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Lovelorn Columns: A Genre Scorned

Abstract The newspaper advice column has shaped the American imagination in unacknowledged ways. Using Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) as a lens into a wily, underestimated genre, I juxtapose West's riff on the newspaper advice column with readings of the real thing. I review the lovelorn column's distinctive features and situate West's satiric novella in that context. I also examine the racial dynamics of both the novella and the genre, touching briefly on the careers of two lovelorn columnists: the well-known Dorothy Dix, who was white, and the now-obscure Princess Mysteria, who was African American. In the process, I show that literary critics have allowed the misogyny of West's novella to define one of the most enduring of all women's popular genres. Advice columns have been dismissed as a morally bankrupt product of consumer capitalism, but they did more than simply render irrelevant the question of genuine emotional expression. Using a complex masquerade of gender and race, columnists shifted counsel outside the bounds of interpersonal exchange, forged an anonymous, recursive imaginative field, and generated glimmers of an ethics of intimacy.
Keywords advice column, affect, gender, modernism, *Miss Lonelyhearts*

> Dear Miss Dix—For two years I have been going with a young man who says he will marry me if I will promise to mind him and not dispute him in any way. He is also very stingy: but I think that he would make a good husband if I could just yield to him and stop fighting with him. DISCOURAGED
> Answer: I think if you marry that kind of man you had better get a marriage license with a divorce coupon attached to it. No modern woman would submit to that kind of tyranny. Don't consider marrying him. DOROTHY DIX
> —Dorothy Dix's Letter-Box, *Ogden [UT] Standard-Examiner*, January 1, 1927

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The lovelorn column—banal, ubiquitous, irresistible—may be the most indelible contribution made by the American newspaperwomen who stormed into male-dominated newsrooms in the late nineteenth century. Men wrote advice columns as early as the seventeenth century, but women invented the modern form that achieved unparalleled popularity in the early twentieth century.[1] Personal advice columns flourished in mainstream newspapers, made their way into the black press, and even appeared in foreign-language periodicals designed for recently arrived immigrants.[2] The brisk exchange quoted above—between then-famous Dorothy Dix and a hapless letter writer identified only by her emotional state—demonstrates just how sharp this conventional genre could be; it invokes modern womanhood approvingly and dismisses a miserly suitor as a tyrant. Although the correspondent professes to want help in submitting to her lover, her ambivalence sets up Dix's fierce, comical reply. As Katrin Pahl (2015, 1457) observes in "The Logic of Emotionality," "Feelings can be argued with."

Marie Manning's 1898 debut as Beatrice Fairfax ("She will advise you on the troubles of your HEART") in William Randolph Hearst's *New York Evening Journal* launched the lovelorn genre, which featured pseudonymous women counseling anonymous readers who were variously Confused, Baffled, Frustrated, Angry, and Desperate (see fig. 1; Beatrice Fairfax, *New York Evening Journal*, July 20, 1898; see also Manning 1944, 35–36). In a move that typified the modern era's shift toward stylized emotional expression, Fairfax and her imitators staged first-person exchanges, printing direct appeals from readers and direct first-person singular replies. In the process, they forged an intensely performative zone of shared confidences that cemented women's association with excessive displays of feeling. The genre was distinct from other reader-oriented features in its focus on interpersonal relationships and its promotion of columnists as personalities (Fahs 2011, 121–22; Gudelunas 2007, 31–36). Although bylines were still relatively rare in newspapers in general, advice columnists' names often appeared in triplicate, first as headlines, at the end of each of their replies to readers, and again as captions for their own images.

Despite its woman-identified origins, the lovelorn column's place in US literary history has been largely defined by a man writing about a

Figure 1 The heading for Beatrice Fairfax's pioneering column. (*The New York Evening Journal*, July 20, 1898.)

man. Nathanael West's satiric novella *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), in which a newspaperman with a Christ complex takes over the advice column for his newspaper, was published in the same decade Dorothy Dix Talks appeared in more than two hundred newspapers around the world and reached an estimated 60 million readers (Weatherspoon 1991, 10). West's antihero—a man identified only as Miss Lonelyhearts throughout the text—despairs at his project and sinks into depression and violence. Throughout *Miss Lonelyhearts*, West portrays the advice column as a morally bankrupt product of consumer capitalism, which in turn has encouraged literary critics to dismiss the genre itself, except as a dreary example of how the mass-mediated culture of the early twentieth century commodified neighborly counsel. Like most generalizations without evidence, this conclusion leaves out some of the most interesting parts of the story it purports to tell. Maria Cristina Iuli (2016, 575) has argued that *Miss Lonelyhearts* is "a rare example of inhumanist poetics" that demonstrates just how poorly traditional philosophical notions of the unified subject explain modern, mass-mediated experience. If this is true—and I think it is—

then ongoing critical attempts to grasp that experience must reexamine, with fewer misguided assumptions, the historical emergence of mass media genres like advice to the lovelorn.

To that end, I juxtapose West's brutal, brilliant riff on the advice column with readings of the real thing. In the process, I show that West tells us both more and less about this mass print genre than scholars have allowed. West documents the genre's empowerment of women and the retaliatory violence elicited by that empowerment; he also mocks the mainstream advice column's promotion of a white fantasy world with solvable problems. Yet *Miss Lonelyhearts* cannot (and, in all fairness, was never intended to) stand as an accurate representation of the early twentieth-century advice column, a cultural juggernaut that spanned decades and featured a range of practitioners. West's text illuminates the genre best when we read it against both the parts of the phenomenon it dramatizes (such as how artificial the form's feminization was) *and* the parts it leaves out—how the white-authored mainstream advice column was indebted to the racist icon of the black mammy, how the lovelorn format was adapted to meet the needs of marginalized groups, and how the genre recast intimacy as an act of imagination rather than knowability.

As an ambivalent, gendered matrix of emotional expression, the advice column has implications for modern authorship writ large, especially but not only for women. Relatively few writers, women or men, willingly assumed responsibility for solving readers' personal problems; advice columnists and authors of fiction made up two distinct professional categories that only occasionally overlapped directly. More often, the association was less overt: when columnists codified emotional expression for a large readership, they helped to alter, in broad terms, the production and reception of women's writing. Because their widespread popularity gave them an outsize footprint in mass culture, they professionalized women writers' relationship to emotional expression and formally installed women—mostly but not exclusively white women—as arbiters of a blatantly manufactured version of intimacy oriented to a mass audience. West's novella wrestles directly with the implications of that feminized mediation, especially for white men invested in aesthetic autonomy, the most cherished dream of high modernism.

With the goal of seeing through *Miss Lonelyhearts* in both senses of the term, this essay repurposes West's text as a lens into a wily,

underestimated genre. That lens, however, is not transparent. West's preoccupation with white male authorship, which remains a privileged category for him despite his avant-garde commitments, distorts his view.[3] Indeed, he responds viciously to the lovelorn column: his take is violent, patriarchal, homophobic, and racist. That literary critics have skipped so easily over that viciousness suggests just how readily West's darkest assumptions about gender, sexuality, race, and the mass media have been replicated, even by his most progressive readers. When we revisit *Miss Lonelyhearts* with attention to its indictment of the lovelorn genre and its enshrining of whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality, we gain a better view of the gendered and racial masquerades at the heart of the advice column. We also discover that although West made a strong case for the genre's meaninglessness to literary history, he twisted the evidence in the process of presenting it.

