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Whitechapel, Dark City: Performative Recuperation of Urban Identity in Gilded Age Chicago's Whitechapel Club[1]

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Chicago was in a phase of negotiating its urban identity in the 'Gilded Age' of the early 1890s. The city took the opportunity presented by the Great Fire of 1871 to reinvent itself as a beacon of a new age of American innovation, culminating in its hosting of the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. While this managed reinvention was taking place in the corridors of power, Chicago remained a city of contrasts where the wealth of industry sat uncomfortably next to the deprivation of impoverished communities plagued by the social problems of the industrial era. For some who were aware of this contrast, the Whitechapel Club represented the reality of life in Chicago — a city where violence and mortality were central to the urban character. This article explores the Whitechapel Club's role as a reflection of Chicago's identity of contrasts, as well as the lasting impact it had on shaping the city during the Gilded Age. It focuses on the Club's recuperation of death and morbidity through the use of performative tactics designed to cathartically process the reality of urban life.
Key words: Urban identity, Chicago, social issues, performativity, historical sociology.

Introduction

The early 1890s were a tumultuous period of social development in Chicago. Like other major American cities in the Gilded Age, it was a time that was rife with potential for industrious individuals seeking to make their fortune in a society that was experiencing unprecedented industrialisation (Schneirov 2006). The term 'Gilded Age' is often used to refer to the period of American history between 1870 and 1900 — an era of rapid industrialisation and economic expansion but, also, a time when exponential migration and urbanisation led to abject poverty for many, with the divide between rich and poor becoming ever more pronounced (Schneirov 2006, Flanagan 2018). For this reason, the period is described as 'Gilded', wherein outward displays of opulence belied a society suffering significant social problems beneath a superficial veneer of prosperity. Chicago's geographical location at the crossroads of many of the country's railway lines meant that industry saw the city as a prime location to establish new factories, stockyards and processing plants. This attracted not only entrepreneurs to Chicago, but the working-class labour who were their employees as well. Chicago's growth was rapid, and in the period between 1870 and 1900 the city's population expanded from around 299,000 to 1.7 million (Cumbler 2005). Late 19th-century Chicago was a city of contrasts in many ways. On one hand, it felt the burden common to all growing industrial cities — strained infrastructure, migration, poor living conditions, increased crime. On the other, it was a city that revelled in its ability to reinvent itself after the 1871 Great Chicago Fire, which left 18,000 buildings destroyed and a third of the population homeless (Boda and Johnson 2017). After a concerted period of investment and reconstruction, Chicago saw the 1890s as its triumphant return to the pantheon of American culture, embodied by the decision that it would play host to the World's

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Columbian Exposition in 1893, an event with the express mandate to better the Paris World's Fair only four years prior (Bolotin and Laing 2002). Chicago was a city on the edge, though whether this was the edge of victory or decay depended on the social strata one belonged to.

Living in this society of contrasts required a renegotiation of Chicago's identity, especially important as the city prepared to showcase itself to the world at the 1893 exposition. Chicagoans were forced to confront the grim reality of the city head-on — that, hidden under the veil of industry and innovation, was a city in which vice and violence was omnipresent (Larsen 2003, O'Brien 2015). Grappling with the concept of fleeting mortality was central to understanding the evolution of Chicago's identity in the 1890s. A major part of this process of identity formation was the Chicago establishment's unlikely embrace of the city's gritty criminal reputation. No clearer example of this exists than the Whitechapel Club, a social group of the city's élite that met for five years in the early 1890s. The Whitechapel Club took its names from another crime-riddled metropolis, London, in a reference to the salacious stories of Jack the Ripper's Whitechapel murders that were playing out in the penny press (Sawyers 1986, Lorenz 1998). The Whitechapel Club was a group that represented the best that Chicago had to offer: it was highly exclusive, consisted of men from a range of professional backgrounds, and was (at least, purportedly) dedicated to progressive social change (Lorenz 1998). The practices of the Whitechapel Club were arcane, with members openly fetishizing the type of death and morbidity that working-class Chicagoans grappled with every day. Their fetishization can be seen as performative, a way for privileged Chicagoans to take the city's criminality and, ultimately, incorporate it as a central aspect of the growing metropolis's cultural identity. For many, Chicago's global reputation as a 'crime city' was born in the shadow of the World's Fair, and the serial murders of H. H. Holmes — as the Whitechapel Club shows, Chicagoan's affinity for violence and crime predates the crimes of Holmes, instead reflecting Chicago's organic development as a 'dangerous city'.

