

Introduction

The Problem of Modern Female Innocence

I find it very pleasant not to know. A swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can't see—that's my idea of happiness.

—Henry James, *Portrait of a Lady* (235)

Not-knowing—the who, what, when, where, why, and how of it—anchors this study. Which means, of course, that knowledge also grounds it. As with any binary, knowledge intimately connects and relates to its opposite of ignorance, and the study of one entails the study of the other. That scholars in multiple disciplines who are concerned with knowledge have not, as a matter of course, also developed comprehensive theories of not-knowing is unsurprising only if we acknowledge an epistemophilic bias that pervades traditional epistemology, much scholarly enterprise, and—arguably—modernity itself. As defined by philosopher Cynthia Townley in *A Defense of Ignorance: Its Value for Knowers and Roles in Feminist and Social Epistemologies* (2011), epistemophilia is an “excessive love for knowledge” that “tends to take all ignorance to be remediable, and best remedied, so the proper response to ignorance is to replace it with knowledge” (xii, xiii). To understand why this bias has been so pervasive, we must merely highlight our negative associations with tradition and ignorance, associations that are noncoincidentally also deeply linked to gendered, racialized, and classist prejudice.¹ And yet, this neglect cannot be ascribed solely to not-knowing's negative inflection; Townley notes that other fields within philosophy (such as moral philosophy) often study positively inflected terms alongside their negative counterparts (virtues alongside vice, for instance) (xvi–xvii). Something peculiar has gone

on in the study of knowledge that has unnaturally, and fairly comprehensively, suppressed the concomitant exploration of not-knowing. Thus, a study of not-knowing that would be open to its nonnegative aspects appears particularly odd, even uncomfortable.

And yet, this book is such a study. *An Ethic of Innocence* explores not-knowing as an epistemological practice that is not inherently negative through the figure of the fin-de-siècle woman. She, I argue, marks a turning point in the transatlantic literary-cultural representation of women from seeing female innocence as acceptable, if childish/naïve, to viewing women who choose not to know as antimodern, antifeminist, regressive fools. While the who, what, when, where, why, and how of this study are essential to my project's thesis, they are not necessary to an exploration of not-knowing. That is, there is nothing necessarily modern (the when) or transatlantic (the where) or female (the who) about not-knowing. Nor do the types of not-knowing (the what), the ways not-knowing is expressed (the how), or the reasons not-knowing is claimed, sustained, and embraced (the why) that I cover in this book encompass the necessary or total whats, hows, and whys of epistemologies of ignorance. Instead, my book tells a very particular story—that of the modern female subject as she has been represented within literature and art—in an unconventional way: by exploring the ways in which she has been shaped, circumscribed, opened, and misunderstood through practices of not-knowing.

Using an array of interdisciplinary discourses, including feminist and queer theory, social and feminist epistemologies, and philosophical pragmatism, in concert with literary critical, historical, and feminist cultural scholarship, *An Ethic of Innocence* traces the trope of female choices not to know—what I term an “ethic of innocence”—through a variety of literary and cultural manifestations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though gender and not-knowing are the threads I use to weave these texts together, my analysis is intersectional and treats, in particular, race, class, and national identity of characters as crucial complications to these threads. While this book responds to an overarching story of modern female representation within the transatlantic literary canon that in and of itself reflects significant bias toward white, middle-class, and heterosexual representations of women, the story of not-knowing that my manuscript engages is not limited to such a narrow view of women. Here, the transatlantic nature of the project requires my engagement with related, albeit distinct, canonical relationships to identity and difference. For instance, the early American lineage of indigenous or enslaved voices is importantly divergent

from the British canon's engagement (or lack thereof) with the perspective of the colonial other; meanwhile, these literary traditions' engagement with the topics of immigration, class stratification, and national relationship is likewise discrete and requires text-specific contextualization.² However, one of the more important arguments of this book is that this literary period contains representations of women from a variety of identity backgrounds—some privileged, some decidedly not, many complicated—engaging with strategies of not-knowing. The engagement may look different and have different costs and benefits based on a woman's identity features, but my chapters show that choosing not to know is not a privilege reserved merely for the elite; it is, rather, a flexible epistemic tool that can be, and has been, used to diverse ends by very differently situated characters and persons.³

This practice of not-knowing that this book traces is something I call an "ethic of innocence"; I define this as a system or tactic by which an agent (often, though not exclusively, female) makes a choice against knowledge in favor of a suspended stance of not-knowing. Though I will further unpack this terminology later on in this introduction, I will signal just a few key things about it here. First, I use the term "innocence" rather than "ignorance" to emphasize that this refusal of knowledge is chosen as a particular *gendered* strategy of epistemic negotiation. Discourses of innocence, as the literary canon attests, have been deployed strategically to control women's access to knowledge (women should not know certain things), to infantilize them (women, like children, should be pure and innocent), and to define their sexual worth (women should be virginal and innocent until marriage, as well as chaste afterwards). Of course, the "shoulds" in the parentheticals above also make clear that such discourses surrounding innocence have been used to differentiate "proper" or "good" women from their fallen, racially or economically othered, or questionably worldly sisters. As I will make clear later on in this introduction, these valuations of female propriety that include but exceed consideration of intellectual knowledge alone make the term 'innocence,' rather than 'ignorance,' a ripe one for my study of the ways in which women choose not to know in this era. Second, I have yoked innocence to the term "ethic" in order to emphasize the reasoned, epistemic, and sociomoral dimensions of this choice not to know. In doing so, an "ethic of innocence" breaks from a linear understanding of innocence's temporality (as a state that precedes but can never follow knowledge or experience). We are, I suspect, used to thinking of innocence as something one *is*; through the composite "ethic of innocence," I posit innocence as something one *adopts, has, or does*.