Lovelorn columns bear out most, if not all, of the claims Lauren Berlant makes about women's genres in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2008). Centered on suffering and drawing on women's assumed emotional expertise, they provide an "education in disappointment management" (230). Even Berlant's arguments about how mainstream narratives appropriate African American interiority are relevant to the advice column (6); the genre's best-known incarnation featured the ventriloquized voice of a black mammy, as I discuss below. Yet the lovelorn column's form, history, and impact differ significantly from Berlant's sentimental "supertexts," such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life* (1933). Tucked into a corner of an inside newspaper page, the advice column was more microtext than supertext. Its stories were partial by design. Columnists provided answers, not endings; they rarely shared the results of their advice. Was it followed? Did it work? Who knew? The question-and-answer structure depicted exchanges, not narratives with resolutions.

The genre may well have contributed to modernists' well-documented loss of faith in representations of suffering. Attending to its formal features, however, reveals a satiric edge that, for many writers of modernist fiction, served as an antidote for that loss of faith.[4] Advice columns have much in common with the ironies and formal play Berlant (2008, 215–19) finds in Dorothy Parker's countersentimental texts. Although columnists rarely take Parker's oppositional stance toward

intimate publics, the genre's multivocal reflections on close attachments do something less confrontational and perhaps more surprising: they generate glimmers of an ethics of intimacy. Although columnists answer appeals, every reader is invited to ponder possible replies. Thus individual expressions of emotion become opportunities to consider right and wrong behavior and sustain inquiries into principles of conduct, especially toward those we hold dearest. Voyeurism, posturing, oppressively restricted definitions of womanhood, and racist appropriations kept the genre from becoming anything close to a dignified forum for rigorous ethical inquiry. Yet its ethical dimensions were not insignificant. Creating a vast imaginary collective of woman-identified wisdom, the columns featured serialized problem-solving and fostered a communal approach to human relationships.

Tracing the emergence of a genre scorned, I review the advice column's distinctive features, situate *Miss Lonelyhearts* in that context, and examine the racial dynamics of both the novella and the genre, touching briefly on two careers: that of the well-known Dorothy Dix, who was white, and that of Princess Mysteria, a little-known columnist who was African American. My analysis takes a dramatic and grim turn when it dwells, at length, on a rape passage, which also happens to be the most sustained treatment of women's authorship in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. As difficult as it is to read, West's deployment of rape reveals a nexus of textual and sexual violence that we cannot ignore—not if we want to reckon honestly with the damage wrought by the large-scale degradation of women's authorship, bodies, and advice. I conclude with an exchange that resists such degradation, turning to a column in which Princess Mysteria responds to a reader who is a rape survivor. Throughout, I show that columnists deployed highly stylized personas dependent on gender and racial masquerades, which in turn set the stage for the circulation of a model of intimacy based on speculation rather than proximity or knowledge.

How to Write a Lovelorn Column (Don't Blither)

The feminized nature of the advice column has tainted its reception and obscured its historical particulars. In 1901, the *New York World* published a parody titled "May Irwin: Her New Department of Heart-to-Heart Blitherings" (February 10, 1901), in which a columnist urged readers to share their "heart worries" so she could "toss great bunches

of sunshine into [their] darkened little lives."[5] The parody exaggerated the indulgent tone of advice columnists like Marion Harland and Harriet Hubbard Ayer (Fahs 2011, 127–28). Although such "blitherings" suggest why writers who advised the lovelorn were dubbed "sob sisters," the genre was more contested and variable than critics have allowed. Columnists forged a multidimensional space that was alternately playful and solemn, ironic and revelatory; the longest-running and most popular columnists did not "blither." Rather, they rejected uncontrolled outbursts of feeling and advocated action.[6] Dix's reply to Discouraged, quoted above, was more bracing rejoinder than gushing commiseration. From her earliest days as a columnist for the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, Dix was telling young women that "if your heart says one thing and your head another, listen to the head every time" ("The Way to a Woman's Heart," *Times-Picayune*, October 23, 1898) and complaining that "our girls grow up with a lack of judgment and an excess of affection" ("Woman and Love," *Times-Picayune*, October 7, 1900).[7] Similarly, to a teenage girl who confessed, "I get such a weakness that I think I am going to fall" around an older love interest, Beatrice Fairfax wrote, "You are a very silly girl, and your lover has had more patience with you than I would have had" (*New York Evening Journal*, August 6, 1898).

The lovelorn column's distinctive features become apparent when we compare a long-running advice column in which letters address a masculine authority to a more typical column in which letters address a feminine authority. One of the early twentieth century's most notable and longest-running advice columns was A Bintel Brief, created in 1906 by *Jewish Daily Forward* editor Abraham Cahan, who counseled generations of Eastern European immigrants. Although Cahan failed to avoid being called a Yiddish Dorothy Dix (Walker 1996, 55–56), his column was as far from the woman-identified lovelorn genre as an advice column could be. Cahan's columns appeared in a single Yiddish newspaper, anchored in its Lower East Side neighborhood and committed to advocating a socialist worldview. He offered readers grave, kind advice at a significant emotional and rhetorical remove. The published letters were addressed to "Dear Editor," "Worthy Editor," or "Mr. Editor," not to Cahan personally, and certainly never to "Dear Abraham."

In a letter published in 1906, an anguished Jewish husband asked for guidance because his Christian (and pregnant) wife had begun to

express a dislike of Jews and a longing to return to Christianity. Cahan (1971, 44) answered: "Unfortunately, we often hear of such tragedies, which stem from marriages between people of different worlds. It's possible that if this couple were to move to a Jewish neighborhood, the young man might have more influence on his wife." As was typical for him, Cahan wrote in first-person plural and referred to the letter writer in the third person; he explicitly acknowledged that he was writing not just to the letter writer but to a community. His replies were formal, even distant. To a terribly ill garment worker who was suicidal, Cahan (115–16) wrote, "We print this letter with the hope that perhaps some readers will recognize the writer and manage to rescue him. Possibly he is only influenced by melancholia and his condition is not as tragic as he describes it." At times, Cahan's printed replies didn't even answer the question posed by the letter writers; he simply took the opportunity to write generally about the topic raised.[8]

A 1905 column by Nixola Greeley-Smith illustrates just how differently—more precisely, how intimately—the woman-identified personal advice column related to its readers.

