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"VITAL CONTACTS": DRAMATIC DOWNCLASSING IN BOSWORTH CROCKER'S *HUMBLE FOLK*

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ABSTRACT
The present paper provides a revision of the concept of vital contact, which gained importance during the Progressive Era, and its gendered division, as applied to Bosworth Crocker's plays included in the collection *Humble Folk* (1923). Taking Crocker's plays as case studies, this paper discusses the binary division between tourism narratives and sociological narratives of slumming, which enables the rediscovery of Bosworth Crocker, a long-neglected transatlantic author usually regarded as a minor writer known through her failed marriage to famous critic and scholar Ludwig Lewisohn. Consequently, the present discussion argues how, through her theater, Crocker engaged with social activism, appealing to the social conscience of her audiences/readers and voicing the need to legislate on tenement housing, prostitution, domestic violence and women's rights over their own salaries, concerns that marked U.S evolution from Victorian to modern times.
RESUMEN
Este ensayo revisa el concepto de "contacto vital," que gozó de importancia en la Era Progresista, y sus diferencias en base al género en las piezas teatrales de Bosworth Crocker recogidas en el volumen *Humble Folk* (1923). Tomando las obras de Crocker como foco, este ensayo también discute la división binaria que a menudo se da en obras ambientadas en los barrios bajos entre ficción turística y ficción sociológica, para así redescubrir a Bosworth Crocker, una autora transatlántica olvidada por la crítica,

normalmente reducida al estatus de escritora menor, y solo conocida por su matrimonio fallido con el famoso crítico y escritor Ludwig Lewisohn. Por lo tanto, el presente artículo argumenta que, a través de su teatro, Crocker demuestra su compromiso con el activismo social, haciendo un llamamiento a la conciencia social de su público y dando voz a la necesidad de legislar sobre la vivienda, la prostitución, la violencia doméstica y el derecho de la mujer a mantener su sueldo, problemas que marcaron la evolución de los Estados Unidos de la era victoriana a la era moderna.

Vital contact, or genteel excursions into the deprived world of the slums, is a concept which gained importance during the Progressive Era. While for some this contact was a form of tourism, for others it was the analytical means that would precede social reforms. American theater, moving then from mere entertainment and melodrama to a more politically committed American realism, also echoed such cross-class interactions. The five one-act plays in Bosworth Crocker's collection *Humble Folk* (1923) not only demonstrate two sides of vital contact—tourism narratives and sociological narratives of slumming—but also show her grappling with "gender consciousness" even as her work evolved from dramatizations of slum life as entertainment to more engaged views that appealed to the social conscience of her audiences and readers.

The notion of vital contact endorses engagements across class and gender lines. Vital contact, a phrase made popular by Harvard rebels in the 1910s, "suggested a form of elite renewal that could foster amity and shared goals across class lines." Borrowing Christine Stansell's words:

> Working people would provide their privileged friends with an animating experience of simple charm and human drama; in turn, the educated mentors would teach the working poor good citizenship and civic organization. There was condescension at the heart of the effort, to be sure, but nonetheless the desire to socialize democracy made encounters across class lines in liberal settlement houses more reciprocal than they had been in the 1890s. (61)

In his book-length study of this concept, *Vital Contact: Downclassing Journeys in American Literature from Herman Melville to Richard Wright* (2005), Patrick Chura has identified a gendered division inherent to this downclass journey: "For male seekers of vital contact, class descent often resulted in a renewed masculine identity

as a result of the exchange of the softening conditions of privileged life for the rugged hardships of a labor environment" (2), that is, a reinvigoration of middle and upper-class identity and masculinity also found in the work of male writers such as Theodore Dreiser or Jack London (Schoket 125-26). In contrast, female downclassers featured ameliorative work and an active inculcation of "bourgeois moral, spiritual, and aesthetic standards among working class subjects" (Chura, *Vital Contact* 5), at the same time that, as Eric Schoket has discussed in the case of Progressive Era women narrative writers, they helped to create "gender consciousness" (132). Theater, the art form that holds a mirror up to nature and that is also potentially charged with an immediate political effect, echoed such cross-class contacts popularizing slum plays that were meant either to just entertain middle and upper-class audiences, or, more hopefully, also to move their consciences. While the study of downclassing and slum plays written by male playwrights, such as Eugene O'Neill, George Scarborough or Israel Zangwill, has been the concern of recent research (Chura 2011, Westgate 2014), such plays by women have been ignored. Recent studies have underlined the zeal of American women fiction writers of the Progressive Era to transform society by making use of specific strategies in terms of plot, style, characterization and theme (see Harker 2007). Nevertheless, apart from passing references to suffrage plays written by women (see Chapman and Mills 2011 and Chapman 2014) or the study of brothel drama (Johnson 2006), the work of women playwrights, those largely forgotten advocates of social reforms (Engle 8), remains largely in oblivion.

Bosworth Crocker (1862-1946), a long-neglected British-born American author, is one of these forgotten women playwrights who showed interest in depicting how the other half lived and, more importantly, in providing means that could move their audiences to act. Through her plays, Crocker not only creates gender consciousness, but she also invites her audiences to become downclassers, paradoxically resulting in her inculcating moral, spiritual, and aesthetic standards among the middle and upper-class spectators. Her largely unexplored 1923 collection of one-act plays, *Humble Folk*, the focus of the present essay, proves to be Crocker's dramatic form of social activism. Furthermore, the present exploration of the five plays included in this volume discloses Crocker's dramatization of vital contact and her own evolution from dramatizing life in the slums as a form of entertainment to exploiting

the possibilities of vital contact to claim those social reforms that would mark the evolution of the United States from Victorian to modern times.

