

RE-PLACING THE PROSTITUTE: *RUTH HALL* AND THE SPATIAL POLITICS OF THE  
STREETWALKER

By

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Submitted to the Department of English and the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
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## AN ABSTRACT FOR THE THESIS OF

Melissa Naomi Gilstrap, for the Master of Arts degree in English, presented on 3 May 2016, at the University of Kansas Lawrence.

TITLE: RE-“PLACING” THE PROSTITUTE: *RUTH HALL* AND THE SPATIAL POLITICS  
OF THE STREETWALKER

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Laura Mielke

In Fanny Fern’s 1854 *Ruth Hall*, the eponymous heroine encounters an opulently maintained brothel immediately after moving in to a third-rate boardinghouse in the slums. Rather than treating this as a marginal incident in the novel as many previous critics have done, this thesis asserts that Ruth’s confrontation with the prostitute, the embodiment of capitalism’s worst impulses, is a key moment that defines and complicates her subjectivity as an urban, mobile, and public female author. After I explore how the prostitute physically invaded boardinghouses, spaces already made suspect for the ways they commercialized and “prostituted” domestic labor, I then show how the antebellum streetwalker simultaneously pervaded not only the streets, but also mid-nineteenth century discourses of urban life. By using Foucault’s 1967 theory of heterotopias, this thesis argues that the boardinghouse, the boarding school, and the brothel are all fundamentally connected as female-oriented liminal spaces, spaces

that in *Ruth Hall* have the potential to either nourish authorial voice or to produce “painted women.” Lastly, I propose that before we can place Fern or Ruth within the modernist tradition of flaner/ie/flaneuse, as David Faflik does in some of the field’s most recent scholarship on *Ruth Hall*, we must interrogate how the streetwalker would have complicated the peripatetic female artist’s relationship to the space of the street. Ultimately, I conclude that although Ruth employs various rhetorical techniques associated with the public prostitute to boost her sales and reputation as a public author, the results of this strategy are nothing less than ambivalent.

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## I. Introduction

For most critics of Sara Payson Willis's 1854 *Ruth Hall*, the prostitute's place in the novel is marginal, her influence ephemeral. After all, Willis (or Fanny Fern, as she was better known) devotes only three fairly vague paragraphs to the subject, and she does not use the term "prostitute," "brothel," or "parlor house" at any point in the narrative. As Laura Hapke suggests, this is not an unusual portrayal for an antebellum author, for the prostitute "had been mentioned only in passing from the inception of the nation's literature" until the end of the nineteenth century (1). Scholars, unsurprisingly, have typically treated the "brothel scene" found in the middle of *Ruth Hall* in one of three ways: as a contrast to Ruth's existence as a boardinghouse dweller, as an analogy for all exploited female labor, or as a humanistic critique of capitalism's alienating forces in which Fern portrays these tragic women not as a social scourge, but as fellow subjects judged and suffering under a sexual and economic double standard.

David Faflik, in the first instance, posits that upon arriving in this rundown urban district, "Ruth receives, at first, a sad reminder that the grass is indeed greener even in the city," as she gazes at these fallen sisters across from her (100). For Lauren Berlant, on the other hand, the prostitute in *Ruth Hall* is the "exaggerated embodiment" of the anguish all women who are exposed to "uninvited male mental and physical abuse" feel (439). For this reason, Ruth finds it narratively and rhetorically convenient to "link herself" and "her writing" to the work of the prostitute (Berlant 439, 431). Karen Weyler similarly argues that Fern rejects the dominant "seduction" narrative thought to send women spiraling morally downward into prostitution; she writes, "instead, [Fern] diagnoses the root cause of prostitution as the limited economic opportunities available to women," likely because she understood prostitution to emerge from the intersecting social forces of "both masculine economic power and the sexual double



standard” (Weyler 105). In Fern’s mind, then, indigent women usually had only two options: take up a respectable, feminine trade that paid poorly or make a profit by enduring the stigma of sex work. Rather than join in with the slew of mid-nineteenth-century reformers, religious, and political leaders looking to condemn these “bad girls,” Weyler contends, Fern empathizes with their predicament—so much so, that she (not unproblematically) likens her protagonist’s struggle in *Ruth Hall* to a kind of “intellectual prostitution,” whereby she must sell out her artistic abilities to unappreciative and undeserving male editors (96). Likewise, Stephen Hartnett makes the case that Fern’s affected reaction to the prostitute and the events surrounding the brothel scene is actually the author’s attempt at mediating the menacing effects of modernity for her readers through a sentimental lens (*RH* 91). By putting a “familiar, human face”—the “young and fair” or “wan and haggard” woman at the brothel window could be someone you once knew, after all—Fern makes “incomprehensible historical forces” occurring across an industrializing America more recognizable and understandable (Hartnett 14, *RH* 91).

While I agree that *Ruth Hall* does draw on the image of the prostitute to make a political and social critique on the state of the slums and the women who work there, I insist that this is not the end of the story: the brothel and its infamous inhabitants, I posit, are two of the most influential forces shaping not only Ruth’s subjectivity, but also the way space is constructed, mediated, and contested in this novel. I argue, then, that Fern uses the “specter” of the brothel—the ultimate abject space for nineteenth-century women—to explore, critique, and/or condemn spatial practices concerning other politically and socially contentious nineteenth-century spaces, including the boarding school, the boarding house, the commercial literary industry, and even the home. Moreover, I suggest that we can really only understand the novel and its imaginative networks in terms of the brothel: in other words, Fern *must* deal with the brothel’s presence as

the primary space of the public, working woman in order for readers to see Ruth—or any other “public” woman, for that matter—as a positive figure in public, political, or social life. Part of the novel’s mission, then, is to re-“place” the current, mid-nineteenth-century image of the “working” woman, moving the besmirched laborer existing on the fringes of society to the center of the city’s discursive imagination.

But the upwardly mobile, working-class woman seeking to follow in the path of the financially successful “self-made man” faced another problem her male peer did not: navigating the streets on foot, the main form of transportation available to antebellum working urbanites, only further associated her with the figure of the “streetwalker” as prostitute. As some scholars have pointed out, however, Ruth’s presence on and impressionistic style inspired by the streets arguably makes her part of the urban, modernistic tradition of flaneur/flaneuse. I contend that the one cannot exist without the complicating effects of the other: “Floy” as flaneuse only actually emerges after her subjectivity-defining experience with the public prostitute. A representation of Ruth’s keenest street and business savvy, “Floy,” subverts the essentializing effects of gendered space, but not without some ambivalence.

While the role of the prostitute in Fern’s 1854 novel remains largely marginalized in scholarly thought, space, on the other hand, has proved a key term for Fern scholars for more than twenty years. Maria Sanchez, for example, argues that what *Ruth Hall*’s heroine does with space obscures the learned nature of middle-class domesticity, so much so that Ruth’s “natural” taste for cleanly décor, emphasizing flowery accents and breezy textiles, can only be attributed to an essential, inner self. Recently, though, scholars have focused less on how the novel’s construction of domestic space reinforces some of the text’s most essentialist impulses, and more on how the constant shifts within space actually spurs the most significant changes in Ruth’s

subjectivity. As Ruth succeeds in the fast-paced, urban literary scene of the city, Betsy Klimasmith contends, the novel comes to “celebrate the class mobility made available to urban women who embrace mobility, mutability, and display of the self to the public gaze” (42). Of course, without Ruth’s newfound street smarts, business acumen, and sense for the workings of the modern press—all things learned and picked up in the city—none of “Floy’s” celebrity (or her considerable earnings) would be possible.