As a segue to further exploration of an ethic of innocence, I offer the following portrait of what I consider to be a characteristic fin-de-siècle non-knower, a character whose very freedom to choose anything in her life is made possible, and then cut short, by her gendered choices not to know. Indeed, her tale's title, including its indefinite "a," suggests that if not an everywoman, Isabel Archer, of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, is at least a discernable, turn-of-the-century type. *An Ethic of Innocence* argues that this fin-de-siècle female type is not defined merely by the uses to which she puts her choice not to know; just as, if not more, important to this book's analysis is the way in which such a choice (and its uses) has been misunderstood and mischaracterized, by other characters and readers alike.⁴ For, crucially, the fin-de-siècle/modern woman's choice not to know has been judged, not merely as an epistemic lack but also as a sociopolitical failing.

Not-Knowing as *Trope-cum-Trap*

Isabel Archer, the protagonist of James's 1880–81 novel, embodies a paradox that faced many an intelligent, educated, middle-class women on the cusp of modernity: she knows that to obtain the (classed, raced, gendered) status of "lady," she must marry and adopt the role of wife and mother but fears that by marrying she will lose her independence and agency. Isabel is no ignorant socialite; early on, she is characterized as a "prodigy of learning," evincing a palpable, distinct "love of knowledge" that differentiates her from the "horridly ignorant" other girls (66, 27, 62). Yet Isabel's knowledge is affectively and experientially limited; as her cousin Ralph puts the matter, she is fond of "happy knowledge—of pleasant knowledge" but has not yet acquired "miserable knowledge" through personal suffering (64). Instead, Isabel demonstrates "a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action" (68). Yet such determination evidences no mere Pollyannaesque romanticism; Isabel clearly understands that the independence her class in particular permits her indulgence in this worldview. Therefore, despite perceiving Casper Goodwood, her first suitor, as "the finest young man she had ever seen," she refuses to marry him in order to maintain her independence (47).

The Portrait of a Lady's narrative trajectory painstakingly charts Isabel's failures to keep both her independence and the merely happy knowledge to which it is linked. In the face of social pressures to marry, the connivance of false friends, the *laissez-faire* attitude of her family, the corrupting force of

money, and her own naïve stubbornness, Isabel soon opts to marry a man who neither truly sees nor respects her and who curtails her worldview and her freedom with gusto—a marital fate many critics have abhorred.⁵ But before this tragic narrowing of her fate, Isabel does experience a period of independence, partially financed by an inheritance from her rich uncle but also partially purchased by an embrace of a very curious phenomenon for this passionate lover of knowledge: a series of choices not to know.

The quote that opens this introduction is said by Isabel Archer to her friend, Henrietta Stackpole, when Henrietta asks what Isabel plans for her future. This conversation occurs directly after Henrietta discovers Isabel has rejected (for the second time) the suit of Casper Goodwood. Henrietta sees this rejection as a grave error, asking Isabel accusingly, “[D]o you know where you’re drifting? (235). Isabel’s response, “No, I haven’t the least idea,” is followed by the cheeky claim that she “find[s] it very pleasant not to know” (235). Henrietta’s dismayed reply to Isabel’s perversity, that she is behaving “like the heroine of an immoral novel,” expresses both the (negative) moral inflection such “drifting” has and also the sentiment that it is only in an unrealistic, even fictional, world in which such “drifting” for a leading lady, is permissible. It might be tempting to dismiss Henrietta’s reply as mere reactionary conservatism that sees no path for women aside from marriage; such a dismissal is troubled, however, by the clear New Woman attributes Henrietta also represents; she is introduced as a career journalist who does not find her equal footing with men to be at odds with a “duty” to marry and who “smell[s]” so much “of the Future” that “it almost knocks one down” (127, 131). Indeed, Henrietta even declares, in the same conversation, that if Isabel decides to marry an Englishman she will “never speak to [her] again” (234). So, something else in Isabel’s reply other than the mere rejection of marriage must be irking Henrietta.

Seen in light of questions of knowledge, Isabel’s reply might trouble Henrietta as an immoral rejection of reality, in that it describes Isabel’s abdication of intellectual control. The vision Isabel imparts of happiness as “a swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can’t see” provokes a romantic dream of being carried off, without active volition but in forward motion (235). The multiple rather than singular invisible roads over which the carriage trundles mark out a meandering and unconscious path, in stark opposition to the planned, directional use to which roads are often put. The nocturnal nature of the trip, further obscuring its traveler’s knowledge of the journey’s path, hints at the not merely risky but also risqué nature of such a journey (despite its clear disengagement from

coupling with Goodwood, whom Isabel tellingly terms the “stubbornest fact she knew”) (162). Passion and happiness, for Isabel, happen via not-knowing: choosing to divest oneself of sight and control and instead moving unwilling and alone, at the whim of machines and beasts rather than human logic and fact.