Methodology

A common way to analyse a city's sociocultural identity is to examine the institutions upon which that city was built. Often, the most useful way to accomplish this is by engaging with ethnographic fieldwork: utilising such methods gives the researcher opportunity to make firsthand observations of how communities function and, arguably more important, the people who make up those communities. In their discussion of the benefits of urban ethnography, Italo Pardo and Giuliana B. Prato (2017) pose that 'while there is no need to fetishise fieldwork – certainly not as an end – its unique value cannot be overstated' (p. 2). Indeed, ethnographic fieldwork provides great insight into a city's function, but where problems arise is in how to conduct an effective ethnographic analysis through the historical lens, absent the ability to conduct ethnographic observation. Here, a broader approach is required that accomplishes the overarching goal of rendering a more thorough and insightful view of a population, reliant on other forms of data aside from participant observation, often the preferred research method of the ethnographer. As Pardo and Prato point out, however, the practice of urban ethnography is not a nil-sum proposition where methods beyond participant observation should be summarily

dismissed: as they assert, 'there is no need for the complexity of urban life to translate into academic complication or disciplinary insecurity' because of a reluctance to engage in interdisciplinary work (2017: 2).

Historical data has traditionally had a significant role in ethnographic research, albeit to mixed reactions from some ethnographic researchers. For example, Peter Jackson (1985) refers to the early work of Robert and Helen Lynd (1929), where historical data was used to elucidate patterns of change in Muncie, Indiana, and provide a baseline for their observational research. Even here, the use of historical data is used to *support* traditional participant ethnography, not as a means to render an ethnographic product of its own. This is, thus, not a new challenge faced by urban researchers: Jackson was writing in the mid-1980s when he argued the need for ethnographic studies 'more adequately situated in terms of their broader historical or social context' that would avoid 'static, cross-sectional accounts' (1985: 165). The best way to avoid this, from a historical perspective, is to expand the use of historical data away from empirical statistics and into the realm of more qualitative, descriptive accounts of life in another period. Reflective accounts like memoirs provide a window into urban life at a very specific moment in time and, when contextualised using contemporaneous materials like news reports, can form the foundation of an urban ethnography that is removed from the events described, yet still reflective of how those events were perceived and interpreted by the people who *were* there.

Much has been written about Chicago's government and industry in the late 19th century, however less has been written about the city's more informal institutions like the Whitechapel Club. One reason for this is that the nature of the group itself precluded scrutiny. While its existence was not necessarily a secret, the exclusivity of the Whitechapel Club was such that its practices were not widely publicised outside of its membership (Lorenz 1998, Banning 2014). This presents problems for researchers, because what information does exist about the Whitechapel Club is limited to the testimony of its members who, over time, spoke about their involvement of the group and its activities. Nevertheless, even if the description of the Whitechapel Club that currently exists is not entirely full and thorough, it still showcases the unique relationship that Chicago's élite had with crime and death — enough, at least, to make this article's case that the group performatively engaged with such subject matter as part of the identity negotiation process.

Literature Review

The study of how cities develop an identity is not one with a long, historic tradition in scholarship. For some, in the past the city was an anomalous social formation; its importance far outstripped by that of the rural or non-urban communities where the majority of a nation's population resided (Sadalla and Stea 1978). It should not be surprising, thus, that sociological urban studies initially entered into the academic discussion in the mid-to-late 19th century — the very period discussed in this article, when rapid industrialisation was forcing mass rural to urban migration across the then-developing world (Sadalla and Stea 1978, Grossman and Jones 1996). Like Chicago itself, early urban studies were split between analysis of architectural features of the city and the experiences of people living in newly-developing 'ghetto' areas

where poverty and crime was rife (York et al. 2011). Indeed, the Chicago School of Sociology led by Robert Park, Louis Wirth and Ernest Burgess represents some of the most influential work on the social impact that urban environments have on the population. Taking a macro-based approach to studying the city — and Chicago in particular — these early theorists found that the geographic locations that a person lived in within the city was more predictive of their social outcomes than any other single factor. Effectively, it was the city itself that was the most significant influence on an individual's self-conception and identity, which in turn is a product of the collective identity of the specific part of the city that they are from (Park and Burgess 1925). This interpretation of the city serves as acknowledgement that urban environments are not, by nature, homogenous. Instead, they are venues where individuals from a range of backgrounds are forced to live side-by-side, forming communities in concentric zones with their own (often contrasting) sociocultural identities. It explains the fundamental conflict at the core of Chicago's identity: a city of great, concentrated wealth and power surrounded by concentric zones of urban decay and poverty.

