INTRODUCTION: BECOMING VISIBLE

ALISON EASTON, R.J. ELLIS, JANET FLOYD, AND LINDSEY TRAUB

The over-arching contention of this collection of interdisciplinary essays is straightforward: the later decades of the nineteenth century in America – the immediate postbellum period, the Gilded Age, and the Progressive Era – were a time of critical change in the cultural visibility of women, whether it was a visibility attained by them, granted to them, or contested by them. During this period, economic and social changes, still profoundly inflected by matters of gender, class and race, saw women making new kinds of appearances throughout American society. Often highly controversial, these changes were recorded across and within a wide range of cultural artifacts, events and texts. In this process, women were not always visible to each other, nor to state institutions, hegemonic forces, or subsequent historiography, but their motivations, activities, and understandings were essential to shaping, at various levels, the character of their present society and the nation’s future.

This collection therefore advances a range of perspectives on the complex ways in which American women were seen during this period and asks how, when and where they became more culturally visible (as opposed to merely present). The essays included here consider women with a public profile, those only intermittently “seen”, and those who became invisible to later generations. By exploring the appearances of immigrant women, women of the working class, Native American, African American, and white middle-class women, we can show how, across the USA, it was fundamentally women who drove this change forward, in groups and as individuals.
The editors and contributors to this volume particularly want to understand women’s presence in nineteenth-century American society and culture in terms other than the traditional polarities of inside/outside and private/public, since these dichotomizing frames simply do not fit the complexities of what was happening. Much power and consequence were invested in those binarized concepts; their rhetorical organization of space appeared central to both social recognition and personal freedom. They were generated as much by economic structures of advanced industrial capitalism and the racist social structures of segregation as by the patriarchal thinking that had given birth to liberal notions of the public and private spheres, yet they certainly did not constitute the norm for most women, even though such ideological mystifications still materially affected their lives. Given that the hegemonic powers of these decades – patriarchal, capitalist, white supremacist – determined how “public” and “private” were defined, the distinction between these poles was used to establish and perpetuate social divisions (in labor and in living) that served the vested interests of the economically and racially powerful, and to occlude or deny the interests of those with less power, little power, or no power (most women, peoples of color, the working class). Consequently, the binarized terms “public” and “private” were far from transparent or static in the nineteenth century; they were not extant concrete realities but rather, as Mary Ryan puts it, “cultural constructions imposed on a complex world.”

What has proved remarkable, in retrospect, is how difficult any quest to move consistently beyond these polarities becomes and how these binaries re-impose themselves, if sometimes only by implication. This is perhaps a sign of how much power accrues in sustaining the socio-cultural organization that these binaries sought (and seek) to naturalize. In Deleuze’s words, “It is wrong to say that the binary machine exists only for reasons of convenience … the