Unfortunately, Bosworth Crocker has largely passed into the annals of American theater history as the wife of the brilliant critic, writer, and scholar Ludwig Lewisohn. Ralph Melnick, in his biography of Lewisohn, presents Crocker as that opportunist middle-aged woman who divorced her first husband, Henry Arnoux Childs, a gambler and heavy drinker who had brought his family to the verge of poverty, to marry the then ascending star Ludwig Lewisohn (109). She was twenty years his senior. According to Melnick, Crocker rarely worked, nor produced anything substantially worthy, and she – together with the four children from her previous marriage to Childs – became a heavy burden on Lewisohn's shoulders (180, 306). Crocker's insistence on being called Mrs. Lewisohn, even when separated, and her entering a libel file against Lewisohn for depicting her in pejorative ways in his autobiographical works, *Mid-Channel* (1929) and the novel *The Case of Mr. Crump* (1926), ignited the legend of Crocker as an aging old woman who thought she would live off Lewisohn forever; a woman vengeful enough not to let her husband free when he wanted to marry concert singer Thelma Spears, who was forty years Crocker's junior, and twenty years Lewisohn's junior. But this seems a one-sided and biased perception of a woman who, when considered from a different optics, appears as a female warrior strong enough to struggle for her children's well-being and who, through her writing, became a well-known playwright who believed in the political use of theater and in its power to transform society.

Born in England in 1862 and raised in the United States, Bosworth Crocker is still a woman writer difficult to locate. As Judith E. Barlow has noted, the fact that Crocker used many different names –her full name; Mary Arnold Crocker Childs Lewisohn; her maiden name; Mrs. Lewisohn, as well as at least two *noms de plume*– makes it difficult to ascertain the exact size of her canon (201). Crocker copyrighted at least twenty-five plays, and she is known to be the author of poems, essays, and the drama reviews of *Town Topics* from 1919 to 1924 ("Mrs. Lewisohn, Wrote Poems, Plays" 24). Besides the obstacle that her different names have become to measure Crocker's oeuvre, one should add her transatlantic condition. Her works were sometimes anthologized as if she were a British author –as in *Fifty Contemporary One-Act Plays*

(1920), edited by Frank Shay and Pierre Loving– whereas other editors listed her as an American, as in Barrett H. Clark and Kenyon Nicholson's *The American Scene: An Anthology of American Plays* (1930). But independently of the nationality she was attributed, the fact is that Crocker's works were very popular in her times and published together with masterpieces by acknowledged playwrights such as August Strindberg, Lady Gregory or Anton Chekov (see for instance B. Roland Lewis' *Contemporary One-Act Plays* (1922) or T. R. Edwards' *One-Act Plays for Stage and Study* (1931)). Furthermore, and in stark contrast with the obscure and egotistic image of Crocker that Lewisohn's biographer and friends have contributed to spread, she understood the need of writers to get organized in order to protect and promote their rights, as exemplified in her charter membership of the Authors' League of America or of PEN (Poets, Essayists and Novelists), the international organization founded in 1921, later known as PEN International, and which still nowadays champions writers' freedom of speech world-wide. But more importantly, perhaps, Bosworth Crocker proved her political commitment to free speech in her plays, in which she tackled, with a feminist touch, social issues that needed urgent reforms: from immigration to tenement housing, and from prostitution to women's rights.

It is significant to note that Crocker had first-hand contact with the work of settlement houses; she served as the chairwoman of the committee on cultural activities at the Henry Street Settlement House (Melnick 109). The Henry Street Settlement House, founded by Lillian Wald on New York's Lower East Side in 1893, "established instructional programs that were intended to help new immigrants confront their problems including English-language training to help with assimilation, and childcare and donations of food, coal, and clothing to help with the deprivations of tenement life" (Westgate 117). A key element in the cultural apparatus of this Settlement House was its theater, which, created by Alice and Irene Lewisohn and under the name of the Neighborhood Playhouse, became one of the most important little theaters of the city at that time, together with the Provincetown Players and the Washington Square Players. Furthermore, Crocker's belief in culture to ameliorate life in the slums can also be seen in her donation of her play *The Baby Carriage*, produced by the Provincetown Players, for a special bill for the benefit of the Brooklyn-based Friendly House Settlement on 24th and 25th February 1919 ("Entertainment for Friendly House" 7,

"Provincetown Players' Performance for Friendly House" 10). The Friendly House, founded towards the end of the nineteenth century, was a charitable organization specifically concerned with the plight of ill, disadvantaged and impoverished citizens, especially children and their mothers, who were the victims of the immigration boom and of scarce protective legislation (Brooklyn Historical Society). *The Baby Carriage*, like the other plays included in the present article, deals precisely with the social ills that organizations such as the Henry Street Settlement House or the Friendly House, with which Crocker worked directly, were fighting.

