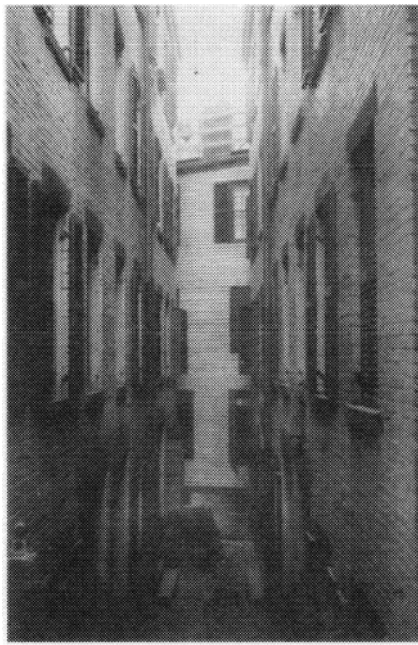
These pictures of Canny Place in the North End and Commonwealth Avenue in the Back Bay show the dramatic difference in light and space, and the appearance of order and chaos, available to working-class immigrants and the Boston elite. Top: Canny Place, from Dwight Porter, *Report Upon a Sanitary Inspection of Certain Tenement House Districts of Boston* (Boston: Press of Rockhill and Churchill, 1889); bottom: Commonwealth Avenue. Courtesy Bostonian Society/Old State House.

tion, and Scudder's language made clear the gulf between neighbor-hoods: as she walked, "dreary warehouses reared their immense sinister surfaces against the day"; a few minutes later, "the great artery of com-merce" came into view. Then she crossed a bridge over the railroad tracks and greeted silence; "the dignified city of her youth rose about her—a city of prosperous and pleasant homes, of attractive churches, of noble public buildings, of tranquil sunny streets." Her heroine con-cluded, " 'Poverty and wealth, labor and luxury, connected, or divided, by commerce. . . . I have walked straight through our civilization.' "

The contrast between the orderliness of Scudder's Back Bay, sunny and tranquil, and the cacophony of the working-class districts increased to the point that in 1907 Louise Bosworth, a young woman investigating the "living wage," could describe her nightly exploration of the West End in language fit for a Dante-esque descent: "I gasped," she wrote her mother, "when we plunged straight for the west end, the worst part of the slum district":

> I had thought myself pretty brave to go down there in broad day-light but at night seemed even different. . . . The population was sprawled all over the street. Under the electric light all over the pavement and side-walks men were smoking, dragged out-looking women were nursing babies or watching the poor puny things asleep in the flar [sic] and noise, and the children—the swarm of children were playing, sleeping, shouting and tearing around everywhere.[22]

She entered a gloomy hallway in pursuit of an interview, and someone rushed by in the dark. Bosworth followed her up to the third floor where "in a stuffy little kitchen with children all around and a foreign mother, we found our girl. There were dozens of candles burning on the table, it was crowded with them, in brass candlesticks and broken cups and even pieces of mud shaped as holders. In the center was a beautiful branched brass candlestick." Afterward, she learned that bi-zarre ritual was Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year.

Nothing in this landscape made sense to the middle-class Protestant Wellesley graduate from the Midwest—not the promiscuous mixing of men, women, and children living in the street, not the language, not

the "foreign" mother and her candles.[23] It was just this sort of cleavage that the settlement house was invented to try to mitigate. The settlement house's middle-class invasion itself was an admission of the segmented class and ethnic geography of the city.

Yet Bosworth's and Scudder's writings reveal more than just their ideas on ethnic and economic geography. Their writings expose their place in a shifting urban sexual geography that was both ideological and physical. For a middle-class lady like Scudder to settle in a working-class neighborhood was already breaking the bounds of proper sexual geography. The gender ideology prevalent among the middle classes from the 1870s to the turn of the century increasingly separated work from home and saw the home as the opposite, rather than the microcosm, of the world outside it. This ideology placed women firmly in the home, creators of peace and light and virtue, and men in the harsh world outside, battling one another in the marketplace and fighting it out (often literally in the nineteenth century) at the polling booths.

The dominant ideology left little room for women who worked outside the home. They were neither "true" women nor "true"—that is, manly—workers. Nor did it encompass women working for wages in the home, doing piecework, and bringing waged labor into the domestic domain. And it certainly did not account for the contested employment relations between servants and mistresses.