How do we make sense of this eminently intelligent, learned, and sensible woman turning away from fact and embracing the choice not to know? And why does she need to do so in order to claim her independence, both bodily and intellectually, from the burgeoning modern world? An exchange between Isabel and her aunt early in the novel gives us one clue. When Isabel claims that she “always want[s] to know the things one shouldn’t do,” in response to her aunt’s query as to why—“so as to do them?”—she instead responds: “so as to choose” (93). Here, the idea of choosing (rather than knowing) takes on the privileged position and moral valence; rather than seeking the distinction between should and should not as moral instruction, Isabel seeks the distinction in order to engage a different binary: choosing vs. obeying. For Isabel, to choose is a value in and of itself; I suggest that it is this insistence on enacting her agency via choice rather than via knowledge that troubles Henrietta.⁶ Here, Henrietta’s judgment, that Isabel “live[s] too much in the world of [her] own dreams,” can be read not as a critique of dreaming but of rejecting “contact with reality” when dreams better suit one’s desires (310).

The gendered, raced, and classed expectations of her late nineteenth-century marital reality clamp down firmly upon Isabel when she finds that the marriage she believes she has chosen has instead been brokered by a woman she thought was her friend in order to shore up the fortune of that woman’s illegitimate daughter with Isabel’s now-husband Osmond.⁷ When these secrets are revealed to Isabel by Osmond’s sister, Osmond’s sister expresses incredulity at Isabel’s ability to “succeed in not knowing” and to maintain her “innocent ignorance” (365). These two phrases seem to work in tension with one another; an “innocent” ignorance would seem to be not-knowing through some kind of naïveté, but the idea of “succeeding” in an enterprise of not-knowing constructs the act of not-knowing as an effort and accomplishment. Isabel herself is contradictory in her expressions of her lack of knowledge. She says she “had no idea” and that she “do[es] not know” these secrets, but she then also claims that “things *have* occurred to me, and perhaps that was what they all meant” (365). Isabel constructs herself oppositionally as both unknowing and as having ideas (albeit without concluding on their meaning). Perhaps here, we see the culminating illustra-

tion of how, for Isabel, “the love of knowledge coexisted in her mind with the finest capacity for ignorance” (284).

With this contradictory picture of Isabel in mind, it is possible to understand the novel’s tragic trajectory as a result not of Isabel’s inability to choose her independence, but rather her inability—after choosing independently to get into the swift carriage of happiness—to continue to choose not to know, within the bounds of her particular embodied identity, when one of these choices has been to marry. Though Osmond’s sister sees her act of illuminating Isabel as to the true relationship between Osmond and his mistress as a freeing good, in the way that her own realization of her husband’s limitations was “a wonderful simplification,” she accuses Isabel of rejecting such simplicity (362). And indeed, Isabel is not happy to have obtained this information, though she recognizes she is “much obliged to [Osmond’s sister].” “I suppose I ought to know,” she says to her, “but I’m sorry” (371). We as readers are only able to take the full measure of her meaning at the novel’s close, where once again Isabel is offered the love (if not the hand) of Casper Goodwood. Goodwood’s final moments with Isabel in the novel are filled with his own attempt to jump into that swiftly moving carriage of happiness. Upon realizing how unhappy Isabel has been in her marriage, Goodwood offers her the following alternative reality, which seems in many ways to echo Isabel’s own previous embrace of pleasure and dreams:

Why shouldn’t we be happy—when it’s here before us, when it’s so easy? . . . It would be an insult to you to assume that you care for the look of the thing, for what people will say, for the bottomless idiocy of the world. . . . We can do absolutely as we please; to whom under the sun do we owe anything? What is it that holds us, what is it that has the smallest right to interfere in such a question as this? Such a question is between ourselves—and to say that is to settle it! Were we born to rot in our misery—were we born to be afraid? (434–35)

The questions Casper asks betray his willingness (and also his identity-based ability) to reject the knowledge of convention, propriety, of even community and shame for the more productive choice of happiness. Isabel is tempted by Casper’s offer, and his vision of their cares-to-the-wind rejection of social mores strikes her as both rapturously beautiful and deadly dangerous. For Isabel, to believe in Casper’s worldview is no longer the unknowing happiness of a surrender to nighttime freewheeling in a carriage; it is, instead,

“the next best thing to her dying”—a strange bit of phrasing that equates happiness with death, unhappiness with life (435). No wonder, then, that she escapes her moment of temptation—the “white lightning” of his kiss—into a darkness that once again signals freedom but not, as before, happiness (436). During Isabel’s flight across her uncle’s lawn to the safe banality of the house, she might have “s[een] nothing,” but in this final dark journey, she embraces knowledge that cannot be described as anything but miserable. We find that “she had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path” (436). No longer careening across unseen roads, Isabel is now fully a knower who sees the singular, straight (perhaps even the proverbially narrow) path in front of her and whose knowledge most likely returns her to her unhappy, unfree marriage. Not-knowing, no longer viable, has been relinquished as a strategy, and as a character, Isabel (along with the fin-de-siècle “lady” she represents) is the worse for its loss.

At root, *An Ethic of Innocence* asks why: Why has not-knowing (instead of knowledge) been a site of female happiness and/or resistance at the turn of the century for this lady and so many both like and unlike her? Why has this pattern been so difficult for readers and critics to comprehend? And, most centrally, why has the relinquishment of knowledge, despite its concomitant affective or even material loss for these women, been generically, and morally, required?