Not surprisingly, both Faflik and Klimasmith largely reject the “separate spheres” dialectic as an organizing metaphor for the antebellum urban experience. Instead, Klimasmith maintains that the *network* better frames a landscape characterized by “porosity...connectivity and permeability” (10). Spatial theorists have likewise leaned toward collapsing physical and conceptual binaries categorizing and distinguishing space—between spaces of production and consumption, leisure and labor, or private and public, for example—for fundamentally, Henri Lefebvre posits, “*Social spaces interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another,*” leaving few places untouched by the social or representational practices occurring in other places within any real or imaginative network (86, emphasis in original). Lefebvre, furthermore, refutes space as a pure, empty container to be passively filled up by social or political institutions—rather, space is often the political act itself. Foucault’s 1967 speech “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” thus offers a valuable lens through which to examine the political and social contests that emerge when non-hegemonic or *othered* spaces (such as boarding schools, hotels, brothels, and cemeteries) mirror, challenge, or expose certain cultural “truths” about hegemonically produced and controlled spaces.

Claims that *Ruth Hall* subverts traditional narratives of gendered space by rewarding “urban women who embrace mobility, mutability, and display of the self to the public gaze”

within this networked conceptualization of space are troubled, however, when we take into account that we might explain the figure of the prostitute in exactly the same terms—unequivocally urban, mobile, and public (Klimasmith 42). Only Weyler offers an extended analysis on the subject, arguing that male-female relationships created through financial dependence, such as the ones forged between Ruth and the some of the close-fisted editors of this unnamed city, often mirrored the similarly exploitative dealings between clients and prostitutes. While Weyler’s essay provides an excellent survey of Fern’s commentaries on these practices, it fails to take into account how the antebellum brothel, a discursively constructed space in its own right, implicates other places and institutions—including the newspaper industry—within a networked vision of space.

Therefore, in this thesis I first provide an overview of the ways in which the business of bordello-keeping epitomized what seemed to most antebellum cultural commentators an inescapable ethos of commodification and social decay. The prostitute and the streetwalker made alarmingly manifest these alienating changes, especially as she became increasingly prevalent and conspicuously visible in the living spaces and thoroughfares of the modern metropolis. Next, I argue that we need to see the female urban spaces in *Ruth Hall* as fundamentally connected, for only then can we begin to understand how Fern rewrites and re-places the prostitute in the city’s discursive consciousness. Finally, I show how Fern’s social critique of the inequities of gendered travel reveal how the specter of the streetwalker continually haunts her upwardly mobile movement. Though I assert that Ruth employs some of the courtesan’s “business” techniques to her own advantage, I conclude by contending that this strategy complicates her role as an artist and an author.

## II. The Spatial and Mobility Politics of the Streetwalker in the Antebellum Period

“Architectural Determinism,” an early- to mid-nineteenth century movement which theorized that a space’s occupants would eventually absorb the values of the space itself, is an important launching point for any discussion of space in the period (Klimasmith 23). First, the existence of such ideologies proves that the connection between space and subjectivity was not only inextricable for America’s nineteenth-century citizens, but also explicit. Perhaps more importantly, champions of this spatial dogma, including Andrew Jackson Downing, a significant figure in the Gothic Revivalist movement, and Catharine Beecher, founder of the Hartford Female Seminary, reasoned that if a country could design itself into moral rectitude, it could just as easily design itself into social chaos (Sweeting 103, 45).<sup>1</sup> Proponents of the movement thus found much to protest in hotels and boardinghouses, residences that facilitated everything from indiscriminate mixing between the genders to illicit sexual encounters (Klimasmith 44). According to Klimasmith, *Ruth Hall* initially affirms the ideas of this creed, for Fern’s protagonist cannot begin to exhibit her “natural” tastes and domestic sensibilities, a significant aspect of nineteenth-century bourgeois subjectivity, until Harry secures a more private home away from his snooping parents (27). Nonetheless, Ruth’s extended stay in the slums later in the novel “disrupt[s]...ideas about the power of home promulgated by architectural reformers” as Ruth emerges from this supposed epicenter of vice just as moral and maternal as when she arrived (Klimasmith 28).

For Downing and Beecher, the ideal home housed only the nuclear family, thereby separating the private family from all public connections (and naturalizing this separation in the

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<sup>1</sup> Coincidentally, the teenage Sara Willis attended the Hartford Female Seminary from 1828 to 1831 (Warren 26).

process). The hotel and the boarding house, such as the one the Halls find refuge in, veered away from this moral model, spatially prioritizing peer relationships over family ties. Rooms connected by short hallways, instead of by miles, made it that much more likely that guests would mingle, create friendships, and sometimes even form love interests. Consequently, Ruth forms affective ties with most of the people she meets in these temporary residences, from the affluent Mrs. Leon to the “waiters, porters, and ‘gentlemen friends’” who take up a collection fund for Ruth after Harry dies (Klimasmith 30). In the country, family thrusts themselves upon Ruth. Compared with the hypocritical Ellets and senior Halls, then, Ruth’s urban pseudo-family looks all the more preferable.

At the same time, the trend for urban subjects to look to peers for guidance and support was a point of great anxiety for nineteenth-century advice writers and traditional middle-class leaders. The spaces young middle-class men occupied only encouraged these peer relationships to flourish, thus further reiterating this change: moved out of their paternal “homes and those of their shop masters” the era instead found them instead “clustering in boarding houses and hotels,” “where supervision was limited—or absent entirely” (Halttunen 13). Certain locations, such as the “theaters, gambling saloons, and...brothels,” further encouraged vice and the breakdown of these hierarchical bonds (13). The fact that these hotspots of vice were generally located in working-class neighborhoods “where a lawless disregard for middle-class morality prevailed” did little to ease these cultural commentators’ minds (13).

Boardinghouses didn’t just make these depraved places more accessible; their living structures actually mimicked the compressed, communal design of the sinful houses their elders urged them against. The single man (or, more rarely, the single woman) in a boardinghouse often lived in the same manner as the single woman in a brothel: they paid rent in frequent

installments, shared communal living spaces and meals, heeded the requests of their landladies or madams, and avoided the traditional demands of housekeeping, freeing them to pursue “other,” likely more profitable, careers (Gamber 102). Though not all boardinghouses were brothels, Wendy Gamber explains, most brothels doubled as female-only boardinghouses that “provided their inmates with room and board, albeit at exorbitant rates, usually extracted by madams from prostitutes’ earnings” (102). Once respectable or (at least) decently honorable boardinghouses could also be “flipped” for the sake of a larger return on investments.

Essentially, landladies frustrated with the meager profits and taxing upkeep associated with the position sometimes “abandoned boardinghouse keeping” in favor of the “more lucrative pursuit of brothel keeping” (Gamber 103). Unsurprisingly, greenhorns new to the nuances of city life couldn’t always correctly differentiate the two dwellings; unlucky single women were thus prone to stumbling into this lurid profession by mistake (Gamber 103).

Boardinghouses, an institution so widespread that “somewhere between a third and a half of nineteenth-century urban residents either took in boarders or were boarders themselves,” seemed less likely to imitate the architecture of the private home, then, and more likely to reproduce the social and structural designs of houses of assignation (Gamber 3). But boardinghouses subverted traditional domestic discourses in other ways as well: according to the sentimental narratives of the time, wives and mothers tended to their homes out of a deep felt love for their family—material rewards for such work would cheapen the affective value of their labor (Gamber 7). By requesting compensation for these domestic services, services usually not seen as an actual form of labor in the first place, boardinghouse keepers perverted hegemonic ideologies concerning women’s work. “If women’s unpaid labors of love made houses into homes,” Gamber concludes, “women’s market labor converted boardinghouses into hovels, even

brothels” (8). Like the city call girls, women (usually widows) renting their homes out to strangers commercialized crucial aspects of their femininity, “services” they were supposedly meant to give only within a marriage. While the harlot may have prostituted her body, then, boardinghouse keepers prostituted something arguably just as intimate: the sanctity of their homes.