It was, however, an ideology of space as well as function, and it defined working-class Boston as off-limits to middle-class women like Scudder. Working-class sections had "rough" men, those toughs smoking in the street. They had saloons and other "questionable" enterprises including dance halls, which to middle-class reformers were the feminine version of saloons. Young, single working girls went there and spent time in all too close proximity to working men. They also had kitchen barrooms, often Irish, where homebrew was sold in a congenial, homey atmosphere, which horrified middle-class observers as destructive of the sanctity and purity of the home, not only because it brought commerce into the home but also because men and women drank together in shirtsleeves, sometimes barefoot, and not bareheaded. And these neighborhoods had cheap theaters, where men and women watched other men and women pretend to be what they were not, and even places of prostitution, where there was little pretense at all.[24] Working-class

neighborhoods failed to conform to the middle-class vision of sexually segregated civic virtue.

Middle-class men could enter working-class districts without endangering their status. Middle-class women, in theory, could not. Middle-class women, like Scudder and Bosworth, could not pass into such dangerous territory nor transgress these class bounds without risking their status as "ladies," without risking contamination.[25] Definitions of "class" in this way were gender specific as well as geographic, and definitions of womanhood were class specific.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, women of all classes contested this gendered ideology of urban space.[26] "Streetwalker" and "women of the streets" were euphemisms for prostitutes. Yet not only was Scudder's heroine traipsing heedlessly along these same city streets, more and more women were working outside the home and frequenting the streets in their leisure time. Indeed, the line between prostitute and working girl was always a fine one in this period, in part because they both occupied the same space.[27] Scudder's character participated in this broader challenge to the city's sexual geography. Her cousin was scandalized to learn that the heroine had spent an afternoon at the Central Labor Union, "not a spot frequented by young ladies of his acquaintance."[28]

Scudder's novel challenged the division of urban space on another level, as well. When Scudder's character marched along the streets of Boston, she not only crossed class boundaries, but also headed from one female domain to another. She departed from her cousin's home, a feminine, domestic, private space in the Back Bay. The Back Bay was a women's space because by 1900 it was littered with women's organizations and because as early as the 1880s about 30 percent of the Back Bay's residential lots were owned by women and 60 percent of the area's residents (in contrast to 30 percent in the North End) were female.[29] From this feminine realm, Scudder's heroine headed toward a female-founded and female-dominated settlement house, just like the one in which the author had lived. In addition, the heroine, like Scudder herself, attended and taught at a women's college.[30]

The domain of the book is largely female, despite its urban setting. In the reality of a male-dominated city, Scudder had reconceived the city itself and turned it from a masculine entity—a place with no public

space for middle-class women—into a feminine city—a parallel female
universe. She did not create a world without men, but rather a world
where men met on women's turf, a place where women empowered
themselves in public affairs. This transformation was not simply a feat
of the imagination. It had tangible implications for the way women
interacted with the city's male political, economic, and social actors and
with each other. The settlement house was both a concept and a physical
institution.

As women like Scudder created new spaces for themselves in the city,
in bricks and mortar as well as fiction, they diversified the character of
women's places. The home had been the only acknowledged space for
women in the Victorian American city. There were homelike aspects to
both Wellesley and settlement houses, but they were not homes. Scudder
carefully distinguished among them. She put them on a continuum,
with the parental home on one end and Denison House on another.[31]

At the settlement house, the forces of the city all met: businessmen,
workers, and the unemployed of both sexes; welfare workers and phi-
lanthropists; educators and doctors; journalists and ladies. They met in
the course of their daily business, but in the reconceived city, they met
on female turf. In Scudder's novel, the men at the settlement house
observed and talked; the women alone acted. Conflict occurred on all
sides in the settlement house as in the novel, both between and within
classes and sexes. Settlement house workers and female charity associa-
tion visitors bitterly opposed one another over the best methods of
providing social welfare and relief and even over how to define the
"needy" and the "worthy poor."