Though useful when it comes to understanding how urban geography develops from a sociological perspective, the Chicago School was more focused on social outcomes than on urban identity. Harold M. Proshansky, a pioneer in the study of urban identity and ethnographic research, found that 'for each of the role-related identities of an individual, there are physical dimensions and characteristics that help to define and are subsumed by that identity' (1978: 147). His argument that physical environment or, as he puts it, 'place-identity' is central to a person's self-conception can be broadly applied to the collective identity adopted by the citizens of a city as a group. Edward Relph (1976) proposed a three-dimensional model of urban identity, arguing that the identity of a 'place' is the result of interactivity between its physical features, the activities that take place there and its symbolic meaning to the broader population. Much of the literature on urban communities has focused on the first of these three factors, the way that physical environments impact on sociocultural identity, but comparably little research has been compiled on the symbolic interactions between a city and the people who live there. Symbolic interaction goes beyond the physical — it is fundamentally grounded in a population's *perceptions* of the place that they call home, and how they are able to recuperate these perceptions — both good and bad — into a salient narrative of the city's identity. Recuperation is a critical sociological theory that suggests it is possible for a society to incorporate 'dangerous' or otherwise threatening ideas, sanitise them and commodify them for its own benefit (Debord 1967, Hutcheon 1989, Stabile 1995, Bleakley 2018). Although they were initially developed as a Situationist critique of capitalist structures, the principles of recuperation can be applied to urban identity formation as well, particularly in cases like 19th-century Chicago, where the grit of urban life was treated with excitement and became a major element of the city's risqué appeal to non-urban visitors and migrants.

The connection between Chicago citizens and death was well covered in Jeffrey Adler's *First in Violence, Deepest in Dirt* (2006), which examined the impact of Gilded Age phenomena like industrialisation and migration on the swelling rate of violence in Chicago in the era. Adler suggests that the preoccupation with mortality was common in the Gilded Age, not just to

Chicagoans but to Americans as a people: he notes that 'Americans had held fatalistic attitudes toward life and death' that were exacerbated by the increasing inequality experienced by a large proportion of the population (Adler 2006: 203). The acquiescence to death that Adler identifies is reflected in the behaviours of the Whitechapel Club which, though seemingly unusual, in the context of the Gilded Age were in keeping with a general community acceptance of inevitable mortality. The inner-workings of the once-secretive Whitechapel Club were incrementally revealed in the press in the years after its decline, partly a result of its membership mostly working as newspaper reporters. The most notable of these journalistic accounts comes from Charles A. Dennis, former city editor of Chicago's *Morning News*. Dennis was not a Whitechapel Club member himself, but through his position as the supervisor of several younger journalists who were members he gained access to a range of recollections about the Club that he compiled and published in a 36-part series in the *Chicago Daily News* in 1936. The Dennis files provide the most thorough account of the Club's culture and practices, especially as his work is derived from multiple sources rather than a single informant. His work provides the basis for the best modern rendering of the Whitechapel Club, written by Larry Lorenz (1998). Lorenz assesses the Whitechapel Club from a journalistic perspective, discussing the group's position as 'one of the most peculiar of all press clubs' (1998: 83). Although he is less focused on the Whitechapel Club's reflection of Chicagoan identity, Lorenz's research draws on a number of journalistic sources to provide a strong depiction of the Club, its membership and their influence on the city's journalistic community.

Discussion. A tale of two Chicagos — The Urban Metropolis in the Gilded Age
In order to understand the urban conditions that facilitated the creation of the Whitechapel Club, it is crucial to recognise that the late 19th century was a transformative period for Chicago. In 1885, the city became home to the first skyscraper in the world — the Home Insurance Building, a ten-story structure in the downtown Loop area that was innovative in its use of structural steel (Webster 1959, Mentzer 2019). In the years that followed, skyscrapers would become a feature of Chicago's skyline, a physical representation of the growing wealth of the city's downtown area. The skyscraper impacted more than Chicago's skyline, however. Before the invention of the skyscraper, cities usually expanded outwards fostering a low-density urban sprawl (Squires 2002). Skyscrapers allowed for a repurposing of scarce land in Chicago: as the central business district expanded upwards rather than outwards, density levels increased in the zones surrounding the city centre, exacerbating the poor social conditions in the city's 'slums' (Park and Burgess 1925, Du et al. 2017). This also impacted on the experience of crime in the city, as the social issues experienced in the impoverished inner-city zones inevitably spread into adjacent areas of the city where wealth was concentrated (Park and Burgess 1925, Larsen 2003). The Gilded Age was a time when the United States began to see the rise of 'new money' — wealth was accumulated by industrialists in manufacturing, steel, the railroads and stockyards, all of which Chicago was known as a hub for in the late 19th century (Larsen 2003, Adler 2006). It was from this cohort that the city's élite came, divergent from the New York City set in that there was less status afforded to legacy and more recognition given to successful