Humble Folk, Crocker's collection of one-act plays that explicitly represent life in the slums, opens with an introduction by Crocker's husband at that time. In his sincere appraisal of his wife's plays, Lewisohn highlighted her ability to capture true feeling:

> These plays by Bosworth Crocker have the tang and edge of life, the power and pathos of reality. They, too, deal with the problematic element in human existence. But they do not deal with that element in abstract terms or through the feeble symbolism of the consciously sophisticated. They show character in conflict, character which *is* action, passion which *is* struggle, circumstance which *is* crisis. (9-10, emphasis in the original)

The five one-act plays that make up the collection all deal with the lives of immigrants in the United States: Germans, Irish, Scandinavians, as well as Catholics and Jews; all struggle to win that battle against a naturalistic environment. Some of her protagonists become the unforeseen realistic winners in the battle for life as they negotiate their own traditions while assimilating the American way of life. In these struggles, Crocker seems to argue, female characters need to emerge as strong heroines if only to survive. While observing and writing from the outside –Crocker's own ethnicity, class, and religion (she was raised as a Catholic) set her apart from the kind of characters that people her plays– she succeeds in adopting other people's voices. Although sometimes she approaches stereotypical representations of slummers, she generally does it in such a way that her work does not fall into the realm of nativism that has problematized that of many white Progressive-era reformers, even most admirable ones such as Margaret Sanger or Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Ganobcsik-Williams 23, Rich 29). Rather than merely acting as a privileged tourist who after a trip into New

York City underworlds could return to the safety of her home to write about those harsh realities she had seen, Crocker employed her plays to actually give voice to those who had been marginalized. And she does it in such a way that she makes her audiences see the others as subjects and provides an invitation to transcend superficial empathy to share with her a critical standpoint to foster ongoing social debates.

In her depiction of life in the slums, Crocker was participating in a tradition that theatre critics of her times, such as John Corbin, despised for staging an "ugly reality" without an apparent "noble purpose" ("The Drama of the Slums" 14-15). In fact, slum plays started invading Broadway at the end of the nineteenth century, and maintained their popularity until well after the First World War. These plays were highly controversial, as they popularized evil natures and immoral acts found in the slums that middle-class spectators perhaps did not dare to see with their own eyes, although slum tourism was becoming fashionable. Nevertheless, some playwrights also found in the aesthetization of poverty and slumming as cultural entertainment the means to claim for reforms. As Katie N. Johnson has said regarding brothel plays, "they were also part of a new American realism that recast the relationship between bourgeois spectators and lower-class subjects on the stage" moving beyond voyeur realism to occasionally suggest ruptures in policing (3), a remark that can be extended to many slum plays. Regarding her portrayal of poverty, I believe Bosworth Crocker shares with her serious contemporary progressive reformers the same sincere concern, suggested by J. Chris Westgate as follows:

> Unlike fashionable slummers, progressive reformers addressed the misfortune of slum life through activism, legislation, and education by emphasizing subjects like tenement house reform and settlement work and launched a campaign that historians credit with developing a "social conscience" that has influenced discussion of poverty in the twentieth century. (5)

Crocker's social conscience is evident in plays such as *The Last Straw*, *The Baby Carriage*, *The Dog*, *The First Time*, and *The Cost of a Hat*, where she covers myriad slum realities which called for social reforms, such as poverty, gender inequality, temperance and prostitution. Significantly, as I argue in the following discussion, with her plays Crocker moves from what Westgate called "tourism

narrative" towards a much more politically and socially committed "sociological narrative." As Westgate states in his study of slum plays by male writers, "Whereas the tourism narrative privileged the sights/sites of slum life, the sociological narrative privileged the problems from slum life, from tenement neglect to ethnic prejudices to the social evil of prostitution" (55). The five plays included in *Humble Folk* prove Crocker's own evolution towards social commitment, an evolution that goes hand in hand with the importance her characters gain as they are depicted in their struggles and not as the mere victims of the locale in which the play is set.

The Last Straw, the play that opens the volume, is essentially built upon a tourism narrative, which I believe relates to the fact that it is also Crocker's earliest play in the collection. She copyrighted it in 1914, and the play premiered at the Comedy Theatre, produced by the Washington Square Players, in February 1917. The scarce extant reviews agree on saving this play from the general failure of that night – *The Last Straw* was seen as "The most creditable play" by the *New York Times* reviewer ("Comedy's Players Not at Their Best" n.pag.), and by Walter Prichard Eaton, writing for the *Indianapolis News* (14). The *New York Times* underlined the fact that the play is "sympathetic and lifelike," partly also because it was well-played, particularly by Arthur Kuhl as the male protagonist. Likewise, Eaton also applauded its "sincere and thoroughly impersonating" characterization, favoring Margaret Vonnegut's role as the protagonist's wife (14). The play is set in the kitchen of a basement flat in New York City which, just visually, prioritizes the sight/site of a tourism narrative and invites the spectator to witness the impoverished and harsh reality German immigrants in New York were forced to experience. The very space the Bauers occupy signals their material deprivation and their social immobility. The scarce pieces of furniture – barely a table and four chairs for a family of four (given that the grandmother and a little child have passed away), an old side-board and an old ironing table (Crocker 14) – tell of the Bauers' economic difficulties. The location of the Bauers' flat at the very bottom of the building is a metaphorical extension of their social class. The gas-heater, with several flatirons on it, and the view of the side walk the only window in the room provides (14) serve to signal this place as a kind of underworld: Hell on Earth. The Bauers' connection with the upper floors in the building that represent the higher classes is through a dumbwaiter, partially seen through an

outer door, and a whistle. Every time it rings, Mr. Bauer must respond immediately, which enacts the higher classes' exploitation of the lower classes. Furthermore, this also represents the lack of physical contact between classes but how, in spite of this, the higher class still finds the means to make use of the lower class.