Epistemologies of Not-knowing, Ethics of Innocence

The topics of not-knowing, subjects’ negotiation of sociocultural spaces, and gendered epistemology have emerged in recent scholarship as natural interdisciplinary bedfellows. Even so, the notion that not-knowing might be a necessary, even ethical, component of epistemology has not lost its controversial edge. For example, when, in a 1975 talk given at the National Symposium on Genetics and the Law, Italian-born microbiologist, US immigrant, and Nobel laureate Salvador E. Luria advocated the balancing of the commonplace, modern, socially sanctioned “right-to-know value, that is, the ethics of knowledge” with what he termed “the ethics of innocence,” he understood his idea’s radical thrust (3). Indeed, we might see the “right-to-know” paradigm Luria invoked as a warped version of the post-enlightenment emphasis upon the pursuit of knowledge, one that has turned knowledge acquisition into a moral, ethical, and epistemic mandate. As a result, rather than viewing knowledge acquisition as a mere tool among

a variety of others, this false elevation of the pursuit of knowledge lends a metaphysically absolute value to the attempt “to know” that modernity has come to equate with goodness, virtue, rightness, or even moral superiority. The extension, of course, is that knowledge’s opposite, not-knowing, evidences vice, small-mindedness, wrongness, and moral inferiority.

Such pejorative treatment of not-knowing works, in Luria’s provocative view, as a form of “obscurantism and oppression” that impedes the integrity of any knowledge pursuit (5). Recent developments in the field of epistemology have taken this view to heart. Increasingly, interdisciplinary scholarship in feminist theory, cultural studies, race studies, and philosophy have begun to interrogate not-knowing—what this literature terms “ignorance”—as an epistemic field that is no mere empty opposite to, but rather complex interlocutor with, epistemologies of knowledge. A basic tenet of such inquiry holds that ignorance is neither a lack nor a unified state, but rather can itself be studied epistemically. Recent scholarship looks at both the methodological questions at stake in ignorance (ways in which one might not know) and the varieties of ignorance one might study (for instance, ignorance as a descriptor of a state of not having access to certain facts or as a descriptor of a refusal of facts that one has been presented with). In short, rather than thinking about ignorance as merely an absence of knowledge, studies that theorize an epistemology of ignorance seek to understand the various presences that not-knowing occupies in our cultural reality. In Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger’s 2008 edited anthology *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, their introduction makes clear that the space not-knowing occupies can be one “made, maintained, and manipulated” in order to strategically maintain doubt or ignorance in a population (what might be seen as akin to the “fake news” brouhaha of the early days of the Trump presidency), but it can also be embraced as part of a strategy of “resistance or moral caution” on the part of the powerful or, fascinatingly, the oppressed (8, 20). In both examples, however, these engagements with ignorance emphasize the social, not objective, sphere in which the production of both knowledge and not-knowing takes place.

Landmark studies of the epistemologies of ignorance have integrated interdisciplinary and intersectional approaches to knowledge in order to construct readings of invested ignorance that expose its conservative, even obstructionist, foundations. For example, the philosopher Charles Mills argues, in his article “White Ignorance” (included, in modified form, in both *Agnotology* and another anthology on not-knowing, *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*), that racial hierarchies and racist beliefs are anchored,

in part, by a normatively produced ignorance, including the suppression of facts that would counter racialized stereotypes, blindness to racially inflected embodied differences in experiences, and even liberal-identified expressions of color-blindness (Sullivan and Tuana 20–28). This “cognitive tendency” toward ignorance on the part of the hierarchically advantaged toward the disadvantaged is “not the only kind of privileged, group-based ignorance,” Mills argues; he goes on to name “male ignorance” specifically as another “doxastic disposition” requiring critical unpacking (22, 23). Likewise, literary theorist Eve Sedgwick has argued that ignorance alongside knowledge plays an essential role in Western legal regulations of sexuality and gender privilege, claiming that “inasmuch as it matters not at all what the raped woman perceives or wants just so long as the man raping her can claim to have not noticed,” our laws “privilege at the same time men and ignorance” and that the “male receives careful education” in this confluence (5). Here, both Mills and Sedgwick make clear the odd reality that social configurations help us learn not-knowing just as we learn to know; furthermore, Mills claims, without attention to ignorance’s social construction and meaning, we will never be in a position “to reduce or eliminate it” (Sullivan and Tuana 23).

And yet, the reduction/elimination of all types of ignorance cannot be our only impetus to study not-knowing. Not only have scholars started to study epistemologies of ignorance to understand sustained ways in which oppression operates via the use of chosen ignorance *to* injustice (on the part of the oppressor) and enforced ignorance *of* information (on the part of the oppressed), but—and this is key—we have also started to think through the myriad ways in which marginalized subjects have appealed to ignorance in order to resist dominant power structures, carve out spaces of resistance, or simply make their lives more livable. Linda Martín Alcoff argues in her essay “Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types” that

members of oppressed groups also have specific reasons to maintain their own ignorance about the social order; for example, reasons based on the need to maintain civil relations with other people with whom they may have to work, [or] to avoid the emotional distress of having to acknowledge the full weight of one’s oppression or the humiliation of one’s family members. (Sullivan and Tuana 44)

Alison Bailey’s work, “Strategic Innocence,” extends Alcoff’s insight to explore more robustly the “strategi[c]” “wield[ing]” of ignorance by oppressed groups

in order to “gai[n] information, sabotag[e] work, avoi[d] or dela[y] harm, and preserv[e] a sense of self” (77). For an example, she turns to Frederick Douglass’s autobiography to explore, as a strategic form of ignorance, the way he describes “play[ing] dumb as a means of gaining information” (88). Such an example—which involves exploiting a form of white ignorance simultaneous to the performance of ignorance on the part of the black person—helps to show the complications that arise when knowledge and ignorance are analyzed with attention to the intersectional identity attributes (race, gender, class, etc.) that condition epistemology in the first place. Ignorance, like knowledge, is not solely a tool of the privileged; indeed, such scholarship begins to explore the way in which strategic not-knowing can work to resist dominant epistemic structures, not merely enforce them.