entrepreneurialism. Many of the Chicago élite made their fortune on the back of working-class labour and, as such, there was a mutualistic relationship between the two groups: the fortunes of Chicago's élite were more directly dependent on labour than in places like New York City; thus, the interconnectivity between classes was perhaps more pronounced than it was elsewhere in the United States in this period.

Even from an environmental perspective, Chicago's downtown élite were not entirely shielded from the inherent grime of the city. Indeed, the spread of the 1871 Great Fire has been attributed to Chicago's poor infrastructure, which resulted in both human and industrial waste entering the Chicago River and flowing into the downtown area. It has been speculated that these flammable pollutants were the reason that the river did not provide an effective firebreak, causing the blaze to 'jump the river' from the poorer South Side to the more affluent North Side (Boda and Johnson 2017). As much as the severity of the 1871 fire was the product of unsustainable urban growth, it was also the fundamental reason that Chicago was a city on the rise by the time the Whitechapel Club was formed eighteen years later. Although it was an unmitigated disaster for the city, the Great Fire gave Chicago an opportunity to rebuild in a purposeful manner, and effectively to take control of shaping its urban identity. Unlike other cities, where civic leaders were forced to work around established urban landscapes, the damage rendered by the fire meant Chicago was in many ways a blank slate that was primed to be reinvented for the Gilded Age (Cuff 2009). It facilitated the city's rise as an architectural powerhouse, which in turn set the stage for the city to the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893.

Distinct from other global events like the Olympic Games, the 'World's Fair' was not awarded by a centralised committee. Instead, it was a model adopted for major exhibitions around the world, such as the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition held in London and, only four years prior to the Chicago event, the 1889 Paris Universal Exhibition. The decision was made for the United States to host a World's Fair to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's 'discovery' of North America, with the United States Congress given the power to choose a city to host the event, formally dubbed the 'World's Columbian Exposition' (Larsen 2003). There was a perception that hosting the World's Fair would considerably benefit the city chosen, contributing to an increase in economic investment and a boost in real estate values, resulting in stiff competition for the honour between Chicago, St Louis, Washington DC and, notably, New York City.

Ultimately, Chicago was selected over New York City based on a campaign that sold the city as location that possessed 'abundant supplies of good air and pure water […] ample space, accommodations and transportation' that their rivals in New York City did not (Lederer 1972: 389). The Chicago pitch inherently played into the perception of New York City as an urbanised locale which possessed the usual social problems afflicting major cities in the Gilded Age: overcrowding, poverty and crime. Chicago was cast as a contrast, a safe space where there were extensive patches of 'empty' land to develop for the World's Fair (Lederer 1972). The portrayal of Chicago by World's Fair organisers was a far cry from the experience of Chicagoans living outside the affluent Loop and, in a respect, is reflective of the 'two Chicagos' that existed in the

Gilded Age. While the World's Fair campaigners presented Chicago as a sanitised form of urban life, this was not the experience for many Chicagoans existing outside the affluent 'bubble': the geographical location of Chicago at the 'crossroads of the nation' meant it was the ideal place for industry to develop, using Chicago's access to the railroad network to ship products to all corners of the nation. Prominently, Chicago was home to a robust meat trade, with the slaughterhouses of the Union Stock Yard on the fringes of the inner-city in many ways marking a physical barrier between the powerful capital of downtown Chicago and the poverty-stricken working-class communities beyond (D'Eramo 2002). When pitching the city as a safe, clean alternative to New York City, the official biography of Chicago ignored the experience of this 'other Chicago'. In some respects, this was part of the World's Fair legacy: the process of selling an 'ideal' Chicago by its very nature excluded the working-class citizens that did not fit comfortably with the narrative the city was pitching for itself. Ultimately, it reinforced the boundaries between the 'two Chicagos' — one, a safe and aspirational Gilded Age city and, the other, a decaying metropolis not dissimilar to that the World's Fair campaign derided in New York City.