But the most important strategy Crocker employs in this play to foster empathy for impoverished immigrants relates to animal rights, which seem to be placed well above human rights. The event that sets the play in motion is the unfortunate deadly accident of a cat. Apparently, the cat had got trapped in the dumbwaiter shaft when Mr. Bauer, not noticing the cat was there, set the dumbwaiter in motion. The injured cat ran off to the street and Mr. Bauer followed. When the cat appears dead, a neighbor affirms she has seen Mr. Bauer kicking the cat to death, something the German janitor denies. His word means nothing against a richer woman's and consequently he is fined. As Mr. Bauer complains to his wife, "They got me rattled among them. The lady was so soft and pleasant – 'He must be made to understand, your Honor,' she said to the judge, 'that dumb animals has feelin's too, just as well as human beings'" (27). The fact that Mr. Bauer is not given the chance to say that he was indeed trying to help the cat leads the audience to reconsider immigrants' discrimination at court. Unsupported by the legal system, reminded that everyone thinks he is a murderer –as channeled through some kids' constant chant "Who killed the cat!" throughout the play– and not getting any support from his wife, who keeps saying "Even *if* you kill the cat –what's a cat against a man's life!" (42, emphasis added), Mr. Bauer's only escape is death. Like Willy Loman in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, when Mr. Bauer realizes that he cannot be the breadwinner, that he will never attain the American Dream and that he is worth the same dead as alive, he takes his gun and shoots himself offstage. In order to emphasize how inconsequential Mr. Bauer's life –and death– is to the neighbors living on the upper floors, the telephone bell "*rings continuously while the CURTAIN slowly falls*" (43). Thus, it could be said that with *The Last Straw* Crocker provided New York middle and upper-class and intellectual audiences with a naturalistic glimpse of an unsuccessful German immigrant's life. Mr. Bauer had become a victim the moment he arrived to the United States, and finding not even a chance to struggle, he finds in his death the only possible escape to his history of suffering.

In her next excursion into the life of German immigrants in *Humble Folk*, Crocker provides more active characters and ends the play on a positive note, thus showing her move toward a more optimistic sociological narrative. *The Baby Carriage* premiered at the Playwrights' Theatre on the 14th February 1919; this would be Crocker's only contribution to the Provincetown Players, whose work she probably knew very well also through Lewisohn, then a fervent follower and critic of the Players. *The Baby Carriage* centers on the life of Jewish American immigrants and as such covers many of the topics identified by Julius Novick in plays by Jewish American playwrights, namely, upward social mobility, shame, the keeping of Jewish traditions in the face of acculturation, and new ways of beings Jewish in America. Likewise, it also shares its rootedness in realistic tradition (4-5). As in *The Last Straw*, the very setting suggests the impoverished condition of its dwellers. *The Baby Carriage* takes place at the Lezinsky Tailor Shop on the Lower East Side. This tailor shop is two steps down from the sidewalk (205), which has symbolic implications. Being lower than street level represents the Lezinskys' lower social status and the economic problems they are going through. The tailor shop features "*third-rate*" equipment (205). The family can hardly pay the rent and bills; they cannot pay Mr. Lezinsky's eye surgery, and they "can't afford to buy new clothes" (208), so the Lezinsky kids always wear clothes which are fixed from their father's or older brothers' old clothes. As Mrs. Lezinsky says,

> You see, ... always fine-dressed people around –the mamas and the little children dressed fine– with white socks and white shoes. And our David –and our Julius –and our Benny, even– what must they wear? Old clothes! Yes. And to save the money they should wear black stockings –and old shoes. Never no pretty things. And it's all the time work –work –work, and we never have nothing –no new clothes –no pretty things (*She breaks down completely.*) (227)

This fragment reveals the lie of hard-work as the infallible means to achieve the American Dream and, furthermore, Crocker emphasizes that poverty is a catch-22 situation that plays against these children's opportunity to succeed in America. As Mrs. Lezinsky says, because of their impoverished appearance, no one wants to play with them and they are continually insulted, even being hit and called "Sheeney" by richer Jewish children (227).

Nevertheless, rather than merely depicting from a voyeuristic perspective these immigrant characters' story of material deprivation and unfruitful efforts to succeed in the United States, Crocker depicts Mrs. Lezinsky as a joyful young woman who, although going through bad times, will celebrate her little improvements so as to continue struggling. The plot is set in motion when Mrs. Lezinsky talks to her friend and neighbor, the Irish Catholic Mrs. Rooney, about acquiring the latter's baby carriage for the baby the Lezinskys are expecting. As the carriage is something Mrs. Lezinsky cannot afford and as Mrs. Rooney is going to buy a new go-cart for her little girl, it becomes a symbol of material success. Interestingly, when at the end of the play Mrs. Rooney decides to give the carriage to Mrs. Lezinsky, who will pay for it when she can, Crocker is making a feminist call for sisterhood to help those in need. Furthermore, Mrs. Lezinsky and Mrs. Rooney's alliance in *The Baby Carriage* is very enlightening from a sociological point of view regarding the transcendence of class and religious barriers so that women could fulfil their own American Dream. After initial comic moments that reveal the religious gap between both women, as for instance when Mrs. Lezinsky mentions the Torah and Mrs. Rooney asks "The Toro?" or when Mrs. Rooney insists on being Mrs. Lezinsky's baby's godmother, a figure non-existent in Judaism, the shared understanding of how difficult it is for immigrant women from lower classes to bring up their families in America is encapsulated in the symbolic moment when Mrs. Rooney graciously gives the baby carriage to Mrs. Lezinsky.