> Dear Miss Greeley-Smith: A gentleman friend that I have been going with has presented me with a very expensive gift. I accepted this gift, but find that the gentleman now considers that I have pledged myself to accept not only his gifts, but himself. Does accepting a present from a man bind you to anything? If so, would you accept the man or give back the present? It is a very expensive present. PUZZLED AMELIA
>
> My dear Amelia, I am surprised that a young woman with such a gentle, old-fashioned name should not have new-fashioned notions.
>
> Keep the presents. Take the man. Don't let anything get by you.
>
> Of course, you needn't be in any hurry about taking the man. Get all the presents you can first, for you probably won't get any afterward. ("Does the Man Go with His Gift?" *New York Evening World*, August 4, 1905)

Although not all lovelorn columnists adopted the playful tone of this exchange, most echoed its assumption of familiarity, whether they were instructing abused wives to leave their husbands, telling teenagers they were too young to have serious romances, or chastising husbands who discovered wives' secrets by invading their privacy.[9] Greeley-Smith's orientation toward that readership is signaled by her

breezy overfamiliarity ("My dear Amelia"), pithy imperatives, and wry closing nod to the drawbacks of a gift-based model of intimacy.

No matter who was writing, the most entertaining replies, on the whole, were witty and concise. Some lovelorn columns had an excessively sunny vision—the kind mocked by the "Department of Heart-to-Heart Blitherings" and by the opening of *Miss Lonelyhearts*. West (1933) quotes the beginning of a column-in-progress that his benighted newspaperman is finding impossible to finish: "Although the deadline was less than a quarter of an hour away, he was still working on his leader. He had gone as far as: 'Life is worth while, for it is full of dreams and peace, gentleness, and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar'" (1). Invoking the "gemlike flame" of Walter Pater's aestheticism, West shows Miss Lonelyhearts trying to adapt the language of art for art's sake to the utilitarian advice genre. But the attempt is futile; the aesthetic ideal becomes sentimental drivel, mired in morality. While not all advice columnists were good writers, syndicated intimacy worked best when it ministered to the needy letter writer while also winking at the curious column reader, offering precisely crafted, terse replies that doled out empathy and irony in equal doses. Miss Lonelyhearts's dreamy evocation of "faith that burns like a clear white flame" was, in short, unlikely to succeed. The dreams of syndication West imagines for him—which require Miss Lonelyhearts to create a magical moment in which "the whole world would learn to love" (8)—are doomed to wither.

As should be apparent, we should pause before taking too much to heart West's suggestion that highly popular advice columns depended on magical thinking. He finds the genre purely destructive, but must we? In a mass-mediated environment, intimacy arises neither from knowledge of the other nor from knowledge of oneself but rather from the anticipatory act of imagining. Provisional and temporary, this intimacy emanates neither from longstanding familiarity nor from detailed knowledge of an individual but through the abstract contemplation of an unknown person's struggle, accessible only via a textual representation that is necessarily partial. Every advice column exchange can be read as a minidramatization in which readers are invited to ponder scaled-down versions of other people's intimate dilemmas. The narrative suspense comes less from the desire to discover how the dilemmas are resolved than from the desire to learn

what the columnist will say is the right thing to do in a given situation. In that arrested moment, in that small blank space on the page between Puzzled Amelia's question and Greeley-Smith's answer, we find the possibility of an ethics of intimacy. What should I do about the feelings I have? This question animates every lovelorn column exchange, and taken as a whole, the exchanges accumulate into a multifaceted investigation of principles of intimate conduct.[10]

The lovelorn genre, in other words, is defined not by its answers or by its questions but by the space between the two. Granted, this space of invention is shaped by a misguided insistence on the singularity of subjectivity and a gross oversimplification of womanhood. Yet, like all spaces of invention, it has the potential to spread beyond its intended parameters. Built on the very artificiality that critics from Walter Benjamin to Berlant have found so dubious, that momentary pause licenses readers to enter a realm of moral speculation, to generate their own answers, and to compare them to the ones the columnists provide. The question-and-answer format of A Bintel Brief offers readers a similar opportunity, and Cahan's more distant persona gives his endeavor a more traditionally philosophical cast; by not responding directly to the letter writers, he sounds more academic, even more ethical. The idiosyncratic personalities of the lovelorn columnists, in contrast, create a forum that is more kaffeeklatsch than seminar. Yet the genre's playful variety and willingness to traffic in ironies may well have inspired more, rather than less, imaginative speculation. Rhetorically, it's easier to disagree with an "I" than a "we." Moreover, although my comparison of Cahan and Greeley-Smith pits a male-authored column against a female-authored one, the lovelorn genre's gender normativity was neither simple nor self-evident.[11]

Stylized Emotion and Authorship in Drag

Many critics have retold the story of how West came to write *Miss Lonelyhearts*. One evening in spring 1929, his friend S. J. Perelman invited West to join him for dinner with an acquaintance who wrote the pseudonymous "Susan Chester" advice column for a Brooklyn newspaper. The acquaintance offered Perelman, as possible inspiration for a comic sketch, some of the unanswerable letters Susan Chester had received. Perelman wasn't interested, but West was. He took the letters, kept them, and revised them for use in the novella that

would be published as *Miss Lonelyhearts* nearly four years later. Jay Martin (1970, 110), whose biography of West is the source of the most widely circulated version of this anecdote, identifies West's encounter with those advice column letters as the "one moment in his life" that was "absolutely crucial" to his discovery of himself as an artist.[12]

Virtually every critic of *Miss Lonelyhearts* treats the genre much as West's newspaperman does, as too banal to bear scrutiny on its own terms. One influential scholar goes so far as to suggest that the advice column indicates "the disappearance of the kind of community of tellers and interpreters in which advice is possible" (Barnard 1995, 197–98). The comic strip and the advertisement have been analyzed as key models for *Miss Lonelyhearts* but not the advice column itself, the novel's ostensible subject.[13] Given literary modernism's celebrated rejection of formulaic expressions of emotion, not to mention the bedrock assumption that literature takes on realities that prove too complex, too volatile, or too haunting for any journalistic genre to manage, the oversight is understandable.[14] But it's scarcely tenable.[15]

Advice columns cannot be read as historically accurate indices of the emotional experiences of a single group or era; we cannot verify that the letter writers were telling the truth or even that the columnists did not make up the questions they answered. Columns are best read as curated exhibitions of emotional impasse, revolving around the columnists' status as necessarily feminine pretenders to the throne of wisdom. The lovelorn column helped to make possible—and sometimes manifested—a modernist approach to intimacy that centered on style: it bracketed the question of genuineness and valued an emotional expression by its public face. The attention to stylized emotion in West's critique of the advice column, in other words, derives from the genre's own attention to style. This stylizing of intimate exchange reverberated through early twentieth-century fiction in repeated scenes of intimacy that stress the style and artifice of both settings and participants. Composure—the arrangement of one's feelings—is often represented as both a collaborative process and a trap, and at key moments, characters assess each other's composure on an almost minute-by-minute basis. We see this dynamic at work in the struggles of Edith Wharton's Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* (1905), F. Scott Fitzgerald's titular hero in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Ernest Hemingway's Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929),

William Faulkner's Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), and Nella Larsen's Irene Redfield in *Passing* (1929), among others.