Winning the right to host the World's Fair over eastern rival New York City was a coup for Chicago, a recognition that it was no longer 'a greedy, hog-slaughtering backwater' and was, instead, the nation's leader in fields like commerce, manufacturing and architecture (Larsen 2003: 13). It is a common misconception that Chicago's campaign to host the World's Fair was driven by the economic benefit it would hold for the city. While this was a central aspect of the sales pitch that was devised to ensure Chicagoans were on board with the World's Fair, the reality is that the event cost the Chicago-based organising committee what would be the equivalent of more than half a billion dollars in the twenty-first century (Larsen 2003, Rosenberg 2008). Instead, the World's Fair was an exercise in identity development — an effort by Chicago's business and political élite to fast-track its acceptance in the pantheon of America's great cities, and to overcome the regional prejudices emanating from eastern rivals like New York City and Boston.

A City in the Shadows — Forming the Whitechapel Club
The Whitechapel Club initially formed as a response to the bleeding of the dark, deprived elements of the city into the lives of Chicago's privileged establishment. As Lorenz (1998) notes, the founders of the Whitechapel Club were primarily disaffected members of Chicago's Press Club, driven out of that institution by a combination of the costliness of its fees and the more traditional and culturally refined tone expected of its membership. The breakaway element who formed the Whitechapel Club in 1889 were mostly young, 'wild and erratic geniuses' who rejected conventional decorum in favour of social realism (McGovern 1915: 1005; Dennis 1936b). For the most part, the membership register of the Whitechapel Club remained a secret to outsiders; however, personal memoirs and other anecdotal memoirs allowed Larry Lorenz (1998) to identify a total of 94 members — of this number, 39 members were confirmed as newspapermen. Journalists represented the largest single subgroup in the Whitechapel Club and, perhaps unsurprisingly, the group held this profession to a higher

standard than most: editors or reporters with the trade papers were not permitted to join the Whitechapel Club, with the existing cohort of reporters seeing these publications as merely vehicles for advertising rather than genuine forms of journalism (Lorenz 1998). It is no coincidence that the journalists who were at the core of the Whitechapel Club more often came from the city or police rounds of their publications, rather than the business or finance departments — it was this group that regularly came into contact with the deprived areas outside the concentrated wealth of the Chicago Loop, and saw firsthand the issues experienced by these communities that their social peers were shielded from (Lorenz 1998, Brian 2014). For many who would later join the Whitechapel Club, this exposure to a 'different Chicago' triggered a personal identity crisis. Chicago writer James Weber Linn claims that the pronounced social deprivation experienced by the young journalists of the Whitechapel Club forced them to re-evaluate 'whether this was a world of even-handed justice […] [and] whether the papers they worked for were altogether a civilising and regenerating influence' (Linn 1937: 38). Like the city itself, the members of the Whitechapel Club were consistently faced with the extreme contrasts of the city, pulled between the opulent wealth of their downtown offices and the impoverished communities that they were dispatched to report on.

It was from within the tumultuous, nebulous social context of the late 1890s that the Whitechapel Club was created, a subversive and anarchical backlash to the carefully cultivated image of World's Fair era Chicago as an emergent city of the future. Again, like so many aspects of Chicago's identity, the Whitechapel Club served as a direct counterpoint to this vision: rather than a city reborn from the ashes of the Great Fire, the Whitechapelers viewed Chicago as a place where death and decay were rife. The question of why the Whitechapelers were so fascinated by death is interesting: Chicago was not alone in the United States (or, indeed, the world) as a city where death was common. Perhaps the best explanation for this lies in the membership of the Whitechapel Club. Although the Whitechapelers had regular exposure to the 'other' Chicago, the Club members did not generally come from working-class communities. Instead, they adopted the role of outside observers, which placed the experience of the poor in stark contrast to their own privileged lives in Chicago's affluent downtown milieu. The Whitechapelers were, to a great extent, the *enfant terrible* of 'polite' Chicago, shocked by what they found outside their social bubble. As a result of their own community generally showing minimal interest in the problems of the poor, the Whitechapelers were prone to behaving unconventionally in an effort to process their experiences.