As noted earlier, this baby carriage symbolizes Mrs. Rooney's prosperity –her husband is making some money so they are moving to the Bronx, a better area, and getting a go-cart for their Eileen. The baby carriage thus also appears as the symbol of mobility so prevalent in the American Dream, the device that will enable Mrs. Lezinsky to provide her baby with fresh air, as she says, and better living conditions. Furthermore, Mrs. Rooney also gives Mrs. Lezinsky other symbolic gifts. First, skates for the Lezinsky kids, also representative of mobility, plus a book, symbolic of the required education these deprived children need to prosper in the United States. The fact that Mrs. Lezinsky is looking forward to emulating her Catholic friend leaves no doubt as to what Crocker thought about cultural assimilation in the pursuit of the American Dream. In contrast with the stereotypical Mr. Lezinsky, such a pious and firm Jewish husband, Mrs. Lezinsky does not care about fasting and

Jewish celebrations as much as about being able to dress her kids with the dignity that would prevent other kids from insulting them. Very symbolically as well, Mrs. Lezinsky has decided the name of her future baby; she will name her after her friend's daughter, Eileen, being the first of the Lezinsky children who does not have a Jewish name. In his review of *The Baby Carriage*, John Corbin appreciated how "simply and truthfully written" it was, and also that it was "a work of shrewd and sympathetic observation" ("Village Morality" n.pag.) However, as argued here, in *The Baby Carriage* Crocker not only depicts the harsh reality lived by immigrants from the Lower East Side, but also – and more importantly – she shows female characters joining forces and struggling to survive and improve their lives. If women from the lower class were helping each other, Crocker seems to be asking, what would members of a privileged audience feel is the right thing for them to do?

The next two plays in *Humble Folk* are especially significant not only because of the polemical themes Crocker presents, but also because they take place in venues rarely frequented by her target audience. *The Dog*, which received a minor production by the Bryden Royal Players in 1915 of which no reviews seem to exist (Barlow 202), is set in a magistrate's court, while *The First Time* (n.d.), unproduced to this date, is located in a matron's room in a police station. The protagonists in both cases are on trial, a device Crocker employs to voice women's legislative demands. As Amelia Howe Kritzer has noted, generally speaking, "The plays built around the figure of the woman on trial express awareness of tension between the lives of individual women and the status of women as a class, anxieties regarding the potential power of women, and patterns of gender policing" (1). So even if the protagonist of *The Dog* is on trial for attempting suicide and the protagonist in *The First Time* is facing a prostitution charge, they simultaneously represent the collective of "women," who at the time – and well into the middle of the twentieth century –were judged by and subjugated to a legal system they could not be a part of, as jury members, judges, or legal representatives. Referring to this gendered –male– appropriation of the legal system, Kritzer has also observed that

> Courts have served to affirm the denial of property rights, divorce, custody of children, and bodily autonomy of women. Legal systems have identified certain acts, such as prostitution and contraception, as woman-specific crimes. They have placed special restrictions on

> women, such as limiting those with whom they could associate or prescribing the wearing of particular clothing. (3)

With her trial plays Crocker was giving a public hearing to stories usually silenced by the law, the stories of women for whom living in slums was not the worse evil, since the patriarchal legal system could always make their lives even more hellish.

As mentioned earlier, the protagonist of *The Dog*, Selma, is on trial for attempting to take her own life. Selma, a Swedish immigrant, is more harshly silenced by the judicial system than Mr. Bauer was in *The Last Straw*. Certainly, gender matters and this judicial system patronizingly claims to know what is better for Selma. The failed dialogue inside the courtroom evidences Selma's voicelessness, a feature of modern women that, as Mary Chapman has said of US suffragist writers, "realistically dramatizes the limits to women's participation in the public sphere" (9). When Selma tries in vain to explain that she did not want to kill herself, that it was an accident, the play becomes an absurdist piece where all kinds of terrible events come together to make Selma and her husband's life even more miserable. At a first level, their tragic story is used by Crocker to reveal the miseries of slum life. The couple had come to the United States fifteen years earlier, leaving behind their family and hoping the Promised Land would offer them the opportunities hard workers traditionally get. For some time the husband worked at a chemist's, until his memory failed and he was fired. Since then, Selma, who surprisingly is a great *haute couture* designer and a card painter, has been the breadwinner. But her health has also failed her. And the story that follows is the harsh reality many immigrants and impoverished people have experienced in America, a reality that equates material deprivation with denial of access to proper medical treatment; that is, an elitist health care system Crocker started denouncing in this early play and which still nowadays is the center of political debates in the United States. Having reached rock bottom, Crocker lists the means the New York poor could resort to: the couple has managed to survive thanks to the Salvation Army, the money the Church gives them from time to time and the alms some generous people offer (102). Realizing that they cannot even feed Hector, their dog, Selma had taken the painful decision of poisoning the dog with chloroform. Right after opening the bottle, she regretted it. But too late for her, because after inhaling the chloroform and fainting she was thought to be suicidal and taken to court.