If nineteenth-century city dwellers couldn’t avoid the corrupting influences of the market in their own places of residence, they certainly weren’t safe from them on the open streets. “[G]enteel-appearing streetwalkers,” transient women who actively solicited their male patrons in the back alleys and byways of the metropolitan streets, likewise buffeted the “rising generation” with sexual temptations (Whiteaker 28, Halttunen 9). Because of the streetwalker’s “usual attempts to be fashionably dressed and attractive,” Larry Whiteaker reveals, most New Yorkers hadn’t the slightest suspicion of her real occupation, ensuring that “many of these women passed as respectable citizens” (28). Moreover, nineteenth-century New York also “lacked segregated red light districts,” meaning there were few places these streetwalkers could or would not conduct their business (Hill 176). Of course, the fact that sex workers existed almost invisibly alongside genteel citizens did nothing to detract from moralists’ fears about the seemingly pervasive dangers of the city. To avoid putting their status or soul in jeopardy, they suggested, young men must avoid superficial, unsentimental women altogether; similarly, young women must refuse to become or imitate these fashionably fallen women (Halttunen 89).



Because most American cities had yet to develop dependable and affordable inner-city transit systems, evading the streetwalker's influence was easier said than done. Most of the city's population at the time—including the urban poor, the working class, and sometimes even the middle-classes—spent substantial portions of their traveling or working careers as pedestrians (Halttunen 39). Thus, while “streetwalker” is rarely used in anything other than its most derogatory sense today, mid-nineteenth-century speakers used it in two ways: to neutrally describe someone on the street *or* as a barbed epithet for a sex worker (OED “streetwalker”). In 1872, for example, W.W. Reade proclaimed Athens as the place where “the milestones are master-pieces, and the street-walkers poets and philosophers,” using the term to positively describe the city's pedestrian poets (OED “streetwalker”). Since the late sixteenth century, writers and speakers have also used “streetwalker” to describe public prostitutes, of course, but it wasn't until the mid-nineteenth century when its current connotations were consolidated. J.C. Hotten's 1864 *The Slang Dictionary: or, the vulgar words, street phrases, and "fast" expressions of high and low society* defines it as a “*Social evil*, a name beginning to be applied to streetwalkers in consequence of the articles in the newspapers being so headed” (OED “streetwalker”). One event in particular contributed to the sensationalism surrounding streetwalkers to which Hotten's dictionary refers: the 1836 murder of Helen Jewett, a pampered New York prostitute, helped normalize and even encourage the press's coverage of sex work, especially as talk of Jewett's death drove circulation sales skyward (Canada 70–1). Spatially and discursively, then, the antebellum prostitute had brazenly strolled out of the shadows and merged into the quotidian rhythms of urban life, actively transgressing the boundaries of the brothel. In their shared journey for employment, nineteenth-century urbanites were sure to bump elbows with these working girls. They were off to the mill or the office; she was headed to her next

client. And now that they were just as likely to have a prostitute live down the block as down the hall from them, boardinghouse dwellers, it seemed, could never gain relief from the snares of the marketplace.

### III. The Boarding School, the Boarding House, and the Brothel

Of course, Fern, a middle-class writer herself, was not free from some of the same concerns distressing nineteenth-century advice writers about morally suspect spaces like the boarding house. With potential seductresses now living anywhere in the nearby vicinity, male boarders certainly faced a threat to their propriety and possibly to their mortal souls. The damage a night with a prostitute might cause to a single man's reputation was usually fleeting, though, especially if these trysts were rare and not habitual sins. Antebellum women, of course, could expect little to no forgiveness for similar indiscretions; once she lost her chastity, she was permanently marked as "fallen." Thus, the problem with spaces like boardinghouses and boarding schools, a youthful iteration of the boardinghouse, Fern declares, was that they often did more to set up women for lives of infamy than for productive domestic or civic lives in middle-class homes or in the marketplace. At the same time, Fern contradicts the determinism of this popular spatial teleology by portraying the boarding school, the boarding house, and the brothel as places where authorship is born, thus forging an alternative path for the "public" woman.

Though *Ruth Hall's* subtitle, *A Domestic Tale of the Present Time*, implies it will take place largely within a traditionally domestic setting (i.e. the private, middle-class home), Fern's choice proves deceptive, for the eponymous protagonist of Fern's *Tale* actually spends more time pining for a home than actually living in one. Only twice—first as a young girl and later as a newly married wife—does Ruth live in what readers would have considered a conventionally domestic setting. Both times are as short lived as they are ultimately unsatisfying: while her father's home

lacks familial warmth, her connubial home lacks the privacy needed to establish an independent family of her own. The domestic realm becomes altogether uninhabitable when Ruth's mother and husband, the only relatives redeeming these settings from utter unhappiness, both suffer untimely demises. Foreshadowing the circumstances that would later send her to the city's boardinghouse, Ruth's father consigns her to a distant boarding school "[a]fter her mother's death" leaves him as Ruth's sole caretaker (*RH* 14). Here, Ruth finds herself equally out of place as in her familial home. The same sensibilities that compel Ruth to "quiver with emotion" at a "sweet strain of music" or "a fine passage in a poem" also hinders any attempt at fitting in with a "mischievous" group of girls more interested in their paramours than their lessons (*RH* 14-15).

Unlike her domestic experiences, Ruth's boarding school education ultimately proves crucial for her development as a writer. While Ruth's compatriots loathe "[c]omposition day," Ruth completes the "frightful task" with ease (15). In the middle of a fruitless search for employment much later in the novel, Ruth also recalls how "while at boarding-school, an editor of the paper in the same town used often to come in and take down her compositions in shorthand as she read them aloud, and transferred them to a column of his paper" (*RH* 115). It is this recollection, of course, that prompts Ruth to seek successful employment with the local papers. While the boarding school scene foreshadows Harry's tragic death, then, it also augurs the birth of "Floy," the pen name of Ruth's much beloved print persona. Apart from her unaffectionate and overbearing father and brother in the boarding school, Ruth not only cultivates what will eventually be her most marketable skill, but also finds eager audiences for her work.

Unfortunately, the boarding school's parallel and overarching emphasis on sexual development eclipses the potential power of Ruth's voice. For Ruth's "madcap roommates,"

there is little value in education for women of marriageable age; consequently, they “slip out at the side-street door to meet expectant lovers” whenever the situation allows them (*RH* 15).

Although Ruth initially avoids the “all-absorbing love affairs” that consume her fellow boarders, she, too, comes to see their appeal in the passage below:

[H]er lithe form had rounded into symmetry and grace, her slow step had become light and elastic, her eye bright, her smile winning, and her voice soft and melodious. Other bouquets, other notes, and glances of involuntary admiration from passers-by, at length opened her eyes to the fact, that she was ‘plain, awkward Ruth’ no longer. Eureka! She had arrived at the first epoch in a young girl’s life—she had found out her power! (15)

*Ruth Hall* uncharacteristically seems to give priority to Ruth’s feminine charms in this scene, a departure from the text’s usual emphasis on female economic independence. Yet as Susan K. Harris proposes, Fern frequently manipulated tropes of domestic fiction in order to ultimately question or undermine them. In this case, the novel’s “facetious equation of Ruth’s discovery of sexual power with the discovery of gold [‘Eureka!’]” she writes, “suggests that readers should reevaluate the idea that sexual maturity is the crowning achievement of a woman’s life” (618). Indeed, *Ruth Hall*’s entire narrative arc means to prompt readers to reevaluate certain cultural “truths,” for which Ruth’s boarding school roommates often act as a mouthpiece: “all the world knew,” they declare, “that it was quite unnecessary for a pretty woman to be clever” (16). Moreover, the novel’s boarding school scene prompts us to think about the fate of girls who, without the foresight to invest in their education while young, believe and live these clichés. Ruth survives her husband’s death because she studies, practices, and capitalizes on a skill; if the same happened to one of Ruth’s boarding school bunkmates, her options would thus be much

more limited: get married again (often an unfavorable or impossible route for older women), take up a poorly paid “needle trade,” or sell their prized sexual allure as a prostitute.