The phenomenon was not exclusive to women, either, even though advice columns were embedded in a translocal, gendered space—the woman's page—that relied on a gender binary for coherence and meaning.[16] When Marie Manning (1944, 35–36) joked about the "far from literal pen-and-ink drawing" of herself published along with the Beatrice Fairfax column, she highlighted the always-exploitable gap between author and persona. In its indisputable artifice, a columnist's persona acted as a fulcrum of detachment for letter writers, whose vulnerabilities were both acknowledged and mitigated by the artfulness of the whole endeavor. It was not uncommon for readers to speculate about the true identities of the columnists disguised under the advice giver's cloak.[17] The personas offered writers both opportunity and risk. Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer, who trademarked her pseudonym of Dorothy Dix, exercised significant editorial and financial power. But writers without the foresight or resources to protect themselves from exploitation could lose control of their columns and find themselves out of a job, as did Dix's predecessor, Marie Manning (Gudelunas 2007, 62; Golia 2010, 193).

As West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* reminds us, the use of personas also made authorial cross-dressing possible. Although the limited historical evidence available suggests that women writers were behind most of the female pseudonyms adopted by columnists, men were always free to participate—as long as they were willing to masquerade as women. "Susan Chester," the Brooklyn advice columnist whose unanswerable letters inspired West's novella, was a man, Quentin Reynolds, who had played football at Brown University (Meade 2010, 4). From the beginning, the lovelorn genre was *both* woman-identified and potentially queer, despite its status as a mainstream forum that did more to enforce normativity than foster oppositional expression. Although the advice column's primary function was not to support "alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and . . . willfully eccentric modes of being" (Halberstam 2005, 1), its multivocality nonetheless circulated countercultural narratives and values. Moreover, the use of pseudonyms untethered biological sex and emotional expertise, even as the genre affirmed that very link. The advice columnist's promotion of stylized intimacy thus invested a

long tradition of authorial masquerade with a distinctly modern dimension, one that was not yet available in, say, 1722, when sixteen-year-old Benjamin Franklin adopted the voice of a middle-aged minister's widow and slipped an essay signed "Silence Dogood" under the printing-house door of the *New-England Courant* in Boston (Chaplin 2009, 75). Although Franklin's matronly persona freed him to publish satirical commentary on morality, religion, and politics and provided him an instant hit, the eighteenth-century genre did not *require* the gender masquerade. But the twentieth-century advice column did. The forum presumed the assumption of both womanhood and artifice; it thus encoded a peculiar blend of gender essentialism (intimacy specialists must be women) and gender fluidity (intimacy specialists must pretend to be women).[18] These conflicting assumptions held true whether men or women were giving the advice; the playfully hyperstylized femininity required of advice columnists was a textual version of drag. If, as Judith Butler (1993, 237) tells us, drag allegorizes "heterosexuality and its constitutive melancholia," then the lovelorn genre—in both name and strategy—is a drag performance in print. It fostered gendered play, not gendered knowledge.[19]

West, whose interest in the precarious state of early twentieth-century authorship has been well established, thematizes the gender paradox at the heart of the advice column in more subtle ways than even his most insightful critics have realized. Miss Lonelyhearts has been called a "universal, Tiresias-like character" balanced between two sexes (Martin 2006, 475), but balance in fact eludes Miss Lonelyhearts throughout the novella. West's choice to excise his newspaperman's real name (he was "Thomas Matlock" in an early draft [Daniel 1971, 53]) encourages readers to see Miss Lonelyhearts less as a double-sexed prophet of Greek myth than as a person knowable only as a gendered media product, framed in a way that flouts the gender binary that gave coherence to the women's pages. As many critics have observed, by repeatedly referring to Miss Lonelyhearts as "he" and "him," West mocks him as feminized and laments the conditions in which he writes. On almost every page of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, male pronouns are attached to a female name—not just any name, but a name that articulates a woman's stereotypical role in print culture: to be a "Miss Lonelyhearts" is to be a woman defined by one's emotional state and obsessed by the search for a male romantic partner. Kate Marshall (2013, 141) astutely notes, "Miss Lonelyhearts the character

coincides with Miss Lonelyhearts the category, and the play between the two describes *Miss Lonelyhearts* the novel." Yet the historically specific meanings that attach to gender in the course of that "play between the two" have yet to be fully articulated.

West invites us to think about the fungible position of women writers by dramatizing the overdetermined femininity of the advice columnist, the condition that enables and bedevils Miss Lonelyhearts. Early in the novel, when West describes Miss Lonelyhearts's physical appearance, the narrator's associations morph rapidly from male to female, from religious icons to newspaper icons. West sets his character alongside the names of real-life columnists and presents Miss Lonelyhearts as an amalgam of spiritual heritage and popular appeal: "Although his cheap clothes had too much style, he still looked like the son of a Baptist minister. . . . On seeing him for the first time, Shrike had smiled and said, 'The Susan Chesters, the Beatrice Fairfaxes and the Miss Lonelyhearts are the priests of twentieth-century America'" (1933, 3–4). By calling them priests, Shrike simultaneously recognizes and scorns their status as feminized—but not necessarily female—posers stepping into the tradition of pastoral counseling. The guise taken by West's gendered media product (a Baptist minister's son with "too much style") is that of a priest in drag. West sees no upside to this voguish new confessional, however. The utopian promise held out by the advice column's potential to foster moral speculation—fragile as it is—is utterly absent from the genre imagined in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, which includes no published answers to any letters. By choosing not to replicate the question-and-answer form (although Shrike dictates a few pretentious replies), West denies his readers that anticipatory pause between question and answer and effectively shuts down any possibility of an ethics of intimacy.

Against Women Writers: Rape and Rage

Preoccupied specifically by white men's role in a shifting mass-cultural landscape dominated by the feminized form of the personal advice column, West insists on the debasement of the form and the media landscape that houses it in the most explicit of ways, via sexual assault. The sexual violence follows logically from West's often-quoted assertion, "In America, violence is idiomatic," and as critics have noted, rape and other acts of sexual aggression occur at crucial moments

throughout *Miss Lonelyhearts* (West 1932). Justus Nieland (2004, 72) observes, "The female body in *Miss Lonelyhearts* remains the recurring site of repression and masculine dominance," while Jonathan Veitch (1997, 68), calling out the feminization of mass culture, tells us that in West's vision, "Mass Man" is a "she." Yet even critics who read *Miss Lonelyhearts* as a send-up of the exclusions and denials inherent in the Enlightenment public sphere or as a radical expression of antirealism and antihumanism move on too quickly from the material realities of the text's violence against women, particularly against women writers.[20] After all, West gestures to real women by name in the text.

The violence in *Miss Lonelyhearts* is visited on both men and women, but women get the worst of it. It's not just that they are repeatedly objectified, although West makes that process explicit.[21] Women are trivialized and victimized openly. The few critics who address the text's violence toward women suggest that it is best understood as part of West's devastating critique of how feelings are manufactured and received in a public sphere created and sustained by capitalism.[22] But when we read *Miss Lonelyhearts* as a general critique of mass culture without analyzing the historically gendered parameters of the influential print genre it invokes, we risk becoming ourselves complicit in a literary tradition that elevates men at women's expense—and insists on a gender binary that obscures more than it reveals.