This is one reason why, although this book’s focus is on the relationship between gender and knowledge/ignorance, the readings I turn to in the following chapters explore the various other intersectional strands woven into character representations that affect the ways in which these characters and texts embrace and reject knowledge. For instance, chapter 1 treats immigrant voices alongside middle-class, white ones; chapter 2 focuses upon lower-class women’s experiences, both white and black; chapter 3 takes as its subjects lower-middle-class white and Chicana women; chapter 4 focuses upon lower-class, African American women’s experiences; and chapters 5–7 primarily focus on white experiences, but the classes of these individuals vary widely. Attention to intersectional analysis also helps make sense of the sometimes-surprising critical reception such characters and texts have received. Thus, though this book demonstrates that individual women of many distinct identities are represented as strategically employing innocence within this period, it also makes clear that the way in which their choices are received—by other characters and by readers alike—are contoured by racial, class-based, and other identity-based biases.⁸ Any continuities I trace in tactics of not-knowing across identity lines in these fin-de-siècle and modern women is not, in short, an attempt to flatten their identity differences. Indeed, while work in feminist epistemology has taken as foundational the interdependent nature of knowing, its more radical work has added insights from feminist and gender theory, as well as other intersectional approaches to identity, in order to study not only the power differentials attending knowledge production, distribution, and uptake but also the alternative forms of knowledge that gender bias, combined with other forms of bias, has rendered less visible or credible.⁹

Another avenue for thinking about modes of not-knowing is through the types of knowledge that might be judged too risky, socially, to try to

know for *any* modern human, not merely women. For literature enthusiasts, such invocation smacks perhaps of the religious and/or supernatural warnings about knowing that proliferate in early science fiction. Take, for example, Frankenstein's caution to his interlocutors about the hazards that attend the hubristic knowledge-at-all-costs seeker in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*. His command to the hearer/reader of his tale to "learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquisition of knowledge" comes with the simultaneous, almost wistful claim that "the man . . . who believes his native town to be the world" is immeasurably happier "than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow" (Shelley 932). Lest we move too quickly to dismiss this representation as the bogeymen of scientific progress (on one hand) or the humanist's corrective to the mad scientist (on the other), I would like to return us to the key insight from which epistemological studies of ignorance emerges: the pursuit (or rejection) of knowledge is, above all, a socially determined value that is neither inherently positive nor negative, but rather gains moral valence from the effects, consequences, and discourse surrounding its pursuit.

To unpack this socially determined aspect of the value of choosing not to know, epistemic treatments of ignorance draw on the work of both feminist and social epistemology; Townley credits both for insights that have been crucial to breaking down the presumed equally and autonomously available good of knowing.¹⁰ Social epistemology in particular takes as foundational the interdependent nature of knowing—we know not within a vacuum but as one in a community of knowers with whom we interact epistemically as well as civically, morally, ethically, and so on. Thus, it follows that any socially inflected ethics of knowing/not-knowing balances the desire to gain new information with an attention to the social impact, both negative and positive, that such new information will have (5). For example, Luria suggests that "genetic research on race difference in intelligence," even if possible to pursue in a manner that avoids reaffirming social biases about race within the study's design itself, might not be worth knowing within a social sphere in which racial equity has been, on the one hand, a desired goal and, on the other, a persistently difficult one to attain (2–3). Such scholarship suggests that it is not merely or primarily our attempts to play God in groundbreaking feats of scientific prowess that we should curb, but rather the seemingly innocuous practices of knowledge acquisition that mask more insidious, systemic harm to those who are already socioculturally disadvantaged.

Of course, we need not be limited to reading contemporary philosophical concepts back onto fin-de-siècle and modern texts; provocatively, the philosophical work in epistemology I reference above cites the nineteenth-century philosophical pragmatist movement as one of its orienting approaches to knowledge. Pragmatism's emphasis on methodology, process, and the discursive, interdependent nature of truth complements the feminist and social investments in revising assumptions about knowledge that make an inquiry like mine possible. This fin-de-siècle philosophical movement is not only useful to *An Ethic of Innocence* because it emerges contemporaneously to the literary texts I treat; it also, at its core, takes on the modern predilection to view knowledge asocially. Pragmatism's social orientation toward epistemology—that it deems “true” or “factual” what is socially, collectively determined to be not *objectively correct* but, instead, *subjectively useful*—might at first appear to be unscientific, anti-intellectual, or wishy-washy—a soft humanism at odds with modernity. Yet if what we mean here by pragmatism's humanism—its acknowledged acceptance of the inextricability of human bias from what we perceive of as reality—remains suspect within a modern purview that has emphasized structuralism, mechanization, and a certain logic of coldness, it would behoove us to note the ways in which Luria, an internationally renowned, respected, and rewarded modern scientist, promotes theories that share in pragmatism's “humanistic” bent.¹¹ For Luria's framework—one in which “values are not given but chosen, partly consciously, partly unconsciously, and are adhered to or modified or abandoned in the continuing effort of each individual to create a moral identity,” one in which “values are only norms for human interaction,” and one in which “morality does not exist in a vacuum”—looks, through its emphasis on social interdependence and exchange; values and morals that are contingent and changing rather than absolute and steadfast; and socially determined, continually negotiated sense of “right/wrong” or “true/false,” very much like American Pragmatism (1, 4).