While the link between prostitution and the boarding school is subtle in *Ruth Hall*, Fern makes the connection more explicit in “Girls’ Boarding School,” a particularly withering essay she wrote for the *New York Ledger* in 1857. Fern essentially argues that because of a lack of supervision, these popular “institutions” bred not only disease, but also weak wills, snobbery, and anti-republican sentiment. While *Ruth Hall* is interested in *showing* some of the ills of boarding school life, “Girls’ Boarding Schools” *tells* any mothers “contemplating sending her daughter to a boarding-school” to strongly reconsider, especially “at a time when the physique of this future wife and mother requires a lynx-eyed watchfulness on your part.” At stake is not only the health and vitality of these “growing girls,” who, as Fern later maintains, only receive “a formal, listless walk, in a half-mile-procession, to answer the purpose of *exercise*,” but also these girls’ future ability to mother their children or to act as a “proper” wife. Without the “lynx-eyed watchfulness” of parents, relatives, and the community to monitor these young women, the article claims, the boarding school quite literally invited “the painted woman,” the most pernicious of influences, to become bedfellows with their daughters. Because the boarding student “*has* no choice” in her roommates or acquaintances, except “what chance and the railroads send,” the “blushing country maiden” is often forced—according to Fern—to associate with the “over-dressed, vain, vapid, brainless offshoot of upstart aristocracy.” Thus, in the article’s greatest rhetorical flourish, Fern presents the battle for the heart of the fresh country damsel not as a local, womanly squabble, but as a battle for the very nation’s soul. Only by guarding the nation’s most prized, but largely vulnerable, citizens could American readers ward off the evil, undemocratic influences of European villainy.

Most notably, Fern's "Girls' Boarding Schools" addresses a fundamental anxiety in the antebellum period's "cult of sincerity" with the painted woman, "sometimes a prostitute but more often a woman of fashion, who poisoned polite society with deception and betrayal by dressing extravagantly" (Halttunen xv). As Karen Halttunen explains in her classic study of the mid-nineteenth-century crisis of hypocrisy, the "painted woman" symbolized the increasingly cryptic nature of a modern, more fluid social order (60). The ditzy, sartorially obsessed girl of "upstart aristocracy" like the one Fern describes endangered American's faith in the nation's natural meritocracy, a hierarchy supposedly based purely on one's inner virtue and character. If men and women could simply change their outer appearance to quietly slip into the highest echelons of society, while ignoring altogether the integrity of their conduct, the legitimacy of this hierarchy would collapse (Halttunen 63). Perhaps most alarmingly, real prostitutes and streetwalkers copied the painted parvenu's style of dress, making it almost impossible to distinguish wholesome women of fashion from their bawdy counterparts. This phenomena confirmed for nineteenth-century Americans that women of loose morals (and sexuality) had, as William Sanger put it, invaded not only "your squares...your opera, [and] your hotels," but also higher society's "private circles" (29-30). Fern, of course, would add the girl's boarding school to that list, making it all the more important for antebellum mothers to keep their daughters out of these unsupervised and uncontrolled environments. Though, as Fern mentions, most women considering sending their daughters did so to gain the independence needed to attend more freely fashionable parties themselves, thereby answering the call of the "omnipotent voice of fashion." Fern's attempt to halt the flow of female students to these questionable institutions, therefore, likely had limited results.

While *Ruth Hall*'s fictional protagonist may escape the polluted influences of the painted woman in her boarding school, then, Fern has a harder time imagining girls in the non-fictional world would be able to do the same. Even though many middle-class parents shared Fern's concerns about the nature of the supervision their daughters would receive in these schools, these academies remained popular "as a rite-de-passage in the socialization process" and as a marker of a girl's transition "from childhood to adulthood" throughout most of the nineteenth century (Gorham 22). To better understand this paradoxical tradition, then, we must turn to Foucault's 1967 talk "Of Other Spaces," his treatise on how certain spatial "contests" might be theorized within the processes of modernity. Here, Foucault envisions modern space not as entities existing partitioned from one another or as a hierarchy of oppositional places; instead, he writes "our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites...formally, we can describe these relations as series, trees, or grids" (2). Like power, space might be conceived as a network, in which all sites are connected and related to each other for some cultural or social purpose. Foucault argues, for example, that the cemetery functions as the locus of the city's spatial network "since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery" (5). "[C]risis heterotopias" and "heterotopias of deviance," spaces which have a unique purpose in any given network of sites, are Foucault's main focus of the essay, for they are "linked" with every other site or place at the same time that they also "contradict all the other sites" (3).

According to Foucault, the "boarding school, in its nineteenth-century form" can be classified as a crisis heterotopia, as its inhabitants (pre-pubescent and pubescent girls) are in a socially and corporeally liminal, possibly "contaminated" state (4). In this way, the boarding school in Western society had the important role of ensuring that a girl's "first manifestations of sexual virility...[took] place 'elsewhere' than at home" (Foucault 4-5). The regulation of the

(particularly female) body could thus be achieved through the regulation of space: until they had safely emerged as properly normed and “useful” bodies, liminal subjects could exist in various “non-spaces” that removed them from the public gaze.

Under the category of heterotopia of deviance, on the other hand, spaces “in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed,” Foucault also lists the brothel (5). Of course, it’s not hard to see how the brothel’s inhabitants might fit this description: for the sake of profit, these subjects defied nineteenth-century norms dictating that all sexual relations stay within the institutionally sanctioned, heteronormative, and reproductive bedroom (5). Within the spatial framework of the network, however, scholars should not consider the brothel as a closed off or separate entity from the hegemonic marriage bedroom, but as its mirror image. For Foucault, the brothel was a “counter-site,” a “kind of *effectively enacted utopia* in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within a culture, are simultaneously *represented, contested, and inverted*” (3, emphasis my own). Basically, the brothel was not only a kind of “effectively enacted utopia” legitimizing sex solely for pleasure, but also a place that challenged, exposed, and inverted the “truth” of institutionalized monogamy.

Foucault’s concept of the heterotopia is especially significant for this study of *Ruth Hall* because it frames the narrative’s imaginative network connecting the boarding school, the boardinghouse, and the brothel. All are forms of heterotopias, but the idea proves useful for more than just classification: for *Ruth Hall*’s protagonist, all three spaces facilitate her subjective transformation into her authoritative, subversive, and public persona known as ‘Floy.’ Because this Roman à clef holds up Ruth as the exception to the rule, the same cannot be said about the majority of girls and women inhabiting these liminal spaces. In *Ruth Hall* and “Girls’ Boarding



Schools,” for example, Fern is concerned that the “crisis” subject of the boarding school could emerge from this state as a deviant subject—without skills, and at the death of a husband, a woman may have to work in ways that “prostituted” her worth, whether literally or metaphorically. Ruth’s compositional skills help her avoid this particular fate, but life in the boardinghouse puts her at risk again of being implicated into the deviant discourses associated with the brothel. If nineteenth-century ideologies of the home proclaimed the private sphere a “utopia” for middle-class families, the boardinghouse was domesticity’s “heterotopia,” its equal but opposite mirror image. Where the home claimed stability, privacy, and morality, the boardinghouse claimed fluidity, connectivity, and social disorder in equal measure. Nonetheless, by emphasizing that the public author—not the public prostitute—made her living within the walls of the boardinghouse, *Ruth Hall* imagines a different kind of female subject emerging from one of the antebellum era’s most socially contentious spaces of “otherness.”