By reserving its most intense animus for women who try to be literary, not simply those who give advice, *Miss Lonelyhearts* teaches a shocking lesson in the misogyny of US literary history. Perhaps the very obviousness of this phenomenon accounts for the way it has gone missing from critical commentaries.[23] As Miss Lonelyhearts listens to a group of his friends gathered at a speakeasy, they discuss why and how women writers deserve to be raped. In this scene—which few critics acknowledge and none consider at length, although it appears in one of the few chapters West published separately, before the novella came out—the depth of the resentment expressed against women writers testifies to their relative power and visibility (West 1932). The passage is notable not so much because of the alarming details of the violence it enacts against women but rather because of the way it imagines and mocks multiple authorial positions for women—and the way Miss Lonelyhearts is positioned in relation to the violence incited by women's literary work.

> One of them was complaining about the number of female writers.
>
> "And they've all got three names," he said. "Mary Roberts Wilcox, Ella Wheeler Catheter, Ford Mary Rinehart . . . "
>
> Then some one started a train of stories by suggesting that what they all needed was a good rape.
>
> "I knew a gal who was regular until she fell in with a group and went literary. She began writing for the little magazines about how much Beauty hurt her and ditched the boy friend who set up pins in a bowling alley. The guys on the block got sore and took her into the lots one night. About eight of them. They ganged her proper." (West 1933, 13–14)

These women are perceived as "regular until" they invade a literary realm of male privilege by pursuing aesthetic ideals. The violent, participatory spectacle of gang rape is the antidote to the problem of women who write for little magazines, and working-class men act as enforcers to protect the privilege of the middle-class male literati. Although Miss Lonelyhearts's personal struggle is with the genre of the advice column, the narrative's general frustration with women writers extends beyond this single journalistic category. West includes real women writers in the rape threat. The initial complainer mangles and intermingles the names of two immensely popular but now-obscure writers with a critically acclaimed one: prolific mystery novelist Mary Roberts Rinehart (1876–1958), newspaper poet and syndicated columnist Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850–1919), and Willa Cather (1873–1947), who often published novels using her middle name, Sibert, and whose canonical status requires no elaboration here. As if to drive home the way literary women appear to have assumed parallel positions with literary men, West also references a three-named male author, the well-regarded British novelist and influential editor Ford Madox Ford (1873–1939). Both Rinehart's and Wilcox's contributions to popular culture are recognizable, if not celebrated, and both received voluminous mail from fans who felt emotionally connected to them. When West invokes Cather with the reference to "Ella Wheeler Catheter," the barroom lament expands to include a self-consciously literary author who, in a widely read essay on the art of the novel published in 1922, described popular fiction as a threat to true art.[24] Using the blanket category of "female writers," the barroom complainer puts Cather in close company with two writers whose work she would have

disdained, which Cather herself may have found even more offensive than the transformation of her last name into a medical device used to relieve distended bladders.

As the "train" of gang rape stories continues, the "regular until" phrase is repeated and gains momentum.

> "That's like the one they tell about another female writer. When this hard-boiled stuff first came in, she dropped the trick English accent and went in for scram and lam. She got to hanging around with a lot of mugs in a speak, gathering material for a novel. Well, the mugs didn't know they were picturesque and thought she was regular until the barkeep put them wise. They got her into the back room to teach her a new word and put the boots to her. They didn't let her out for three days. On the last day they sold tickets to niggers. . . . "
>
> Miss Lonelyhearts stopped listening. His friends would go on telling these stories until they were too drunk to talk. They were aware of their childishness, but did not know how else to revenge themselves. At college, and perhaps for a year afterwards, they had believed in literature, had believed in Beauty and in personal expression as an absolute end. When they lost this belief, they lost everything. Money and fame meant nothing to them. They were not worldly men. (West 1933, 14)

For women to be "regular until" is to be safe from torture only when one's ambitions as a writer do not threaten men's subject position, whether by turning men into objects to be studied, as the "scram and lam" writer does here, or by rejecting the boyfriend who works in a bowling alley, as the little-magazine writer does earlier in the passage. The second writer's "trick English accent" signals her initial pretensions, while her embrace of "this hard-boiled stuff" reflects her determination to adapt to changing tastes by writing in a masculinized genre.

In the narrative's larger context, women writers embody commodity capitalism. When women write, men lose their faith in artistic expression, and Pater's aesthetic ideal is rendered impossible to pursue; somehow, the gender bending and the successful authorship of women are made synonymous with the problem of losing one's belief in "Beauty and in personal expression as an absolute end." Miss Lonelyhearts himself, who has reluctantly taken up the position of a woman,

is a case in point. Marshall (2013, 143) cites this last line, out of context, to demonstrate West's exposure of the absurdity of the literary as a category, arguing that West rejects both the idea of the personal and the idea of expression, turning instead "to a literary world comprising endlessly reflecting media." This reading vividly illuminates the recursive—and, for Marshall, contagious—process that makes personal expression impossible in the networked media environment Miss Lonelyhearts and his readers inhabit. Yet in its failure to acknowledge the context of the assertion, which appears as a rationale for men who discuss gang-raping women to punish them for writing literature, this interpretation also conceals the gendered violence inherent in West's depiction of the media-facilitated loss of inwardness.

When Miss Lonelyhearts tells us that "money and fame meant nothing" to his abject, predatory buddies, he contrasts them with the worldly Rinehart, Wilcox, and Cather, each of whom had earned both money and fame in considerable measure. The rape stories are vicious gossip, circulated like jokes ("That's like the one they tell about another female writer"), and West interrupts the "train of stories" only when the violence becomes a commodity: "on the last day they sold tickets to niggers." The degradation of African American men—who are invited to join the attack only after the white men have finished and are required to pay for the privilege—intensifies the degradation of the presumably white rape victim and makes explicit the whiteness of the attackers.[25] At this point, and only at this point, does Miss Lonelyhearts stop listening. Already complicit in a chilling account of predatory heterosexual homosociality, he goes on to excuse the violence. Ducking his own status as a writer who appears in public as a woman, Miss Lonelyhearts positions the male storytellers—not the women writers/gang rape survivors—as the real victims, as the people who have lost everything.

The same chapter that features the rape stories concludes with another act of violence, this time with Miss Lonelyhearts as the attacker and a gay man as the target. The narrative shifts, in effect, from one public sex culture to another, exchanging barroom misogyny for a gay pickup scene, when the drunk Miss Lonelyhearts and his friend Gates stumble out of the speakeasy and into a "comfort station," one of the public restrooms in Manhattan that served as a contested space for sexual encounters between men in the early twentieth century (Chauncey 1994, 196–201). When they find an old man

sitting on a toilet in the comfort station, they harass him and force him to accompany them to another bar. In a telling reference to the predatory sexuality of the rape fantasies, the narrative makes explicit the substitution of a male for a female victim: "'If you can't get a woman, get a clean old man,' Gates sang" (West 1933, 16). The title of this chapter—which includes the gang rape—is "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Clean Old Man," ironically referencing Gates's formula. In a violent, drunken mimicry of the scientific study of sexuality, Miss Lonelyhearts and Gates interrogate the man, whom they assume is gay: "'Aw, come off,' Gates said. 'We're scientists. He's Havelock Ellis and I'm Krafft-Ebing. When did you first discover homosexualistic tendencies in yourself?'" (17). Gates invokes two of the earliest and most influential sexologists, Austro-German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902) and British psychologist Havelock Ellis (1859–1939), both of whom published major treatises on human sexuality in the late nineteenth century. Although Gates initially proposes the ruse, it is Miss Lonelyhearts who persists and becomes abusive when the man, George B. Simpson, refuses to cooperate. Krafft-Ebing and Ellis based their work on case studies, a practice West mocks through Miss Lonelyhearts's increasingly vicious demands that Simpson confess his deviance.