In the settlement house, businessmen, labor leaders, welfare workers,
and others opposed one another over dinner. Unlike the strikes and
political disputes that paralyzed the city, these disputes were domesticated
and their impact controlled. Amid these conflicts, the settlement house
continued to function: finding employment, educating, investigating,
and organizing neighborhoods and unions. The settlement house used
a domestic form to create a public, urban institution. It did not so
much mediate between public and private for its female residents, as
has been claimed, as eradicate the bounds between public and private—
eradicate the notion of home as refuge from the world outside it and
of women as limited in their proper sphere to the space within four

walls. Living in the house itself was a public action. The settlement house was both part of a city reconceived and a vehicle for building a reconceived city.[32]

As in the novel, Wellesley and Denison House, the college and the city, were tightly bound. Emily Green Balch and Katherine Coman, like Scudder, were both Wellesley professors and Denison House residents. Jane Addams had shaped Hull House, the first United States settlement house, not only on the model of the English male settlement houses she had visited but also on her own female seminary experience. So, too, did the leaders and residents of Denison House use their female college experience to shape the House's urban vision and the institutional character. These were women whose primary duty was not homemaking for men, and the urban institutions they created reflected undomesticated priorities.

In contrast, Scudder described the late Victorian home of her heroine's mother. It was the perfect refuge from the world outside it, far removed from all the conflict and competition of American streets. The heroine's mother rarely set foot outside the home and insisted that no concerns from the world outside her parlor should enter it. To Scudder, the middle-class home was prisonlike; to the mother, it was a sanctuary. Its creation was a service she had provided before her widowhood directly to her husband and indirectly to civilization at large. The mother described how she "helped" her late husband in his social service work: "To help him was my highest privilege; but I tried to do it chiefly by making a lovely home to which he could return. . . . Our rooms were in a dreadful hideous street; but I shut the street out as well as I could with the draperies. . . . He used to wish to talk a great deal about his 'cases,' his work, but I never encouraged that. I felt he so needed relief." When her daughter asked whether she invited her poor neighbors in, as settlement workers did, her startled mother replied, " 'Oh, no!' "[33] She was the model Victorian keeper of women's sphere.

Scudder's rejection of her mother's privatized refuge for the different sanctuaries of Wellesley and Denison House posed the spheres as mutually exclusive. But myriad other middle-class women who crossed the boundary from private to public in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Boston moved daily from one domain to the other, blurring boundaries. They formed dozens, even hundreds of institu-

tions, and many of these women wrote their organizations' correspondence while dandling grandchildren on their knees.[34] The development made quite an impression; the era's authors freely satirized it, one of them having a heroine declare, "I shouldn't be a true Bostonian if I didn't try to start some movement," and another proclaiming Boston "a mammoth woman's club."[35]

Women intended some of the institutions they formed to mediate between the privacy of the parlor and the public nature of the city. They created these as separate female spaces rather than female-controlled and feminized mixed-sex spaces. In the New England Women's Club, women practiced their debating skills on each other before venturing into a heterosocial city political arena.[36] The Women's Educational and Industrial Union (WEIU) bought buildings in the city's male-dominated center and created lunchrooms to provide space for working and other women safe from that perennial lothario, the traveling salesman. Other groups were also creating female urban space. Department stores arose in this era for the first time, and self-consciously fashioned themselves into women's spaces to attract customers; they, too, had lunchrooms. But the Boston women's organizations, in distinction to the commercial emporia, were controlled by women, and women set the rules of behavior and the values.[37]

Physically manipulating the city by buying or erecting buildings was clearly a strategy most available to middle- and upper-class women in this era—largely white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant—who had access to the resources necessary to participate in creating the city's structure. Once these groups had situated themselves downtown, it is not surprising that they launched, from their new physical proximity to the corridors of power, lobbying efforts at the city hall and state legislature for their own rights and to make the city a better place for women to live.[38]

These women's aggressive efforts to reshape the city were shared by members of the male middle and upper classes, who helped design parks and playgrounds and supported city missions and settlement houses. Indeed, the women of Denison House, like those men, seemed bent on redefining working-class neighborhoods. Women were never outside the city's power structure; they were always part of it, although their role changed.