Pragmatism has not traditionally been a lens through which we have read literature, which should not surprise; though philosophy has often been used to study literary texts, pragmatism's particular tenets have caused it to sit uneasily within the discipline of philosophy and be viewed, in early pragmatist William James's words, as more of a “method” than a “dogma” (*Pragmatism* 38).¹² Thus, pragmatism has been seen as a philosophy that offers not new ideas but rather new ways of organizing, connecting, and working through old ones, which has meant to certain critics, most notably renowned American pragmatist Richard Rorty, that pragmatism has little

to offer to literary critics as they search for ways to understand the stories we continue to turn to and tell (Rorty, *Take* 125). And yet, Rorty's own attention to language, politics, morality, and society within his version of pragmatism indicates some of what the pragmatist method might offer literary critics.¹³ More importantly, his essay "Feminism and Pragmatism" (to which I will turn in the book's latter half) compellingly argues that pragmatism is of value for feminists who seek to insist on the social distinctiveness of female experiences within broadly patriarchal cultures, while neither reducing all individual female experiences to a unitary whole nor arguing that patriarchal cultures have oppressed women's essentialized rights.¹⁴ As such, he defends pragmatism's particular use for contemporary feminist criticism that seeks to incorporate post-modern, poststructuralist views of the de-essentialized, fluid, and hypercontextualized self into its purview—aims that many contemporary literary critics concerned with feminist theory share.

Indeed, adding a feminist perspective to pragmatism enables further pluralization and contextualization of the already complicated way in which pragmatism has understood subject positions. Doing work similar to what Cornel West has done in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989) to merge racial politics and spirituality with pragmatism, scholars such as Charlotte Haddock Seigfried, Ann Clark, Heather E. Keith, Marjorie C. Miller, Shannon Sullivan, and James Livingston have begun to write about connections between pragmatist and feminist thought, both historically and contemporaneously (Sullivan, *Living* 171).¹⁵ For instance, in her book *Living across and through Skins*, in which Sullivan uses Dewey's idea of "transactional" bodies to describe the porous, imbricated nature of person-to-person relationships, she outlines some of the major tenets of pragmatism that could lend themselves to feminist analysis. Such potential commonalities include an emphasis on real life or a lived reality, a rejection of a neutral or "God-like" point of view, and an "inclusive and collaborative" style of thinking, writing, and working (Sullivan 5). Pragmatism—which emphasizes the intersubjective, work-in-process nature of "reality"; material, lived experience; and mediation of old and new forms of knowledge—provides one turn-of-the-century model by which readers could take choices not to know seriously without rejecting feminist politics.¹⁶

Glossing Not-Knowing

All of these more neutral or positively inflected understandings of ignorance as tool or method, drawing from pragmatism, feminist theory, social and

feminist epistemologies, and epistemologies of ignorance, help to frame the trope of female choices not to know that *An Ethic of Innocence* studies. This chosen female ignorance, or “ethic of innocence,” is not represented uniformly within modern literature and art in terms of the situations in which the choice arises, the types of knowledge refused, or the effects of such refusals, but rather in the means by which not-knowing was deployed to negotiate social dynamics for characters with distinct identity attributes. In other words, the pattern this book traces in fin-de-siècle and modern literature is not in the content but rather the methodology of choosing not to know. I use the term “ethic” to insist that (1) the methods of enacting innocence are multifaceted, containing strategies of forgetting, projecting, fantasizing, lying, refusing, and dreaming, to name a few, and that (2) these methods, like any system of ethics, form a coherent means of approaching one’s intersection with reality. As such, a reader must understand that there is nothing essentialized about the innocence I want to discuss, nor do I want to associate innocence primarily with characterological goodness, purity, or religiosity, however socially or personally defined. Indeed, these are the traditional readings of innocence that I would seek to oppose.

Thus far, the theoretical claims I have outlined that structure this book are not particularly literary or artistic. Indeed, the above claims might also be made about persons, as in the fields of epistemology, philosophy, and many disciplines within feminist studies. But two aspects of my approach to not-knowing mark this project as definitively literary. The first is the vocabulary I use to name the form of not-knowing I trace; though my philosophical peers investigate the idea of not-knowing under the terminology of “ignorance” or “agnotology,” and though “ignorance” might be a more natural corollary term for knowledge than innocence, I have chosen to use the term “innocence” for its literary and artistic epistemic resonance. One, if not the, dominant arena of knowledge-gender-ethical confluence that the field of literature has invested in is intimate, bodily, worldly, and sexual knowledge. Particularly within the literary-artistic shift between the Victorian and the modern periods, the extent to which representations of women’s epistemic participation within the public sphere show them to be fully embodied, sexual beings has dominated our critical conversations about gender within modernity. The historically hallowed representation of “innocent” female literary figures, by contrast, features at once sexual and epistemic purity. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, to be able to speak knowledgeably about one’s body and sexuality was tantamount to demonstrating one’s sexual experience: chastity was not merely of the body but also of the mind. And yet, the idealized innocence of female minds