While their corporate employers were heavily invested in the World's Fair narrative of Chicago, the Whitechapelers knew that the reality was far different. Indeed, in some ways it was the significant cohort of Whitechapelers who worked in the print media that gave the Club its primary power in shaping Chicago's identity: the Whitechapel Club served as a venue for journalists to discuss the social problems facing the city and, while the Whitechapel Club itself was not a lobbyist organisation for the most part, the discussions it hosted and the worldview it helped cultivate among members translated into the journalism they published, thus influencing wider perceptions of Chicago. That the city's élite wilfully turned a blind eye to the social issues plaguing the city only reinforced the Young Turk perspective that Chicago's establishment was

too conservative and traditional to understand the true identity of the city that they claimed to represent (Dennis 1936b, Dennis 1936d, Lorenz 1998). Charles Goodyear Seymour, the Club's inaugural president, was notorious in Chicago's journalism community for his open disdain for the hypocrisy of Gilded Age society — perhaps part of the reason he was chosen to lead the Whitechapel Club in the first place, along with humourist and Club co-founder Finley Peter Dunne. Seymour, a general duties reporter for the *Chicago Herald*, often published stories that were purposefully designed to shed light on the contrast between the 'two Chicagos'. On one occasion, dispatched to cover the city's annual charity ball, Seymour related an incident he witnessed where two young homeless women were removed from the site of the ball by police to make way for the city's wealthy élite who were — purportedly — there to raise money for the destitute (Dennis 1936d, Lorenz 1998). Seymour's targeting of the Chicago establishment no doubt would have been unwelcome in the traditional circles of the official Press Club, again showcasing the major role that awareness of social harm experienced by Chicago's less affluent population had on the foundation of the countercultural Whitechapel Club.

Performativity and Recuperation — Morbidity and Death as Identity Negotiation
Charles Goodyear Seymour was not only the founding leader of the Whitechapel Club, he also gave the group its unusual name. Seymour was sitting with journalist Frederick Upham Adams at Koster's saloon, which would provide a venue for the Whitechapel Club, when a swarm of newsboys rushed in to announce the latest Jack the Ripper killing in London's East End (Dennis 1936b, Lorenz 1998). While the Ripper murders did not inspire the creation of the Whitechapel Club — it was already, in some form, in the process of being formed — it did guide the shape that the group ultimately assumed. In many ways, the Ripper motif provided perfect symbolism for a group that was highly concerned with casting light on the myriad of social issues facing underprivileged communities in Gilded Age Chicago, and the United States more generally. Since 1888, the Whitechapel murders have been inherently tied to the venue in which they took place: the dilapidated, violent and poverty-stricken rookeries of Victorian London (Godfrey 2014). Enshrined in the cultural zeitgeist by writers like Charles Dickens and Jack London, the iconography of Victorian London is immediately evocative of a specific time and place. The Whitechapelers of Gilded Age Chicago would have seen the similarities between their city and the Ripper's London, where violent murder was committed against a backdrop of industrial urban decay. The Whitechapel Club operated at a time when there was little sense of community in a rapidly-expanding Chicago and, for that reason, it was common for the city's citizens to disappear without a trace, only to be found murdered sometime later (Larsen 2003, Adler 2006). In this, the Whitechapel Club saw comparisons with the Whitechapel murders, which (in their own social context) shone a spotlight on the correlation between poor living conditions and moral deviance, in relation to both the murders themselves and the 'fallen women' killed.

Central to this perspective is that Gilded Age society was an inherently hierarchal structure: like their London-based counterparts, the Whitechapel Club questioned whether the poor were responsible for their own conditions, or if these conditions were in fact a result of the ever-widening gap between rich and poor in the United States. It was not coincidental that

most of the motifs adopted by the Whitechapel Club, such as the skull of a Native American woman or the noose used to hang a Western outlaw, were symbolic of American colonialism in the West, not relics of their own urban environment (Dennis 1936a, Lorenz 1998, Larsen 2003). Again, this suggests a fascination with insatiable American expansion, and its impact on those who stand in its way, but also a desire to process this concept in a way that is removed from the lived experience of Club members, allowing the Whitechapelers to deal with the concept of death and morbidity, recuperating the idea but stopping short of engagement with the specific trauma taking place in the 'other' Chicago. For the Whitechapelers, Jack the Ripper was the embodiment of Gilded Age inequality and a cipher for all the social issues that they covered on a daily basis. Their fetishization of the Ripper was undoubtedly tongue-in-cheek, but at the same time served as a recognition of the natural endpoint for social decline in the city: violence and, ultimately, death.