As Ruth observes her grim surroundings from this boardinghouse for the first time, she observes a district populated by exploited emigrants, working-class tailors, child launders bent under heavy loads, and old women trying to sooth ailing children. At “one block’s remove,” Ruth next spots a mysterious and “pretentious-looking house” which, unlike the bare tenements around her, is furnished with pricey “damask chairs, satin curtains, pictures, vases, books and pianos” (90). Not quite understanding the nature of this residence yet, Ruth notes that “it was odd that people who could afford such things should live in such a neighborhood” (90). The building certainly stands as a foil to the unsightliness of Ruth’s dirty boardinghouse, occupied as it is by working-class immigrants and widows.

Before describing the occupants of this perplexing place, Fern makes sure to point out who’s supporting this “business”: “Throngs of... gray-haired men, business men, pretentious

substantial-looking family men, and foppish-looking young men” (90). Again, *Ruth Hall* offers another contrast: while the men retain their respectability, vanity, and their social positions, the sex workers become virtual “untouchables.” As Weyler reiterates, “Fern does not blame the prostitute; she blames her married, male patrons” (106). Whether “young and fair” or “wan and haggard,” the women with “the stain that the bitterest tear may fail to wash away” will never be respected members of society (*RH* 90-1). While Fern invites readers to connect to the prostitute’s plight by reminding them that these fallen women labor under a sexist double standard, Fern’s final narrative comment simultaneously distances her urban observer from that same woman. The protagonist, “Floy” eventually becomes the city’s most beloved journalist. In contrast, *Ruth Hall* brands the fallen woman with a corporeal, venereal, and/or spiritual “stain,” fixing her forever in this pariah caste. Like Foucault’s homosexual, the sordid *act* of the prostitute constructs, constrains, and essentializes her *identity*. The novel may grant Ruth a riches-to-ragsto-riches narrative, then, but it ignores this possibility for her promiscuous neighbors: girls seduced into the life while “young and fair” will likely remain there, stagnating in this social station until they grow old, “wan and haggard” (91).

At the same time, this particular depiction of a brothel proves to be conspicuously misleading. Parlor houses, the kind of richly decorated operation described in *Ruth Hall*, employed only a small, elite portion of this workforce in nineteenth-century America (Whiteaker 28). Brothels prosperous enough to employ “colored servants” and to afford “damask chairs, satin curtains, pictures, vases, books, and pianos” would rarely be found in the slums, adjacent to the kind of second-rate boardinghouse Ruth finds herself in (*RH* 90). Likewise, parlor houses were also discriminating in the kind of prostitute they advertised and “sold.” In Whiteaker’s study of what George Templeton Strong called New York’s “whore-archy,” he argues that the

affluent patrons of parlor houses were not just looking for youthful, attractive bedfellows; they also wanted girls skilled in the arts of conversation, music, cards, and dance for daytime entertainments (27). A realistic representation of a parlor house would probably not feature a “wan and haggard” face, as older, less physically appealing women would find themselves out place in parlor house establishments; unless, of course, they were the managing madams (*RH* 91, Hill 223). Because the vast majority of New York prostitutes either occupied “comfortable but not luxurious brothels” or walked the streets to make their profits, *Ruth Hall*’s eponymous heroine would have been much more likely to encounter these notorious tarts on the sidewalks and the streets, not from the safety of a boardinghouse window (Whiteaker 27). If Ruth cannot maintain a physical distance from the abject space of the brothel, here she can at least maintain a representational one. By portraying the prostitute as a presence neatly contained within the parlor house, an environment markedly different from Ruth’s own, the novel attempts to minimize the brothel’s effect on Ruth’s respectability.

While Fern may try to remove the taint of Ruth’s living condition with a less-than accurate representation of the brothel, Katy’s implications in the pecuniary temptations of sex work again brings the illicit industry uncomfortably close to home. Not shortly after Ruth fully grasps the nature of the “business” beside her, Katy returns home from her errand to procure rent money from her grandfather Ellet. Upon arriving, Katy shows her mother a bag she received from an unknown stranger, one who claimed to know Harry Hall. Assuming it’s filled with money, Ruth exclaims, “‘A gentleman?’ said Ruth. ‘Why it is money, Katy. How came you to take money from a gentleman? Who was he?’” (*RH* 91). Fern, of course, suspiciously declines to comment on *why* Ruth would be so horrified to see Katy arrive home toting a fresh source of funds, especially in the family’s current financial straits. Juxtaposed so closely to the “brothel”

scene, Ruth's panic becomes much more comprehensible: having just realized her location within the social geography of the city, Ruth realizes Katy very well could have collected this money from a lewd "client" expecting sexual favors in return (from either Ruth or Katy). Within the heterotopia of the boardinghouse, then, the threat of being fallen—and essentialized as such—looms larger than ever for Ruth and her daughters.

The brothel's clients aren't the only men making veiled propositions to otherwise virtuous women, though. Sam and Jim, two working-class men that frequent Mrs. Skiddy's notso-fashionable boarding house also bid over the price of her body. As the "dragon," their badtempered landlady, dresses in the background, the two men gossip about their newly widowed roommate, conjecturing that she was as "poor as Job's turkey" (*RH* 74). Unlike the average antebellum home—which featured separate rooms for dining, meeting guests, smoking, reading, etc.—the rooms of boardinghouses were less strictly partitioned off, meaning that such private and gendered activities like dressing and smoking were often awkwardly wedged together. With heels up and cigars in hand, the power dynamics and phallic implications of the scene soon become plain as the two begin to bargain over her, estimating that "any of the sex may be bought with a yard of ribbon, or a breastpin" (*RH* 74). Besetting Ruth from outside and inside her lodgings, Weyler suggests, is a part of Fern's rhetorical strategy: "In having Ruth consider the affective dimensions of prostitution at the same time her fellow lodgers plot her sexual conquest...Fern intends to shock her readers, as well as force them to see the sexual dangers to which women across class lines are vulnerable" (110). In other words, Fern makes the prostitutes' plight sympathetic to middle-class readers by exposing the myth that only the sexually promiscuous, non-genteel woman would be threatened by lascivious men, men not bound to the same restrictive sexual standards as women. At "one block's remove," there is little

physical distance between Ruth and the fallen woman, but these kinds of conversations suggest there is also little metaphorical distance between them as well (*RH* 90).

Accordingly, many antebellum city dwellers would have seen little difference between a single woman boarder and a woman “for sale,” nor would they have been able to accurately tell the difference between brothels and boardinghouses since “a house filled exclusively with prostitutes was outwardly indistinguishable from a female-run boardinghouse with few tenants” (Gilfoyle 167). In order to keep up a least some facade of gentility and class, in fact, many New York madams advertised the prostitutes they employed as “lady boarders,” thus further muddling an already unclear line between honorable female boarders and boarding prostitutes. An 1870 Gentleman’s Directory, for example, invited potential clients to visit the “10 Lady Boarders” at “No. 55 West Houston St.” Here, Miss Ada Blashfield kept “eight or ten boarders, both blondes and brunettes,” which the directory goes on to deem a “pretty lot” (qtd. in Hill 215). Though the term confused many city novices—sometimes even landing them in trouble—Gamber explains that “[S]avvy urbanites knew that the term ‘lady boarder’ denoted a prostitute” (102). While married female boarders were safer from such lewd implications, single woman living in a boardinghouse were all but guaranteed to have their propriety and chastity questioned (Hill 180). Because they not only dressed, talked, and walked alike, but also shared a common name, it’s not hard to see why it would be easy to mistake a virtuous, but unmarried, female boarder with a prostitute and vice versa.