> "Let's drop it," Gates said. "The old fag is going to cry."
>
> "No, Krafft-Ebing, sentiment must never be permitted to interfere with the probings of science."
>
> Miss Lonelyhearts put his arm around the old man. "Tell us the story of your life," he said, loading his voice with sympathy.
>
> "I have no story."
>
> "You must have. Every one has a life story."
>
> The old man began to sob.
>
> "Yes, I know, your tale is a sad one. Tell it, damn you, tell it."
>
> When the old man still remained silent, he took his arm and twisted it. Gates tried to tear him away, but he refused to let go. He was twisting the arm of all the sick and miserable, broke and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent. He was twisting the arm of Desperate, Broken-hearted, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband.
>
> The old man began to scream. Somebody hit Miss Lonelyhearts from behind with a chair. (17–18)

In contrast to the gang rape stories, in which no one intervenes to help the women, here someone stops the assault (and the chapter) by hitting the perpetrator. From a historical standpoint, the scene dramatizes both the "pansy craze" that peaked in 1931 in Prohibition-era New York and the backlash that followed (Chauncey 1994, 331–34). From a literary-critical standpoint, however, it's even more telling: West orchestrates, with mind-boggling economy, an all-out attack on the advice column, deploying just about all of the imperatives of white heterosexism in a scene fraught with assumptions of perversity that reverberate in multiple directions at once. Miss Lonelyhearts' masquerade as a famous sexologist figures the confessional genre as a violent invasion of privacy, made visible through the persecution of "the clean old man," whose hygienic resistance to self-narration ("I have no story") inspires fierce retaliation. The attack exposes Miss Lonelyhearts's irrationality; by twisting the arm of a man who won't confess anything, he is not, in fact, twisting the arms of the misguided letter writers whose needs overwhelm him.[26] But patriarchal logic explains everything here, as West's return to the gendered rhetoric of sob sisterhood reminds us: women are always the problem. By invoking the sexological category of the sexual invert, West reverses the subject position of Miss Lonelyhearts: the "clean old man" is, to some degree, conceptually female, a woman presenting himself in the body and persona of a man. Gates, the less committed interrogator, is deterred when he realizes that "the old fag is going to cry," but Miss Lonelyhearts grows more determined when the man begins to "sob." As West's exemplary advice columnist, Miss Lonelyhearts manifests sympathy only as a weapon. Thomas Strychacz (1993, 184), who remains one of West's most discerning critics, has tied the novella's value to its "self-consuming doubt about its own cultural status." This reading, compelling as it is, fails to specify the violent consequences of that doubt for literary women and gay men, who are positioned, in rapid succession, as proxies for the mass media genre that is causing all the trouble in the first place. Miss Lonelyhearts's impromptu restroom impersonation of Havelock Ellis—a scientist whose work cast both racial and sexual differentiation as necessary to the survival of the white race—only reinforces the sense that whiteness and masculinity are imperiled.[27] By embedding a white male rape fantasy in a chapter that turns a gay man into an unwitting avatar of every advice-seeking letter writer, West gestures—in perhaps the cruelest way possible—toward the

gender fluidity at the heart of this paradoxically feminine genre. He does more than highlight the lovelorn genre's drag; he casts the whole process as invidious. In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the advice columnist weaponizes sympathy and, cannibal-like, mobilizes it against Simpson, "the clean old man," who is less a person than a category, a victim who stands in for gay men, who themselves stand in for women. The old man also substitutes for Miss Lonelyhearts, who, by donning the advice columnist persona, has turned himself into precisely the kind of writer his barroom buddies want to assault. Humiliated by the loneliness of patriarchal power, he can neither escape his own self-loathing nor participate in anything close to communal problem-solving.

Racial Masquerades: From Mammy to Mentalist

The entitlement nurtured by Miss Lonelyhearts's whiteness silently fuels his rage, even as the gang rape scene's extension of a compromised male privilege to African American men reflects the interdependence of racial categories. The racial whiteness of the advice columnist was intertwined, from its earliest incarnation, with racial blackness. In this, advice writers took the same path as their more literary contemporaries: imitation and racial masquerade paved the way for the mainstream advice columnist just as surely as racial ventriloquism made high modernism possible (North 1994, 3–34, 195). The racist stereotype of the black mammy, a minor figure in antebellum minstrel shows, achieved unprecedented popularity at the same time the advice genre emerged (Kibler 1999, 112–13). To see the mammy's resonance for the genre, we need look no further than Dorothy Dix, a white Southerner who based her professional persona on an African American caregiver, Emily Meriwether. Meriwether, who was born into slavery and worked for Dix's family long after Emancipation, was celebrated for her sage advice.[28] Although not all white columnists were raised by black caregivers, the phenomenon was indebted—in ways we have yet to recognize—to this racist icon.

Racial masquerades were not limited to white authors, either. Princess Mysteria's popular column, Advice to the Wise and Otherwise by Princess Mysteria, appeared regularly between 1921 and 1930 in the weekly *Chicago Defender*, the nation's premier African American newspaper (see fig. 2). Princess Mysteria was the stage name and pseudonym

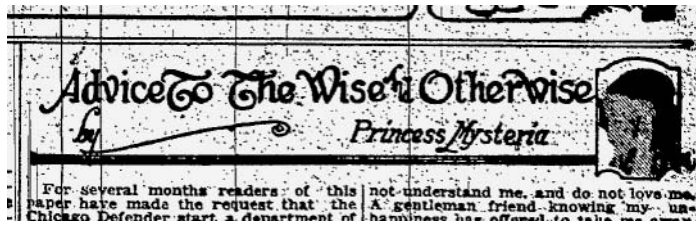

Figure 2 The heading for Princess Mysteria's long-running column (*Chicago Defender*, April 30, 1923)

of Vaulleda Hill Steward Strodder, a Kansas-born African American woman whose celebrity as a vaudeville mind reader, or "mentalist," was established by 1917: from the West to the East Coast, she was touted as the "Hindu Mystery Woman Who Answers Every Question" (*Oregon Daily Journal (Portland)*, October 16, 1919).[29] Mysteria adapted the lovelorn model to the needs of African American readers, many of whom had recently moved north as part of the Great Migration. Mystical aura notwithstanding, the column practiced emotional constraint and provided brisk, practical advice. In other ways, however, Mysteria diverged from the dominant form. A self-consciously exotic author publishing outside the mainstream press, Mysteria did not appear white, unlike all of the era's successful syndicated columnists (see fig. 3). According to news reports, she spoke with a foreign accent, was educated both in the United States and abroad, and was fluent in four languages. Despite her association with Hindu traditions, her column endorsed Christianity. A study in ambiguity, her persona appeared both American and foreign, African and Asian, Christian and Hindu, hard-nosed guide and mystical mind reader. The following letter demonstrates another notable difference: her column's breadth and depth.