The settlement house daily journals show the residents constantly

coming into conflict with the local inhabitants over definitions of mutual service and appropriate behavior.[39] Some working-class women could be grateful for settlement house services and connections. Even in the vibrant, working-class ethnic neighborhoods of the North and West Ends, transience was high. In the South End, it ran rampant. The search for an adequate and affordable dwelling, frequent layoffs, and minimal wages forced so much movement that many women could not find or create fully sustaining communities. A German woman who tailored with her husband claimed that the Denison House visitor was the first person to come inside her rooms in the one-and-a-half years she had lived in Boston.[40] At the same time, both these women and women whose neighborhood networks did provide human support and jobs often found exasperating the obtuseness, condescension, and rudeness of their middle-class visitors, who always seemed to show up at mealtimes, who chased away customers, interfered in domestic quarrels, and who noticed every speck of dirt in the place.[41] It was not simply that the two sets of women had different standards of cleanliness. They had competing visions of the city.

Working-class women's voices come to us more often in fragmented and discontinuous form than those of the middle class and elite, usually filtered through the lens of middle-class social workers or other recorders. Piecing these fragments together provides some sense of working-class women's own perspectives. Middle-class and elite women, for example, defined kitchen barrooms as dens of iniquity. Yet their own descriptions of them and of conversations in and about them show that many working-class women and men saw them instead as bastions of working women's enterprise and as community centers that turned a hostile city into a neighborhood. In them—unlike in the commercialized, less personal, and much less familial male-only bars—local ethnic values and habits prevailed. According to the Irish neighbors of Denison House, Irish neighborhood police would not enforce liquor laws against local kitchen barrooms.[42]

Mary Kenney, an Irish Catholic working-class labor organizer, was twenty-eight when she arrived at Denison House in the early 1890s, beckoned by middle-class and elite women interested in working women's welfare. In her autobiography, she displayed the ambivalence that characterized cross-class relations. She called Denison House "the

first open door in the worker's district in Boston" (ignoring the male South End House nearby).[43] Kenney was grateful to the elite women who gave the use of their homes for union meetings, providing safe space for women workers to organize, as opposed to the bars in which men often organized.[44] But at the same time, she noted the limited way in which the WEIU allowed a new mixed-class study group on industrial relations to use its building. She recalled, "They let us use their building, but the sign with gold letters of the Union for Industrial Progress must be put up at the back door on Providence Street and all literature intended for mills and factories must have the Providence Street address. That door must also be our entrance."[45] Within a year, she claimed, mutual understanding had grown, and the front door was opened to the group. Nevertheless, it was clear to working-class women that they could not rely on middle-class and elite women to reinvent the city on working-class women's own terms; rather those women might simply reinscribe class boundaries on new surfaces.

When Mary Kenney married Jack O'Sullivan, labor reporter for the *Boston Globe*, she created her own organizing space. "Our Carver Street home," she wrote, "was like the cradle of a new-born movement. And our life there expressed the joy of youth finding comrades in ideals, fighting for those ideals and of growing up to them."[46] In her home, as at Denison House, the representatives of the city—labor, welfare, elites—met over dinner. Wealthy Mrs. Glendower Evans did Mary Kenney O'Sullivan's ironing so that O'Sullivan could dine with Justice and Mrs. Brandeis, and when he was ill, conservative reformer Robert Woods spoke deliriously of "Mary O'Sullivan's mashed potatoes."[47]

On the other hand, working-class views of urban life and space reveal multiple and not united visions. Mary Kenney O'Sullivan condemned an elite social worker neighbor for interfering in cases of domestic violence caused by drinking, but proved less than tolerant of her own neighbors a few years later. When her Carver Street house burned, the O'Sullivans moved next door to Denison House. They did not stay long. She read in the *Survey*, a magazine of social work, that there were fifty-two saloons within three or four blocks of Denison House. Moreover, she explained, "I knew this neighborhood was not for us. Our rear windows were opposite of the Harrison Avenue tenements where men and women roomers got up at noon and smoked cigarettes till night,

another picture I didn't want my children to grow up with.''[48] When she was widowed, O'Sullivan became a rent collector and agent for various philanthropic landlords and their agencies while remaining a labor activist. In one case (in a neighborhood rough enough for her to keep a gun under her pillow), through agitation with the police and her own efforts she made the building a safe haven for professional women to live and a meeting place for the working women's organizations she continued to create, but she did it only by evicting seven illegal liquor sellers, empowering some working women by providing them with space at the expense of others.[49]