Like her fallen sister, then, *Ruth Hall*’s eponymous protagonist also obtains her livelihood from the inside of a boardinghouse. Instead of hawking her sexuality or her body, however, Ruth subverts popular discourses of the “lady boarder” by refiguring the space as the

“home base” for her newspaper operations. Of course, Ruth’s children figure prominently in *Ruth Hall*’s depiction of the tiny garret—they brighten and keep the space appropriately maternal, after all—but Fern also makes sure to emphasize how Ruth’s boardinghouse room serves the craft of writing, both as an art and as a business. Replacing the flowery accents and tasteful decorations that once festooned her marital home, Ruth instead furbishes her “little room...with newspapers, envelopes, letters opened and unopened, answered and waiting to be answered (*RH* 174). In a mutually constitutive relationship, Ruth molds and changes the space to fit her new, commercialized identity, while the space also becomes part of the “performance” of that subjectivity. Upon the opening of a new chapter, for example, *Ruth Hall*’s narrator informs her readers that “our heroine had become a regular business woman” (173). Looking for ways to attest to the veracity of this proclamation, the narrator subsequently pans around Ruth’s room for visual proof. All manner of writing and reading paraphernalia “littered” the room, this observer notes (173). As unequivocal evidence, the narrator then shows us Ruth “sitting, pen in hand, trying, with knit brows, to decipher some horrible cabalistic printer’s mark on the margin of her proof; then writing an article for Mr. Walter, then scribbling a business letter to her publishers” (173). It is not enough to declare that Ruth has developed a heightened sense for business; in order to claim it as an *identity*, which the text has done here, *Ruth Hall* must portray its protagonist “performing” as a businesswoman. From this room, as suggested by the plethora of opened and unopened missives strewn about the floor, Ruth will also establish an extensive affective network throughout the city with her devoted admirers and fans. By firmly positioning Ruth’s boardinghouse garret and her “businesswoman” subjectivity at the center of the novel and simultaneously marginalizing the abject presence of the bordello, then, Fern effectively replaces

the image of the sexualized “working” woman usually associated with the boardinghouse with a more rhetorically empowered working woman: the urban artist-author.

Ultimately, from the heterotopia of the boarding school to the heterotopia of the urban boardinghouse, Ruth’s progression through space shows that occupancy in these kinds of fluid, non-hegemonic places precipitate the subjectivity needed to develop a modern, female authorial voice. At the same time, Fern attempts to ward her readers off from inhabiting these same spaces because the boarding school, boardinghouse, and (of course) the brothel simultaneously made urban women incredibly vulnerable. By living in the same vicinity as these harlots, city women could expect to be both propositioned by men and tempted by the seemingly illustrious lifestyle of the parlor house prostitute. Though Ruth breaks from this prevalent spatial teleology by refiguring the boardinghouse as a place for public writers rather than for public women, not all women would be able to avoid the essentializing discourses constantly threatening to brand her as a “fallen” woman. In the next section, I contend that such upwardly mobile women during the period also had to deal with another iteration of the prostitute, the streetwalker, as they both navigated the space of the streets pursuing their next “professional” opportunity.

#### IV. Walking the Streets: Women’s Mobility and the Specter of the Prostitute in *Ruth Hall*

Four years after *Ruth Hall* was published, the *New York Ledger* printed Fern’s jocular take on antebellum cross-dressing laws in “A Law More Nice Than Just.” In the piece, Fern expresses her bewilderment over why women should be arrested for appearing publicly in trousers, especially when the more feminine, obtrusive options for dress might detain them from an invigorating stroll in a long drizzle. “Think of the old maids (and weep) who have to stay at home evening after evening,” she exclaims, “when, if they provided themselves with a coat,

pants and hat, they might go abroad, instead of sitting there with their noses flattened against the window-pane, looking vainly for the ‘coming Man’” (300). Instead of similarly waiting on this ‘coming Man,’ a play on two events in an old maid’s life she could expect to grow old from anticipating—Jesus’s rapturous return and her next suitor— Fern strikes out on the streets in her own cross-dressing experiment.

After tweaking one of her husband’s suits to better suit her feminine figure, Fern experiences the “delicious freedom” of a walk free from the inconveniences of her skirts— though not particularly free from her husband’s howling laughter (301). The experience is so fulfilling, Fern declares she will oblige a tailor to make her own suit, no matter what prudish gossipers or the law may say about it, for, she writes, “I’ve as good a right to preserve the healthy body God gave me, as if I were not a woman” (302). This final, frankest line of Fern’s article highlights what makes Fern’s critiques so persuasive: by juxtaposing God’s corporeal ideals with man’s codified sexism, she turns what might seem a comical skirmish over municipal laws into a significant doctrinal matter concerning gender equality and the will of God. While it cannot go without mentioning that Fern quickly released another article named “A Law More Nice than Just II” just seven days later describing the polite “advantages” women received from wearing conspicuously girlish outfits, Fern shows here that she was well aware and openly critical of laws restricting women’s movement, especially in spaces where men were entirely free from similar limitations. International female artists, including Flora Tristan and George Sand, shared Fern’s social sentiments and her interest in drag; only in male garb, after all, could a single woman promenade the streets free of intrusive or licentious stares. In this state, the *flanuese* could also rest assured that, even in an era in which prostitutes invaded every city neighborhood, no propositions would be made to her. In order to avoid the most defamatory of identity crises for



nineteenth-century women—being confused for a streetwalker—ambulatory female urbanites instead chose to be confused with men, a preference making them vulnerable to jail time, but less so to social disgrace. In the following, then, I not only show how laws pertaining to prostitution would have posed a significant hazard for wayfaring women like Fern, but also how problematic the prostitute's presence proved for both Fern's antebellum commentaries on space *and* mobility.

Although Fern may sooth the sting of her satire with guffaws in the *Ledger*, *Ruth Hall's* sentimental narrative persistently invites readers to better grasp and sympathize with its protagonist's gendered struggles for both greater physical and social mobility. First, *Ruth Hall* returns to familiar affective territory when it compares the senior Mrs. Hall's privileged mobility with Ruth's limited access to similar forms of transportation. While the elder Mrs. Hall can easily climb up into her "old-fashioned chaise" and "discov[er] Ruth's abode," Ruth can only make a similar trip to the Hall's household under great financial hardship (118). After her arrival at Ruth's hastily put together boardinghouse room, the old lady determines to guilt Ruth into turning over custody of Katy by provoking all of her motherly sensibilities concerning the welfare of her child. Once accomplished, the "artful manœverer," sweeps Katy away, quickly pointing the carriage back to their cottage (118). As synecdoche for her rigidly traditional mother-in-law, the "old-fashioned chaise" represents the element of power the old woman holds over Ruth in the form of transportation.