Selma's story up to here would soften any Judge's heart to acquit her, above all on account of her bad luck and that she seems good at heart. Nevertheless, Crocker does not only use Selma to lead her audiences to sympathize with these immigrants' desperation, but also to bring to the stage the polemical issue of the specific medical and legal control over the female body. The ever sincere Selma, anemic to the point of exhaustion, is also pregnant, and cannot but admit that she has actually been trying to kill herself. The Doctor is brought as a witness to confirm that: "She does not wish to have the child, and has been taking all kinds of nostrums with the hope of preventing its birth" (105). Representative of a patriarchal legal system which is not going to stop and think about the reason that might lead this poor woman to wish the death of her unborn child, the Judge declares, "You understand now that any attempt against your own life –or the life of the unborn child– constitutes a criminal offense?" (110). Crocker, making use of the possibilities that setting a play in a magistrate courtroom provides, incorporates a dialogue which is simple and direct in form but enormously complex in its moral dimension:

> Selma: What's to become of us if I have to have it?
> Judge: That is not the point at law, the statute remains.
> Selma: Then there's no other way.
> Judge: The one way for you is to avoid committing a criminal act.
> Selma: Everyone does it.
> Judge: What is that you say?
> Selma: Women I know, customers –even– who don't have to earn their own living. (110)

Already in 1915, Crocker is bringing to the fore a very polemical issue, as she is reminding the audience of the need to regulate and reformulate the laws pertaining to contraception and abortion, to decriminalize it and make it accessible to women of all races and classes. Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger, together with other feminists, were leading these demands that the New Women who managed to win the right to vote in 1920, after a long struggle, saw as essential. Indeed, 1923, when *The Dog* was published, was also the year when Margaret Sanger opened her first birth control clinic.

As Leslie J. Reagan has noted, abortion in the United States was criminalized in the mid-nineteenth century, and it was not decriminalized until the mid-1960s and early 1970s (2). The

criminalization of abortion was a decision taken by two male-dominated domains, the state and medicine, claiming that abortion was "immoral, unwomanly, and unpatriotic." It is well-known that the main target of this legislation on abortion was middle-class white Protestant women, that is, those considered purely Americans, in fear that immigrants would take over the country. But although the criminalization of abortion was aimed at these women, it obviously affected "women of every class and race" (Reagan 13). The prohibition on terminating a pregnancy did not mean the end of the practice. It is estimated that towards the end of the nineteenth century there were two million abortions a year, and "A study of ten thousand working-class clients of Margaret Sanger's birth control clinics in the late 1920s found that 20 percent of all pregnancies had been intentionally aborted" (23). But what is also true is that the criminalization of abortion led women to abort on the margins of the law. While many physicians, either emotionally moved by their patients or taking advantage of their desperate situation, agreed to practice "controlled" abortions, other practices became widespread. Certain herbs, such as junipers, pennyroyal, tansy, ergot, and Seneca snakeroot (9), which probably are the "nostrums" Selma in *The Dog* has been taking, had been administered since colonial times for the domestic restoration of menstruation. Other women resorted to physicians who, or whose clinics, were not prepared to perform abortions. And other practices, antique and common since the late nineteenth century too, included hot douches, violent exercise, falling off chairs, and rolling down stairs. All these practices unfortunately resulted in alarming numbers of deaths, roughly estimated at over ten thousands a year, but which due to the lack of records at the time cannot be confirmed (Reagan 27, 265, note 49).

Thus, it seems Crocker uses Selma's case to engage her audience in the debate on birth control. In a witty theatrical strategy, Crocker separated the characters by putting them within the railings that divide the Court from the auditorium, and so inviting the audience to sit on the jury of Selma's peers, the one she could not have at that time. As jurors, the audience is left to wonder whether Selma's fragile appearance is just due to her malnutrition or if the "nostrums" she has been taking or whatever abortive practices she might have been performing might not only be ineffective, but also fatal. Furthermore, in Selma's reply that "Everyone does it" and also "Women I know, customers –even– who don't have to earn their own living," one grasps the widespread practice of illegal abortion and

how the class divide left poorer women at the mercy of criminal physicians and fate. Although Selma is eventually acquitted, proving also the patronizing legal system that oppressed women to later acquit them, the Judge's remark that "the statute remains," no matter how much Selma's situation would worsen if she had the baby, illuminates the injustices of a male legal system that will not really understand the plight of a woman, and even less so if she is impoverished.