problematically links women to another nineteenth-century discourse of childhood and innocence. As Robin Bernstein points out, during this century, “sentimental culture had woven childhood and innocence together wholly” (4); this new weave of concepts could be used to not only value but also infantilize the innocent adult female, which was understood all too keenly by some Victorian feminists (such as Frances Power Cobbe) who decried the middle-class Victorian social order, which “ke[pt] its females perpetual children, sexually innocent, financially dependent, adorably helpless” (Nelson 72).¹⁷ By using “innocence” rather than “ignorance” to refer to the state of not-knowing that the female characters I study choose, I mean to make evident this literary conflation between knowing, sexual experience, public-sphere activity, infantilization, and idealized femininity within the Victorian and modern eras. That these concepts are not neutrally applied to all women but rather include significant class, race, national, and other identity-based biases is also key to my project’s understanding of the way in which innocence, and its various literary-cultural valences, have been used to value, control, define, and contain women.¹⁸

The other means by which this book announces itself as a literary-artistic study is through the types of knowledge that I chart female subjects choosing to reject. Some forms of knowing that I study (that one’s abusive partner is likely to batter again, for instance) are literary representations of human experience and thus could be studied from a philosophical, psychological, or sociological perspective as well as a literary one. But I am also interested in the forms of literary knowledge that are rejected by the representations I engage: knowledge about newly popular versus outmoded genres, for instance, as well as knowledge of reality versus fantasized alternatives. Here, I study not only the ways characters choose not to know, but also how those who write these representations choose not to know and/or engage in generic formulations that are deemed “ignorant” rather than “knowledgeable.” This expansive, even metaphorical, use of knowledge might seem, to some, to be a stretch; indeed, to call sentimental narration in all its maudlin presence a form of not-knowing is potentially strange. But this is precisely the point that epistemologies of ignorance would make about not-knowing in general: that not-knowing is not mere lack; it is, or at least can be, a substantive epistemic engagement on its own. In claiming that an outmoded literary genre within modernity like the sentimental is a form of not-knowing, I am insisting that we look at the content as well as the action of not-knowing in order to study its use-value to modern female subjects.

Alongside characterological and literary rejections of knowledge that would often read as backward or conservative, *An Ethic of Innocence* also treats, in its latter chapters, more radical rejections of knowledge—refusing to “know,” for example, that women are people or that maleness and femaleness are inescapable binary opposites. Just as these rejections of knowledge are more radical, some of the texts I turn to that showcase such rejections—suffrage protest, fantasy, and speculative fiction—and their fantasized alternatives to knowledge are not regularly treated as a part of a conservative, feminine archive. And yet the throughline of chosen female innocence, I argue, is there, in both these radical texts and their more conservative kin. Part of the stakes of this project are, thus, to understand what such a continuity means: how these strategies of choosing not to know can be deployed so disparately, what the fantasies are constrained by, and where the conservative might be more risqué than we suppose or vice-versa: what, ultimately, contours and defines a fin-de-siècle female ethic of innocence.

This book focuses its study on literature, art, and critical work from the later nineteenth century (starting in the 1870s/1880s) through the early twentieth century (extending to the 1930s/1940s) on both the British and the American sides of the Atlantic divide. In doing so, I treat a period that has, within literary studies and with the exception of work on new women writers, traditionally been split into studies of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, or modern, studies, as well as treating together two national traditions that literary studies have tended to keep discrete. Recent developments in the field of literary studies have begun redrawing these boundaries, through long nineteenth-century studies (which treats work at the turn of the century and the first few decades of the twentieth century) and longer views of modernism (that locate the field’s beginnings in the midnineteenth century). Exciting developments in scholarship have emerged at the interstices of these temporal and national boundaries; for example, *Recovering the New: Transatlantic Roots of Modernism* (Edward S. Cutler, 2003), *Atlantic Citizens: Nineteenth Century American Writers at Work in the World* (Leslie Eckel, 2013), *American Literary History and the Turn toward Modernity* (Melanie V. Dawson and Meredith L. Goldsmith, 2018), and *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel* (Emily Blair, 2007) each reach across one or both of these traditional divides for their critical thrust. This book joins such efforts to reap the intellectual insights that redrawing canonical boundaries sows. Particularly at the juncture of fin-de-siècle literature and gender studies, a transatlantic approach—for

instance, like the one taken by the recent anthology *Transatlantic Conversations* (edited by Beth Lueck, Sirpa Salenius, and Nancy Lusignan Schultz, 2016)—leverages the dialogue between British and American feminisms that was already taking place in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries to make legible continuities and tensions beyond the limits of nation. And though the argument this book proposes straddles both nineteenth century and modern literary studies, it couches the chosen innocence it studies as, alternatively, a fin-de-siècle or modern phenomenon—not to segregate this trope from the nineteenth century but rather serve as a corrective to the already-segregated temporalities it seeks to breach.