Those women of whom O'Sullivan disapproved had more in common with the younger, single, wage-earning women who also sought to create a city that met their needs. These women not only claimed the streets as their own, but also appropriated dance halls and working-girls' clubs. Moreover, by their work choices they demonstrated their desire to live in public, not simply in the private world. Overwhelmingly they chose factory work, even with low wages and appalling conditions, over domestic service. They rejected working in the home, even someone else's home. They rejected all the confining, irrational aspects of being at someone's beck and call and instead favored work that provided time for relatively autonomous leisure and working space away from family relations. And even domestic servants, who were largely Irish, refused to work in the suburbs where there was little companionship and no Catholic church.[50]

Like married working-class women, these unmarried working women greeted middle-class and elite attempts to aid them with some ambivalence. Despite myriad middle-class and elite attempts to provide supervised working-girls' clubs and hotels for vulnerable single women, the vast majority of women workers participated in neither. Bosworth, the living-wage researcher, admitted that a Miss Rider "has decided views upon all the various problems of the living wage, and seems to be hunting a solution to the lodging house question on her own account."[51]

Bosworth herself lived at the Hemenway, a model lodging run by Bertha Hazard. At first Bosworth was thrilled. In November 1907 she wrote to her mother that "[o]ur house seems like a tiny oasis in a big desert," and that living there with a shopgirl, teacher, stenographer, cook, stitcher, and other working women was "a grand opportunity for

me of not only living cheaply and well and having an attractive home but of living with working girls." By May, she had had enough. Hazard, it seemed, was overly restrictive in her supervision, "so suspicious and narrow and exacting. But I find that is the type of woman who usually heads these houses and my room-mate says Miss Hazard is really better than most of them—for which the gods be praised!"[52] Bosworth found that successful model rooming houses were above the price range of most working women; the amenities that made them successful also made them expensive: a good table, good public rooms, little supervision.

Although some philanthropic homes for working-class women proved more flexible in response to their constituents, few such homes in Boston, including the YWCA in this period, accepted African American women. In 1904, a black branch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in Boston, the Harriet Tubman Crusaders, created Harriet Tubman House in a rented South End brownstone as a residence for black women who, regardless of income, were excluded from the city's college dormitories and respectable rooming houses. In 1909, three years after the house incorporated, Mrs. Julia O. Henson, active in the branch and in the black Northeastern Federation of Women's Clubs, donated her own townhouse down the street as a permanent headquarters. The house provided fewer services than many white philanthropic homes, featuring only rooms, kitchens, and some recreation by the club women volunteers who raised money for the house. While settlement houses testified to the increasing class and ethnic divisions of urban geography; Harriet Tubman House testified to the continuing racial discrimination by white women.[53]

Black women, like white women, had multiple relations to urban space. Some created networks of support and kinship that were unrelated to physical proximity. Most black working women did live-in domestic service; through their kinship and visiting relations, they created networks of their own that overlay spacially those of the white women for whom they worked.[54] While there were also black neighborhoods in Boston, one on the "wrong" side of Beacon Hill and a more working-class area in the South End where black churches provided meeting places for a multitude of black women's organizations, Harriet Tubman House seems to have remained the only autonomous space created and run for and by black women until after World War I.[55]

It was not that there were no black club women who wanted their own space. Middle-class black women's challenges to women's place often resembled those of white women in form (for example, the creation of woman's clubs), but their meaning and possibilities differed. In *Woman's Era*, a Boston black women's newspaper of the 1890s, an editorial declared that "woman's place is where she is needed and where she fits in. . . . It is spurious womanliness that only manifests itself in certain surroundings."[56] Having claimed all space, the *Woman's Era* hoped also to create a discursive space to aid educated and refined "colored women" because these women in every state found it impossible to mingle "freely with people of culture and learning"; even "the most cultured colored woman" could not do so.[57] For these elite women, the newspaper would create a national community.