With *The First Time*, that other piece set in a legal environment, Crocker further questions the hypocrisies of a male-controlled judicial system at the same time that she invites the audience to visit the underworld of prostitution. The prostitute dramatic figure, according to Katie N. Johnson, was a "veritable obsession of Progressive Era American Culture" that was not properly legitimized until Eugene O'Neill's *Anne Christie* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1922 (1, 15). Differing from typical prostitute play settings, such as the brothel interior, Crocker's play is set in the matron's room, which adjoins the hearing room where the protagonist, Mary Kennedy, will be on trial. This change in location is what allows Crocker to depart from the usual melodramatic elements also found in this kind of play to focus on the realities of prostitution as told from a feminist perspective. Crocker uses this space to provide the chance to listen to Mary's version, something that will not happen during the trial. As the other characters affirm in the play, a prostitute's word does not count (140). As Kritzer has observed regarding trial plays,

> The trial dramatized in the play reduces the sense of threat by disciplining the unruly woman and reinforcing gender boundaries. Nevertheless, the presence and speech of the unruly woman, especially in the public arena of performed drama, expresses the ongoing and unresolved challenge to gender boundaries and masculine dominance. (1-2)

Given that, as indicated earlier, the trial does take place offstage, Crocker introduces another woman, Mrs. West, the matron, as a device to let Mary speak. Mary's story can be regarded as the typical story of a paradigmatic Fallen Woman that, dominated by male figures at certain points of her early life, is doomed to wander the red-light districts. Raised in an impoverished environment, Mary first worked at a factory; an exhausting job that barely paid the bills. She

was expelled from home after a tremendous fight with her drunk father, and so, after attempting some badly paid jobs, Mary came to prostitution whimsically. Her beauty –at that time, which contrasts with the horrible aspect of the alcoholic Mary of the present– caught the attention of a married man. Nice words, nice presents, and the promise of keeping her forever transformed Mary into a prostitute. "It's the married men are the worst" (130), says Mrs. West, reminding the audience that this is a common practice. When Mary got pregnant, the married man gave her some money and abandoned her. By then Mary had learnt that she could use her body to survive and to maintain her baby and her mother, who takes care of the child. This pattern shows that Crocker is adapting the archetype of the working girl's downfall so present in many plays of this period, which, as Johnson has argued, "suggests that prostitution was the last resort for working-class women's economic survival, not merely a social evil" (81-82).

Nevertheless, *The First Time* moves away from these other plays where usually the prostitute follows "the romanticized hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold archetype" so popular on the American stage (Johnson 92). The play goes beyond being a mere didactic and melodramatic piece on the reasons that lead women to become prostitutes, putting the whole blame on male clients and on the rise of capitalism. Surprisingly, Crocker –without judging Mary– invites the audience to reconsider the double standard prevailing in prostitution and the acceptance of prostitution as a way of earning a living. Regarding the first issue, the moral double standard, it is remarkable that, as Mrs. West wonders, when Mary was arrested, the man she was arguing with was not. Actually, this man is the archetypal villain of prostitute plays: her pimp, Jo Prindell. Moreover, Jo was the one who called the police to have Mary arrested when Mary wanted the money she had earned. Nevertheless, when Jo appears to pay the fine, Mary is extremely thankful and happy. Ironically, her pimp –very smart and displaying a brand new diamond– has pawned Mary's belongings to get her out of jail (145). While it is true that Mary does not equal other exceptional dramatic prostitutes renowned for their strength, independence or intelligence, such as Jane in Bayard Veiller's *The Fight* (1912) or the empowered Molly in Rachel Crother's *Ourselves* (1913), it is significant to note that, through Mrs. West, we are invited to see Mary not as a stupid woman who trusts once again the man who robs her and has sent her to jail, but as a woman who understands that to survive in a

woman-hating world, she needs a man –whether good or bad. Furthermore, in the same way that Crother's *Ourselves* is considered unique in its sympathetic presentation of the prostitute's perspective, which was not in keeping with traditional brothel drama (Johnson 147), Crocker's Mary's physical decadence and her moral shortcomings are presented as the effects of economic pressures and social and political problems, thus also attempting to move the audience's sympathy towards her. This is achieved mainly because Crocker eliminates the typical features of the brothel play: the sensational portrait of the sexual underworld, the melodramatic format, the simplistic female victimization, and the final punishment, death or rescue scene. And the overall effect is that she leaves no hint of a realistically voyeuristic pleasure in looking at the brothel world, leading instead the audience's attention not that much to the problem and its circumstances, but to its possible solution. When at the end of *The First Time*, Mrs. West says "And there's nothing the poor thing can do!" (145), a practical reform agenda suggests that if at least Mary could keep her own "salary," perhaps she could control her own life and change her red-light story.

Significantly, the protagonist of the last play in the collection, *The Cost of a Hat*, is representative of those who fought for women's right to their own salaries –a struggle that precluded the still ongoing equal pay for equal work demand. Women's right to own their salaries was a concern of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony since the beginnings of their public lectures and writings. Women's right to keep what they earned was indeed included in the "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions," signed at Seneca Falls on 20th July 1848: "He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns" (Stanton et al. 71). Although it is true that the state of New York, where *The Cost of a Hat* is set, passed an act in 1860 to ensure that women had the right to collect their wages, common practice showed that many women, and mainly those from the lower classes, had no control over their properties. Crocker's downclassing journey takes the audience to Hell's Kitchen, to the flat of an impoverished family of Irish immigrants, which Crocker uses to bring to the fore not only women's right to control their belongings, but also other social evils that have haunted women: alcoholism and domestic violence. Certainly, and although unfortunately no reviews exist to support this point, the themes of this play seem very appropriate for the audience of its 1925 premiere by the Cellar Players (Barlow 202). The Cellar Players were the cultural extension

of the Hudson Guild, a sort of settlement house that, from its building on 436 West 27th Street, aimed at bringing different classes together to work for the amelioration of the living conditions of their neighbors (Woods and Kennedy 212-16).