While the Halls move quite easily between city and countryside with their modest means of transportation, then, Ruth remains stuck in the heart of the city, left with virtually no access to her oldest daughter. As *Ruth Hall* points out, the Halls lack not only an appreciation of their greater mobility, but also the taste necessary to appreciate the "picturesque" aesthetics of travel not associated with economic gain or preservation. Nothing pleases the doctor more than "to sit

at the window and count the different trains which whizzed past” or the “number of wagons, and gigs, and carriages, that rolled lazily up the hill,” highlighting how his miserliness infects even his leisure time (128). Rather than embrace the organic façade in vogue in the mid-nineteenth century, then, “a wondrous glare of white paint, (carefully renewed every spring,) blinded the traveler whose misfortune it was to pass the road by the doctor’s house” (128). The tacky couple may have the capital, but they don’t have the “taste”; the text proposes the inverse to be true for Ruth.

Unlike the Halls, the patriarch of the Ellet family utterly fails to grasp the economic costs of travel: Ruth’s father conjectures that his daughter can simply “go once in awhile, I suppose, to see the child” (119). Ruth must remind him that the railroad “costs fifty cents every trip,” the equivalent of a week’s pay as a washerwoman (119). Like most of the working class of the antebellum period, Ruth walks—to find a job, to keep up with errands, or ask for money from relatives. But as a widow and a mother, even walking is not without its handicaps: while working-class fathers would likely leave their children with their wives, leaving their travels unencumbered, Ruth can make few trips without her daughters in tow. Between her trek from *The Daily Type*’s office to the *The Parental Guide*’s, for instance, Ruth walks tirelessly; after having “kept pace” with her mother “for so many hours,” Nettie’s “weary little feet” prematurely curtail Ruth’s protracted job hunt (*RH* 121). Without access to private or public childcare, the burden of gendered travel literally grows heavier as Ruth later walks “the whole distance” to her in-laws country home “with Nettie in her arms” (129).

At face value, then, Nettie’s presence both evokes pity for Fern’s motherly protagonist and highlights the gendered inequities of urban, upwardly mobile movement. But Nettie is needed for another reason on which *Ruth Hall* is unsurprisingly mute. Ruth’s youngest daughter

not only gives Ruth a convenient excuse to retire at the end of the night, but her presence also prevents Ruth from walking completely unaccompanied, raising suspicions about Ruth's real purpose for touring the industrial districts of the city. As Marilyn Wood Hill explains, "Nineteenth-century women found it 'unsafe' to walk the streets unescorted, especially in the evening," not only because men would proposition them for sex, but also because under current vagrancy laws "any woman unaccompanied by a male was subject to arrest" (115). Because there was no decisive way to discern the honest, genteel woman from her licentious foil, overzealous officers frequently incarcerated otherwise law abiding women found walking the streets at inappropriate hours (Hill 114). As George Templeton Strong commented in an 1855 diary, "if the policeman did make a mistake, the morning would find her disgraced for life, maddened perhaps by shame and mortification" (qtd. in Hill 115). Even though Fern does her best to make Ruth unmistakable from the "painted woman," in reality this would not have mattered much—any woman, orderly or not, risked public, long-lasting embarrassment if caught out after dusk. Later, when Ruth is later rich enough to whisk Katy away from her in-laws—in a carriage, no less—the vicious "old lady" makes sure to remind Ruth that her temporary peripatetic existence has tainted her respectability, perhaps permanently. When Ruth informs the elderly Halls she has "earned enough" for both Katy and Nettie's support, her mother-in-law jeers, "Well, if you have, which I doubt, I hope you *earned it honestly*" (185). Assuming Ruth is "fit for nothing but a parlor ornament," Mrs. Hall suggests the young mother has earned her financial security from a "parlor house," the only other profession where a nineteenth-century woman could make so much money in so little time (*RH* 130).

If invading the streetwalker's "place of business" is perilous to Ruth's reputation, *Ruth Hall* presents the spaces of the patriarchal literary industry as no less so. At the *Daily Type*'s

office, for example, Ruth is caught unaware of the sexually-charged politics involved in propositioning editors for a place in print. After being rudely greeted, Fern's naïve protagonist finds herself facing a group of editors "who, in slippared feet, and with heels higher than their heads, were whiffing and laughing" (120). "Ruth's face crimsoned" as the jovial smokers refuse to acknowledge Ruth on respectful terms; thus mirroring the phallic posturing of Sam and Jim earlier in the novel, "heels and cigars remained, in status quo, and her glance was met by a rude stare" (*RH* 120). Only this time, men aren't bartering for her attention, but brushing it away, not unlike her pretentious brother. As Weyler notes, Ruth is humiliated to find that despite all her genteel qualities, she "is treated in a fashion little better than the men might treat a prostitute" (111). Essentially, Ruth's body is the only "currency" she possesses here, since the same traits that were once praised in the domestic world find little purchase in the realm of letters. Workingclass women, the editors make sure to inform Ruth, are a dime a dozen—their writings, too, are "more chaff than wheat" (*RH* 120). Penetrating these dens of male homosociality will prove harder than Ruth expected.

Life on the street is certainly not without its legal or social hazards; yet in Ruth's urban ordeals, Faflik finds a refreshing, provocative way to reimagine Ruth's role as an artist. Tribulations of these kind, Faflik argues, are what enables Ruth to evolve from a naïve country wife into a streetwise, literary powerhouse who possesses "a metropolitan mastery that bears all the hallmarks of flanerrie, but in a female form that Deborah Epstein Nord names the flaneuse" (96). Faflik, in fact, makes the case that Fern's "impressionistic, 'painterly' narrative posture" mirrored that of Charles Baudelaire's writings as a flaneur (96). Though Klimasmith also mentions that Ruth draws disruptive, "rich material for storytelling" from the streets in a similar

manner to a flaneur, Faflik is the first to place Ruth explicitly in this modernistic tradition, making his assertion revolutionary in the history of Fern criticism (45).

My primary complaint with his reading is that, in his focus on the spatio-temporal pressures of boarding, Faflik leaves out any mention of the scarlet sisterhood complicating Ruth's relationship with the streets. As Nord illustrates, women "[t]respassing into those spaces of masculinity in which the male artist holds sway" are "unwittingly thrust into the position of whore" (118). In fact, a handful of scholars once declared it impossible for female flanerie to exist on the American scene (except perhaps anonymously) because of the "specific social meaning of a solitary woman, walking the streets without any apparent purpose, looking into the faces of passers-by" (Brand 200). It was not just that the flaneuse would elicit suspicions that she was looking for "clients"; the idea of a woman gazing, perhaps even in a confrontational manner, into the faces of passing men and women inverted the power dynamic in which men *looked* while women were *looked at*. Feminist critics and humanist geographers, including Deborah Parsons and Deborah Epstein Nord, have since challenged the notion that the flaneuse did not or could not exist. Women did indeed gaze upon the city and its crowd in similar ways to the male Rambler, Parsons insists, and they used the "gender ambiguities" inherent in the position of the urban artist to protest the totalizing and privileged male perception of the city (6-7). Still, as Nord reminds us, the flaneuse often found the "position of spectator" uncomfortable when their gendered bodies put them simultaneously in the middle of that same "urban spectacle" (13). The specter of the prostitute did not only haunt the flaneuse, though; even male spectators could not escape all ties to the prostitute. The painted woman served as "metaphor for the role of the artist," Parsons argues, for she, too, gleans "the material of her profession" from the streets and "offers her constructed body as a commodity" (24-5). In the same way these women sold their

body to the highest bidders, Baudelaire concluded the artist to be “prostituting his work for publication” (Parsons 25).<sup>2</sup> So while I don’t disagree that Fern may adopt the narrative style of flanerierie—and Ruth his street savvy—we should remember that no city stroller could ever quite escape from the shadow of the city’s pleasure women.