The editors recognized that Boston had a multitude of women's clubs "willing and anxious" to receive "colored" members. The paper's editor, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, herself belonged to the WEIU. In this setting, however, the Woman's Era club was still necessary, "not necessarily a colored woman's club," the founder's daughter declared, "but a club started and led by colored women." There were "so many questions which in their application to the race, demand special treatment, so many questions which, as colored women, we are called upon to answer, more than this, there was so much danger that numbers of women would be overlooked unless some special appeal was made to them."[58] While the club members felt charged not "for race work alone, but for work along all the lines that make for women's progress," they clearly felt they needed a space that empowered them as black women rather than just as women, a space in which they could articulate and act on their own interests.[59]

They made this reasoning even more explicit in their justification for having a black newspaper: they did not, they insisted, believe in accentuating race lines, but did believe in being "more accurately represented than we are or ever can be in any paper that has no colored man or woman on its editorial staff," and special contributors or reporters were not sufficient. *Woman's Era*, which included news about men as well as about women, was clearly concerned with gaining more control over the public representation of black people in Boston. At a time when black

women were routinely presented by whites as immoral, and when female respectability earned with it crucial privileges of protection and influence, the importance of such control cannot be overestimated. But the Woman's Era club's ability to create a permanent imprint on the city's landscape was hindered by a lack of funds. Unlike white women's clubs and despite a building fund, the Woman's Era club and its newspaper remained ensconsed in the home of its president, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin.[60]

Despite its limits, black women's access to public space in the North seemed vast compared to the South. Boston-born Harlem Renaissance writer Dorothy West described the experience of southern black visitors to Boston in the 1910s in her novel, *The Living Is Easy*: "The sisters went shopping every day. Charity and Serena were extravagantly thrilled to walk into any store, to take their turn at any counter, to try on any garment Cleo chose. The thrill got a very good start when they boarded the front of the trolley, expanded through their shopping spree, continued unabated when they ate their ice cream at the time and place of purchase, and increased, if anything, when they walked through the same entrance of the moving picture palace as anybody else who had paid admission."[61]

This relative equality in consumption, of course, was not matched by their status in production. Though Mamie Garvin Fields was a teacher in South Carolina, when she came to Boston to earn money for her trousseau, she worked first as a maid. She refused to allow herself to be redefined by her new setting in a white woman's home, referring to herself as "the teacher coming in with her chambermaid's uniform on."[62] Black women's class status had to float free of occupation and residence, given the limits imposed by racial discrimination. Instead it depended on community standing, social club and church affiliations, and education.

When Fields and her friend found, like many white domestic servants, that their "free time wasn't so free," they switched to work in a garment factory downtown, becoming the only native-born women in the plant. When, in addition, they opened their own dressmaking establishment, they did so, not downtown, but on the upper floor in the home of a friend in a black neighborhood of Roxbury.[63] Opening up a shop in

one's ethnic neighborhood rather than downtown was a common strategy for women petty entrepreneurs of the time. In their own neighborhood, they could take advantage of kinship and neighborhood ties that they helped construct. Downtown relied on a more anonymous clientele.

To change those patterns of access required material resources. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin's home was in the relatively elite Boston black neighborhood, in that part of the West End closest to the Back Bay and Beacon Hill; Harriet Tubman House lay in the less desirable and less expensive South End. Perhaps Ruffin and other middle-class black women were unwilling to settle for the South End as a clubhouse locale. When two black women's clubs did buy their own buildings, in 1920, they did so in the South End. By that date many West Enders had moved to that district, and some of the original Woman's Era club members were among the founders.[64]

There is little question that the power these women had to shape the city to their ends was limited and affected by class, race, ethnicity, and geography. Middle-class and elite white women could build downtown, immigrant and black women could open shops only in immigrant and black neighborhoods, and none of them controlled the shaping of streets, the conditions and locations of factories, and other fundamental aspects of urban geography. It is not surprising that they sought allies. Poor and working-class women were particularly vulnerable to shifts in location of workplaces and services, and particularly bereft of avenues to influence. Whereas working-class men had access to political machines because of their votes, working-class women had little to offer and little to hope for from political machines unless they had a large number of voting male relatives. Until 1920, when Boston women gained the vote, they often turned instead to those other voteless but more powerful and well-connected urbanites, the middle-class and elite women who were erecting their own social welfare machines in places like Denison House. In response to working-class women's demands, these middle-class and elite women established day nurseries and kindergartens. Often working-class women forced their hands, turning settlement houses into de facto nurseries simply by dropping off children there, altering the urban landscape by their practices of everyday life.[65]