Unlike other press clubs or social organisations of Chicago's Gilded Age, the Whitechapel Club was highly performative in the way that it operated, to the point of eccentricity. Although Seymour was the first leader of the Club, and chaired the Club's meetings, the position of 'president' was technically held by another: Jack the Ripper. On convening each meeting, the Whitechapelers would leave an empty chair for the Ripper in the event he deigned to show up, a performative act that again reflects that Club's purposeful engagement with the morbidity of urban life (Banning 2014). This performativity was not limited to the Ripper iconography, but to death itself. Decorations were fashioned out of the skulls of the mentally ill supplied by Whitechapeler and hospital superintendent Dr John C. Spray (Lorenz 1998). The central meeting table was shaped like a coffin, its centrepiece the skull of a young Native American girl that Seymour had brought back from an assignment in the American west (Dennis 1936a). There were other macabre 'souvenirs' from the west dotted around the Whitechapel Club rooms, including blood-stained blankets of Native American warriors, pistols used as murder weapons and nooses used for hanging the outlaws who used them (Dennis 1936a, Lorenz 1998, Brian 2014). At this point, it is important to make clear that the Whitechapel Club's engagement with death was never more than symbolic and performative. There is no evidence that members ever participated in violence or murder, only that they collected the morbid mementos of such acts. Rather, the Whitechapel Club's focus on murder and death was a physical representation of what many of them already did in their daily lives — engage with human suffering from the outside, and recuperate it into a form that was palatable for public consumption.

Recuperation is an important facet of identity formation, in the sense that it allows individuals to reconcile unsavoury (but unavoidable) realities, and to incorporate them into their self-conception in a way that contributes to building identity, not challenging it. The quest to reconcile the social problems experienced by Chicago's underprivileged with the innovative, wealthy city of the future promoted in the lead-up to the 1893 World's Fair was a central driver of the Whitechapel Club's formation (Larsen 2003, Rosenberg 2008). Before the members could accept urban decay and social deprivation as central to Chicago's identity, however, it was important first to negotiate their relationship with death — an ever-present reality of urban

life for the communities they reported on (Lorenz 2003, Banning 2014, Brian 2014). To recuperate the tragedy and finality of death in a way that allowed it to become a part of the 'real' Chicago identity, the Whitechapel Club adopted a practice of mocking the subject (Lorenz 1998). In doing so, the natural fear of death was mitigated by constant exposure, even immersion, in symbolic totems. This is not to say that death was not treated seriously by members of the Whitechapel Club, many of whom were journalists, doctors and police officers that were exposed to death to one degree or another every day. Instead, the mocking of death and rejection of the grief that conventionally accompanies it served as a cathartic process that helped Whitechapel Club members to cope with Chicago's inherent brutality. That the Club's activities and traditions were excessively performative, even ridiculous, was essential to the recuperation process. Performativity provided a necessary buffer between the reality on the streets and the hyper-reality created by the Whitechapelers, providing a space for members to consider challenging concepts of mortality faced in the course of their work without revisiting the trauma of actually experiencing it firsthand (Gingrich-Philbrook 1997, Brian 2014). This was important not just for the individuals in the Club, but for the development of the city's identity itself. The mainstream portrayal of Chicago as a bright beacon of opportunity was rejected by the Whitechapelers, who did not see the city they knew reflected in this depiction. The separation of the Whitechapel Club from the other established social and professional clubs of the period was a reaction to this, and a clear sign of the schism between establishment and radical perspectives on Chicagoan identity.

The Fall of Whitechapel — An End to Performative Identity-building in Chicago
Though the Whitechapel Club was not formally deregistered until 1902, it had transformed into a largely different group by 1894 and, for the most part, no longer existed in its original form. A number of micro- and macro-events around this time impacted on the Club's decline, including the 1892 death of Club visitor Morris A. Collins. The president of a group called the Dallas (Texas) Suicide Club, Collins was invited to the Whitechapel Club by 'fringe' member Honore Joseph Jaxon, a union organiser (Dennis 1936c). An advocate for legalised suicide, Collins killed himself shortly after his visit to the Whitechapel Club — in some recollections (perhaps apocryphal) he was 'taunted' to lead by example by founding Whitechapeler Frederick Adams (Lorenz 1998). If the connection between Collins's suicide and his visit to the Whitechapel Club was in any doubt, his final instructions were addressed to Jaxon, where he requested that the Whitechapel Club take possession of his body, dissect it for scientific research and burn what remained (Read 1930, Lorenz 1998). The Club went to great effort to fulfil Collins's request, claiming his body from the morgue and transporting it to the Indiana dunes where Collins was cremated in a ritual ceremony performed by the Whitechapelers (Read 1930, Dennis 1936e). Collins's suicide and the active involvement of Whitechapelers in cremating his body, still considered an unholy practice in Gilded Age society, would have reminded members of the reality of the mortality that they usually mocked and provided a blow to the sense of hyper-reality that usually provided a buffer between reality and performativity.