> Dear Mysteria, I am in distress. I have been keeping company with a young man for a year. About a month ago he questioned me as to my past life. I told him I had always been a good girl, which I have, only when I was about 8 years old I was the victim of something I was not responsible for. I did not tell him this, as no one knows of it but my parents. If I should become his wife is there any way he could find this out? He has hinted marriage several times but has not asked me outright. He is an exceptionally good boy and is very particular. I am so afraid he would later find this out.—Distress.

Figure 3 Princess Mysteria (Vaulleda Hill Steward Strodder) dressed for her vaudeville act (*Chicago Defender*, August 25, 1923)

> Your position is indeed a peculiar one, and your refusal to dig down into the hideous thing of the past, something that you were wholly irresponsible for, was only proper. You answered his question as he asked it. A child of 8 has hardly started to live. If he proposes marriage to you, you may have your father to tell him of this dreadful happening. It will be better for your father to tell him than you. It will relieve your worry for him to know it, otherwise you will live with him always in fear of the skeleton in the closet. ("Advice to the Wise and Otherwise by Princess Mysteria," *Chicago Defender*, February 9, 1924)

The ethics of intimacy are primary here. The space between Distress's question and Mysteria's answer invites readers to devise and justify an array of possible answers. And the exchange reminds us that the genre offered multiple points of identification; although the visual and textual privileging of the columnist invited readers to identify with her, readers' first-person appeals invited identification with them as well, particularly when they were as powerful as the letter written by Distress, whose pseudonym departs from the adjectival pattern to make her appear as the very personification of suffering. The

passage features a (relatively) frank treatment of the sexual assault of a child. In doing so, it captures the complex dynamic of Mysteria's column, which addressed a wider array of problems than white-authored columns, which tended to nurture a white fantasy of life as manageable by restricting the kinds of letters they answered. (The challenge—really, the impossibility—of maintaining that fantasy is probably Miss Lonelyhearts's most pressing problem in West's satire.) Mysteria, in contrast, declines to make this fantasy accessible. Billed as the woman with all the answers, she did not shrink from intractable problems.

Mysteria takes the radical step of publicizing a rape and reassuring a survivor of her innocence, using melodramatic phrases ("hideous thing of the past," "this dreadful happening") that her matter-of-fact replies generally eschewed. She also gently urges Distress to be honest, while shifting to her father the task of informing the "exceptionally good boy" about Distress's rape. Although this is the only letter of its kind that I found, it typifies a primary difference between Mysteria's column and those published by writers like Dix. Mysteria dealt more directly with violence, domestic abuse, divorce, and nonmarital sexuality.[30]

Mysteria, in other words, may well have chosen to answer some of the supposedly unanswerable letters that inspired West to write *Miss Lonelyhearts* in the first place—which goes a long way toward explaining why a columnist like Mysteria has no place in West's novella. The letters that cause Miss Lonelyhearts to despair come from a Catholic mother of seven who needs an abortion for medical reasons but whose husband refuses to allow it, a sixteen-year-old girl who can't get a boyfriend because she was born without a nose, and a boy whose cognitively impaired sister has been raped (West 1933, 2–3). Faced with petitioners with crises similar in severity to the one faced by Mysteria's Distress, Miss Lonelyhearts is flummoxed. Trapped in West's vision of the lovelorn genre, this Baptist minister's son cannot proceed. His collapse into violence is generally interpreted as a sign of superior vision: he sees where the advice column is going, and he refuses to go. That's to his credit, according to critics. But is it? Even a cursory look at a column like Mysteria's requires us to reconsider blanket dismissals of the genre as inherently corrupt—and as antithetical to literary work. When we take into account *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s violence against women writers, West's condemnation appears even more suspect.

By allowing West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* to be the single entry point into the meaning of the personal advice column, literary historians have oversimplified the genre's gender masquerade and missed the racial one entirely. And that's probably not all we have missed. In its excessive and paradoxical emphasis on gender, the lovelorn genre opened and shut doors at the same time, but we have yet to chart its precise effects. The blurry image of Princess Mysteria—whose unknowability, combined with the extravagance of her claims to know all, epitomizes the personal advice column—demonstrates that this mass media phenomenon was more elastic than we have assumed. A kaleidoscope of audience-oriented intimacies reflected multiply via fluctuating artifices, the genre did far more than simply render irrelevant the question of genuine emotional expression. By recalibrating the parameters of advice giving, it shifted counsel outside the bounds of interpersonal exchange and forged an anonymous, recursive imaginative field. While critics have demonstrated that West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* manifests the violence and loss occasioned by that shift, we are only just beginning to recognize its broader consequences for literary modernism. Dorothy Dix and Princess Mysteria engaged in their own radical experimentation with form. Especially from the social media–saturated vantage point of the twenty-first century, we must not shrug off these early versions of mediated intimacy. The advice column offered women writers a commanding new platform from which to assert themselves at a watershed moment for women's rights, but we have been so busy describing the damage done—often with minimal evidence—that we have not paused to reflect on the revolutionary nature of the platform itself. The emotional expertise of the advice columnist was an abstraction, funneled through an elaborate pretense that invited disclosure while promising anonymity for all parties. Honoring the form's strangeness, a quality that has been obscured by its spectacular success, may be the first step toward understanding it.

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Notes

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1 In her history of mainstream US newspaperwomen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Alice Fahs (2011, 121) argues that advice columns allowed journalists "to assume new public roles, to create new personae, and to establish new public spaces in print." See also Golia 2010, Weisberg 2012, Gudelunas 2007, and Hendley 1977.

2 The ethnic press emulated the features of mass-market dailies, as press historians have long noted (Park 1922, 86; Wittke 1957, 3–4). Anna D. Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann (2015, 148) mentions a Polish-language press advice column, and Valerie Matsumoto (1991) analyzes Mary Oyama's Dear Deirdre column in the *New World-Sun* (San Francisco) in the 1930s. Gertrude Bustill Mossell's column, published in the *New York (NY) Freeman* from 1885 to 1887, appears to be the first advice column designed specifically for African Americans (Hutelmyer 2007).

3 On *Miss Lonelyhearts* and the avant-garde, see Eburne 2010 and Murphet 2009.

4 Jonathan Greenberg's (2006) argument that West's protagonists are best understood as attempts to resolve the tension between the claims of satire and sentiment applies to the advice column itself; he argues that satire reemerged as a fictional mode "precisely when inherited conventions for the representation of suffering became discredited" (589–90). In a related essay that praises West's insight into mass culture, Jonathan Lethem (2009, xi) suggests that West represents the difficulty of establishing "an intimate ground of operation from which an authentic loving gesture might be launched."

5 In the parody, an absurdly understanding "Auntie May" comforts a host of undeserving letter writers and rationalizes their indefensible behavior. Almost from its inception, the lovelorn column appealed to parodists; West was one of a long line.