Conclusion

Middle-class and elite white women creating safe space for themselves downtown and building launching pads for lobbying campaigns at the state legislature; black women creating residences, shops, and newspapers; and women workers creating child care and unions—all demonstrate women's active agency in shaping the city. Yet drawing a reciprocal relationship between women and urban space is not drawing an equation between women in public and women in power. Streetwalkers had been "public" women without being empowered by their presence in public. Women on the streets "were subject to intense male scrutiny," according to Mary Ryan, and the growing theatricality of the mid- to late nineteenth century, which Karen Halttunen has discussed, meant that "women's miles" (in the common parlance of the day) were not places where building after building housed women's organizations.[66] Instead, they were shopping streets that became promenades where women placed themselves on display in appropriate costumes.[67] In less fashionable districts, as Kathy Peiss has shown, working-class women also had a sense of themselves as costumed and on display in their off hours, in search of a squire and patron for dinner and a good time. Certainly it is important not to mistake this public appearance for empowerment.[68]

Even in the relatively new female spaces I have delineated here, spaces created by as well as for women, there were limits to female autonomy. Denison House bowed to external pressures at odds with its purported agenda. Its board managed to resist pressure to rid itself of its peace activist residents for two years during World War I, but ultimately asked the head resident to take a rest. In Scudder's settlement house novel the women alone were actors, the men were guests and marginal, but outside the settlement house, it was equally clear that the major actors were the male leaders of labor, industry, and church. In the novel, even her cousin's home was a battleground for those forces it purports to exclude, with its values shaped by her cousin's business sense. The women's spaces themselves were contested.

The spaces were also incomplete. In Scudder's novel there were no politicians at all. The settlement house did provide both working-class and middle-class women with an avenue of access to the powerful and influential that they did not otherwise have. But there were still vast

realms from which women were excluded. "An American woman," wrote Scudder, "has few opportunities to agitate effectively for political reform."[69] Formal politics was on the agenda. Women lost the municipal suffrage fight in Massachusetts in 1895, but Scudder had her head resident claim that her house was now "ready to stand for larger activities in civic reform."

Mary Ryan has claimed that "the politics of the public streets divided women by race and class, and between the dangerous and the endangered."[70] But some women strove to invert that formula, to reimagine urban space and create places to bring women together—settlements and cross-class organizations. There were many things the settlement could not do, but it could create a space where women were not simply objects for male eyes. By reconceiving the city with public space for women, by creating new types of spaces—kitchenless apartments, kindergartens, day nurseries, Women's Trade Union League offices—women enhanced the possibility for their own political empowerment in a variety of urban sectors, from telephone exchanges to legislative halls.[71] Once they moved into the public sphere, women, like colonizers settling in to a new place, sought indigenous collaborators (in this case, powerful men); they could do so from a position of some power instead of simply as supplicants or the petitioners of an earlier generation. They had something to give back: services to provide to would-be voters, research organizations, constituencies and machines of their own.

Boston's women formed no unified bloc. But changing the notion of women's space, in an era when men and women shared few spaces on equal terms, was a crucial transformation of the city's structure. Women could not vote in Massachusetts until 1920, but using their new spaces, they were not powerless; they won strikes and day nurseries, government-sponsored school lunches, fresh milk, and legal aid; and attained appointed political positions by the 1910s. Women's experiences were shaped by the changing urban environment, but at the same time, women actively shaped their environment, reconceiving the city to redefine their place in it. In the early nineteenth century, women had largely filled urban spaces created for them. By the early twentieth century, they enjoyed urban spaces they had created themselves.

1

The "Overworked Wife"

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*Making a Working-Class Home
and Negotiating Status, Autonomy,
and the Family Economy*

O n August 21, 1893, a visitor from the Denison House settlement reported that Mrs. Scanlon's husband was to be buried the next day. Mrs. Scanlon had three children, all of them small. She had received help from Berkeley Temple and was now cared for by Rev. Mr. Dickinson and his people. Five days later, on Saturday, the visitor returned to 65 Chapman Street and found Mrs. Scanlon braiding her daughter's hair, hoping to find a small tenement near a day nursery and work enough to keep her three children with her.

I used Mrs. Scanlon's story in the previous chapter to point out the spatial awareness of working-class women and the intimate and vital impact of the city's geography on their daily lives. I also used it to demonstrate women's active engagement with urban space: Mrs. Scanlon, seemingly in dire straits, moved to take control of the geography of her life. Unfortunately, things went from bad to worse for Mrs. Scanlon, and her story illustrates not only the enterprising strategies of women of the working poor and the density of their local networks, but the limits of their ability to redesign or reappropriate urban space in their own interests.