In the brief reading of James's Isabel Archer—herself a transatlantic creation (as an American transport to England and then Italy)—I have hoped to mark out some of the ways in which Isabel's embrace of not-knowing might signal the unique nature of gendered not-knowing at the fin-de-siècle. To start, Isabel is intelligent and loves knowledge (that is, she is neither stupid, nor does she reject epistemology altogether). Then, too, Isabel reads and questions things (that is, she is not childlike or complacent in her acceptance of the world). And finally, like many "new" or modern women, Isabel seeks independence and values choice (that is, she is concerned with maintaining her freedom and will). In all these ways, Isabel Archer distinguishes herself as a competent, intelligent, and thoughtful—perhaps even modern—subject. And yet, she chooses not to know in specific moments because, for her, to *not know* is what exemplifies happiness when the structures of the world seem to preclude it. The narrative trajectory of this novel is also instructive for my study: our female protagonist moves from choosing not to know in order to negotiate her independence and make her life more livable to feeling trapped, via knowledge, into obeying sociocultural mandates for married ladies that render her miserable. On the cusp of modernity, our "lady" finds herself unable to sustain her practice of not-knowing as an independent, intellectual move; on the contrary, her resistance to knowing is deemed, toward the novel's conclusion, not only futile but also indicative of her "innocent ignorance." And, make no mistake, her gender is of tantamount import: not only is the knowledge she rejects rife with gendered obligation, and not only is the term "innocent" flush with gendered, literary meaning, but—most strikingly—her male beau, Casper Goodwood, endures none of the narrative foreclosure or characterological condemnation for his similar efforts not to know.

No, the kind of knowledge rejection that Isabel Archer so aptly displays in *The Portrait of a Lady* is inseparable from her identity as a

turn-of-the-century woman. For, though the female ethic of innocence *An Ethic of Innocence* studies is rife within late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature, modernity's representational ideologies—for a variety of reasons I will begin to sketch out below—have disparaged and cast this trope aside as outmoded Victorian residue. Women's choices not to know have been repressed within modern representation—and this study returns our attention to them within modernity: where they have always, even if unknowingly, been.

Not-Knowing as Fin-de-Siècle Story, Gendered Story

In the late eighteenth and much of the nineteenth centuries, the female innocent—so long as she was also white, middle-class, and heteronormative—might have seemed, to observers, to embody a romantic faith, childish hope, and sheltered ignorance to life's harshness deemed essentially (and unproblematically) feminine. A few such touchstone characters (all of whom can be read with greater or lesser levels of complexity) include Madame de Tourvel from Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782), Jane Bennet from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Georgiana from Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" (1843), Amelia Sedley from William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847–48), and the March girls (particularly Beth) from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868–1869). More radically, later nineteenth-century texts, such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–1872) and Henry James's *Daisy Miller* (1878), often present heroines (again, white, economically comfortable, and straight) who display nascent feminist impulses by refusing to abide traditionalist, masculine-centered knowledge.

For example, Eliot's *Middlemarch* tells the story of main character Dorothea Brooke, an intelligent woman who remains "willful[ly]" blind to the affections of her suitors; instead, she chooses to marry the elderly, pedantic "scholar" Edward Casaubon, who she believes is engaged in great work, a book entitled *The Key to All Mythologies* (35). Once married, however, Dorothea shortly discovers that her husband's supposed great work is nothing but an endless sham of a project, doomed to failure, and that her husband, far from being a great man, is petty and belittling. Nonetheless, she remains loyally by his side, even after she develops romantic interest in another character, the young artist Will Ladislaw. Casaubon, while dying, asks Dorothea to promise to continue with his work in his stead; she puts off answering him, and, before she can agree to his bidding, he dies. After

his death, she is able to put aside his instructions, the “Synoptical Tabulation for the Use of Mrs. Casaubon,” and go on with her life free from “his cold grasp” (479). Dorothea thus not only literally rejects knowledge by rejecting the key to the scholarly project that she “had no belief in” (521), but she also paves a path by which she continues to reject more socially constructed “knowledge” for the sake of her own happiness. Though Casaubon makes a provision in his will that should Dorothea marry Will, she will lose her inheritance, Dorothea gives up this money and risks her reputation by marrying him anyway. Ultimately, Dorothea’s various rejections of knowledge work in her favor; as the text explains it, “[S]he was blind, you see, to many things obvious to others—likely to tread in the wrong places . . . yet her blindness to whatever did not lie in her own pure purpose carried her safely by the side of precipices where vision would have been perilous with fear” (363). Female innocence in *Middlemarch* thus becomes a tool by which such a woman can evade patriarchal and social control.

James’s *Daisy Miller*, which tells the story of young American Daisy Miller’s flirtatious relationship with (among others) the older, richer, more sophisticated Winterbourne, depicts a similar use for female innocence; however, *Daisy Miller* more clearly depicts the themes of sexual and moral purity at stake in such representations of choosing not to know. In the course of James’s novella, many of the main characters argue over whether Daisy’s flouting of social conventions in her behavior toward the texts’ men is evidence of her “exceedin[g] innocen[ce]” or, rather, shows her to be “a designing, an audacious, an unscrupulous young person” (12). Her seeming “mixture of innocence and crudity” allows her to take liberties, such as spending time alone with men she does not know well, without enduring immediate condemnation from the others in the text, as they are not able to ascertain if she is truly morally reprehensible or merely ignorant (or both) (30).

The novella is careful to suggest, despite the “is she/ isn’t she” dialogue it depicts, that Daisy is not merely unknowing. For instance, when Daisy’s friend Mrs. Walker tries to get her to mend her ways as she is “old enough to be talked about,” Daisy refuses to listen to Mrs. Walker on the basis of chosen innocence: she claims, “I don’t think I want to know what you mean . . . I don’t think I should like it” (43). Here, though Daisy explicitly chooses to reject “knowing” what Mrs. Walker means, she also exhibits her knowledge about what she chooses not to know; otherwise, there would be no way for Daisy to articulate this knowledge as something that she shouldn’t like. Daisy’s shrewdness, as depicted in this exchange, is not