In many ways, Collins's funeral pyre on the Indiana dunes was a last hurrah for the Club, which had moved in early 1892 from Koster's to a new headquarters at 173 Calhoun Place — a costly endeavour that resulted in the Club falling into debt, unable to pay vendors or the landlord (Lorenz 1998). The move led to a concerted change in the Club's membership, which in turn impacted on its adherence to tradition. While the Whitechapel Club had previously been strict on its membership rules, the need for increased capital to fund the group's activities led to a loosening in the restriction that only two members of any profession should ever be admitted. Ultimately, this resulted in a less socially conscious membership made up of businessmen who coveted the Whitechapel Club for its reputation and exclusivity rather than its focus on Chicago's deprived (Whitlock 1916, Mott 1960). The Whitechapeler's inability to keep up with their payments, despite including some of the most prominent members of Chicago society, was also affected by the Panic of 1893, an economic depression that made it no longer viable for members to continue supporting financially a social club that did not offer any return on investment (Stevens 1894, Carlson 2005). The Whitechapel Club's decline was not because its remit for social change had been achieved — indeed the Panic of 1893 continued until 1897, a period in which the conclusion of the World's Fair only added to Chicago's social woes by returning thousands of workers employed by the fair to unemployment and poverty (Larsen 2003). Instead, the Whitechapel Club ended because the group itself experienced recuperation, overrun and sanitised by new, establishment members who were not aligned with the values expressed in the Club's original charter.

Conclusion

There was little need for the Whitechapel Club by the mid-1890s, at which point the inherent contrasts in the city's identity were readily apparent to Chicagoans. Originally, the Whitechapel Club had formed as a reaction to the city's reluctance to even accept the significant disparities that existed between the wealthy, privileged downtown and the deprived inner-city that sat just outside the Loop (Park and Burgess 1925). To correct this imbalance, the Whitechapel Club did not just acknowledge the social problems of Gilded Age Chicago, it embraced them totally. Its members operated on the periphery of Chicago society — though most were professionals, and nominally privileged, their profession routinely put them in a position to bear witness to the brutality and morbidity of the city that their more senior colleagues did not (Read 1930, Lorenz 1998, Brian 2014). It is not coincidental, with this in mind, that the Whitechapel Club was founded and led by muckraking journalists at a time when reporting on social problems in the urban environment was prioritised in much of the press. The difference in perspective that Club members had on what life in Chicago *actually* was like for much of the city's population is central in understanding why the Whitechapel Club splintered from the traditional professional clubs of the era. Whitechapelers kept a foot in both upper- and lower-class society, and were better positioned than most to recognise the contrasting nature of the city. The formation of the Whitechapel Club was a result of this unique viewpoint on Chicago's emerging urban identity. For as much the practices of the Whitechapel Club were performative exaggerations designed to ridicule the concept of mortality, they served a practical purpose. These arcane rituals gave

Whitechapelers the chance to renegotiate their relationship with death, normalising the subject and allowing them to process what was a common fact of life in 1890s Chicago.

As the twentieth-century approached, eccentric groups like the Whitechapel Club were no longer necessary for the simple reason that there was no longer a pressing need for Chicagoans to negotiate the identity of the city, and their place within it. In the early 1890s, it remained unclear what kind of city Chicago was — for the élite, it was a legitimate contender to wrestle the title of America's first city from New York City but, for the less fortunate, it was a cruel and unforgiving place. The members of the Whitechapel Club were among the first to recognise that determining the city's identity was not a binary choice between these two versions of Chicago. As they recognised, Chicago was both: it was opulence and poverty, sanitised boulevards and crime-ridden alleys. In some respects, the Whitechapel Club was outlived by its legacy. Members of the Whitechapel Club went on to become some of the city's greatest muckrakers — journalists dedicated to shining a light on poverty and the human condition (Lorenz 1998). These muckrakers continued to shape Chicago's identity as a city of contrasts, a concept that was pioneered by the Whitechapel Club. Although the Whitechapel Club was regularly (and understandably) criticised as an eccentric oddity of the Gilded Age, its unusual practices were a product of the cultural identity negotiation that Chicago was undergoing in this period. The engagement of Chicago's privileged élite with such a performatively macabre social group reflected a blurring of the lines between two societies that existed within the city limits, and through their actions they helped establish this incongruity as a fundamental aspect of Chicagoan identity well into the future.

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