As in the other plays in the collection, the very room where the action of *The Cost of a Hat* takes place is representative of the material deprivation typical of tourism narratives. This is a flat in a tenement house that at first sight tells of poverty and suggests violence. Some rickety chairs and a worn oilcloth on the floor are enough to signify the economic difficulties of the O'Connors. Furthermore, a broken vase on the kitchen shelf suggests violence, something that is later confirmed when the father, Pa, violently takes money from the vase to go on drinking heavily. The very beginning of the play reveals the political stance Crocker was taking. As Sheila, a young woman, helps her mother to cook, she "shuns marriage, on the grounds that servants, unlike wives, get paid for their drudgery – an argument that many feminists were making at the time" (Barlow 202). Actually, for Sheila, that her mother left her work as a maid to get married and do housework for no pay is an ironic situation. Furthermore, advancing the equal pay for equal work demand, Sheila's unfair salary is also made evident. As her father reproaches her: "If yourself had but good luck to be born a boy, now, you might been earning men's wages, and me and you, we resting our old bones. What good are *you*?" (159, emphasis in the original). Sheila, who is a strong female protagonist, answers back. She claims she pays the rent and her father's booze. And this is so because Sheila, independently of what the law rules about her right to own her salary, must give all she earns to her father. As Pa warns her, "Mind that you don't go stealing money on me" (160).

Significantly, Crocker also seems interested in showing that link between women's right to property and to own their salaries and their men's alcoholism. From the beginning of the woman's movement in the United States, temperance and the demand for women's rights walked hand in hand. Many women had to see how their husbands drank away their money, leaving their families living in poverty, and without legal redress. In Susan B. Anthony's words: "The wife of a drunkard was completely at his mercy. He had the entire custody over the children, full control of everything she might earn, and the law did not recognize drunkenness as a cause for divorce" (qtd. in Harper 61). Although women in the United States had gained some of the rights Anthony mentions by the time Crocker

wrote this play, reality proved that women's lot, and especially that of those in impoverished environments, had improved legally but not factually. Moreover, another concern of early feminists, that alcoholism also led to episodes of gender violence, is evident in *The Cost of a Hat*. If there is no dish which has not been smashed in the apartment, it is because when Pa comes home drunk, this is what he does, together with battering his wife. As Sheila says to her mother, "You belong to him [...] he can kick you on and off" (154).

Crocker shows spectators that women's rebellion against this world of moral and material deprivation is possible through Sheila. Willing to own what is hers, Sheila has bought a new hat, the one that gives the play its title. Just the act of wearing it in front of her father becomes a political act, a re-affirmation that she is going to control her own money. Pa's reaction is foreseeable: he takes "*the hat and strikes at her. She watches him with a set, white face*" (169). Then Pa crushes the hat into a shapeless mass, while Sheila, defiantly, claims, "I'll buy me a better one" (170). What follows is a scene of gender violence, where Pa strikes both his daughter and his wife, when Ma tries to come in between. Throughout the fight, Sheila repeats her decision: now "(*coldly indifferent*) I'll buy me a better one." For Sheila, this has been "the last –mind that, Ma– the last!" (170). Significantly, due to her father's continued maltreatment of her mother and herself, Sheila has learnt to say enough and, more vitally important, to identify a forthcoming episode of gender violence. When her boyfriend appears and, instead of consoling her, sentences "Serves you right. I might be lamming you some fine day," while smiling at her (173), Sheila realizes her fiancé will turn into the monster her father is the moment they get married and he starts seeing her as a property without rights. Consequently, and hoping to return one day to take her mother out of this hell, Sheila leaves forever, leaving her father "*in mortal terror,*" calling out to his daughter, and her mother in tears (178). Impoverished Noras, Crocker suggests, should also know when and how to slam doors.

To conclude, the analysis of Bosworth Crocker's one-act plays in *Humble Folk* illustrates this playwright's social and political commitment to show the harsh realities impoverished people in America were going through. Crocker's dramatic social activism, as argued, is not a safe place to dwell, but a creative and self-critical location charged with an urgency to think and act. An evolution may be traced from *The Last Straw* to *The Cost of a Hat* which suggests Crocker's transition from a tourism narrative, which mainly aimed at

picturing the harsh reality of those at the bottom of society, to a more feminist sociological narrative aimed at diving into the problems of slum-dwellers, particularly those of women, through more active protagonists. The plays discussed in this essay have dealt with relevant issues that marked the evolution of the United States from Victorian to modern times: tenement housing, immigration, prostitution, birth control, women's rights and gender violence. Nevertheless, what is also remarkable is that these themes are still under discussion, in the United States and beyond, nowadays. Although both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man (1948), among other key documents, were signed to protect men and women with basic rights pertaining freedom, health, housing, property or work, the truth is that these rights need to be defended, and not only in offices. In 1923 Lewisohn introduced Crocker's plays as "small body of dramatic work that expresses life directly, that has the priceless quality of bleeding where it is cut, that is full of human voice and human woes" (10). Bosworth Crocker's excursions into the underworld of slum life to collect the human voices and woes of those rarely heard still speak to us, common citizens, a hundred years later, leading us to confront unfair situations and miseries that require active social justice and thus to reconsider how literally vital our cross-class contacts are.

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