By September 6, Mrs. Scanlon had given up on her original scheme. Now she sought a room for herself and planned to put two of her

children in a mission home. Four days later she had put the two older children in a home and taken rooms at 83 Middlesex Street. She would, reported her visitor, be glad of work if she could put her baby in a day nursery. A nearby day nursery, at 64 Tyler Street, could take the baby the following week. Work, however, was scarce. The 1890s depression was reaching its height. In November, Mrs. Scanlon began to clean for Denison House.

On her own, with her baby, rooms, and a job, Mrs. Scanlon faced other worries. In January her baby boy fell ill. Mrs. Lucinda Prince, a Denison House resident, visited him at City Hospital and reported him no worse. Two months later, On March 9, 1894, Mrs. Scanlon came to Denison House, apparently no longer working there, to tell the residents that her baby had died that morning. On April 25, Helena Dudley, the head of the settlement house, visited one of the House's benefactors to arrange for Mrs. Scanlon and her son Charley, to quit the city altogether. She got Mrs. Scanlon work where she could keep her son with her, in West Lebanon, Maine, at three dollars per week.[1]

There are many noteworthy aspects to this case. First, Mrs. Scanlon's survival required geographic transience; she first moved within the city, and then left it, within little more than a year. Second, and most obviously, Mrs. Scanlon could not, despite her strategic deployment of no fewer than four social agencies—a home mission, a day nursery, Berkeley Temple, and Denison House—make ends meet as a widow with young children in Boston during the 1890s' depression. Third, whatever the aims of the Denison House visitors, Mrs. Scanlon had her own agenda for them; she made multiple use of the house's staff: housing agent, employment agent, employer, visitor, and neighbor. Fourth, Denison House's account makes no mention of help from neighbors (other than the settlement workers) despite the presence of neighbors in the Scanlon apartment surrounding Mr. Scanlon's death. Fifth, no one treated the death of family members as remarkable; they saw such occurrences as tragic but commonplace.

If to middle-class and elite women, working-class family life seemed a perpetual disorderly carnival of inappropriate mobility and behavior, to working-class women like Mrs. Scanlon, their lives had their own rules and resources. The networks and strategies of working-class matrons were often opaque to the middle-class and elite women who tried

to aid them and who tended to mistake grim conditions—lack of running water, for example—for willful slovenliness. Scanlon's transience, economic vulnerability, mobilization of social agencies and neighbors, children's death, and struggle to preserve her own status formed the core of working-class life on the shifting terrain of late-nineteenth-century Boston. This chapter turns to such working-class women's experience of Boston and their daily informal attempts to map it, controlling or negotiating its spaces.[2]

Married Women and the Family Economy

Amidst the South End's faded elegance, where Irish and Germans, Chinese and Syrians, Eastern European Jews and southern black and rural white Yankee migrants jostled each other on the streets and in the new lodging houses; on the North End's dark and winding streets, in its damp and moldering tenements, and at its bustling Italian and Jewish street markets; and among the African Americans, Jews, Irish, Portuguese, and Italians of the densely populated refurbished West End residences, working-class matrons made their daily rounds. Unlike Scudder, they rarely experienced the city as a whole. They shopped, worked, and visited in the neighborhood.[3] They witnessed the era's rising tide of immigration, creation of urban infrastructure, and commercial and industrial growth on a distinctly local level: in the flood of relatives in their evermore crowded lodgings, the jobs that appeared and disappeared, the strangers hawking wares in raucous, barely intelligible accents outside their doors, and the ever-present urban grime and garbage-strewn streets.

The 1890s' depression helped make Mrs. Scanlon's struggle harder, as the recurrent depressions between 1870 and 1920 did for other working-class women, but her predicament was by no means new, nor even limited to depression eras.[4] The material conditions of working-class women's lives changed remarkably little during this period. People of all classes tended to assume that the prime earner in a family would be male, but for the working class, adult men were an unreliable source of support.[5] In his study of unemployment, Alex Keyssar found that though the annual unemployment rate in the late nineteenth century was only 8 to 10 percent, over the course of any given year 20 to 30