With this in mind, I want to continue building on and complicating Ruth’s position as a “reader” and “writer” of this new urban frontier with these spatial/sexual politics at the forefront. If we consider Ruth as a flaneuse, then, it is no coincidence that the “scenery” featured in her first panoptic view of the city is of the exploited poor, ostracized immigrants, working-class women, and pitiable prostitutes. Within this distancing maneuver, Ruth constructs herself as separate from the objects of her gaze—she, unlike them, does not “belong” there. Consequently, she will leave this dilapidated part of the city for more respectable housing at the culmination of the novel. Ruth’s narrative voice emerges from the boarding school and “Floy” from the cemetery, then, but “Floy” *the flaneuse* emerges only after the epiphany-inducing experience with the boardinghouse/brothel. While propriety and respectability may restrict Ruth, “Floy,” her constructed persona, is free to navigate and manipulate the spatial politics of the streetwalker to her economic and artistic advantage.

First, “Floy” decides that if men are going to compete and bargain over her commercial worth—as Sam and Jim do—they will do it not over her body, but her manuscripts. While these men allow her no agency in the first instance, in the latter “Floy” shows a level of control and power unprecedented for women in the male-controlled antebellum literary market. David

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth, as Weyler has discussed, certainly fits the bill of the flaneur/flaneuse on this last account, then, as she constructs her compositional labors as a form of artistic prostitution.

Dowling, in fact, posits that, in their attempts to secure Fanny Fern's signature for their paper, editors ran roughshod over the gentleman's code, an informal system that prioritized publisher's "prior claims" to an author's work (67). Fern stoked this battle by "encourag[ing] publishers to overlook trade courtesy by openly bidding for authors like her to write for them" (Dowling 67). In *Ruth Hall*, then, Floy mirrors the business philosophy of her creator. Rather than wither under Mr. Lescom's or Mr. Tibbetts's wages for the sake of loyalty, then, she leaves them Mr. Walter, her new friend, pseudo-literary brother, and (not coincidentally), the highest bidder for her work.

Though the marketplace was not free from all vestiges of sexual tension, this is no longer such an obstacle for a wiser, more street-savvy Ruth. Floy expertly negotiates an economic rivalry that "echoes a love triangle" between Mr. Tibbetts, Mr. Lescom, and Mr. Walter for her own financial gains (Dowling 74). Though she was not long ago laughed out of the *Daily Type*'s office, Ruth also shows a newfound confidence in this space when she circumvents one of the most sexually charged scenes of the novel. As she informs Tibbetts that she will no longer be writing for him, the jealous editor retaliates by cutting off her exit from his office. *Ruth Hall*'s audiences would have recognized this as a melodramatic trope, Dowling points out, and this dramatic set-up likely "would have led to a rape scene on a Bowery stage or in a Richardson novel" (73). Rather than let herself be "prostituted" for less than her worth for a moment longer, Ruth handily escapes Mr. Tibbet's trap by throwing his own words back at him as she marches out of his presence.

Secondly, Ruth employs anonymity, another convention associated with both the prostitute and the flaneur, for her own writerly benefit. While the flaneur used it to collect his aesthetic materials undisturbed and unattached from the crowd, prostitutes often used their obscurity to add to their appeal. Men in search of repercussion-less sex could thus meet with

these painted ladies discreetly; later, he could part with her without concern for his reputation. As Nord neatly sums it up, “the relationship between client and prostitute exemplifies the transitory and anonymous nature of the relationship between urban spectator and the streets” (43). In that same way, Ruth keeps a tight watch over anonymity, only revealing it when advantageous, in an attempt to sustain the buzz around her journal articles and her forthcoming book. Not coincidentally, male readers respond to the “voice” of the mysterious Floy with gushing proposals of love and marriage. A Southern slave owner, for example, attempts to ply Floy to the marriage alter with “a box at the opera, a carriage, and servants in livery, and the whole heart and soul of Victor Le Pont” (153). Not willing to be bought out of her independence so quickly, Ruth moves on to another missive with a curt, “[t]he next was more interesting” (153). No longer vulnerable to the gaze of men on the street or in the boardinghouse, ‘Floy,’ unlike the prostitute, is not willing to put her body up for sale.

Such anonymity proves romantically and sexually titillating to her male readership precisely because she cannot be bought, captured, or sexually domesticated within the confines of a marriage. In other words, her erotic appeal, like Baudelaire’s “passante” or passerby figure, lies largely in their fantasies of possessing something so ephemeral. While still slightly tinged by the lopsided power dynamics of the client/prostitute relationship, the anonymous exchange nonetheless remains Ruth’s preferred method for keeping in contact with her growing fan base. By refusing to disclose her “real” identity to these love-struck male readers, Ruth thus manages as flaneuse to “subvert the superior possession of the male gaze by [herself] controlling the image that it objectifies” (Parsons 26). In other words, readers are only allowed access to what Ruth determines is commercially or socially advantageous for them to have access to—nothing more and nothing less.



## V. Conclusion

By remaining physically out of the public eye, but persistently in the mind's eye through her published narratives, "Floy" avoids becoming the corporeal spectacle associated with the disgraced urban prostitute. As a symbolic gesture at the culmination of the narrative, Ruth thus trades in her laborious and socially suspect peripatetic existence for a more private mode of transportation: Mr. Walter's carriage. Like her middle-class counterparts, Fern is at times wary of modernity's tendency to commodify anything and everything, but this "happy ending" is one instance where her protagonist yields to and even embraces the era's spirit of unstoppable commercialization. Here, Ruth avoids selling her body and succeeds by selling her soul. While the phrasing may sound overly ominous, it is helpful for complicating uncritical celebrations of Ruth's ascension to the top of the middle-class. As Klimasmith puts it, "for Fern, commodifying the psyche leads not to paralysis but to profit" (18). Though I agree, put into the context of the prostitute, the "psyche" is just another item on an arbitrary spectrum of what is and what is not okay to market: because the commodification of sex endangered bourgeois values, antebellum society might have seen the "self" or the "soul" as the preferable thing to sell. Because *Ruth Hall* makes such an effort to treasure Ruth's individuality and the development of the self, readers might see the latter as the more degrading option.

Moreover, though Ruth can triumphantly trounce off into the sunset, her journalistic efforts have ostensibly done little to nothing to help real, flesh-and-blood prostitutes escape sex work, or, alternatively, to reassess the sexist notion that the loss of virginity debased a woman for life. In fact, if Ruth's articles feature visions of the poor and the abused from which she alone profits, we might consider her works a "prostitution" of sentimental imagery. In other words, in return for the depiction of their bodies and their experiences—things perhaps too sacred to make

money from—Ruth turns a profit. In that same vein, we might also consider depicting prostitution in print as just another way of profiting off a woman’s body—only twice removed. Because Floy’s actual articles are never revealed to us, however, constructing a definitive argument on the exact nature of her journalism is challenging.

Though *Ruth Hall*’s actual description of the brothel and the sex workers within is sparse, the novel’s focus on the boarding school and boardinghouse reveals that this place’s influence is much greater than previously estimated. Through the concept of heterotopia, critics can understand Fern’s representation of the boarding school, the boardinghouse, and the brothel as not only historically, but also theoretically linked. By continuously manipulating and marginalizing the presence of the brothel and its inhabitants, Fern’s protagonist re-“places” the antebellum image of the “lady boarder” with a working female writer. Fern’s assessment of gendered travel in the antebellum period also exposes how the specter of the streetwalker, the spatially transgressive form of the prostitute, problematizes Ruth’s movement through the city and up the social ladder. Finally, though Ruth may avoid putting her body on the marketplace, the commodification of her soul as ‘Floy’ makes her presence in print no less complicated.

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