6 Dix's biographer noted an insult from a reader that Dix treasured: "You're just about as sentimental as a mustard plaster!" (Kane 1952, 84). Not all columns were restricted to published responses to anonymous queries, either; some functioned as dating services, employment guides, and social-service agencies. Golia (2010) argues that women-authored columns created

interactive communities, broadened notions of democratic participation, and gave readers new opportunities to forge virtual relationships.

7 On Dix's feminism, see Culley 1977.

8 On Cahan's column, see Bier 2015, Walker 1996, and Sanders 1969. From early on, Cahan's column was praised as more valuable than the standard lovelorn column. It also inspired Liana Finck's graphic novel, *A Bintel Brief: Love and Longing in Old New York* (2014).

9 These examples are drawn from Betty's Balm for Lovers, *New York Evening World*, September 6, 1905. Greeley-Smith wrote that column as "Betty" in addition to a column that appeared on the editorial page under her own name, in which she sometimes answered letters like the one quoted here.

10 Golia (2010, 13) stresses "the interactive potential of advice giving and receiving" and pays special attention to Nancy Brown's long-running column in the *Detroit News*, which held a series of extraordinary in-person gatherings in the 1930s that attracted tens of thousands of column readers (291–349).

11 Wiegman and Wilson (2015, 14–18) suggest that queer theorists have underestimated the dynamic nature of normativity.

12 Martin's 1970 account gets two key facts wrong: the gender of the acquaintance (it was a man, not a woman, writing as Susan Chester) and the name of the newspaper (it was the *Brooklyn Daily Times*, not the *Brooklyn Eagle*). Perelman himself may have contributed to the error; Perelman's *The Last Laugh* (1981) makes the same mistakes (162–63). So does Ritzenberg (2013, 152n19). For more accurate accounts, see Meade 2010, 3–4; Woodward 2011, 115; and Rich 2013.

13 Scholars have affirmed the genre's debasement without citing relevant historical evidence. James C. Davis (2007, 229–31) reads columns solely as newspaper advertisements and circulation stunts. Jonathan Veitch (1997, 73) draws on Jean Baudrillard's critique of the mass media to cast the genre as "a sham exchange between two parties who have already agreed upon the answers" and "a *model* of public discourse during the thirties" but cites no actual columns. Nor does Rita Barnard (1994), whose otherwise trenchant analysis acknowledges the lovelorn column's popularity and contends that West saw columnists and artists as equally compromised by the rise of mass-market consumer culture. John Keyes (2005), the only West critic who considers the advice column as an independent phenomenon, cites as "typical" an Ann Landers column published three decades after West wrote *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Calling the genre "a paradigm of mutual inauthenticity," Keyes dismisses the letter writers in *Miss Lonelyhearts* with casual misogyny, labeling them "an all too common female type, passive and victimized" (89).

14 See, for instance, Trachtenberg (1982), who identifies the newspaper sketch as a form Stephen Crane overcame to achieve his aesthetic goals.

Trachtenberg reads human interest stories in city dailies as "an attempt to fill distances inherent in mystified space with formulaic emotion fostering the illusion of distance transcended" (141).

15 A noteworthy exception is Beth Blum's "Modernism's Anti-Advice" (2017), which does not address the lovelorn genre but makes a related case for the reciprocity of modernism and self-help discourse, suggesting, among other things, that "modernism's elusive style develops in part as an attempt to articulate a better alternative to self-help's reductive advice" (129).

16 Heather A. Haveman (2015, 1) defines "translocal communities" as "collections of people with common interests, beliefs, identities, and activities who recognize what they have in common but who are geographically dispersed and cannot easily meet face to face."

17 For example, the *Picayune* sent Dix to community events to demonstrate that she wasn't "a group of office boys or a cynical male writer" (Kane 1952, 70).

18 Gender bending persists in twenty-first-century incarnations of the advice column: *Slate*'s popular Dear Prudence column was written originally by male economist Herbert Stein; the literary website *Rumpus*'s Dear Sugar column was launched in 2008 by Steve Almond, who apparently pictured Sugar as "a wise woman with a troubled past" (Dear Sugars, 2016).

19 Extending Butler's definition of drag as symbolic expression through hyperbole, Sam See (2009, 811) argues, "Gender performativity itself is always draglike and all the more so where gender normativity is 'taken for granted.'" See is quoting Butler 1993, 237.

20 While Nieland (2004) acknowledges the significance of gender in West's critique of Enlightenment ideals, more recent work that reads *Miss Lonelyhearts* from a systems-theory perspective does not (Marshall 2013; Iuli 2016). Ritzenberg's (2013, 111) study of sentimental touch celebrates Miss Lonelyheart's handclasp with Peter Doyle as "a brief, utopian reprieve" from managerial culture but does not address West's exclusion of women from that reprieve.

21 Shrike describes one of his admirers as "a cow-eyed girl of great intelligence. He illustrated the word *intelligence* by carving two enormous breasts in the air with his hands. 'She works in a book store, but wait until you see her behind'" (West 1933, 6).

22 Iuli (2016) argues that West shows the failure of humanist epistemologies to solve the cognitive disorientation caused by the convergence of mass media and capital (576) and that the text is "an unparalleled narrative rendition" of self-referential systems in art (583). Nieland (2004, 60) contends that *Miss Lonelyhearts* critiques "the universalizing affective logic of Enlightenment humanism" more than it attacks "feminized domestic or middle-class culture." On the limits of feminist critiques of modernism as antisentimental, see Greenberg 2006.

23 Stiles (2014, 244) includes the rape passage in a list of scenes of "nonchalant brutality." More typical is Strychacz (1993, 163), who mentions it parenthetically. Geha (1971) argues that Miss Lonelyhearts pursues a psychotic path to salvation through unconscious identification with abused women.

24 "The Novel Demeuble" (The Unfurnished Novel) appeared in the *New Republic* in 1922 and went on to become Cather's most influential essay (Woodress 1987, 342).

25 In an omission that reflects the widespread critical disinterest in this scene, the only critic who analyzes race extensively in *Miss Lonelyhearts* does not mention this moment, even though it is the novella's only direct reference to African Americans, albeit through hate speech; see Davis 2007.

26 For an alternate reading of this scene as a failed attempt to restore community, see Barnard 1995, 199.

27 On sexological discourse about race and queerness, see See 2009, esp. 806–7.

28 Scholars have long acknowledged Meriwether as a likely source for the African American authorial persona Dix developed in 1905, a shrewd, outspoken washerwoman named Mirandy. Dix published more than eighty Mirandy articles between 1905 and 1920, most illustrated with racist caricatures, which were collected and issued as books in 1914 and 1922. In the larger project from which this essay is drawn, I show that Dix's mainstream white persona was as dependent on the mammy as her blackface persona.

29 I identified Mysteria's name and birthplace through US Census records from 1900 and 1920 and the obituary, "Princess Mysteria Pens Last 'Advice to the Wise'" (*Chicago Defender*, March 22, 1930).

30 Although Mysteria preached monogamy, respect for parents, and sexual restraint, she also advocated divorce for abused women, even if they had children. She also declined to castigate letter writers, especially women, for sexual indiscretions, unless they involved betrayals of prior commitments.

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